Spyro's Old Flame

Chapter 12: Flame's Plan

Flame had already checked the plasma sockets twice, but he figured he might as well do it again, just in case. If the wiring wasn't right, the four oscillation cones wouldn't get enough juice and the force field wouldn't work. That or the cones could explode and electrocute everyone in the vicinity. He decided he better check all four of them as well, just to be on the safe side.

Red's tech might as well be black magic for all the young dragon knew, and he was pretty sure some of it was. Locating an intact power generator and cables to connect it with hadn't been too hard, and with Ashes' help, they had found a decent amount of dark gems too. She even came up with the idea to hide the cables in some seaweed, so the elders wouldn't see the trap until it was too late. An addition without which, Flame had to admit, his plan might not work.

Meanwhile, Spyro had scrounged the old library for books that might be helpful and returned proudly carrying no less than three volumes on dark gem electrodynamics. The schematics in particular had been very handy. And Ember was out guarding the entrance. Everyone had pitched in and things were coming together nicely.

Yet, Flame felt himself getting more stressed by the minute. Hooking up the generator had taken him longer than he would have liked, and he was also finding it a little hard to concentrate with everyone running about...

"Hey, Flame," Spyro nudged his shoulder, then nudged him again until he looked up. "Hey, check this out!" The purple dragon dropped into the shallow water with a splash, then rolled over on his back, his arms and legs shooting out in a horrible display of rigor mortis. He even lolled his tongue out to really sell the scene.

"Ehm... yeah that looks great, Spyro.", Flame said with an encouraging smile. "But it doesn't have to be perfect, just remember to lie still."

Behind Spyro, Cynder gave an exaggerated sigh. "You look ridiculous, like a dog playing dead. I can even see you *breathing*."

"Oh, surely nobody is gonna notice that," Spyro flushed a little, looking down at his chest. "Maybe if I were to hold my breath?" He gave it a try, and in the process, puffed up his chest which only made him look more like a suffocating dragon than a dead one.

Cynder looked at him, unimpressed, then shook her head. "This is never going to work..."

"You worry too much! Besides, I wanna see *you* do one better. You haven't even practiced your corpse-look yet."

The dragoness gave a scoff. "Playing dead is so... undignified. I still think *my* idea is better."

The two had been bickering all morning, mostly about the viability of Flame's plan, which Cynder wasn't a big fan of. Her plan was considerably simpler: she wanted to jump the elders the second they entered the cave and tear them apart limb by limb. And while Flame had to admit that her approach had its appeal, he doubted Astor would give them the chance. They'd never risk exposing themselves unless they thought Spyro and Cynder were dead.

Besides, he had a strong suspicion that convincing the village of Tomas and Astor's guilt would be a lot harder if Cynder had torn them to pieces first.

"Look, I know it sucks but it's just for a few minutes," he said to the much bigger black dragon. "But we gotta lure them in. And this is the best way to find out if they're really guilty."

"Exactly!" Spyro chimed in. "We're like the cheese in a mousetrap, and when the elders get close enough - snap!" He smacked his talons together for added effect.

Cynder groaned and lifted her wings in exasperation. "Fine I give up... but this better work. And if any of them pokes me or anything, I *will* bite."

"Deal," Flame promised, then breathed a small sigh of relief when the dragoness strode off to talk to Ashes. Now he could return his attention to the plugs.

It wasn't that Cynder was entirely wrong. Flame's plan had more moving parts. The elders could see them breathing, or the trap could fail. It had taken a while for him to convince his friends that this was the way to go.

If things went wrong now, it would be Flame's fault, and Flame's alone. And could he truly blame Cynder for not trusting him? He thought back to yesterday's events, how he had fumbled about in the dark and barely found the chamber in time to rescue them. How he had almost drowned himself in the process. Not to mention how all of it could have been easily been prevented if Flame had just put two and two together sooner. He had *seen* Tomas and Astor that night. He should have known something was up. But he was too damn worried about not seeming cowardly in front of Spyro to remember.

At the very least, he shouldn't have let them go in there alone...

He shuddered, but forced his mind back to the task at hand. *You can't think about that later. Once the elders are taken care of... once you've set things right...*

At least the fasteners seemed to sit on fine, Flame thought. Unless, of course, he had accidentally damaged one of the pins when he plugged them in. Had he checked the pins? He couldn't remember.

In a moment, his talons were back on the device, disconnecting the plugs to check them for the third time, his mind already racing with worst-case scenarios. So many things could go wrong: the power-up could fail, the batteries could explode, the elders could notice the cones or the cables and run off...

He was interrupted when a pair of larger purple paws found his. Spyro sat down next to him, draping a wing over Flame's shoulder. "Hey, everything is gonna be fine, Flamey..."

Flame nodded, hoping he could share his mate's optimism. Of course, Spyro would say it's a good plan, he would support him no matter what.

"And don't worry about Cynder. She's just a little on edge. This is the second time they've tried to assassinate her after all. Heh." Spyro let out a dry laugh. "I guess it gets a little tiresome after a while..."

Flame didn't feel like laughing. Spyro was joking to ease the tension, as he always did, but they both knew what Astor and Tomas were capable of. And Flame also knew that Spyro was just as nervous about the two elders getting away as Cynder - he just didn't want to show it and risk making Flame even more nervous.

"Cynder could be right," he murmured. "If the force field fails..."

"Then they'll fail... " Spyro shrugged. "And we'll just have to get them some other way. Your plan is still the best we got, dude." He gave Flame an encouraging smile.

Flame didn't reply. He just looked at the cables in his talons, wondering why Spyro was putting so much faith in him. This was all Flame's plan, but ultimately, Spyro had been the one to convince everyone to go for it. But Flame wasn't a hero like Spyro. He wasn't used to having dragons rely on him.

He had tried not to worry too much for Spyro's sake. He had spent the entire morning trying to push away the doubts, and he had been so busy with setting everything up that it had mostly worked, but now they were coming back like water tumbling through a broken dam...

He heaved a deep sigh, nose dipping, wings sagging. His thoughts involuntarily found their way back to that cave. The water rushing in, reaching up to Cynder's throat... Spyro, climbing the rock so he could keep her head above the surface... Flame had seen it all on the monitor, safe from the control room he should have found much sooner.

Then he remembered diving, the ice-cold water surrounding his scales, Spyro's talons grabbing him before everything went dark. He had been so scared, so lost. So close to screwing it all up. Maybe, in a sense, he had.

"Hey," Spyro dipped his head to meet Flame's eyes. "What's going on inside that little noggin of yours?"

"Nothing," Flame said reflexively, forcing a smile. "I'm good."

Spyro let out a disapproving grumble. He inched closer, nudging Flame's flank.

"Hey, what are you doing? I said I was okay..."

Spyro didn't answer, just nudged him again... and again... and again... He wouldn't stop.

"Okay okay, fine," Flame sighed, giving up. "I just.... and it's not a big deal, okay? But I just can't stop thinking about yesterday..."

"Of course you can't... I can't either." Spyro said. "That shit was scary. We both almost died..."

"It's not really that..." Flame said. "It's just that... I really screwed up, didn't I? If I hadn't forgotten about seeing Astor and Tomas that night, none of this would have happened. I should have remembered sooner. I should have found you faster. I should have..."

"Flame... stop that," Spyro tried, but Flame just shook his head.

"I know what you're trying to do, Spyro, but let's face it. This was my first attempt at being like you, being a hero, and I do everything wrong and almost drown myself in the process. I'm just... useless."

"Dude! DUDE!" Spyro flew up. He sat down in front of Flame, gripping him by the shoulders. "You *cannot* be serious right now! If it wasn't for you, me and Cynder would have been dead! Who cares if you got there a little late, hell none of us knew what we were doing. But you saved us and that's what really matters!"

"All I did was wreck a generator. Any dragon could have done that..." Flame whispered, turning from Spyro to look at the ground. "It took me so long to find you. You could have... could have..." His throat tightened up, preventing him from finishing the sentence. Suddenly, tears burned in his eyes.

He heard a shuffling as Spyro inched closer. With gentle talons, he lifted Flame's chin so that their eyes met. "You're wrong. Not just anyone could have done what you did. Most dragons wouldn't have thought to find us with the smell of dark gems. Most dragons wouldn't have been fast enough, small enough, *brave* enough to crawl into that crevice..." Spyro paused for a second. "I'm not even sure I would..."

What a ridiculous thing to say. Of course, Spyro would have dared to go down there if he could. Spyro was never afraid... or was he?

"But... I failed, didn't?" Flame asked, looking at Spyro with wet eyes. "I mean... because I almost drowned, you had to go back and save me when you should have been getting Cynder out."

"And if it wasn't for you, me and Cynder would have drowned! Yes, you passed out. So what!? You still went down there, knowing you might not come back, to save us. *That's* what makes you a hero." Spyro brought a gentle paw to Flame's wet cheek, wiping away the tears. "You're *my* hero," he said. "And I'm only alive because of you. You're the best little hero anyone could ask for."

And before Flame could object or argue, he wrapped his wings around him and pulled the red dragon close. Flame remained still, letting the soft wing membrane envelop him like a cloak. Like a shield against his own worries, leaving no space between him and his mate's warm chest and softly beating heart.

It was actually... quite effective.

He exhaled, melting into his partner's embrace. "I just don't wanna screw this one up you know?" he whispered into Spyro's scales. "I can't let them get away again..."

"You're not gonna screw this up..." Spyro's soft rumble from above as he dealt soft nuzzles to Flame's forehead and between his horns. "I promise. "

Flame buried his face in Spyro's chest. If his mate said he can do it, he would simply have to try to believe it. For a while, he just sat there, listening to the steady beats of Spyro's heart and water dripping in the cave. Further back, Cynder and Ashes were still talking about something, probably, how to prevent the elders from escaping if it should come to it.

"I just wish you would tell me when you're feeling like this," Spyro said after a while. "I mean when you get these worries. So that we can talk about it. So I can help you."

Flame looked up at Spyro. Was he serious? Did he have any idea how much of his life Flame spent freaking out over things? It was practically his hobby. "But... what if that's all the time? Like several times a day?" he asked, wiping away a leftover tear from his cheek.

"Then I guess we'd have to talk about it all the time, several times a day," his mate smiled. Although behind his smile, his violet eyes were completely serious. "Do you promise," he asked, "that you'll tell me?"

It was hard to say no, especially with Spyro looking at him with those pleading eyes. Eyes that wanted nothing but to help. But he had no idea how bad it could get. What if he'd get tired of Flame? Heck, what if he thought that Flame was crazy? But if he said no, Spyro would be heartbroken. Flame breathed deeply and exhaled. He was simply gonna

have to trust his mate. "I promise," he said, meaning it.

"Thanks, hun! It means a lot..." Spyro squeezed him tightly, and Flame felt warm relief grow in his chest, relief and maybe a bit of *admiration*. Admiration for the first dragon that had offered to share a burden Flame had struggled with alone for so long. He raised his nose to nuzzle Spyro tenderly, and the purple dragon hugged him tighter.

"You know..." he said after a while. "Cynder was really impressed with you, yesterday."

"She was?" Spyro could be expected to be proud of Flame no matter what, but Cynder was a different matter...

"Yeah totally! And she's rarely ever impressed. She mentioned how brave you were to dive right down that dark hole you went through, especially after the cave was flooded..."

"Well... it wasn't *that* flooded." Flame said, a small blush growing on his cheeks. "And it was really more instincts than bravery, you know..."

"Oh you," Spyro pulled his wing away to deliver a big wet lick across Flame's nose, who huffed in surprise. "You gotta learn to take a compliment, dude," he laughed, then assaulted Flame with another lick. "Now that you're a real, bonafide hero, you're at risk of hearing one now and then."

Flame groaned and wiped some drool off his nose. "I promise I will... if you can promise to warn me next time you're gonna slobber all over my face."

"No deal," Spyro replied, eyes glinting with mischief. He gave Flame another extra wet lick, then used a wing-thumb to lift Flame's nose towards him. Before he knew it, their muzzles met. Spyro's lips, warm wet and soft, pressed against Flame's. The red dragon's eyes shot open at the sudden kiss, but a quick glance in Cynder's direction confirmed she was still talking with Ashes, and Ember was out scouting.

They were finally alone. As alone as they were going to get any time soon, anyway.

Flame closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and gave in to the wet warmth of their kiss. It sent shivers through his body, especially when their tongues touched. For a moment, the rest of the world disappeared. Until...

"THEY'RE COMING!"

It was his sister. She burst through the entrance, rushing up to the two males, panting hard. "I saw them... I saw them on the road... Tomas and Astor. And they'll be here soon too!"

She stopped and cocked her head when she saw the two boys wrapped up in each other. "Oh... And here I thought you guys were supposed to work on the force field thing."

Flame startled, quickly freeing himself from Spyro's arms and wings. "We were... I mean... we are!"

Next to him, Spyro just chuckled, pulling his wings in and getting up on all fours. "How far away are they?"

"Not far. Maybe a few minutes, at most."

"A few minutes!?" "*Gnorc-spit!*"! Flame was sure he'd have more time. They had left Magnus before sunrise just to make sure they'd have all morning. The water had barely receded out of the chamber yet.

"What's wrong?" Spyro asked.

"I never got the chance to actually test the damn thing. I have no idea if the trap actually works!" Flame's anxious heart kicked into overdrive at the thought of that force field crumbling when the time came. He looked at the sockets, then at Ember whose expression quickly turned to worry.

"So... what do we do, bro?" She asked. "Do we like... abort?"

Ashes and Cynder had come too, and now, suddenly, everyone was looking at Flame, expecting him to make a decision. Expecting him to know what to do, as if had ever been in charge of anything important before. As if he had even the slightest idea what he was doing.

"I... I..." he stammered. His eyes found Spyro's; his mate looked at him with an encouraging smile. Whatever happened, he would always have Spyro's support.

It's too late to pull out now...

They trust you...

Your stupid force field is simply gonna have to work.

Flame swallowed hard, then turned to his friends. "Let's do it." He said. "Ashes, Ember, go hide by the entrance! And you two," he pointed at Cynder and Spyro, "You know what to do."

Spyro gave a claws-up, then he and Cynder were off to their platform where they promptly dropped to the ground, looking all dead. Ashes and Ember took position behind the rocks by the entrance, each one each side like planned, just in case they'd try to escape. Flame quickly attached the last two cable plugs, checked the holdings, then darted off to his own hiding spot behind one of the columns, where the backup switch was hidden.

Everyone was in position. Everyone was ready. Flame's heart was pounding so hard he was afraid the old dragons might hear it and his wings were wet with sweat. He just prayed they wouldn't see the cables. That they wouldn't detect the faint brimstone smell of dark gems, that they wouldn't see the way Spyro's chest moved ever so slightly as he lied in the faint light.

Minutes passed, one quieter than the other, so many that Flame was beginning to think they weren't coming, that maybe Ember had seen wrong. Or maybe they were heading to another cave? Then, suddenly voices, echoing softly from the entrance. Shadows against the cave wall, accented with the flickering light of lanterns. Flame's heart froze when he finally saw Astor's green face appear by the darkness of the cave, followed shortly by Tomas.

They were careful, slithering inside the chamber without making a sound, slinking from column to column with their lanterns dimmed. Astor's eyes glimmered in the darkness, shifting back and forth, left and right, and Flame held his breath as they got closer and closer to his hiding place. His claws grasped the cave floor - if they saw him he would have to pounce before they had a chance to escape.

To his relief, they didn't see him. As Flame had expected, the old dragons went straight for the raised stone platform at the center of the chamber; where that force field trap had now used to be; where Spyro and Cynder's bodies clearly lay dead. Or supposedly dead.

As soon as the elders saw the two dragons lying there, they seemed to relax. In fact, Flame could faintly hear Astor breathe a sigh of relief. "Well, that takes care of that..." he heard him say, and Tomas even laughed.

Laughed!

Rage welled up inside Flame, pulsing through his muscles, turning his vision red. But he forced himself to remain still. They weren't within the force field yet.

The two old dragons continued to Spyro and Cynder to take a closer look, now much less careful, walking as if they didn't have a care in the world. They didn't see the cables, didn't notice that the active power cones were blinking red. Then, finally, they stepped over that invisible line.

And nothing happened.

Flame felt a cold shiver travel down his spine. He grabbed the backup switch, sweaty talons fumbling in the darkness to find the button. He found it, pressed it and again nothing. Just a low buzzing from the poles and sparks shooting out from the wires.

Astor froze. He had heard it. He stopped Tomas with a claw, then raised his lantern to look around. "Is anyone there?"

Panicking, Flame pressed the button again... and again and again. Finally, he realized the cable wasn't connected to the switch properly. He pressed the plug in place, clicked the button again, and then suddenly, finally, the thing buzzed to life. A shining blue grid shot out from each of the four corner cones, instantly surrounding the two dragons.

Tomas let out a frightened shriek and shied back from the grid, dropping his lantern in the process. Astor, equally shocked, took his staff and struck it against the force field. "What in all the realms is this!?"

It had worked! They're trapped...

Flame could barely believe it. But he had no time to celebrate now. It was time for the next part of his plan. He composed himself for just a second, heart beating in his chest, then jumped out from his hiding place.

"F...Flame?" Astor's jaw nearly fell to the ground when he saw the red dragon. "What in all the realms are you doing here!?"

Flame took a deep breath, ready to channel his inner actor. Then, with the most innocent voice he could manage, he answered the elder. "I was just exploring the caves and... Woah!" He ran up to the force field and fell to his haunches to poke at it like he had never seen anything like it in his life. "What is this blue grid thing!?"

"Nevermind that now, boy. Can't you see that we're trapped?!" Astor growled. "Yeah, go and make yourself useful and look for a switch," Tomas added.

"Alright Flame, time for the hard part..." the red dragon thought to himself. "Alright, I'll look for the switch thing. But wait!" He turned to the platform where the two supposedly dead dragons were lying. "Isn't that Spyro and Cynder!?"

He ran up to the platform, and his talons flew to his cheeks in an expression of melodrama. "Oh no! I think they might be dead!" Even in the darkness, he could see Spyro's chest rising and falling, and he gave a silent prayer to whatever ancestors might be watching that the elders wouldn't notice. "What do you think happened to them!?"

"Oh my... how very err... tragic," Tomas managed, trying to look as shocked as possible. "They must have somehow wandered in here by accident and... ehm..." he wobbled his talons around in the air, trying to think of something. Behind him, Astor was looking increasingly frustrated and worried.

"Well, I suppose I ought to run straight back to the village and tell everyone, right?" Flame suggested, innocently. "I'll tell them that I found you guys here, trapped, and Spyro and Cynder are dead somehow." He peered curiously at the two old dragons, trying to hold back the devious smile that seemed to want to grow on his maw. *I gocha now, bastards...*

His suggestion had exactly the response he had expected. "Don't!" Astor shouted. "I mean... it's better you get us out of here first! Then go straight home and let us take care of this!" Behind him, Tomas looked petrified. Neither of them seemed particularly keen on Flame involving anyone else. Clearly, whatever story they were planning to sell the village about the tragic heroes' demise didn't involve them trapped in a force field a couple of feet away from their place of death.

"Sure, I can get you out first, but... what did you say you were doing here again?"

"None of your damn business, whelp!" Astor snarled. "I've had enough of your questions. Get us out of here right this instance!!" He struck the force field with his staff again, sparks flying. The elder had already lost his patience.

"And do you guys know what's up with all the dark gems?" Flame asked in the same innocent tone. "It's weird... When I got down here, there were dark gems everywhere and one of the generators was running. But only members of the council have access to dark gems. Like you guys."

By now all color had left poor Tomas' face. His trembling mouth opened and closed again and again, like a stranded fish gasping for air, as he scrambled to think of some excuse.

Next to him, Astor had become uncharacteristically calm. He didn't say anything at first, didn't threaten or scream. Instead, he just fixed Flame with his eyes, hard, piercing eyes that always seemed to dig into his very soul. And even now as an adult, even with a force field buzzing between them, those eyes still made Flame feel like a helpless little dragonet. "What are we trying to say here, Flame?" he asked, his voice a low growl. "Spit it out, boy."

"This is it," Flame thought. *This is when you find out if you were right or wrong...*

He cleared his throat, then steeled himself to meet Astor's eyes. "I *saw* you guys last night. I *know* you lured Spyro and Cynder into that cave. And...," Flame turned to Tomas who stared at him with wide eyes. "I saw you carrying a satchel full of dark gems. Like the one you have there now..."

Tomas gave a sudden yelp, hugging the satchel to hide it from Flame's view. In fact, he did it so suddenly that a fist-sized gem slipped out, clinking along the cave floor. An unintentional admission of guilt that sent Tomas scrambling to pick it up while Astor groaned and buried his face in the palm of his talons.

"Buuuuut... I guess nobody needs to know that. Maybe it'd be easier if I simply forgot to mention anything about you or dark gems when I talk to the villagers. It would just lead to a bunch of questions, right?" He looked closely at Astor's face, curious to see his reaction. "Maybe it would be easier if we could all just say there was a cave in..."

Both dragons just stared at Flame, blinking in confusion. "But... that's not... but why would you...?" Tomas stammered. "Yes... Why?" Astor asked.

Flame had expected the question. He had an answer ready, one that he had rehearsed a hundred times this morning, but saying it now still made him feel terrible, especially within earshot of Spyro.

"Well... maybe I'm sick of those two arrogant dragons being everything anyone ever talks about on this stupid island. Maybe I'm sick of seeing Spyro strut around, hogging all the glory. Maybe I'm sick of being second-best, of living in his shadow. And after that Homecoming Party... how he and his new dragoness friend humiliated me in front of everyone..." Flame paused and turned his back to the dragons, clenching his fist dramatically. "Maybe the realm would truly be better off without those two."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Astor's eyes remained fixed on Flame, studying him as if he was trying to determine how much they might have in common after all. Then finally, a disgusting, vile grin grew on the old dragon's beak-like muzzle. "Maybe you're brighter than I gave you credit for, boy," he said. "Very well, I think you might be right, maybe it's in the village's best interest we simply say there was a cave in and leave it that. Even heroes have accidents after all..."

Flame felt a shiver travel down his spine. Up until now, some small part of him had held onto the hope that this was all in his head, that the elders he grew up with couldn't possibly do something so vile. But now, looking at Astor's grinning face, there was no doubt. The elders had wanted Spyro and Cynder dead, and now they wanted Flame's help to cover it up too.

He tried not to let his disgust show as he continued. "Alright then, we have a deal. But I just have one more question... I know why I want them gone, but what about you guys? You seemed to be really proud of Spyro."

"Ha!" Tomas scoffed. "Let's just say our prodigy wasn't as *loyal* as we had hoped." "A disappointment really," Astor chimed in. "To be perfectly frank, I never really cared for that little varmint."

"Just so you know, the feeling is mutual," Spyro's voice made both elders jump. They turned to the platform where the dead dragons in question had mysteriously awakened from their deaths and were approaching the field.

"You... you're ALIVE!?" Tomas gasped, his face all white. He looked like he had seen a ghost, or two ghosts more specifically. Two very big, very angry dragon ghosts.

"You're not looking as relieved to see us alive as one would expect," Cynder said with a low growl, fangs glimmering in the faint light as she circled the force field like a shark circling its prey. "Would you have preferred we stay dead, hmm?"

"Oh... Oh, we're just relieved! So relieved!" Astor quickly exclaimed a painfully fake smile etched on his bearded muzzle. He then elbowed Tomas who nodded vigorously. "Ah yes, very relieved. Ehm, how much did you hear exactly?"

"Enough," Cynder snarled, fiery teal eyes pinning the elders under her gaze. "Enough to know it was a mistake to give you slimy, treacherous, two-faced little serpents a second chance..."

"By the ancestors, surely you don't believe we'd ever actually want to hurt you or Spyro!" Tomas cried. "Yeah, the whole thing about the cave-in, that was his idea!" Astor pointed his staff at Flame. "He wanted to cover it up. He wanted to take your place!"

"Oh, is that so?" Spyro made his way over to Flame. Then, to the surprise of both elders, leaned in to nuzzle the smaller dragon. "You did great bud. "Thanks to you, we got the elders trapped *and* a confession."

Flame's heart fluttered as he rubbed noses with Spyro, the tension in his body replaced by melting relief. The elders were captured. Everyone was safe and unharmed. And yes, they had a confession or as close as they were gonna get to it. Things had gone according to plan after all.

When he turned back to their captives, he saw that Astor's face had gone from its usual green to a bright tomato-red.

"You... you were in on it!? Why, you lying, worthless little whelpling! When I get out of here, I'll make you regret the day you were hatched. Why, I'll... Arghhhhh!"

The elder screamed and fell back on his rump when Spyro threw himself against the force field. The ground shook and the force field itself sparked in protest when the purple dragon grabbed it with his claws. Flames danced between his teeth, smoke coiling from his nostrils as he leaned in over the grid, towering the two dragons within.

"If either of you ever talks to Flame like that again..." he growled. "If either of you as much as *looks* at him... then

council and laws be damned, we're gonna have us a nice big elder BBQ, right on the temple steps. Is that understood?"

When no reply came from the two shivering dragons, he let out a plume of fire which sent them both crying and scurrying to the other end of the field to avoid the flames. "You understand me!?" he roared again, louder. So loud that even Flame got a little scared.

Tomas immediately fell to his knees. "Mercy," he begged, clasping his talons together. Astor just blinked, in absolute shock. It was clear no dragon had ever spoken to him like that before. "I understand," he muttered finally, lowering his gaze, his cheeks flushed red. Spyro wasn't a violent dragon, but in this instance, it was clear that he meant his threat and Astor, although humiliated, knew better than to challenge him.

"We won't hurt you if you just behave," Flame said calmly, wanting to diffuse the situation a tad. "We're gonna let the other elders on the council decide what to do with you... after they've heard of your crimes."

"What!?" Tomas got back to his feet and grabbed the grid. No no no, don't do that," he pleaded. Don't tell the council - they won't approve of this at all!"

Cynder barked out a laugh. "Ha! Well, that's putting it mildly isn't it?"

"I think that's enough talking for now," Spyro decided. "I'll fetch us some rope, then we'll tie them up and haul them back to the village, let them be their problem."

"Over my dead body!" Astor roared suddenly, reaching for Tomas's satchel. At first, Flame didn't realize what he was doing, not until he saw the coal-black dark gem in Astor's claws, saw him raising it to throw it towards them, and by then it was already too late.

"Spyro!, Cynder! Look ou..."

A bright white flash blinded Flame and threw him backward while an intense wave of heat washed against his scales. When his vision came back, he was lying on the cave floor and there was nothing but a smoking scorch mark where the force field used to be. Then he saw Spyro and Cynder, lying on the ground, coughing. Flame rushed up to them.

"Are you guys okay!?"

"We're fine, we're fine..." Spyro said, helping Cynder to her feet. He rubbed some soot from his eyes. "Tomas... Astor... where did they go?"

Flame turned around. The old dragons had used the sudden chaos to make their escape and were already bounding for the exit as fast as their legs could carry them. But Flame had prepared for that.

Before either of the elders could reach the tunnel, Ember and Ashes jumped forth from their own hiding place where they had been waiting until now, blocking their escape. Terrified, Tomas let out a yelp in panic, but Astor was already reaching for another dark gem to throw.

He wouldn't get the chance. Spyro was already on his feet, and with a roar, leaped the entire distance over to the elders. He landed between them and the exit so hard the entire cavern shook. A bright plume of fire sent them flying and screaming in the opposite direction, only to be knocked off their feet by a very angry Cynder.

The two elders looked like a pair of tiny mice trapped between the paws of a furious black panther. Tomas raised his staff to slap Cynder on the nose, which only made Cynder angrier. With a growl, she snapped the staff between her teeth and pinned the troublesome dragon under her claws.

However, the distraction was enough for Astor to slip away from under the dragoness and Flame saw what he was doing. The elder dragon was grabbing for one of the dark gems left on the ground. He took one in his claws, then aimed, not at the ground this time - but right at Cynder. He wasn't looking to make another distraction. He wanted to hurt her.

Time seemed to freeze to slow-motion as Astor raised the dark gem with a wicked grin. "Cynder! Look out!" Spyro roared somewhere behind Flame, but he was too far away, and so were Ember and Ashes. There was only Flame.

Knowing what he had to do, he took aim and charged at Astor. His horns connected with him with such force that the green dragon flew off the ground. He landed on his side with a loud groan, the dark gem slipping from his claws, having missed its target. Flame dashed towards the dark gem, reaching for it in the air, but again, it was too late.

There was another bright flash as the gem fell to the ground. Another wave of heat, burning his scales. Blinded, he

reached for Astor, and his claws just barely brushed the other dragon's scales, and when his vision came back, the old dragon had already slipped away again.

He was running, not for the exit this time, not for Flame, but the gate. The old gate to Red's Lair.

Spyro and Cynder had seen it too, but none of them were close enough. The purple dragon caught up with Astor just as the heavy steel doors slammed shut before his nose. "Gnorc-spit!" he roared, throwing his paws at the steel slab.

Flame felt his heart sink. *He got away. You let him get away...*

Cynder appeared on Spyro's side, not about to give up. "Stand back," she ordered, then opened her maw wide. What came out wasn't fire, but a torrent of wind that struck against the titan door with such force that stalactites fell from the roof and the ground shook. The tremor reverberated through the chamber, so hard Flame was worried it might cave in. He had never seen a dragon do anything like that before.

But still, the heavy doors remained standing.

"Dammit!" Cynder snarled. "How do we get him out!?"

"You're not! Nothing can break down those titanium doors!" Tomas shouted from the ground where Ember and Ashes were pinning him down. "There are many ways out, but only one way in. We know this place better than you younglings ever did, we helped to build it! You'll never catch..." the elder was shut up when Ember who had been pinning him down gave him a firm bash between the horns.

Flame sprung to his feet, heart racing. He met Spyro's eyes, the purple dragon had a look of defeat on him. Deflated. Cynder was clawing on the unyielding door, unwilling to give up, but there was no way she was getting through.

You gotta do something... Flame. Anything!

Then his eyes fell on the crevice. That dark, tight, disgusting little crevice he had used to get into the Red's Lair before. When he had to save Spyro. When he nearly drowned. Oh, how he had hated squeezing through it, but right now it made his heart jump with sudden hope.

He bounded to the crevice, grabbed the edge and pulled himself up. "I'll get the door open!" he shouted back at the other dragons.

"Wait!" Spyro caught up to him, grabbing his tail "You're... you're not going in there alone are you?"

Yes, he was. Flame had never been so sure about anything in his life. "I can do this," he promised Spyro. "There's no time, neither you nor Cynder can get through. I *gotta* do this."

Spyro hesitated. He looked at Flame, then exhaled deeply. "I know you can," he said. "Go get him. And be careful."

Flame turned around, grabbed Spyro by his cheek and pressed their lips together. The kiss lasted for just a second, but still ignited Flame with a surge of courage and determination. It was all he needed. He then turned around and descended into the dark tunnel.

Astor wouldn't know about the crevice, Flame was sure. He would have the element of surprise on his side. The elder was not getting away again.

The runt is coming for you...

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There it is, chapter 12! I'm sorry for the cliff-hanger, but I really wanted to get this one out before it's back to work tomorrow. Hope you enjoyed it and, as always, don't be too shy to let me know what you thought in the comments! I always love feedback, positive and negative!

Btw, I have the next chapter almost finished, so hopefully, the wait won't be too long this time! As always, thanks a bunch for reading!

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!

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