

Spyro's Old Flame

Chapter 10: Beginnings and Endings

Flame raced through the dark tunnel, his paws splashing in the rising water. He knew he didn't have much time. He knew it because the water was already reaching up to his knees. It dripped from the stalactites, bubbled in through cracks in the wall, filling every crevice and reminding him that soon it'd be too late. He ignored it and pushed on.

"Straight forward from the entrance, left by the intersection" he mumbled to himself as he ran. *"Right by the two stalagmites that look like mushrooms... or was it left?"*

Suddenly, his nose smacked against something hard and flat, and he fell back on his haunches. "What the...?" Confused, he blew a plume of fire, illuminating a wall of limestone in front of him. Another dead-end.

"No no no no! It can't be!" Flame rushed up to the wall, running his claws over the surface in search of a crevice, a hole, a crack in the rock, anything. There had to be a way through! The chamber where Cynder and Spyro were headed should be just ahead, he was sure of it.

But then he realized that he recognized the flowstone that covered the wall. It jutted out from the flat rock like a waterfall frozen in time. He had been here before. He was running around in circles.

Panic gripped him, like icy claws digging into his heart. But he forced himself to remain calm. "It's okay Flame, it's alright. You just missed a turn somewhere. Just go back, find those damn mushroom stalagmites and start over..."

But it wasn't cool. It wasn't alright. While he was fumbling about in the dark like an idiot, Spyro and Cynder could very well be drowning already. They had to be stuck somewhere, he was sure of it, otherwise he would have run into them by now. Soon they would be dead, because Flame couldn't even memorize a map, because he couldn't find his way through a cave system he had been through a thousand times before. Because he had been stupid enough to let Spyro go to begin with.

He should have grabbed him by his tail and forced him to stay, the heroic fool. He should have never let go of his talons and watch him enter that cursed cave without him. To think that this place might take Spyro from him, now that he finally had him back... Flame shook the thoughts out of his head. *Get yourself together Flame. Focus! You don't have time for this...*

He turned around, then set off back the way he came.

I'll find you Spyro. I won't let you drown...

He ran as fast as he could. He didn't even bother to try to light up his way now. Soon he reached the intersection he had come from, the place by the two stalagmites where the cave forked into three separate paths. At least, he thought it was the right intersection - he noticed to his horror that those mushroom stalagmites weren't even visible anymore. The water was reaching up to his chest now. Soon, he wouldn't even be able to get out himself, but he didn't care. He had to find Spyro. Nothing else mattered.

He took the passage on the left this time, wading down the dark corridor as fast as he could. "Spyro!" he shouted. "Spyro, Cynder, can you hear me?!" But there was no reply - he only heard his own voice, echoing through the dark depths.

The cave split into two, and then split again further ahead. They could all lead to the entrance to Red's Lair, or the wrong way. There was no way to tell, with the water hiding any natural mark that might have helped him remember where he was. Instead, he rushed forward, any system abandoned. "Spyro, Cynder!" he cried out, his voice a hoarse whimper in the darkness. Tears burned in his eyes, making it even harder to see, and the water got deeper and colder the farther he went.

"Please, Ancestors, just let me find them. I won't ask for anything else ever! I just don't want to lose him again," he pleaded, a silent prayer to whatever Ancestors may listen.

Suddenly, a searing pain in his left backpaw. The little dragon fell into the water, whining in agony. He had stepped on something sharp. He pulled himself out of the water and onto a rock where he curled into a shivering ball. It was hopeless. He was lost. He had failed. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes, and he was close to giving in to the hopelessness when he saw something glimmering below the dark surface.

Confused, he wiped the tears out of his eyes and reached into the water, fishing out a diamond-shaped, coal-black rock - a dark gem. It was still hot too, smelling like a mix of smoldering charcoal and sulfur. The smell was so strong that it made the water itself stink like brimstone. At first, he was confused - why would there be a freshly used dark gem in the cave? The Elder Red had used dark gems to power his laboratory - then he remembered Tomas's satchel full of used dark gems spilling out in front of him earlier that night. The elder must have dropped it.

He continued down the cave, following the putrid smell. It didn't take long until he found another dark gem, glimmering in the water.

With reinvigorated hope, the red dragon followed the smell through the network of caves until eventually, he heard something. It sounded like a zap, like an electrical discharge. He stopped and listened carefully, and before long he heard another zap, followed by a thud.

"Spyro? Spyro, Cynder, is that you guys?!"

Following the zapping sound, he found a cave that led him into a large cavity, probably a hundred wingspans wide with a great many columns trailing the walls. Further in, he could see a pair of heavy steel doors, painted red and twice as tall as any dragon he'd seen. He recognized it instantly. This is the chamber where he had once got trapped - he had found the entrance to Red's Lair.

Morning light beamed in from a single hole in the ceiling, the rays landing on an elevated platform surrounded by fastly rising water, and there, behind a blue force field grid, were Spyro and Cynder.

Spyro was just in the process of launching himself against the force field again. His horns slammed fruitlessly against the grid with a loud zap, followed by a thud as he landed back on the floor. Cynder was searching the wall behind them, looking for a way to climb out.

Flame just stared a couple of seconds before he found his voice. "Spyro, Cynder!" he shouted, splashing through the water towards them. "I'm here! Are you guys okay!?"

Spyro looked up, his eyes widening when he saw the red dragon. At first, he just blinked in shock, then a big smile sprung to his face. "Fl... Flame? Is that really you!?"

Flame reached the force field. Through the glowing grid, he could take Spyro's paws in his and rub their noses together. Their scales met and his heart jumped with joy. He had found his mate after all.

Spyro pressed close, as close he could get without getting zapped again, his claws squeezing Flame's as if he wasn't quite sure the red dragon was really there. "What are you doing here?" he whined, his tail whipping back and forth. "How did you find us!?" Cynder peeked out from behind Spyro with the same look of surprise on her face.

"Doesn't matter now. We gotta get you out of here!" Flame looked around. The grid was shaped like a wide dome, enclosing the dragons within. They couldn't climb out, and definitely not fly out. And nowhere did the grid seem wide enough to let them crawl through either.

"It's great to see you Flame, but you shouldn't have come," Spyro's smile had faded and his eyes filled with worry. "Look, the water is rising fast. You gotta get out while you still can. Go to the village, tell them we're down here. Maybe there's a way to shut off the power from the outside!"

"No way," Flame shook his head. "There's no time for that!" He knew Spyro just wanted to get rid of him, wanting him to be safe, but even if there was a way to disable the force field from outside the mountain, they'd never find it in time. "Listen," he said, meeting his mate's worried eyes, "I gotta get you out myself. I gotta find and deactivate the generator. I think I know where it is..."

He had disabled all generators but one the last time he had been through, some fifteen years ago. But he had never found the last one. Now he thought he knew why - the power was coming from Red's Lair itself, behind this chamber.

But Spyro didn't like that idea at all. "Oh no, that's too dangerous, Flame, *way* too dangerous! You could get lost, you could *drown!*"

Water was already reaching up to their paws now, cold and stinking from the swampland that fed into the cave.

"Look, me and Cynder have the situation under control, okay?" Spyro continued. "We'll figure it out, but you gotta get out while you can!" Behind him, Cynder nodded with a strained smile which was probably meant to be reassuring, but her eyes betrayed her doubt. They *both* knew that was gnorc shit, that they'd die without Flame, but they were still

pushing him away.

"Are you insane!?! You clearly *don't* have this under control," Flame shot back. "I'm not gonna leave you here!"

"Even if you were to push deeper, the way forward is flooded." Cynder pointed to the gates. The heavy metal doors were wide open, but the cave behind them was completely filled with water. There was no way Flame was getting through there.

But it wasn't the only way through. There was a small oval-shaped crevice next to the door. It would never fit Cynder or Spyro, but Flame might just be small enough to squeeze through. "I might be able to use that," he pointed at the gap. "And if I remember correctly, Red's lab is in a large chamber directly next to this one ... that crevice probably leads into the same chamber."

"No! No no no no no, you're *NOT* going through there!" Spyro shouted, squeezing Flame's talons so hard it hurt and refusing to let go. "What if you can't do it? What if you get lost or don't make it back in time!?! His voice broke, turning into a pathetic whimper as he looked at his mate with misty eyes. "Wh...what if you die..?"

"I *can* do this," Flame said, calmly with a small smile. "It'll be just like when you freed me, remember? Just a click and you're free!" Somehow, Flame wasn't afraid anymore, not one bit. It was like seeing Spyro so distraught, so worried, had sucked all the fear out of him. Now the only thing that mattered was saving his mate, saving him and calming him down.

"You have to trust me on this," he said, stroking the purple dragon's cheek. It was wet with tears. Spyro, shakingly, looked up at Flame, and he had never seen him so small, so afraid.

"Please don't" he pleaded, even as they both knew it was the only way to save them.

Behind him, Cynder swallowed hard, then laid a claw on Spyro's shoulder. "I think he's right," she said, softly. "I think this might be our only chance."

Flame nodded. He rose Spyro's chin with a claw, then reached through the grid to press his muzzle to his. The kiss lasted only a fraction of a second, but still Flame felt his courage swell.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out," he promised with a brave smile. Spyro drew a shaky breath, looking at Flame with misty, violet eyes, but eventually, he let go of his claws.

"Please be careful," he said.

Flame wasted no time. As soon as Spyro let him go, he hopped down from the platform, waded through the water until he reached the crevice. On initial inspection, it did seem like he'd be able to get through. He paused and looked back at the two trapped dragons who were following his every step. Spyro's worried expression made his chest tighten, not out of worry but guilt. "I'll see you real soon!" he called back to them, hoping it was the truth. Then he crawled into the dark hole.

It was tight - so tight that he had to crouch low and tuck his wings against his back to fit. Worse yet, the passage seemed to get narrower the deeper he got, but it was hard to tell with nothing but darkness ahead and around him, and in either case, he told himself that if he just kept moving, kept wiggling, he wouldn't get stuck.

Eventually, the passage started to slope downwards and the air got hotter. Hot and damp, and hard to breathe. Why was it getting warmer all of a sudden? Were they so deep into the mountain already? But not even this made him pause - there was no time. Before, his thoughts had been erratic and fearful, a whirlwind of doubts and worst-case-scenarios, but now he was singularly focused on one thing, saving the two dragons.

He thought back to Spyro and Cynder, and the water rising around them. Spyro's worried face, looking at him. He couldn't let them down.

After a while, his horns started scratching against the top of the tunnel, and he had to lift his nose uncomfortably in order not to get stuck. Oh Ancestors, what if his horns got stuck!?! He remembered a story he had heard about one of the first dragons to explore the system getting trapped in a passage just like this one. That dragon ended up having to break his own horns to get out.

Flame shuddered, then gave himself a stern shake. *Get yourself together, Flame. It's just a tunnel. It has to end eventually...*

Thankfully, after a few more minutes of excruciatingly slow crawling, it did end. Flame felt an almost euphoric relief when he saw the light at the end of the narrow passage. *Oh Thank the ancestors!* Now all he had to do was find the power generator and Spyro and Cynder would be free!

Relieved, he pulled himself out of the crevice on the other end, then jumped down. Next thing he knew, he was surrounded by warm, bubbling water.

Confused and disorientated, he felt around for something to grab. But there was water all around him, and when he expected to reach the cave floor with his backpaws, he only sank deeper.

Instincts overtook and he kicked desperately towards the surface, swimming and swimming until eventually, his head shot out of the water. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with well-needed oxygen. Air never tasted so sweet!

Where was he? The red dragon looked around, trying to make sense of his surroundings. He was floating in what could best be described as a vast underground sea. This chamber was simply gigantic, much bigger than he had anticipated. Water flowed in from cracks in the cave wall, mixing with the warmer water from an underground spring, filling the air with hot, white steam.

Here and there, banks of sediment stuck out of the water, forming a series of smaller islands from which thick stalagmites rose like an underground forest.

It was a simply jaw-dropping sight, so out of this world that Flame for a moment forgot about the present perils and was filled by a sudden need to explore it all. To locate the underground spring and add it to his map. To find out if this geological phenomenon happened every tide and if it had something to do with Red's experiments.

But he had no time for that nonsense. He needed to find the generator. So instead, he grabbed one of the nearest stalagmites and pulled himself out of the bubbling water. Hopping from island to island, he made his way through the surreal, subterranean world. Here and there, he saw pipes sticking out of the surface, pumps and other machinery that might have once worked to keep the water out. He even passed a control panel that still had electricity, its buttons flickering, and he decided to try to stay out of the water from now on, just to be sure. The last thing he needed was to get electrocuted.

This larger chamber lay directly next to the one where Spyro and Cynder were trapped in, and the wall was cracked in several places. By climbing one of the stalagmites, Flame was able to peer out of one crack and into the adjacent chamber. He was hoping to get a glimpse of the two dragons. But all he could see from this angle was rocks and water. "Spyro!? Cynder!?" he called, but his voice was drowned in the sound of rushing water and steam. It didn't matter. He was close now.

After a while, he had finally reached the far end of the chamber. Here, he found stairs carved into the black rock, no doubt Red's work. The stairs led up to a platform that overlooked the large cavity, from which he was able to access another one of those heavy steel doors, which thankfully, Flame found to be unlocked. Tomas must have passed through here to activate the generator - something he imagined was much easier when the chamber wasn't flooded. But more importantly, it meant he was on the right track!

Just hold on a little longer, Spyro...

He opened the door, revealing to his disappointment yet another cave. But this one seemed dragon-made, and was lit up by lamps. Electric lamps, not the oil lanterns he was used to. Brimming with excitement, he ran through the cave until eventually, he reached another room, and here, Flame saw it, although he could barely believe his eyes, but there it was, right there in front of him: the generator in all its glory.

Flame hadn't seen dark gems in use since Red's time - but now that he did it was easy to see why the elders treasured them so highly.

There were around a dozen of them, lying in what looked like a bathtub covered by a plexiglass dome. Several cables were attached to the strange contraption, and the gems themselves emitted an eerie purple glow, like Spyro's scales but unnaturally bright.

"Woooooah..." Flame flopped down on his haunches, at once overwhelmed. There were so many cables, so many buttons and switches. He had read a few of the books Red had left behind - in fact he probably knew more about Red's tech than most of the elders, but it would take him ages to figure out how to deactivate this thing. Most of the generators he had disabled before had one single button you had to press. This one had dozens of control panels and even more buttons.

He approached the machine warily, pressing a red button. Nothing happened, except that an array of dusty old monitors flicked to life.

They all showed different parts of the cave system and Flame figured it was some sort of surveillance system Red had installed. Most of the places they showed were flooded already, and several of the cameras were dead. But it didn't take Flame long to find Spyro and Cynder. His heart sank when he saw the two dragons - they were alive still, but struggling to stay above the surface in water that reached them up to the neck, with just inches between them and the force fields.

"Oh shit oh shit oh shit...!" Flame started pacing around. He had to turn it off somehow and right now or they'd both be dead!

"Oh screw it!" He exclaimed, then attacked the generator, pulling every cable he could see, pushing every button, tearing and smashing with adrenaline-induced rage. "Die, you stupid machine!" Connectors sparkled around him, the odd machine beeping in protest, but the power remained.

When nothing else worked, he took a few steps back, lowered his horns like Spyro had taught him, then charged forward, aiming directly at the plexiglass dome.

The glass shattered and an ear-shattering blast sent Flame flying back across the room. An explosion of purple sparks and bright yellow flames lit up the cave, black smoke and pieces of machinery flying everywhere. Just a black scorch mark remained where once the generator had stood.

Flame stumbled to his feet amidst smoldering rubble, his vision blurry, his ears ringing. It took a few seconds for his vision to clear, but when he did he turned immediately to the monitor.

Fear froze him in place as he stared at the screen, waiting to see a sign of life. But all he could see was frothing water. Had they drowned? Was he too late? His fear grew worse with every second, settling in his chest until it became hard to breathe.

Then finally, Spyro's yellow horns appeared above the surface, followed by his beautiful snout. He was carrying Cynder in his forelegs, swimming towards some rocks. Flame could see the black dragon moving in Spyros arms, exhausted but also alive. They were going to be okay.

Flame took a deep breath, finally able to fill his lungs with air again as the tension in his chest loosened. Relief like no other washed over him, making him lightheaded, making him stumble and fall back on his haunches and laugh outright. He had saved them! Flame, the useless runt who never did anything right, had actually saved them!

His triumph was cut short by a loud zap from some wires behind him, then the screens went black. The lights went out too, bathing the cave in darkness and the sound of burbling water coming from outside reminded Flame that there was still another dragon that needed to be saved - namely himself.

He rushed through the pitch-black cave, bumping into the stone walls here and there, but he had no time to stop and light up his way. When he reached the great chamber, he could see that it was almost completely flooded. Only some rocks and a few stalagmites remained above the surface.

He closed his eyes and jumped, plunging deep into the warm water. He resurfaced, then swam until he reached the other end where his escape crevice waited for him. Now all he needed to do was to climb through, reunite with Spyro and Cynder on the other side and they could all escape!

But when he got closer, he noticed to his shock and horror that water was pouring out of the crevice.

A cold shiver traveled down Flame's spine. "No way! I was only gone a minute!" He grabbed the rim and pulled himself up to peek inside, and what he saw confirmed his worst fears. It was completely flooded.

"Oh Ancestors, please no!" The little dragon panicked. He started searching along the rock wall for another crevice or rift, anything he could squeeze through, but there was nothing. He waded back and forth frantically, praying to whatever Ancestors might listen that he'd find a way through. And all the while, the water rose around him.

He gave up and pushed away from the wall, looking around for some other means of escape. There were cracks in the wall, but none that he could squeeze through. The cave with the generator was a dead-end. There was no way to get out. He was trapped.

It took a few minutes for the realization to fully sink in, the realization that there was no way out, that this would

be his grave. Minutes ago, he had celebrated his victory over this cave. Now it would claim his life. He would have thought he'd be more afraid, but instead there was a numbness spreading throughout his body. Not fear, not regret, just nothing.

The water was still rising, but there was no reason to panic now. He climbed a boulder to get out of the water. He spread his wings and shook the water off him, deciding that he would at least be as dry as he could be the last minutes of his life before he drowned.

He thought of Spyro and Cynder. They were safe, thanks to him. He had saved them. They would survive. And even in this moment, that knowledge warmed his heart, made him smile. A part of him had accepted that this is how things could end when he let go of Spyro's paws.

Spyro would miss him, Flame knew that. But he would get over Flame, he hoped. They had been friends in the end. Flame had forgiven him. And he had Cynder.

And Flame... he had gotten what he had always wanted. Spyro had returned to him, like he never thought he would, and proved that he truly loved Flame after all, which is all Flame had ever wanted.

The few hours they had spent together that night; the hug in Dark Hollow, the little walk along the beach, it was all worth it. And he had never been happier. And Flame realized now that the same was true for all those other moments, even the ones that he had tried to forget: Their first flight together, their first kiss, their first sleepover. There had been times of loneliness, of suffering following that, but he didn't regret them either. Not for a second.

For all of those memories, and because the Ancestor's had given him the strength to save Spyro, he was grateful.

He only regretted that he wouldn't be around for Spyro's next adventure. That they wouldn't have more time together. He regretted not saying goodbye to his mother, or answering her letters. He regretted not sharing more of himself with Ember.

Water was washing up on his rock now, making his paws wet. Flame curled up and closed his eyes. It wouldn't be long now.

"Flame!"

The red dragon looked up. For a second he thought he might have heard Spyro's voice, but it could have been his imagination. But then he heard it again, clear as day.

"Flame! Answer me, buddy! Are you okay?!"

It *was* Spyro! Flame hopped into the water and waded towards the crack from which Spyro's voice seemed to come. "Spyro! Spyro, I'm here!" he shouted. On the other side of the crack, he could see him, the purple dragon himself, wet, exhausted but completely real.

"Oh thank the Ancestors, you're okay! I was so worried!" Spyro tried to reach in to hug Flame through the crevice, but they were too far apart, so he settled for grabbing his claw instead. "Oh damn, you're cold! Are you okay, Flamey? We gotta get you out of there!"

"Spyro, what are you still doing here?!" Flame gasped, his relief to see Spyro quickly turning to concern. "You should have left by now!"

"We're coming to get you!" Spyro shouted back. "But Flamey, please, we gotta hurry!"

"No... wait!" Flame's grip tightened around Spyro's paw. "There's... there's no... I'm ehm..." He didn't know how to finish the sentence, didn't know how to tell Spyro this was it for him, that there was no way out. He breathed deeply, then exhaled, meeting Spyro's bright eyes. "I'll catch up with you guys, I promise. Just go on without me and I'll meet you outside."

"Spyro!" It was Cynder's voice, coming from somewhere behind him. It was followed by a roar as more water welled in from above, another chamber overflowing. But the purple dragon ignored it. He wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm coming for you, and that's that! Go through the main tunnel, Red's gate. I'll meet you half-way, but you gotta hurry!"

"But it's flooded!" Flame said. There was no way he was getting through there, and even if he was, Spyro shouldn't wait. He especially shouldn't try to get to him.

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

With that, he let go of Flame's claw and disappeared under the water, leaving him alone again.

Flame took a shaky breath, his heart thundering in his chest. A whole new responsibility had been laid on his shoulder, the knowledge that Spyro wouldn't leave without him. If he didn't make it, he would doom both of them.

He returned to the other side of the chamber, full of anguish and worry. The cave should be right next to the crevice he came from and he could just barely see the outline of the dark mound below the surface.

Terror gripped him like a pair of icy talons, threatening to crush him. It wasn't a fear of death, but a fear of diving into that dark hole. The black pit waited for him, black and seemingly never-ending, like a well with no bottom.

In fact, that's what it reminded him of. The well near Crocodile Swamp - and every fear he had felt that day coursed through him now.

But Spyro wouldn't leave without him. So he swallowed his fears, took a deep breath then dived.

At first, he was disorientated - water and bubbles everywhere. Then he looked around, found the tunnel and swam in its direction.

The water was at first warm, warm from those underground springs, but it got colder the deeper he swam. As he entered the cave, the light disappeared as well, so that soon he couldn't see where he was swimming. Like a blind dragon, he used his claws to guide him forward, guide him deeper into the depths.

After a while, his lungs started burning with a lack of oxygen. It got worse the deeper he got until the need to breathe was all he could think of. The steady strokes of his legs turned into a frantic kicking, he opened his mouth wanting to fill his lungs with well-needed oxygen, but instead, he filled them with water. He began sinking. He couldn't breathe.

Light. Light from somewhere above, perhaps the other chamber. But it was so far away, like a star in the sky, and he was getting dizzy. His vision was a dark tunnel, getting darker and darker, and the more water he inhaled, the more tired he became, like he was lulling himself into a deep sleep, and his lungs didn't hurt anymore. He closed his eyes.

He felt a sharp pain in his paw, claws digging into his scales. A purple paw, bigger than his own, had grabbed hold of him, and it was pulling him, pulling his heavy body upwards.

He found that he couldn't move, and he wasn't sure what was happening or where he was, or if he was dreaming or already dead. He wasn't sure if the feeling of Spyro's paw was really happening now or just a memory. Then darkness consumed him completely.

The sudden light burnt in his eyes, almost blinding him. His backclaws clawed behind him, trying to find purchase in the slimy cobblestone as the paw pulled him out from the dark hole and into a warm summer day.

He blinked, utterly surprised and completely dumbfounded when suddenly, he was greeted by Spyro's smiling mug.

"Hey, what are you doing down there, little dude?" The little purple dragon chuckled with that both energetic yet warm voice he had.

Before Flame could reply, he had pulled him out of the well and wrapped his arms around Flame's shivering shape.

Flame let out a surprised gasp. Spyro was the last dragon in the world he expected to show up to save him, and now he was hugging him!

"If they touch you again, you let me know," he whispered, and Flame nodded, but all he could think about was how warm the purple dragon was against his own, mud-covered body.

Spyro wasn't older than Flame was, only sixteen summers, but yet he felt so much bigger, so much stronger.

For reasons he couldn't quite understand, his heart raced in his chest. He rested his head on Spyro's shoulder, and Spyro didn't seem to mind.

After the hug, Spyro told him to wait by the well, then returned with a whole bunch of leaves he used to dry Flame

off with. "Do those bullies pick on you a lot?"

"Only sometimes..."

He heard a low growl emanating from the other dragon. "How long has this been going on?" he wanted to know.

Flame shrugged and looked away. He would rather not talk about it. It was embarrassing, not being able to defend oneself.

Spyro, noticing this, decided to change the topic. "You know, there's this problem back in the village that I gotta deal with, a mission of utmost *importance*..."

"Oh..." Flame felt his heart sink a bit. He was wondering when Spyro would find some excuse to dump him. "Yeah, I get it... I'll talk to you later," he said, wings drooping.

"Well, it's just, I could really use some help with this one..." Spyro moved closer, draping a wing over Flame's shoulder. "This isn't your regular gnorc attack or gem hunt, this is *way* more serious. I think I need a sidekick, someone I can trust. Think you're up for it?" He beamed at Flame.

"Wait... you want *me* along? You sure?" Flame wasn't trained like Spyro. He couldn't fight or find gems or do much of anything really. He couldn't even glide yet. How could he possibly be of help?

But Spyro seemed sure. "Absolutely," he said, looking at Flame without a hint of doubt or sarcasm. The two set off towards the village, Spyro practically dragging Flame along, and Flame wondering all the time if this was some sort of joke.

"So what's this problem you need my help with?" he asked, peering at Spyro skeptically.

If his suspicion was apparent, Spyro made no note of it. "It's an infestation of our precious village, nothing short of an attack really..." he said, making Flame's heart quicken a bit. "The village is overrun by sheep."

"Sheep!?"

"Ah yes, a full-blown sheep infestation, I'm afraid. Tomas wants his best dragon on this, that is to say, *me*, but the fluffy little bastards are so fast. I'm gonna need some backup on this one, and that's where you come in, compadre."

"Tomas asked you to deal with a *sheep infestation*?" Flame was even more sure now that this whole thing was a joke.

"Oh yeah, they've been getting real cocky lately too, trampling through our gardens, causing problems. Just wait till you see it..."

"If you say so...." Flame gave the purple dragon an odd look but decided to humor him for now.

When they finally reached the village, there were of course sheep around, but not more than regular. Some in the village among the houses and gardens, some were standing in the meadow or on the surrounding hills.

"There's the enemy," Spyro whispered, nudging Flame in the direction of one group of sheep that were chewing on some grass, not bothering anyone.

"We attack from different directions, I go straight forward and you flank them, you know, a Pincer Maneuver."

"A *what* maneuver? Wait...!"

But it was too late... Spyro was already charging in the direction of the sheep. They scattered, baaing and bouncing off different directions. Spyro caught up with a few of them, knocking one of its feet, toasting another with his fire breath. The roasted sheep poofed and turned into a butterfly which his dragonfly companion was all too happy to snatch up.

Flame set off in the direction of some of the fleeing sheep. He charged towards one of them, but it jumped out of the way before he could hit. He caught up with the other group, but they were jumping off over the hill before he could reach them. *Gnorc spit!*

Full of embarrassment, he returned to Spyro, but when the purple dragon saw Flame, he had a wide grin on his face.

"That was awesome, Flame!" he said, raising his paw to offer the dragon a fistbump.

Flame blinked in confusion. "But... I didn't catch a single one!"

"But you sure scared them off, which was the entire point! They'll think twice before they mess with Dragon Village again, won't they? Especially with *Flame the Red Terror* guarding it...", he said, bumping shoulders with Flame.

"I guess..." Flame stifled a small smile. Suddenly, a warm feeling welled up in his chest, something he had never quite felt before.

"Alright, enough talking. Oh! oh! Let's get those fat ones over there, they look like they're planning something." He pointed towards a couple of innocent-looking sheep. "You attack this time, and I'll flank 'em. You ready Flamey?"

"*Flamey?*" Flame had never had a nickname before. He nodded eagerly. "Yeah sure, let's get 'em!" he said, feeling a jolt of excitement, even though he knew how stupid this whole thing was.

They must have spent hours chasing sheep around the village. They chased them over Mrs. Eldrid's vegetable garden and through the bustling town center, probably causing more trouble than the sheep ever did. But it was fun.

After a while, Flame's paws had started aching from running around all day and he flopped down in the grass, utterly exhausted.

With a thud, Spyro fell down next to him, panting. Sparx buzzed to a landing on his horn, happy and full of butterflies.

"That was pretty heckin' awesome. Thanks for the help, bud," Spyro said, turning to Flame with a bright smile. "I had no idea you were so fast!"

The red dragon cooked his head as if he didn't quite hear him. "I'm... fast"?

"Yeah, totally! You might want to practice your aim a bit, but you're definitely among the fastest dragons I've seen."

"Oh wow... thanks..." Flame's face warmed at the compliment. *Spyro thinks you're fast...* Mostly when people commented Flame, it was to tell him he was too small or too weak.

"I had fun too," he added, "But tell me the truth, the elders didn't really ask you to save the village from a bunch of harmless sheep?"

Spyro rubbed the frills at the back of his neck. "Well... maybe not. But I felt like taking the afternoon off. And you seemed like you could use some fun too."

"But won't Tomas be mad?"

"Maybe, but I don't give a gnorc's ass about what he thinks," Spyro scoffed. "Besides, it seems like you had a shitty day, and I wanted to cheer you up..."

He paused, then looked down at his tailtip, twisting it between his claws while searching for the right words. "I know I've been pretty busy lately," he said finally. "...and I've been thinking a bit about the talk we had at the beach the other day, and I guess I came off as a bit of a douche..."

Flame looked at Spyro, blinking in surprise. He didn't know what to say. Spyro *had* undoubtedly seemed a bit douchey, but Flame had never expected Spyro to feel the same way about it.

"But hey," Spyro looked up at Flame, "I've decided I'm gonna worry less about what the elders think, and do more things that I like. And I'd like to hang out with you more." He looked at Flame, a hopeful smile growing on his muzzle, and Flame suddenly realized how cute the purple dragon was. In fact, he was totally handsome. "If that's cool with you, of course," he added.

Flame was a little shocked by all this. He looked at his purple friend who just today had rescued him from his bullies and risked Tomas' wrath to cheer him up. Spyro had barely paid any attention to him in years, and it had been especially bad since he took out Elder Red.

He had started to think their friendship was over, but here he was, all but apologizing, and wanting to be friends again. Maybe he was just doing it because he felt sorry for Flame, maybe he'd just forget about him again, but for once,

Flame decided to trust Spyro.

"I'd love that," he said with a smile of his own, extending his paw to Spyro so they could shake on it. Spyro ignored his paw - instead, he pulled in Flame for a tight hug, so sudden that the red dragon yelped in surprise.

Spyro's forearms wrapped around him, pulling Flame close to his chest, and Flame felt his heart speed up again. After a while, he calmed down, closed his eyes and just enjoyed the moment, a big stupid grin growing on his face. They lay like that, side by side in the grass, embracing like they hadn't done since they were hatchlings. This was more than worth getting thrown down a well for.

They stayed in the grass, looking at the passing clouds and talking about nothing in particular until the sun went down.

Before they parted, Spyro told him he'd come by the next day. He even gave Flame another hug, the third in one evening!

That night, when Flame curled up in his bed, he couldn't stop thinking about his weird day with Spyro. In a way, it felt like this unexpected reunion with his old friend might take his life in a whole new direction. He didn't know where it would end, if Spyro would let him down again, or if they would stay together this time, but whatever was in store for him he felt happier about the future that he had in a long while.

If it meant that he could be friends with Spyro, getting stuck in that well was totally worth it.

That night, Flame slept better than he had in ages.

~ ~ ~

There it is, chapter 10! I hope you enjoyed it. I realize it's probably the darkest chapter I've written so far, but in a way, I also think it's the most optimistic. As always, let me know what you think in the comments!

And thanks for being so patient with me and my highly irregular upload schedule! You guys mean the world to me and I really don't want to let you down, and I hope this chapter, even though it's shorter than the previous ones, was worth the wait. And this is not the last chapter. There is another one coming!

PS! Remember [\[url=https://www.furaffinity.net/view/37086976/\]this\[/url\]](https://www.furaffinity.net/view/37086976/) piece? Now that I think about it, I think it fits pretty well with the two dragons hugging in the last scene, so I've retroactively decided that's what it's for!

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!
