

He's pretty much fucked.

Denya leapt back from his opponent, gasping for air. In all fairness, dying in smoldering, fiery ruins was a pretty badass way to go, despite the surrounding flames making it hard to breathe, or even see for that matter. The heat was intense; the fox wondering when the very air would start burning his fur, much like how every breath he took burnt his lungs. One wrong step and he would surely go up in flames, although at the moment that was the least of his concerns.

His bow staff, his trusty little walking stick that had seen him through thick and thin all these years, *wasn't* in his hands when it really should be! No, it had been knocked away with horrific ease and now lay amidst a series of smoldering ruins, with only the silver-tipped pommel sticking out. The fox wasn't afraid of it burning now; no, it'd been enchanted to never burn, break, or even splinter his fingers.

But it *wasn't* enchanted to deal with whatever the hell he was fighting right now!

"Just so you know," Denya huffed, raising his fists and spreading out his legs. "I'm even better at hand-to-hand. That stick was just to handicap myself." That lie was more to himself than his opponent, because he wasn't too sure that *thing* he was fighting was capable of listening.

Seriously, what the hell *was* this thing! School called them "Amalgamations" but they looked more like abominations! This one in particular was just some looming, 8 foot tall, canine-ish monster that, at the moment, may as well be the devil itself! It was rippling with muscle to the point it was a miracle its skin could contain it, with large patches of its brown fur simply missing and revealing the onyx skin beneath. Stupid damn bioweapons.

Denya had seen this thing tear through his squad like ribbons, and they at least had their dragons and weapons to fall back on. Now, it was targeting him.

Alas, those pointy ears on the amalgamation must have been for show, otherwise it *totally* would have been intimidated by Denya's prideful boasting. No, instead it charged straight at him, preparing for a strike. Phew, alright, here we go!

Duck under the overhead strike, sidestep the body. Punch once, twice into its side. Hop back to avoid the side arm swing, lean down and round-house kick, plant his heel into the creature's stomach-

"Ow, *shit!*"

Pain erupted from Denya's foot as he landed that blow, his entire body shuddering. Dammit, he kicked too high and hit the ribs instead! Still, he put *everything* into that kick and should have at least broken a rib, but instead it felt like it was his *foot* that broke. It was like kicking a concrete wall!

A concrete wall that had grabbed ahold of his leg with the intent of breaking it!

That snarling, fleshy, Wolf-like face suddenly became a blur as the amalgamation tightened its grip on Denya's ankle until it creaked, whirling him around. Ignoring the pain of twisting his own skin off, the fox swung his other leg up, slamming his foot directly into the side of the creature's muzzle. The amalgamation barely flinched, didn't even take a step back, but it was enough to release Denya prematurely. The fox only had seconds to react, quickly vaulting off the floor once he was flung away from the creature's grasp and rolling himself back onto his feet.

"Ow..."

Great, now he could barely even stand, thanks to his possibly-broken foot as well as from how hard he'd been flung around. Meanwhile, the amalgamation hardly looked worse for wear, that kick the fox landed not even drawing blood.

Surely Xem was fairing better than he was.

Even through his own fight, Denya had been briefly aware of the aerial dogfight taking place right above him, but he tried his darndest to ignore it to focus on his foe. How was he supposed to help anyways? There was a fight between *dragons* going on up there! And right now, there was a dragon giving his own 25-foot partner a hard time. Even without looking directly at the combat, the fox could tell it wasn't exactly smooth sailing, as he could hear heavy wing-flapping, roaring, and spot the occasional flash of yellow as fire erupted out from one of them. Still, at least it *sounded* even; maybe Xem could pull a win and help him out?

"Hey, Xem?" Denya tested the telepathic bond connecting the two. "*Not to distract you, but how's your fight going-*"

WHAM!!

The fox gasped as an enormous thud shook the ground, the fox not needing to turn around to know that *something* massive just fell from the sky, sending dust and embers everywhere. That telepathic bond was enough to make Denya wince. "*Damn. That bad, huh?*"

"*Shut up.*" Xem responded with a low growl. Even his mental voice sounded exhausted.

Denya couldn't help but chuckle at that, bringing his fists up once again as he stared down the amalgamation approaching him. "Not a bad way to die, right?"

From behind him, the fox could hear the dragon snort indignantly, but he continued regardless. "Fighting in some hellscape, against literal monsters. Our ancestors must be proud, huh?"

"*Mine are!*" Xem growled lowly, the ground crumbling as the dragon attempted to rise from where he lay. "*Unlike you, I have my opponent retreating.*"

“Oh, ok, so you’re just taking a quick little nap for funsies on the ground there?” Denya scoffed, glancing back at the red-scaled dragon in disbelief.

Oops.

The second he turned his head, the fox caught a flash of gray from the corner of his vision. By the time he snapped back, the amalgamation was right in his face, startling the fox. What the hell, when was it *this* fast?! If it could move like that, why the hell did it let Denya dodge and strike at him? Was it *toying* with him?!

It wound up a blow that Denya had no hope of dodging. Out of reflex, he raised his arms to guard right as that fist crashed into him.

Snap! Yup, that was his arm.

Denya roared in pain; that strike was more than enough to break his arm in two, but also enough to launch him off the ground! The fox went flying, rag dolling across the battlefield until finally colliding with something warm and scaly.

Xem.

Through the pain, fear, disorientation, Denya was at least grateful to finally be in the company of something that didn’t want him dead. Kind of. “*Nice catch.*”

It was all he had just to be able to pull himself off the ground. The fox tried pressing his arm down to pull himself up, but no matter how hard he tried, the damn thing just wouldn’t move. He had to dig his knees beneath his chest to lift himself up and just let it hang uselessly down his side, blood oozed from a wound right below his shoulder, staining his fur red as it flowed down to drip off his claws, forming a small pool right beneath him. Some super-powered warrior he was, he could barely even stand without collapsing. His nose was bleeding, one of his eyes was swollen shut, he couldn’t

put weight on his right foot. It was thanks to his training and sheer adrenaline that he didn't simply collapse into shock right now, that the pain wasn't consuming him. It definitely would after this fight.

If he lived long enough, that is.

"*Can you move?*" Denya thought to Xem. He couldn't bring himself to speak, saving his mouth to gasp at the air.

From behind, the fox could feel the dragon start to shift, before slowly shifting upright. Through their bond, he knew that Xem was faring at least a little better than he was. The Ruby dragon was injured and exhausted, with a noticeable limp on his right forearm, but at least nothing looked broken. "*Spare me your concern. You should be more worried about yourself.*"

"*Oh, I am, trust me.*" Denya wanted to turn to Xem just so the dragon could see him roll his eyes, but that would just invite death upon himself all the sooner. He saw how fast the amalgamation moved when he wasn't looking. "*Can you fight?*"

"*I still have my teeth, my claws, my strength.*" Xem shifted behind the fox. "*But my fire has dimmed.*"

"*I'm not really concerned about that last part. We're surrounded by fire.*" Darkness began encroaching the fox's vision, his throat hoarse and dry from breathing in the scalding air. Forget standing, it was all he could do just to maintain focus on that figure before him. The patchfur, fleshy abomination, the monstrous wolf that almost looked like a living being but wasn't, the nightmare that was covered in Denya's blood.

And Denya's friends.

The fox's breath hitched in his throat. It wasn't just adrenaline keeping him upright now, it was rage. "*Link with me.*"

“No.” The dragon chuffed, now fully upright.

“I wasn’t asking.”

“I’d rather die.”

“Perfect, because that’s exactly what’s about to happen.” Denya grumbled. The amalgamation sure was taking its sweet time walking towards him. Was it tired? Leery? Or was it simply savoring its victory. Denya really hoped it was the former.

The dragon snorted, and Denya felt a rush of warm air wash over him. *“Perhaps for you. My opponent is a mere strike away from falling-“*

“Bullshit!” The fox cried out, his voice hoarse. “I can see your memories, you know. Your wing got torn, and the wyvern is circling above us, waiting for you to rise. And when it realizes you can’t, it’ll swoop down and finish you off!”

Xem didn’t respond, which was worse than his typical arrogant attitude for Denya. The one time he hated being right. The silence only sealed the realization that there really was no alternative for them. *“Link with me!”*

“I will not!” Xem roared out, the force alone nearly knocking Denya over, not like it’d take much at this point. *“You anthros are all the same, lusting after our power. I had hoped you’d be different, but with your back against the wall, all you can think about is yourself! How dare you make demands of a dragon-“*

“I’m not demanding, I’m *begging!*” The fox cried. His vision was growing blurry, but not due to his own exhaustion this time. No, it was something else that burned his eyes, something else that ran down his cheek. “Our comrades *died* to these things. *Innocents* have died to these things! And that’s only the beginning if we don’t stop this here and now. But you’re going to deny me, just to prove a point?!”

“Fox-“

“Piss off with that!” Denya wasn’t going to let Xem say his piece now. He’d found the dragon’s gruff attitude charming at first, but now it was about to kill them both. *“Will your ancestors be proud of you, knowing you rolled over and gave up instead of dealing with this threat, knowing you’d rather save your pride than your own kin? How would your fellow dragons feel, knowing you let their deaths be in vain? How would Zander-“*

This time, it was Xem’s turn to interrupt the fox as a fierce roar was felt throughout the battlefield. Denya didn’t need to be paired with the dragon to feel his partner’s intense bloodlust and rage; for a moment, he was more afraid of the dragon than of the amalgamation. He could feel that burning, red-hot breath against his back, feel every fur on his body stand on end as that enormous draconic muzzle hovered mere inches from his head, with fangs the size of the fox’s arms.

“I will devour you for saying his name.”

“You might not get the chance.” Denya muttered, his legs now shaking for a whole new reason. “My friend here might kill me before you do.”

“Your scrawny self couldn’t handle my power. You’d die.”

“Then at least I’d die fighting.”

And then there was silence. The fox couldn’t feel Xem’s breath on him anymore, or perhaps he was starting to lose his senses. Either way, he zeroed in on the amalgamation, who decided it had toyed with him long enough and was closing in. Denya panted, but clenched his fists, waiting to meet his foe head on. Just one more hit... just one more hit...

He saw that arm wind up, saw it barreling towards him, and brought his own arm up to catch it. The impact was *intense*, a shockwave erupting from the point of the blow, enough to waiver the fires burning around them. Denya even felt his feet dig slightly into the crumbling ground.

But he was standing- no, he was doing more than that. The fox was grinning, and soon lifted his broken, useless arm and struck back. Hard.

What *power!* Just moments ago, he felt inches away from death, but now he'd never felt more alive! His body thrummed with strength, each second more intense than the last. All that pain and weariness had seemingly vanished, replaced with whatever could be described as the opposite of it. Ecstasy, excitement, it all pulsed through him in waves. Denya wanted to shout, to laugh, to *dance* in joy.

But for now, he'll settle for pummeling this fool.

While the amalgamation was stunned, the fox took a running start, leaping up to grab the creature's wolf-like head, before slamming that snout into his knee! He was rewarded with an ear-splitting crack not coming from him for once, black blood seeping from the wolf's nostrils. Oh, but he wasn't done yet, the fox launching into a series of blows, the blowback of feeling his arms pulverize the creature's insides satisfying him beyond belief.

From behind him, he could hear a series of thuds and stompings, but he ignored it for now. Linking with a dragon meant Xem should be receiving some of his power as well. It might not be nearly the same as what was currently flooding Denya, but it *should* be enough for Xem to hold off the wyvern's attacks, right?

Because right now, Denya's world consisted of him and this creature. And this creature did not belong in Denya's world.

He kicked down on the amalgamation's kneecap, snapping it inward and sending the monster falling forward; next came the other knee, and that wolflike snout was down to the fox's chest, perfect for a solid, clean hit to take out.

And that solid hit came in the form of a roundhouse kick, hard enough to send the amalgamation flying, far, crashing into debris that went up in a massive burst of flame. It will not be returning.

Was this what it was like to be drunk on power? Because Denya was certainly smiling far wider than he should. No wonder Xem was so reluctant to link with an Anthro, this was like a drug! Like any drug, too much would do more harm than good, and the fox knew the blowback from this alone would cripple him for weeks, if not outright kill him, but right now he felt unstoppable, invincible, unbeatable-

"Would you stop jumping around for FIVE SECONDS and turn around?!"

Uh oh, Xem sounded pissed. Was he still struggling against the wyvern? Honestly, Denya wouldn't mind helping out; with this strength, he felt capable of taking on that creature himself!

Whirling around, he braced himself to combat the deadly creature several times his size, before pausing, craning his neck back.

And laughing.

Xem was *standing!* Not on all fours, but on his hindlegs, almost like an Anthro. Honestly, the fox should be intimidated that the already-massive dragon looked even more so upright, but the way his body looked, with those comparatively short legs and arms on that long torso, just made the fox snicker. Heck, he could even see Xem's shoulder's shaking as though the dragon was laughing along with him.

But that face, oof. That was a murderous glare if Denya ever saw one.

“W-What the heck are you doing, Xem?” The fox chuckled, although he had a good enough idea what was going on.

“What does it look like, you tiny idiot?” Xem bore his teeth in a snarl, yet he didn’t move from his position. *“This is our first time linking, moron. And unfortunately, more than just our powers were shared. This is a side effect, until our minds and bodies can adjust properly. Until then, I will be forced to mirror your movements- Stop waving my arm!”*

But Denya was having too much fun! Still giddy, the fox grinned ear to ear as he raised his right arm, watching the scarlet dragon do the same with his left. He waved it, and so did Xem. He stood on one leg and lifted the other, and so did Xem. He held his paws to his chest and used his fingers to form a heart shape, so did-

“I will tear off your head and drain your body of its entrails!”

Denya reared back his head in laughter, just barely catching Xem doing the same. Hearing the dragon shout that while being forced to stand on one leg and hold a heart to his chest was simply too great! Oh, he was in for the greatest ass-whooping of his life once this was all over, but how could he think about that now? The amalgamation was dead, and Denya felt fantastic! Nothing could ruin this for him.

Well, except for the giant wyvern descending upon Xem.

Denya’s eyes widened. “Duck!” Then, remembering he was the one in control the dragon, lowered his head, just in time for Xem to do the same. The monstrous flier flew right overhead, its talons just barely grazing along the drake’s horns before soaring off, preparing for another run by.

Standing back up, the bonded pair faced each other once more, alarm replacing the elated look they once had. *“Unlink with me, now!”* Xem demanded.

“Your wing’s still torn!” Denya pleaded, now seeing the holes in the webbing. “And you said you’re out of fire.”

“Doesn’t matter! Release me this instance. Let me fight!”

Even with power coursing through his veins, fear and despair filled the fox once again. Denya felt ready to fight the wyvern himself, but if he was also stuck controlling the dragon, he’d likely end up careening or tumbling away. But if they unlinked, Denya would be useless on death’s door once again, and Xem wasn’t exactly winning the fight even with his flight and powers.

Talk about being up shit creek, huh? Better reach for the paddle then.

“I’m really sorry about this, Xem.” Denya muttered before closing his eyes, and forcing his way into the dragon, funneling his thoughts through the mental link they once shared. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the world from much, MUCH higher up, finding his foxy self standing across from him farther away, right past the peripheral vision of his broad, scaly snout.

Right in time for the wyvern to make another fly-by attack.

“It will take DECADES to inflict upon you the pain you deserve, fox!” Denya heard Xem shout in his mind, but he ignored it for now. The mighty dragon took a step back against the crumpling ground and, like with the amalgamation earlier, caught the strike from the wyvern. The flying monster shrieked, attempting to strike at him with its talons, but Denya held firmly to its ankles.

“Bite it! Devour it!”

“That’s gross!”

"It's my mouth, not yours!"

Denya would have shut Xem out by now if their connection wasn't required for this. Instead, he was too busy using the moment carried over from the wyvern's strike, taking a half back step to throw the creature over his shoulder. Letting out a roar of his own, the dragon flew the wyvern into the ground with enough force to shake what felt like the very earth itself. That blow alone would have been enough to sever the spine of a dragon that size.

But this wyvern was different. It hardly let out a cry before leaping out from the ground, snapping its jaws right at Xem's face! It was only thanks to Denya's reflexes that the dragon managed to pull his snout back just in time, taking a quick leap back. No wonder Xem was struggling against this thing.

"Do not patronize me. I had it right where I wanted it."

"You were on your BACK like 5 minutes ago!" Dragons, man.

That slam on the ground certainly did damage, as the wyvern wasn't trying to fly away for another swipe. Instead, it squawked and flapped its wings awkwardly, raising itself high enough to try and snap at Xem's neck. Denya stepped back, dodging each bite while blocking the avian's advances with his arms. Ah, he'll have to be careful; his body was still down there somewhere, and he could very easily step on it like a grape.

"It'd serve you right."

"Not helping!" Denya called out, but with Xem's unique muzzle shape it came out as a garbled roar instead. Narrowing his golden eyes, the dragon's talons suddenly shot forth, grabbing the wyvern by the clawed tips of its wings. And just like that, the enemy couldn't move, going from growling and snapping to squarking and fidgeting instead. Denya made sure to hold it up high, spreading its wings out as far as he could, exposing the monster.

"Bite into it, now!" Xem demanded from within his head. *"The neck, the chest, anywhere. Just bite!"*

Denya *really* didn't want to do that, but that's quite alright, because he had another idea instead. He reared his head back.

"Don't you dare."

Further back, as far as the dragon's lengthy neck would allow.

"Don't you DARE!"

Sorry Xem, but he dared. Closing his eyes, Xem swung his head forth until it collided with the wyvern's. Hard.

The force of the impact must have been enough to sever the link between them, as the next thing he knew, Denya was standing back in his own body, his arms held up as if he were holding a miniature wyvern of his own. Didn't see the wyvern, so much as the trail of dust it left behind as it went *flying* back. Farther and farther away it went, careening into flames, ruins, even entire boulders, with seemingly nothing capable of slowing its flight. Soon, the cries and destruction faded off into the distance; for all Denya knew, the wyvern was hurtling off to this day.

And all of that happened in the span of time it took for Denya to collapse on his back.

The link was broken, and all of that damage returned to the fox with interest. The damaged foot, broken arm, everything. All of it flooded the fox, to the point where falling flat on his back was a light tickle in comparison. Annoyingly, he did not pass out on the spot like he hoped for, or even died. He was stuck in conscious limbo, forced to bear with the pain.

THUD!

Well, at least he wasn't by himself.

The fox grunted softly as the ground shifted from the dragon's fall, coughing as ash and soot coated him. Turns out, he really did make Xem step dangerously close to him, as he could almost reach out and touch the laying dragon from his position. Not that he had any mind to at the moment, no, the two of them were too busy frantically catching their breath, forcing much needed air back into their lungs.

Existence was agony, but Denya managed a smile regardless. They won. They were alive.

"*Hey.*" Denya didn't even attempt to speak with his mouth, turning to smile up at the great dragon. "*Nice job.*"

"*Shut it, fox.*" Xem's mental voice was just as breathless as he was.

"*My mouth is shut, dummy.*" Denya's smiled widened. "*We kicked ass.*"

The dragon snorted before responding. "*We did.*"

"Heh." Finally, he was getting somewhere with Xem. Nothing like a life-or-death battle to really develop a bond. "*We're a good team.*"

"*Debatable.*" Close enough.

Wincing, Denya managed to nudge his good arm forward, although that too felt like it was on the verge of snapping. Curling his claws inward, he managed to lift it up weakly, holding up a fist. *"Bring it in, partner."*

The scarlet dragon rolled his head over to look, those golden eyes flicking between the fox and the hand he held up. Slowly, Xem mirrored the motion, bringing his own mighty fist over. Denya smiled wider at that, even managing a wag of his tail.

Before yelping in shock as that fist came at him way, way too fast!

"I deserved that." The fox managed to think as it collided with him, sending him sprawling over. And with that, his consciousness finally left him, sending him blissfully into the dark void of nothing.

He didn't want to wake up, at least not at first. His dreams were better than anything the world of the living had to offer anyways. He was surrounded by smiling faces, by the sounds of laughter, without the agonizing pain that consciousness was sure to bring.

But the draw of the real world was too strong, and Denya knew he would have to meet his ancestors another time.

His eyes peeked open, before immediately squinting shut. Dammit, was it necessary to place him by a window? Couldn't his rescuers have put him in a bed, like, two feet to either side?

Yes, he knew he was in a bed, and yes he knew he was in the infirmary. He'd woken up far too many times in here, to the point where it was practically his second room. It didn't matter how disoriented or drained he felt upon stirring; if he woke up in pain, he was in the infirmary.

But gods, this wasn't just some pain. The fox had to bite his lip to prevent himself from whimpering. His arm *hurt!*

"Back among the world of the living, are we?"

Denya turned his head towards the familiar voice, grateful he could at least do *that* without wincing in pain. Ah, the amount of times he'd woken up to Eperin looming over him. Typically, it was to those dark green eyes narrowed with frustration, but this time they were raised with concern.

The fox forced out a chuckle. Was the big ol' Timberwolf worried about him? That's cute. "More or less. They wouldn't take me."

"I'm not surprised. You probably annoyed the Boatman to bring you back." The older wolf chuckled, his furry goatee swaying with his muzzle. "At least you had a nice talk with your ancestors."

Denya blinked. "I did?"

"It certainly sounded like it, from how much you were mumbling."

"Wow." The fox muttered, laying back to look straight ahead at the ceiling. "That's weird. I don't think I saw them. I must not have made it that far with the Boatman."

"So, who were you talking with, then?"

Denya's throat tightened. "Everyone who died at Bernant."

The fox took a shaky breath, letting the guilt and grief wash over him along with the silence. He hadn't known them for too long, but he already missed those laughs and

smiles. It was the only thing he was good for, after all. A jokester to lighten up the mood, before they were sent to their deaths.

Eperin had the wherewithal to allow a moment of silence to pass, although the fox still felt those green eyes on him, as if trying to peer into his mind. When that didn't seem to work, the wolf finally spoke. "I don't mean to open fresh wounds, but I'd like to know what happened there. At Bernant."

At what's left of Bernant, more like. Denya sighed, turning back to face the wolf, noting how much more pronounced that concerned look was. "We were a test for their experiments. Five riders and five dragons against two wyverns and two... whatever those things were. Amalgamations?" The fox shuddered. He would have raised his arms to cover himself, were they both not in casts, his left one also hanging from a sling around his neck.

"Amalgamations?" Eperin spoke the word slowly, trying to piece together every syllable.

"Yeah." Denya muttered. As harsh as it was, the fox struggled to look Eperin in the eye. Looking at another wolf right now just felt like looking at the monsters responsible for slaughtering his friends. "Even with everyone linking with their dragons, they could barely take down one of them. The second one... it cleaned them up, while the wyverns just took turns picking apart their dragons." The blood raining down from above, the viscera... Training was supposed to make him numb to it all, just as it made him numb to physical pain during battle, but here he was, feeling ready to retch.

Eperin must have noticed the shift in Denya's demeanor, as he placed a large paw on the fox's leg, squeezing gently. "You don't need to go into details, Den. I just have one more question left for you." The Wolf leaned closer, his free paw tracing a claw along Denya's brace. "How did you survive?"

An excellent question. "I, uh... I linked with Xem."

The wolf's eyes widened. "You *linked* with him? And you survived?!"

"Ow, my feelings."

"Sorry, sorry." The wolf shook his head, his goatee trailing behind. "I meant... he let you?"

"Yeah, I'm surprised too." Denya sighed, leaning back further against the bed. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach, as if he didn't have enough to feel guilty as is. "I had to yell at him for it, too. Honestly surprised I'm even alive, after all I said and--"

The fox's eyes widened. "Where's Xem?"

"He's at the Sanctuary, resting." Eperin gestured over his shoulder with a flick of his muzzle. "He'll fully recover soon, I expect. Dragons aren't nearly as fragile as us Anthros, you know."

But Denya was already leaning forward in bed, forcing himself into a seated position. It was hard with his broken arms in his cast, but one good swing was all he needed to pivot his legs over the side of the bed.

He would have hopped off too, if it weren't for that big paw pressing against his chest, keeping him planted. "Woah woah woah, where do you think you're going?"

"I gotta talk to him about something." Denya huffed, trying to peer past the broad-shouldered wolf.

But Eperin wouldn't budge, crossing his arms. "He's resting, and so should you. It took all of Benson's healing just to put you back together. You need to stay in bed for the next two or three days until you're ready for your next Mending session. Doctor's orders."

“Yeah, but you’re not my doctor.” Denya grumbled.

“I’m watching you on her behalf.”

“Well, watch somewhere else for a couple minutes. Say I slipped off or something while you looked out the window.”

“Denya-“

“Ok fine, say I did some sick double backflip over you while flipping you off. I don’t care; I’ll answer to Benson later. But I *need* to go see Xem, this is important!”

Eperin huffed heavily through his nose, and Denya could see the conflict waging behind those green eyes. Still, the smaller fox maintained eye contact, sitting straight up in bed, despite how sore his back felt. He’d always been a jokester in this school, always the first one to pull a prank for a cheap laugh, but right now Denya wasn’t laughing. He was as serious as he could be, and hoped to all Gods that Eperin would respect that.

With a slight shake of his head, the Timberwolf leaned back and slowly walked around the bed, with Denya’s gaze following him. “I don’t feel like babysitting you until Benson gets back. She’s been quite busy as of late.”

Reaching the other side, the wolf reached behind the window curtain. “If you’re going to leave, at least take this walking stick with you.”

Denya should have been offended at having his precious enchanted bow staff be referred to as a walking stick, but he was more delighted to see it actually retrieved. The fox reached out with his slightly-less-injured arm to take it from Eperin, confidence surging through his slightly-less-broken body. It’s like being reunited with a missing limb. “Thank you, Eperin.”

"I can't hear you." The wolf muttered, gazing out the window. "I'm too busy staring at this flock of geese flying by for the next three minutes or so."

"Right." Smiling, the fox hopped off the bed, wincing as his feet hit the floor. He couldn't put much weight on the foot he used to kick the amalgamation's face. Dammit, he'll have to use his staff as a walking stick after all.

It felt wrong to receive any kind of praise, to see and hear his battle mates congratulate him for defeating the enemy and for successfully Linking with Xem for the first time. Denya winced with every cheer, congratulation, and back pat he received, and not just because it hurt to be touched *anywhere*.

Why were they thanking him? Praising him? Did they not know what really transpired? That Bernant was nothing but smoldering ashes, along with his squadmates and their dragons? Why didn't anyone care? This wasn't the first time Denya was caught hobbling out from the infirmary covered in bandages and bruises, but this was the first time he'd been cheered for it instead of mocked and ridiculed. But if it meant just forgetting his squadmates' sacrifices, then he didn't want it!

Something was wrong here. Very, very wrong.

But Denya couldn't think on that at the moment. He pushed through the people, the hollow praise, and stumbled forward. He didn't look up until he'd stepped outside, striding past the courtyard and into the Sanctuary beyond. Just past the school's territory lay the resting grounds of dragons, where the magic in the air was so potent, he could almost taste it. It was the first time Denya actually felt how condensed the magic in the area really was, another side effect of Linking with Xem for the first time.

He walked forward, past where the other dragons lay. Some resting after an intense battle, others gearing up for their next, but those by the entrance were

accompanied by their riders, where they were no doubt sharing strategy discussions among one another. Or, at the very least, enjoying in each other's company. A rider belonged with their dragon, and vice versa, although Denya never quite earned that connection with Xem. The scarlet drake had always been reluctant to participate with the fox on anything, rather than eager and encouraging like he'd heard the other dragons were.

But then again, Xem was the dragon who chose Denya. If it wasn't for Xem, the fox would have had to leave the school, to be retrained as infantry.

Further in, Denya found the familiar ruby light of the sun reflecting off Xem's scales. Of course his dragon had to pick the largest, farthest hill to lay on, right by the edge of the Sanctuary before the tree line began, while his rider could barely walk straight without using his enchanted staff as a Gods-damned walking stick. Not like he needed *more* exercise.

But he made the trek regardless, panting slightly as he did so, to find Xem laying. The dragon didn't budge as Denya approached, laying forward with his head resting on his forearms, tail wrapped along his side. A simple flicker of his eyes was all the acknowledgement he gave.

Yup, he's pissed. At least his wing looked like it had healed somewhat, the tears in the webbing filled in, albeit thin and soft looking. Dragons, man.

"Hey." Denya huffed, attempting to stand as straight as he could without the staff. Dragons hated when their riders appeared weak.

Apparently, the fox didn't do a good enough job as Xem snorted loudly. "*You look terrible.*"

Denya scoffed. "Excuse you, I look *dashing!*"

"I could breathe on you and send you tumbling down that hill."

"And I'd look beautiful doing so."

Another snort, and Denya swore he saw the edges of Xem's lips curl up ever so slightly. Was it happening? Did he *finally* crack a joke that broke through the dragon's stern exterior, that got this big, grumpy lug to find him funny-

"You did not."

Oh. Well damn.

The drake shifted his scarlet head closer to the fox, now finally facing him properly. *"What do you want?"*

Denya blinked. "I thought you would have known by now."

Xem chuffed. *"Mending takes a toll on your body, physically and magically. I can barely reach your mind just to communicate with you, and that's with you standing right before me."*

"Oh." He had no idea. Must have slept through that class. "All this time, I thought you were so worried about me every time I was sent to the infirmary, you couldn't think straight."

"Not at all. In fact, if I could, I'd be chastising you for being so reckless every time, and demanding you go back to your bed to heal. Which is exactly what you should be doing right now."

“Yeah.” Denya chuckled, before wincing. Ow, Gods, the ribs. “Eperin gave me an earful too, don’t worry.”

“Eperin at least has common sense, although he must not have enough if he let you go.”

“Yeah, shame on him. Bad dog.”

Denya could feel the tension start to build again, and for a moment he was considering taking his chances stumbling back down the hill. Better than Xem puffing him, right? Or, the alternative.

The fox sighed, dropping his smile. “Alright... I came to offer you my life.”

That caught the dragon’s attention. Xem lifted his large, scaly head to loom down at Denya, his golden eyes narrowing. *“Why would I want your life?”*

“You said you’d devour me at Bernant, remember?” Actually, that was the *least* of Xem’s threats, but Denya didn’t want to list them all out right now.

The dragon let out a low growl. *“If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it at Bernant after you were unconscious.”*

Denya blinked. “I thought reinforcements came, and you didn’t want to get caught killing your rider.”

“Your assumptions are terrible.” Xem shifted his head, looking away from the fox. *“No one came. Who do you think brought you back to your school?”*

Denya couldn't think of a response to that. He was sure Xem had his reasons for bringing him back, probably to not look terrible in front of other riders or dragons, but the thought was certainly appreciated. "You do care."

"That's debatable." Another snort.

"Right." The fox nodded. "Well, I was unconscious and I couldn't, uh, consent to your killing of me anyways. I'm fully awake now, so feel free to—"

"Is this your idea of an apology?" Xem growled, and Denya caught a flash of those sharp teeth. *"Because you're just as terrible at those as you are at making assumptions."*

"Yeah, I am." The fox muttered, his heart rate spiking. "That's why I'm not apologizing."

Xem glared at Denya, no longer bothering to hide those teeth. *"You invoked Zander's name!"*

"And I'd do it again." In hindsight, that might not have been the proper choice of words from Denya, but the fox couldn't stop himself from blurting it out. The memories of Bernant were flooding back, as was the adrenaline. He was back in fight mode, and with his own dragon no less.

And that was a challenge Xem had no problems rising to, literally. In a flash, the dragon had shifted onto all fours and *stomped* towards Denya, with enough force to almost knock the fox off his feet right then. In moments, Denya was staring down his own reflection off the dragon's angry, slitted, yellow eyes, that massive snout of his less than inches from his own. He could feel every warm breath washing over him, feel the literal steam coming from the mouth just barely containing the build-up of fire broiling within. But more than that, he could feel the heat of the rage bubbling up, rage that was about to be directed right at him.

“You inconsiderate, manipulative little shit! I had hoped your intoxication from my Link would have worn off by now, but clearly, you’re still delusional if you believe you can speak that way in my presence. Zander was thrice the rider you’ll ever be, and without that smart mouth of his either. I granted you power to save your pathetic life, and you return to me with nothing but arrogance and disrespect!”

“I said it to save *both* of our lives!” Denya snapped right back, although he so, so, SO desperately wished he could shut up right now. He’d rather face down an army of Amalgamations than one pissed off Xem. That dragon *radiated* fear and intimidation; everything from that snarl, those eyes, that growl, that voice, EVERYTHING. The fox wanted to collapse on the floor and prostrate for his life, and likely would have done so if his body wasn’t half-broken, but he stood there, managing to hide back the urge to tremble like a Chihuahua. “I couldn’t stand, and you couldn’t fly. We were sitting ducks! You saw how fast they took down our squad, and that was with all of us working as a team.”

“At least they died honorable deaths!” Another roar, and Denya was genuinely afraid he might go flying back. From behind, the fox could see Xem’s tail thrashing, the dragon clearly agitated. *“Would they have invoked the names of their dragons’ fallen riders to get what they wanted? Would they have, at the very least, the courtesy to at least apologize afterwards?”*

“I don’t know, because they’re *dead!*” Denya spat back. Tears were starting to well up in his eyes, burning his vision just like Xem’s breath was burning the rest of him. Standing this close to each other, the fox could plainly feel Xem’s emotions even with their magical bond in disarray, could feel the rage, anger, and even sadness behind the dragon.

The fox took a shaky breath, his knees shaking, his tail curling around his legs. This wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go at all, and through his anger and frustration, the fox felt a pleading sadness shake him through his core. It was bad enough he lost his friends. He didn’t want to lose his dragon next.

"I'm... not apologizing." Denya said again. His heart went out to Xem, but he also won't roll over and submit, either. He was a fighter worthy of the strongest dragon in the Sanctuary, gods dammit! "I don't regret what I said... I just came to say thank you."

Silence. Xem continued to breathe heavily in Denya's direction, ruffling his fur. He didn't pull his head back an inch either, nor did his eyes lose their hating glare. But the glow in his throat had died down, and his tail had finally slumped back onto the ground. The fox took it as his chance to continue, and so he did.

"I...I said what I did to save us, and in this instance, I believe the ends justify the means. But it was your willingness to Link that really won us the fight, not what I said."

The fox took another sigh, steadying himself. He felt lightheaded, ready to fall over at a moment's notice. "Look, I'm not going to pretend I understand how a dragon's mind works. All I know is Zan- *His* name carries more significance to you than I could possibly imagine, and I used it against you, to do something you would never do willingly. I opened a scar that had never healed, and that is unforgivable. Apologizing is meaningless, because to a dragon, actions speak louder than words."

Xem didn't respond, but his eyes softened ever so slightly, his breathing slowing from ragged breaths to a more standard heavy breathing. "*You're just trying to save your skin, fox.*"

"A little bit, yeah." Denya sighed. No point lying to a dragon, not when their emotions were open to one another. "But I mean every word I say. It was your choice to Link with me, your choice to give me the power to fight back, to avenge our friends, and save other lives in the process. I want to say thank you, but again, I know my words don't mean as much as my actions, so..."

The fox held his arm up, wincing slightly. "Pretend I'm raising both arms here. I would, but the cast-"

"*Get on with it.*" Xem snorted.

Denya smiled. "I'm offering my life to you. I should have died there as well, so I'm essentially living on borrowed time here. Eat me, burn me, step on me if you'd like, since you said I'd deserve it. Or keep me around, and let me work to pay off my debt. Either way, it's yours."

Xem finally brought his scaley head back, his emotions now completely unreadable, not like it was easy to tell what was on a dragon's mind from their expressions alone, besides rage, of course. He chuffed, and Denya had hoped that something had mended in their relationship, that they could still be considered partners.

Turning to the side, the dragon lazily flopped onto the grass, resting his head on his claws once again. *"As if I'd want anything to do with your life. You're more trouble than your worth."* Xem closed his eyes.

Ouch. Somehow, that hurt more than the broken bones, or being turned to ash. There was no response to that, even. Denya just had to accept that this was the way things were. He offered the dragon a silent nod, holding back the tears welling up yet again. Dragons hated displays of weakness. He turned, ready for the very, very long trek down the hill, across the Sanctuary, and back to his room.

But he was stopped as something pressed into his stomach. The fox looked down to see the edge of Xem's tail raised, holding him in place. *"Stay."*

This time, it was even harder to hide the tears, but the fox did as he was told, the biggest smile spreading across his face. Using Xem's tail as leverage, the fox carefully sat down, leaning against the dragon's tail. "I thought I was more trouble than I'm worth."

"I like a challenge."

"Well, since we're being open with each other, I'm still waiting for you to acknowledge my good looks."

"I can't acknowledge what isn't there."

"Ok, I'm leaving."

But Denya didn't leave; Xem wouldn't let him. Every time he tried, the dragon's tail would curl around his waist once more, pulling him back. Not that Denya minded in the slightest. This didn't lessen the blow of losing his companions, of losing his trust in his school, or even of hurting Xem. But at the very least, Denya believed that everything would be ok, because he wasn't alone.

Chapter 2

Battle Prep was perhaps the only class Denya *really* looked forward to, because it was the only class Denya was good at. There was no sitting still, no twiddling his thumbs, no getting yelled at for making shadow puppets or twiddling his pen or talking with desk mates or bouncing his leg or looking out the window or- the point being, it was hard to get in trouble in Battle Prep.

In fact, the fox had built a reputation for himself, as he was the only one in his year who actually *smiled* during sparring sessions. It's when he was allowed to cut loose and be praised for doing the one thing he was good at: Smacking people with a stick! The fox had a near flawless record on the sparring mat and was more than capable of dancing around his opponent and wearing them down. It was something he didn't need to sit and study for, something he could be taught and not get in trouble for bouncing and fidgeting. And sometimes, it just felt *good* to just be good at something without putting too much effort into it. The smiling was just a side effect of feeling confident, although it was a little fun to see his opponents look a bit unnerved by it. Mental warfare, and whatnot. Just makes them all the more predictable.

But today, Denya wasn't smiling. Today, Denya wasn't thriving. Instead, he was grimacing and struggling.

The fox was on the backfoot, struggling to even hold his ground against the flurry of attacks being held his way. It was barely enough for him to hold his staff up to block the sword strikes swinging his way. He raised both arms to block an overhead, lowered his right to deflect one aimed at his side, sidestepped back to dodge a thrust towards his middle. It wasn't even the attacks that frustrated Denya; it was seeing his opportunity to counterattack glaring at him, knowing he had the chance to strike back and land a blow, to shift the tide of battle in his favor. But a part of him just refused to act on it. And that constant hesitation was what kept him on the defensive.

Alas, it wasn't just Denya that was aware of his weakness as well.

"You can't expect to win back peddling all match. Strike them, now!" Xem's voice roared in his head, causing Denya to flinch. It was hard to even pay attention to the dual-bladed cervine attacking him with a dragon back seating him.

The fox barely managed to duck beneath a swipe at his neck that would have surely severed his head if those blades had been real, but rather than retaliating with a thrust from his staff, the vulpine stumbled back, gripping his staff so tight, he was afraid it would splinter in his grasp, even with the enhancements.

"What are you doing?! You're looking like a fool!" Denya could feel his dragon's agitation through their mental link. That certainly wasn't doing any favors to his already shaky nerves.

"You never know. Maybe I'm just wearing them down. They're going to slip up eventually." Denya thought back, still focused purely on the deer before him.

"As if you haven't been slipping up constantly? You've already taken three blows--"

WHAM! Denya winced as he felt a sword collide with his side, knocking the wind out of him. Dammit, he'd been just a half second too late to block that. Even with his leathers on, getting hit by the dulled blade *hurt!* That was definitely going to bruise later.

Still, the fox was still in this, and yet again he leapt back, raising his staff yet again.

"-four, now. You could have caught that blade and retaliated!"

"We're pretending these are real weapons, Xem! I can't catch a blade AND keep my fingers."

"It's how you defeated your last opponent."

"And if you recall, I got chewed out for it by my opponent AND the instructor."

Denya clenched his teeth, swatting the next sword thrust aside with a flick of his staff.

"And maybe, just maybe, I'd like to get through a single day without anyone fucking yelling at me!"

With that burst of anger, the fox swung his staff at the deer, who just barely managed to block the strike. Even then, the staggered step back was unmistakable, as was the shock on the cervine's face. This was the big opportunity Denya had been looking for; a definitive opening for him to strike.

But the fox didn't attack right away, because the deer wasn't there anymore. No, they were replaced by something massive, rippling with muscle, with a sinister snarl on its face.

An amalgamation.

Denya broke into a cold sweat, his bow staff dropping from his trembling fingers onto his feet. No, he couldn't be back here, not again. But the deer was nowhere to be seen; the sparring room was gone as well, replaced with the burning, destroyed ruins of Bernant with the stench of ashes, sulfur and death still hanging in the air. Sheer adrenaline coursed through his veins, and in a blind panic, Denya leapt up to strike at that evil face, knowing a good blow to that snout would be enough to at least disorient the monster.

Only, his fist went right through the wolf-like face. Of course it did; the amalgamation wasn't there, was it? He wasn't back at Bernant, was he?

A sudden blow to his left side sent Denya sprawling onto the mat, the fox yelping in shock and pain. He scrambled back onto his hands and knees, but he didn't get any further as a pair of blades pressed against his neck, the cold steel making him shudder.

“Match over!” Instructor Colsen's voice rang out, stepping onto the mat. Even on his knees, Denya noticed the tiger glancing his way, looking at him with... was it disappointment? Concern? A combination of both?

But with that, the blades withdrew from his neck. A moment later, Versailles now stood before him, offering a hand. With a sigh, he reached out and took it, letting himself get hauled back onto his feet, and walked away to rejoin the crowd.

The crowd that was currently staring at him and mumbling, the fox feeling his insides burn with humiliation. Combat was supposed to be his specialty, dammit. The *one* thing he was good at. Even worse, this was *armed* combat, and the fox was second to none with his bow staff! Yes, his hand-to-hand could use some work; Versailles demolished him the first time they sparred, for example, but Denya was supposed to be the unstoppable one once he had his staff in hand.

“Up next,” Instructor Colsen read from his list. “Zeak and Tylon.”

The fox grunted as he felt someone shoulder check him, barely looking up in time to see a lion smirk down at him. That definitely wasn't the first time Zeak pulled that crap with him, only this time, Denya didn't have the energy to trip him in return.

“Don't let them walk over you. Strike him, now. Take out those fragile kneecaps.”

Nor did Denya have the energy to dignify that with a response. At this point, he was sure Xem was aware why that would *not* go over well with everyone watching, the dragon was likely just venting his frustrations at seeing his rider lose.

“Exactly.”

Well, can't win them all. Denya flopped onto his rump by the edge of the mat, resting his muzzle on his paws and elbows on his knees to watch the next match. Alas,

it didn't take long for him to lose focus, his thoughts drifting back to the battle at Bernant.

Just as he had so every time he was alone with his thoughts for the past week.

Feeling a sudden weight settle beside him was enough to snap the fox out of his trance, and he turned to see Versailles looking at him with a raised brow. "That was... certainly an interesting technique."

Denya chuckled. "Yeah, I, uh... I wasn't doing too well out there. I thought I'd try something new to throw you off guard, ya know?"

"You certainly did." The deer muttered, reaching up to grab their antlers. With a firm tug, the brown arches popped out, leaving their head as smooth as if they'd never been there to begin with. "Nearly chipped my right antler, too. It would have been a very efficient technique if you'd actually aimed at my face."

Denya hummed in agreement, raising his lower lip. "Well, what can I say? Those antlers are so pretty, I got a little jealous. When are you gonna let me borrow them."

"Never."

"Por que?"

"Because you don't need them." Versailles huffed, rubbing a hand along their smooth scalp.

"Sure I do! It'd make me more confident if I knew I could just lower my head and poke someone's eye out."

The deer rolled their eyes. "Since when have you struggled with confidence?"

Every damn moment of my life. "Well, beating me at the *one* activity I'm good at definitely didn't help. I say you owe me a little something to make it up."

"I didn't beat you." Versailles narrowed their eyes, glaring Denya down. "I could tell you weren't focused at all in our bout. You looked like you had your mind in three different places at once, and even then, you not only held off most of my attacks, but even countered me. If you actually took me seriously, it would have been me on my knees in half the time."

Denya shook his head, offering a smile. "Hey, don't sell yourself short. You've definitely improved a lot—"

"Please, if you value my friendship, don't patronize me." The deer shook their head. "Tell me what has you so distracted that you can't even fight properly. What's wrong?"

What an excellent question. What *was* wrong? A hundred different answers bubbled up in Denya's mind, all of which he knew he wasn't allowed to share. How about the fact he survived a gruesome battle he had no right to survive when his far more qualified companions all perished one right after the other before his eyes? Or the fact he was told to keep the amalgamations a secret to not cause a panic throughout the school, and simply insist those deaths were the result of a terrible accident caused by magical discharge? How about how Denya hadn't gotten a proper night's sleep since then, and every time he nodded off, he was back to Bernant?

Maybe he could mention it was all sleep deprivation; it's not like he was hiding the dark circles beneath his eyes. But if he mentioned that, Versailles would ask why, and the fox was far too tired to come up with a convincing lie. So, he decided to stick to the truth; at least, a truth he was allowed to share. "Xem's been speaking to me a lot more lately. It's a little distracting, constantly having a second voice in my head."

"You should be grateful of my wisdom. You clearly need more guidance than most." Xem snorted.

"Don't you have other, dragon-y things you could be doing instead, like chasing sheep or sleeping 14 hours a day?"

Versailles's brows raised. "That's good, isn't it? It's a sign your bond is strengthening, and dragons like Xem don't normally speak to their riders too often. He must be trusting you more."

"I doubt it." Denya rubbed the side of his muzzle, his ears folding back. "We're not exactly having conversations. It's more like he's deciding he can lead my life better than I can. 'Walk straighter, project yourself more, stop holding back at sparring,' stuff like that."

"I wouldn't need to remind you of this if you'd only listen to me the first time."

"Well, why do you feel the need to nag at me to begin with?"

"Because I will not be humiliated in being the only dragon who needs to remind his rider to brush his teeth!"

"I see..." Versailles muttered, and Denya realized the deer was staring at his furrowed brow. It didn't take much deductive reasoning to discern the fox and his dragon were having yet another back-and-forth. "You know, you don't need to argue back at everything your dragon says. You're more than welcome to put up a shield and tune them out. It doesn't bother them."

"Yeah, but I never figured out how." Denya sighed, slumping forth. "I never bothered learning because Xem rarely talked to me to begin with, and even if I tried now, I doubt I could. I'm dogshit at magic and you know it."

To prove his point, Denya reached for his staff at his side, before remembering he'd left it on the mat after his defeat. Damn, he really must be exhausted if he left that behind. Looking back for it, he noticed it'd been set to the side to make room for Zeak and Tylan's bout. Thanks a lot, Zeak; no doubt he was the one who kicked it away instead of handing it back to the fox.

Still, Denya raised his right paw, trying to picture the mental connection he shared with his staff like he'd done countless times in the past. He pulled back with that paw. Nothing. A second time, nothing. A third-

His eyes widened as the staff suddenly flew forward, but not towards him. Instead, it flung itself straight into Versailles' hand, the deer holding it out for the fox. "We've been over this, Denya. You need to picture your connection to your staff like a string. You're giving the string a tug, not grasping blindly in the air."

"Yeah, well can you draw a picture of the string? Because it's kinda hard to picture something that isn't there." Denya grumbled, setting the staff aside. "Point being: if I can't move a stick a couple feet, how am I supposed to block out the mental voice of a very large, angry, powerful dragon? How do you handle it?"

"I don't *handle* anything." Versailles rolls their eyes. "I maintain a very formal relationship with Zin. She offers guidance when she feels it's applicable, but never intrudes with my personal matters."

"Really?" Denya muttered loudly, hoping Xem was picking up on it. "How about that? Sounds like you two have a *wonderful* relationship."

A frustrated growl reverberated in Denya's head, and the fox had to suppress a smile.

But even that mental smile faded instantly when another thud caught his attention. Alas, it wasn't another friend to sit by his side and offer advice, but the crashing of Tylon falling before him, the bear's face covered in bloody welts and bruises.

“I said *match over!*” Instructor Colsen cried out, marching in front of Zeak. “Strike him again, and you’ll be cleaning toilets for a month!”

The lion planted his broadsword into the mat and leaned against it, looking far too calm for someone having beaten another man into the ground with that weapon. “Alright, alright. I wouldn’t want to encroach on Denya’s territory. I know how much he loves cleaning toilets.”

Denya rolled his eyes at that. Not his fault his professors liked sentencing him to chores like that for no reason.

“Yes it is, and it’s not for no reason. If you’d simply pay attention in classes, you wouldn’t be punished so often.”

“Thanks for the input, Xem.”

The lion plucked his large sword out from the ground, sauntering his way over Tylon’s groaning body, just barely avoiding stepping on the bear’s back, to lean over the fox. “Hey, you know what? Why don’t we spar tomorrow, Denny? You can tell me all about your favorite toilets to clean while you’re picking your teeth off the floor.”

Denya sighed heavily through his nose. “Sure.” He said that without thinking, but really, what else would he have said? Was Zeak trying to get a rise out of him, or was he trying to intimidate the fox into cowering out? Right now, Denya didn’t care. He wanted the lion’s ugly mug out of his face as soon as possible, because the longer he stood there sneering, the more people were staring their way and muttering to each other. Hell, he could even see Vermillion’s concerned face in his peripheral vision, and somehow *that* was more painful than the number of bruises currently forming on his body after that bout.

Finally, the fox had enough, and quickly waved his hand in front of him. “Do you mind moving? I’m trying to watch the next bout.” He wasn’t; he just wanted Zeak out of the way.

The lion scoffed, but thankfully stepped away, not without brushing his shin against the seated fox. With that, the attention of the crowd shifted back to the bout, but Denya was too busy looking down at his lap. Was it possible to feel both exhausted and agitated at the same time? He couldn’t tell if he wanted to punch something or take a nap, or both.

“He’s challenging you because he views you as weak, fox. He wouldn’t dare touch you before.”

“Well aware.” Denya muttered, not bothering to keep his voice within his head.

“He’s no match for you normally, but if you don’t, as you Anthros say, shape up, he’ll do to you worse than what he did to the bear.”

“That won’t happen!” The fox grit his teeth. He didn’t even believe what he just said. That broadsword wasn’t exactly something he could mindlessly block like Versailles’ strikes. He could easily be disarmed if he’s not careful, and Zeak wasn’t exactly the merciful type.

A gentle touch on the shoulder was enough to make Denya stiffen up, but he gradually relaxed when he saw who that belonged to. “Do you want to practice after classes?” Versailles asked in the softest tone Denya had ever heard from the deer.

The fox shook his head, and quickly fixed a toothy grin right back. “Nah, are you kidding? Muscles’ doesn’t stand a chance against me. Watch, I’ll take him out in one hit tomorrow. He’ll fall like a tower of cards.”

“You better.” Ah, there was that haughty tone Denya knew Versailles for. “I can’t stand his pompous attitude. I was planning on challenging him myself after his bout, but it looks like you’ll have to be the one to put him in his place.”

“Oh I will.” Denya nodded, a cheeky grin spreading across his muzzle as he slowly leaned towards the deer’s antlers. “But I miiiiight need a bit more confidence before I can-“

“Touch my antlers and I’ll feed you to my dragon.”

“Message received.” Well, it was worth a shot.

“Blah blah blablah the foundation of the Coalition, womp womp womp womp a series of broken peace-treaties. Mumble mumble Xernas accords...”

That was more or less what Denya heard as he laid against his desk, his cheek resting on a stack of books. It was all he could do to keep his eyelids from falling shut, listening to that monotonous tone drone on and on, not to mention the rhythmic, oddly soothing sounds of pens scribbling against parchment from the students around him. Ugh, if only he could bottle that sound up and listen to it every time he tried going to bed. Maybe then his nightmares would be of essays instead.

“Pay attention!” Xem hissed, and Denya’s ears perked up briefly. However, he quickly settled back down; he wouldn’t be shooting up in his seat again like he had the first three times his dragon yelled at him.

Not that it stopped Xem from growling. *“This is why your grades are the lowest.”*

“I’m not smart to begin with.” Denya yawned.

“You’re making excuses. You’re more than capable of succeeding if you put in a modicum of effort. As it stands now, we’ll never be accepted for higher level missions if you don’t pay attention!”

“Mmmf.” The fox rubbed his forehead with his paw, as if trying to push his own attention span back into place. Nope, that didn’t work, back to spacing out. *“It’s just history.”*

“It’s important!”

“Right, because that’s how we’ll win our battles. We’ll recite trivia until our enemies are as bored and tired as I am now.”

“You win battles by studying the strategies employed by your predecessors! Your professor and her dragon fought in over twenty-five major conflicts in the Guild Wars. Wisdom like that is hard to come by.”

Denya sighed again, shaking his head. What had changed? Xem never pestered him this much in class before, and that was when the fox was well rested. A well-rested Denya was an energetic Denya, and an energetic Denya was a distraction, according to his professors. Now here he was, staying nice and quiet *totally* out of courtesy for his fellow students, and *now* Xem has a problem with him? And since when did the scarlet dragon care for history anyway? Professor Chiara was talking about some peace treaty anyways, and usually battles don’t happen at those. *“I can still hear her just fine, alright? I’m just resting my head. My neck is tired, carrying my big, heavy brain all day.”*

“You can’t carry what isn’t there.” Xem mutters, but at least the dragon’s presence dulled in his mind for now. Stifling another yawn, the fox shifted his head to rest on his arm instead, glancing out the window instead... Heh, those two birds are far away. They look a lot like dragons who are even farther away. Look at ‘em, flying around and around... around and around... ‘round and... and...

A sudden, piercing pain in his forehead caused Denya to jolt upright, his eyes watering. Ow, dammit! Wincing, he rubbed at the new mark on his head, finding a piece of chalk on his desk that wasn't there before.

Sheesh, with how hard she threw that thing, it's a miracle the chalk didn't disintegrate on impact!

"Mr. Arany." Professor Chiara called out, raising her voice to be heard over the sea of cackling students. "Since you seem to be so acquainted with the material to be nodding off, would you mind explaining to the class the long-term effects the Xernas accords had on Dearia?"

Denya blinked, and the classroom became deafeningly quiet as all eyes were on him. Hell, the fox could even feel their *dragons'* eyes on him as well, and he knew for a fact he was about to become an example for the others to do better in class. Wonderful.

The fox cleared his throat. "I mean... I *could*, but you're doing such a great job explaining it, I wouldn't want to ruin your flow, ya know?"

Based on the snickering of the students, that wasn't the correct response. He hadn't meant for it to sound as sarcastic as he did, but the annoyance of suddenly (and painfully) being forced out of an impromptu nap made it hard to sound anything less than rude.

Professor Chiara's lips pursed. "How very thoughtful. Why don't we compare teaching notes after class, while you're sweeping beneath the desks?"

More laughter, along with a couple of quiet "ooh's". The fox just had to grimace and hold a thumbs up, not wanting to dig himself into further trouble.

With a nod, Professor Chiara returned to the chalkboard, continuing with her lesson, while Denya flopped back down onto the desk, resting his muzzle on his

forearms. Well, he won't be slipping into a nap anymore, now that he has something to dread after class.

"Thylo has asked me to help tutor you for lessons."

Denya snorted. *"Who's Thylo?"*

"Your professor's dragon."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him to mind his own business. How I handle my rider is my own matter."
Xem let out a proud chuff, and Denya found himself perking up a bit. Now that was rare, having the dragon defend him like that. Maybe today wouldn't be so bad after all.

"But I agree. You need to learn discipline and focus. Next we meet, I'll prepare a few lessons of my own."

"Ah." Good feeling gone.

Finally, riding lessons!

It was one of the few classes Denya actually looked forward to. Yes, he loved Battle Prep, specifically sparring days, since that was the one thing he was really good at, but he also enjoyed riding lessons as it was really hard to be *bad* at it. For now, at least. In their later years, they'll learn much more complex maneuvers, as well as how to

multitask giving commands, fighting, and much more while on the back of a dragon twisting and turning mid-flight.

But for now, their only task was to simply stay *on* the dragon while they flew in formation, performing their own exercises. When it came to simple exercises that required little thought on his end, Denya couldn't be beat.

Besides, he also felt a surge of confidence whenever he stood by Xem on the outdoor field. The dragon may have been a pain in the tail as of late, but the fox did feel assured being able to stand so close to what is essentially the biggest dragon of his year. Even the other dragons stood a couple paces further from the scarlet drake than they did their fellow companions, although that could be in part of Xem's legendary temper as well as his ferocity.

"Game recognizes game, as you'd say." Xem chuffs proudly.

"What I'd give to have your confidence." Denya mentally smirks back, if that's possible, before not-so-mentally yawning. He didn't exactly get much rest sweeping Chiara's room after class. He barely even managed to change into his flight leathers on time before making it to the field.

Not like he was missing out on much. Professor Oksana, their flight instructor, was going over the maneuvers they'd be performing today, and the fox could not bring himself to listen. Why even bother telling them all this anyways? The dragons are going to be the ones following the path, Denya's job was just to stay on.

"It's to prepare you for when we'll turn, dive, and rise."

The fox blinked slowly. *"When we're fighting, we're not exactly gonna have the luxury of telling each other what we're doing next before we, you know, actually do it. It's gonna get random and chaotic pretty quickly."*

“There’s some truth in that.”

“Besides, I know you too well. You wouldn’t listen to any order I give anyways.”

“Also true.”

Denya snorted softly. About time they agreed on something. If Xem wasn’t going to nag him this time, the fox will just cross his arms and lower his head, maybe even rest his eyes a bit. Focusing took too much brain work anyways, he was allowed to just... exist for a while. To just let his mind wander. To think back on today’s events. To Versailles offering to help him train, to Zeak’s stupid challenge, to the breakfast pudding he ate today... mmm, hopefully they start serving that more often, it was delicious. The fox was starting to redevelop his appetite at last, after eating next to nothing for the first couple days after Bernant.

“Denya.”

Ugh, Bernant... was there a way to banish that thought forever from his head? Every other memory Denya skimmed over that day was a little hazy and foggy. He barely even remembered what he’d said to Versailles and the others. But Bernant? No, every detail was etched into his brain forever.

“Denya!”

Even the moments where Denya was having *fun*. That feeling of being drunk on power was just as nerve wracking as the rest of Bernant. He felt ready to fight a *wyvern* by himself! If Xem hadn’t been forced to mirror Denya’s body, the fox actually would have attempted to do that! Had circumstances been a bit different, and he actually took on the wyvern by himself... well, it was likely Xem would be needing a new rider now-

A massive, crushing claw gripped around Denya, instantly forcing him back to reality. The fox’s eyes went wide, his arms and legs pinned to his side, unable to swish

his tail or even breathe! Just when he was about to beg for mercy from whoever this belonged to, the fox felt himself *shoved* back, the world a whirl as his eyes struggled to adjust. And within that same second, he found himself on Xem's back, the dragon turning his long neck to *glare* at the fox.

"Thank you for mounting." Professor Oksana said, now seated on her brown dragon. "I was afraid we'd have to start without you."

"R-Right." Denya muttered, sliding himself into position. A quick glance to either side showed the other riders staring at him. Their dragons, not so much, as they knew better than to maintain eye contact with Xem, whom Denya could feel seething beneath him.

"Now that we're *all* properly mounted." The panther continued. "We'll start easy with Flight Formation C, and transition into Formation D later on. If we're all feeling confident by the end, we'll give Formation E a go as well."

Whatever that meant.

And with that, Professor Oksana's dragon crouched briefly before leaping, taking to the air. One by one, starting on Denya's right, the others flew off as well, until Xem tensed up and launched himself off.

Another reason Denya looked forward to this class: He got to fly his freaking dragon!

"I am not your dragon. You are my rider!"

The cool autumn air felt even better when soaring above the school grounds, flying faster than a galloping horse could run by leaps and bounds, listening to the powerful beat of Xem's wings. It didn't matter how terrible Denya's day had been; up in

the air, he could leave all his problems back on the ground. The various call outs, punishments, even his terrible memories of Bernant. None of that mattered.

Right now, all that was important was that he was *here*, experiencing a wonderful moment that most people never do. All he had to do was not fall off.

Thankfully, that shouldn't be an issue. Formation C, whatever it was, appeared to be long, single file line of sorts. All he had to do was keep an eye on the green drake in front of him, and he'll know when to prepare to bank in either direction, or any manner of basic maneuvers. Even if he lost that line of sight, Denya could still feel Xem's muscles subtly shifting or tensing beneath him whenever he prepared to turn; obviously, it wasn't as much time to react, but it was more than enough for the rider. A shame they won't be able to do the more advanced maneuvers like shuttle loops or aileron rolls, as those sound *really* fun to perform, but these simple steers were still more than enough to get the sleepy fox's heart pumping, to get him grinning ear to ear, to get him feeling *alive!*

Just like how he felt on his way to Bernant.

No...

No, this wasn't happening. Terror struck the fox's chest as he clutched at the dragon tighter, almost missing the queue to bank right. He shouldn't be thinking about that right now! This was his moment to be free in the skies, not to be shackled to his lingering regrets! He wanted to fly. He *loved* flying! He loved the G-Force pressing down on him when Xem rose higher, loved the dew that gathered on his fur and leathers when they broke through a cloud. He loved the weightless thrill of diving down at breakneck speeds, of veering hard to the side with enough force to keep the fox pressed against Xem's back through inertia alone. He loved it. He *loved it!*

Then why was it suddenly so, so hard to breathe? They weren't even flying that high, so it couldn't be the altitude.

“Control yourself! There is no danger here. I’d sense it if there was.” Xem growled in what Denya assumed to be the dragon’s way of trying to sound comforting. *“Even then, this is perhaps the safest location in the entire country. You cannot find a greater gathering of trained dragons anywhere else.”*

It wasn’t like Denya didn’t believe his mount; Xem’s logic was sound. Heck, the dragon didn’t even mention the trained riders and warriors serving as instructors here, although obviously, in his mind, dragons surpassed non-dragons in every way. But Denya’s panic wasn’t logical, was it? He was skittish, trembling, terrified of *flying* for fucks sake! Bernant was taking *everything* from him, bit by bit! His friends, his sleep, his strength, his confidence, his *enjoyment*!

“Fox!”

Denya snapped his head up, feeling that split-second tension beneath Xem that told him the dragon was about to bank hard. The fox shifted left, but he realized that the dragon had intended to turn the opposite direction when he felt himself slide right off his mount.

Free-fall was another aspect of advanced dragon flight that first years weren’t allowed to experience, either.

Denya fell, the wind howling past him, stealing his ability to breathe, as if his panic attack hadn’t already done that. Everything was a blur; blue one direction, green another. Where the ground and sky were in relation to him was a complete mystery, and it took the fox far too long to realize he was actively spinning and tumbling in midair, unable to level himself out. He flailed his arms and legs as though actively fighting against the very air itself, until he simply resigned himself to the whims of gravity. Darkness encroached the edge of his vision, and while he knew his life was in jeopardy at the moment, all the fox could think about was what a big disappointment he turned out to be.

A set of claws suddenly clutched firmly around his body, the shock of which causing Denya to gasp for the air he so desperately needed. The darkness receded

from his vision, clearing it. He was no longer tumbling helplessly through the air, but secure in Xem's clutches, the ground quickly but safely rising up to meet them.

What a strange feeling, to feel safe in a dragon's freaking claws of all places. Claws that could rend flesh and shatter trees, now preserving his life.

Denya actually felt a tad disappointed when those claws eventually opened, Xem trying to set the fox gently on the ground. The second his feet touched the grass, however, Denya's knees buckled from beneath him, and he fell onto his hands and knees, panting. The shock of his impromptu freefall had overridden his previous panic attack, sure, but it wasn't fear the fox was feeling.

"Fox." Xem lowered his large head, inspecting the fox on the ground, but soon a heavy beating of wings interrupted him. Oksana's dragon landed in front of Denya, and a series of thuds told him the others were settling nearby as well. All eyes were on the fox now; all of them, even the dragons'.

Denya gripped at the grass, tearing it from the roots. Humiliation didn't even begin to describe how he was feeling. Dragons hated seeing *anyone* weak, yet here he was on his hands and knees, trembling, right in front of the biggest and arguably most powerful dragon of his year. He wished Xem had never chose him. Xem would be happier with anyone else, because *anyone* else would be more confident.

He wished Xem had let him fall.

A pair of feet landed on the grass before him, but Denya didn't even bother to look up as Professor Oksana ran to him. "Are you ok?! What happened?" The panther cried out, stopping just before her student. "I was told it look like you'd just flung yourself off your dragon-

"I did!"

The fox forced himself upright, back onto his feet. And with a shake of his head, he lifted his chin up and smiled. Wide. “Totally did! Xem was getting *really* bored with the basic flight drills. I mean, he didn’t say he was, but I could feel it, you know? So I thought ‘hey, why not do something to wake him up?’ It definitely worked, didn’t it, Xem?”

Denya turned to his dragon, trying oh so hard to maintain that smile. His chest ached, his neck fur was raised, and his throat was *hurting*, but he forced himself through it for his dragon’s sake. Alas, it was hard to read a dragon’s emotion through their face alone, and right now the fox was struggling hard to keep his own feelings in check long enough to peer into Xem’s own internal thoughts. All he could see was that the dragon’s yellow eyes were a bit wider than usual, his head nearly on the ground so the two could see each other eye to eye.

“You... You willingly *threw yourself* off your own dragon?!”

Oskana’s voice caused Denya to turn back around, the fox letting out a laugh that was entirely too loud to be convincing. “Yeah! Whew, what a rush that was. I’m glad Xem’s a good catch, otherwise I’d be a big, red smear on the ground, haha!”

The look on the panther’s face was... uncomfortable, to say the least. Her brow wrinkled, the instructor opened her mouth, closed it, then glanced back at her dragon before turning to Denya once again. “Reckless doesn’t even begin to describe that stunt you pulled! It doesn’t matter how *boring* your dragon views these lessons, even he knows they are important to build muscle memory and coordination before you begin more dangerous maneuvers. You will refrain from diverting from the formations in the future.”

And then she spoke with a much softer tone, far too quiet for anyone else to hear. “You are excused for today. Please, get some rest.”

With that, she returned to her dragon, flying off to continue their practice. One by one, the other students launched as well, and soon Denya was left alone on the grass, feeling his dragon’s gaze on his back the whole time.

He didn't dare turn around. He couldn't bear the furious glare that Xem was surely giving him. Denya fell off his dragon, and during a Formation he thought was *easy!* There was only one way to not pass this class, and the fox literally fell head on into it. It was bad enough that the fox made an ass of himself in front of others, but to embarrass Xem in front of his fellow dragons as well... no one else should have to suffer for his own shortcomings.

A quiet grunt from behind perked up the fox's ears; Xem had raised his head. "*Do as your instructor says and rest. Seek me out when you are ready. We have much to discuss.*" With the heavy beat of wings and a powerful gust of air, the scarlet dragon had flown off, leaving Denya alone for the first time in a very long time.

"Resting" wasn't very restful.

To think Denya had been craving a break on his bed all day, yet now that he was actually laying on it, the fox couldn't figure out how to *use* the damn thing. The once-neat sheets were now a crumbled mess between the rider who couldn't stop tossing and turning. Ugh, if only he had someone to just tie him up in these blankets to stop him from moving.

If only he had someone.

The thoughts were particularly bad today, but today had also been particularly bad, so it checks out. The anxiety was ever present, as it felt like Denya should be doing *something!* Should he be preparing for his challenge with Zeak? Studying his other classes? Should he just go see Xem right now?

Xem. Ugh, it felt weird not having the dragon's presence in his mind. The connection between the two had been closed off, like Xem had closed some invisible door between the two of them. Denya lived the vast, vast majority of his life without

sharing his mental space with a dragon, yet he felt so lonely without Xem being able to see through his eyes, to hear through his ears. Even that persistent nagging had been comforting, in its own annoying way.

Despite his constant tossing and turning, the fox managed to drift off a couple times. He never woke up feeling more refreshed, but before he could go back to sleep, he'd notice his connection with Xem was still closed, and the bout of anxiety returned. Only when he dozed off did it stop, only for the pattern to return again.

Once the sunlight filtering through his window began changing into a darker, golden color did Denya finally decide it was time to crawl out of bed. He missed breakfast, no doubt, but for once food wasn't on his mind. Even if he did go to the mess hall and eat, he'd just end up picking at his food, not really tasting it or eating enough to fill him.

Besides, he kept Xem waiting long enough.

With the evening sun in the sky, the fox strode past the school grounds into the Sanctuary. He stiffened up at feeling several dragons turn their gazes towards him, curious what a rider without their flight leathers was doing in the dragon resting grounds, but the fox continued anyways. He was allowed in; Xem communicated to the others the fox would be meeting with him here. And if he hadn't, well, he'd be a pile of ash by now.

Yet again, he spotted the familiar ruby glow of the golden sun shining off his dragon's scales, right atop that hill in the far corner. Despite the nerves he felt, the fox chuckled as he approached his laying dragon. "Is this just gonna be the hill we meet up at when we're having a bad day?"

Xem shifted his golden eyes towards Denya and snorted. "*It appears that way, yes.*"

"Heh, yeah. Until you get sick of me and choose a better rider."

There it is. Denya hadn't meant to think those thoughts towards Xem, but then again impulse control wasn't exactly on the list of talents he possessed. It just sort of seeped out, like water in the cracks of a vase barely holding it all together.

The dragon raised his head, looming it over the fox's own, his warm breath washing over his rider. "*Denya-*"

"No no, it's fine, really!" Denya tried putting on a smile, as unconvincing as it was. "I-I mean, that's why you closed our connection, right? You're waiting for my permission to sever it?"

"Your assumptions are terrible and incorrect, as usual." Xem snorts. *"I didn't want to distract you from the rest you so desperately need."*

With that, the mental doorway connecting the two of them suddenly flung open, and Denya could feel Xem's emotions washing over him. There wasn't any anger, frustration, embarrassment. There was only concern.

Denya's knees trembled. Another crack formed in that vase. "H-hey, c'mon. Don't... don't think that way about me. I'm... stronger than that." The fox had stopped smiling, but he tried speaking as though he was, even with his breath hitching in his throat.

Xem leaned in closer. *"You have already proved your strength to me long ago. But you should know that if there's anything we dragons despise more than witnessing weakness, it's lying. Whether it's to us."* He extended his claw. *"Or yourself."*

"I'm not..." Denya started, but the words refused to form, either in his mouth or in his head. He couldn't even think in words, just in pictures, images of Bernant, the sparring mat, the amalgamation, his free fall, the wyvern, Versailles, all of it one after the other. Another crack on the vase, and water was trickling out, a single tear sliding down his cheek. A single touch would be enough to shatter it at this point.

And that touch came in the form of a mighty set of claws, engulfing Denya's backside and pulling him close.

Denya collapsed into Xem's side, burying himself into those scarlet scales. With his muzzle safely obscured, he sobbed, *wailed* even. Everything, everything he'd been feeling for the past week, everything he'd forced into that tiny, intricate vase, finally rushed out in a violent explosion of raw emotion. Everything poured out of him, directed into that red, scaly wall he was pressed against, with every sob and wail.

The fox's body shook; his muscles burning, as if set aflame. Sheer power rushed through him; through his tears, Denya felt that same consuming energy course through his veins, just as it did in Bernant. That same near-drunken feeling returned, the one the fox feared had almost ended his life in that battle, and with it came the urge to destroy. The urge to tear out entire trees by their roots, to smash holes through the school's brick walls, to strike at the ground until thick cracks formed wide enough for Denya to fall into and just disappear from the world entirely.

But the gentle claw on his back, the *hand* of Xem that was big enough to cover the fox from neck to ankle, kept him grounded. He was here.

The sky suddenly went dark, and through his tear-filled vision, Denya noticed Xem had draped his wing over him, shielding him from the outside world. Of course, it was to save him from his own embarrassment, publicly crying in a valley of dragons. Yet, the fox was all the more grateful. He didn't want to be in this world right now. He wanted to be *here*, wherever here was. He wanted to be safe here, with Xem.

Xem. Gods, he was sobbing in front of his dragon. He was sobbing *on* his dragon. It had just occurred to him what he was doing, and the sheer awkwardness of it was enough to pull the fox out of sobbing. He didn't know whether he should be laughing at himself or cry harder that he just lost any credibility he had with his dragon.

"I am not your dragon. You are my rider." Xem's low, gruff voice growled in his head, the dragon's paw squeezing him closer. *"And I take good care of my belongings."*

“Possessive.” Denya thought back, a smile finally spreading across his face. The crying had finally stopped, although the fox was still sniffing uncontrollably. It had just occurred to him this had been the first time he’d properly allowed himself to grieve over the deaths at Bernant. Sobbing didn’t make what happened right, or bring them back, but getting everything off his chest felt like a huge weight had been lifted off.

Of course, he held onto Xem’s firm, scaly side as though afraid something would just pluck him away. He couldn’t dare to face the dragon now, not with how red and gross his face must look. Man, and he just wiped his messy, disgusting snout against the dragon too.

“I’m fully capable of cleaning myself afterwards. Don’t concern yourself over me.” Xem let out a chuff, and Denya realized the dragon had been looking at him this whole time when he felt that warm breath wash against his back, where his body was exposed between the claws. *“A little moisture is hardly the worst I’ve experienced. Typh’s rider wet himself the first time he dove with him.”*

“No way.” Denya felt a snicker force its way out from his mouth. “Did he eat his rider after that?”

“What dragon would want to eat a rider who just wet themselves?”

Damn, Xem can be funny when he tries! The fox chuckled again, turning to glance back at the dragon, but when he saw those golden eyes bearing down on him, he quickly turned back, facing the red scaly wall once again.

“Um...” He started, before leaning forward, leaning his forehead against Xem. *“Sorry for panicking on you earlier today. I’ve been a wreck lately.”*

“I’m well aware.” Denya felt the dragon shifting slightly, the fox freezing in fear that his mount was trying to leave. To his assurance, however, he felt something large and broad nudge against his back, pushing him into the red scaly wall yet again; Xem had shifted to laying on his side, and was nuzzling into the fox with his snout.

"But you know I don't accept apologies. Actions speak volumes over words. If you want to be redeemed, then promise you'll take better care of yourself. Ask for help, if need be, but do not push yourself to this point ever again. I will not tolerate it."

"Yeah..." Denya nodded. "I... I don't know why I didn't do this sooner."

"Because I'd eat you."

"I meant to vent and ask for help, not crying on your side." The fox rolled his eyes. Dragons, man.

Still, Denya felt absolutely spent. All that tension in his body, released all at once. The fox was... well he wasn't *better* but he *felt* better. The vase was broken, and all that terrible gunk inside had spewed out; onto Xem's side, unfortunately. He now felt ready to start picking up the pieces.

"Thank you, Xem." The fox smiled, pushing himself off the dragon's side. But a gentle nudge from Xem's snout pushed him right back.

"Stay." The dragon commanded. *"Until you're fully ready."*

Denya grunted. *"You just like keeping me around."*

"I do not. You are noisy and slobbery."

"You are literally cuddling me."

"This is how you Anthros express affection."

Denya gasped. “Awww! You’re-“

“I WILL eat you.”

It was hard for Denya to feel threatened after hearing that. In fact, he even started wagging his tail, even after hearing Xem’s annoyed growl. It was a shame the fox couldn’t peer into the dragon’s mind to see what he was *really* thinking; Xem didn’t just shut the door, he barricaded it tight to the point it was a struggle just to communicate mentally with him. Still, the fox had a really good idea how Xem thought about this exchange if he was keeping that door shut so tight.

It made him want to stay a little longer, even if his stomach started growling.

“You should eat.”

“Later.”

And Xem didn’t argue further. Denya didn’t leave this spot until long after the sun had set, after waking up from a nap he fell in unintentionally. The most comforting, relaxing nap he’d had in years.

“Up next: Denya and Zeak.”

The fox grinned; it was about time. He leaned back from where he sat, before kicking his legs forward and leaping onto his feet with a single motion. Twirling his staff in his fingers, the fox stepped onto the mat, teeth poking out from his muzzle. He’d been looking forward to this all day.

Judging from the equally-mischievous look on the lion's face, so had Zeak. The lion slung his practice broadsword over his shoulder, sneering. "This will be quick."

"Probably." Denya shrugged. He'll save the banter for another time. He needed to remind this jerk how he fought when he's serious. And as he squared off with Zeak, the fox prepared himself to fight, watching with barely-contained laughter as the lion's eyes flew wide with outrage.

"Hey! That's not a battle stance!"

"Sure it is!" Denya winked. He crouched with both arms fully extended, holding onto his staff roughly a quarter's way from the edge each. In short, it was the most ridiculous pose he'd done before a fight to this day, looking as though he were midway through a squat routine. The murmurs of the other riders watching him buzzed in his ears, but what the fox chose to focus on was the look of confusion and frustration on Zeak's face.

Denya was good at mental warfare.

"Uh... begin!" Instructor Colsen cried out; even the tiger looked perplexed by his choice of stance. Eh, he'll see soon enough.

Zeak dashed forward, gripping the handle in both arms as he prepared an overhead swing at the fox. As much as Denya despised the lion, he was well aware those muscles weren't for show. A pure-strength match against him was unwinnable, and that attack would easily dislocate his arm should it hit a shoulder.

But that's if the attack hit, right?

Chuckling, the fox suddenly raised his arms, tossing his staff into the air. He watched with satisfaction as Zeak tilted his head up, his eyes following the staff.

Which meant he never saw the kick until too late.

Denya leapt up from his crouching position, twisting his body to plant his right heel as hard as he could against the lion. He had aimed for Zeak's chest, but had accidentally struck higher, a loud *crunch* resonating Denya heard the feline's nose break beneath his impact. Zeak's head flung back, and the lion stumbled back from his charge before falling over, blood trickling from his nose.

"Match over!" Colson sighed, shaking his head as if frustrated that technique worked.

The murmuring grew louder, and Denya found himself grinning yet again as he heard a couple clap his way. He walked over to the lion, extending his arm to help him up, but Zeak slapped his arm away with a growl.

"Cheating bastard." He snarled, wiping his bloodied nose onto his sleeve. "Fight me again!"

"Can't. We get a month grace period, remember." The fox shrugged. Well, he tried to be civil. At least he kept the smirk off his face, although it quickly returned when he walked back to his spot, taking a seat next to a very wide-eyed Versailles.

"That would never work a second time."

Denya stuck his tongue out. "It only needs to work the first."

"I don't even think you could pull that off against one of our instructors... or anyone properly trained."

"Yeah, because they wouldn't be afraid of me." Denya chuckled, watching the bear from yesterday spar with an otter, the two of them wielding short swords. "Xem

made a good point yesterday that Zeak only challenged me because he thought I was off my game. I thought I'd mess with him a little, let him know I actually got some decent sleep last night. If he wasn't so scared of me, he wouldn't overthink and look at the staff that I tossed up."

The deer furrowed their brow. "And if he hadn't?"

"Then I'd leap forward and elbow him in the gut." Denya chuckled. "C'mon, you saw how open Muscles looked, both arms up and running at me. That match was over before it started; he just went for the more embarrassing defeat."

Versailles snorted at that, shaking their head. "Don't call him 'Muscles,' it's too flattering of a nickname."

"How about Meowscles?"

"Meowscles is better."

The fox snickered, leaning further back. "Congrats on your fight earlier today, by the way. I don't think you needed to disarm *all* of Clives' knives, but it was pretty fun to watch regardless."

A rare smile spread across Versailles face. "Better to be safe than sorry. Still, I wish I could fight you again, seeing as how you're back to looking like yourself again. But I suppose I can wait the month out."

"About that, actually." Denya turned in his spot, fully facing the deer. "Can we work out a deal? I'm... My grades in History are really behind, and I heard Instructor Oksana congratulate you on your last test. I could really use a tutor."

“Oh?” Versailles raised a brow. “And you’re offering to spar with me in exchange?”

“I’ll do more than just spar.” Denya smiled. “See, I replayed our last fight a lot in my head afterwards, and I noticed something: You tend to slip into a flow-state pretty easily.”

“A flow state?”

“Like... you look like you’re dancing when you’re fighting, which is *really* cool, by the way. But I notice you develop this really... intense look on your face, and that’s how I know you’re in a flow state, like you’re moving on instinct. If I disrupt your flow, you’ll get tripped up and give me an opportunity to counter.”

Versailles eyes widened. “Like with our bout yesterday?”

“Exactly!” The fox nodded. “I know that if I do something a little unpredictable to you, like parry your strike earlier than you expect or move in a way you’re not planning, you get mixed up and stumble back.”

“I see...” The deer smiled. “In that case, I’ll do more than just help with your History as well. If there’s any course you’d like tutoring in, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I won’t.” Denya smiled, and he felt Xem rumble with approval.

Chapter 3

“A friendly reminder, cadets: Navigation class is cancelled today. The classroom is still a bit of a mess after someone had a... magical accident.” Professor Chiara clasped her paws together, looking towards the room with a slight smile on her face. “Which means today is an early day. Use your extra time wisely. Class dismissed!”

Denya sighed in relief as he pushed himself from his desk, grabbing his notes and shoving them into his knapsack. History was significantly harder when he was actually made to focus through it, instead of finding ways to distract himself or, more recently, napping. His wrist had never felt so sore, writing down so many notes, and he trained with a freaking bow staff of all weapons!

But the satisfaction of knowing he was improving, that he wasn't falling behind everyone, was enough to keep him going... well, that and knowing he didn't have any more classes after this. Finally, a chance to goof off!

After funneling through the doorway with the other students, Denya caught sight of his favorite nonbinary deer, grateful that they were wearing their antlers today. The fox squeezed past the other riders, breaking away to pat the deer on the back. “Thank gods for magic mishaps, right, Versailles? I am *not* ready to read more today.”

Versailles turned and raised a brow, but even they couldn't hide the slight smile on their face. “For once, I agree. I never understood why we need an entire class just to read a map.”

“Exactly, plus we have know-it-all dragons. They kinda make maps redundant.” He couldn't ever imagine Xem getting lost flying anywhere.

The fox felt a stirring in his mind; speak of the devil, the dragon must be waking from his rest. It was difficult to tell if it was a coincidence whenever Xem woke up when

dragons or his name were mentioned, or if he just really liked being involved whenever the topic became about himself.

Versailles chuckled, shaking their head. "As much as I don't like relying on Zin for everything, she is more reliable than any map."

Denya beamed. Glad he could finally get the deer to get on the same page as him. Normally, Versailles was incredibly studious, lecturing about the importance of education as well as combat. He wondered if the deer was a dragon in the past life, given his arrogance and know-it-all behavior wasn't too far off from Xem's, but then again, this was exactly the kind of friend Denya needed right now. Someone who knew how to get him to study and learn, how to stay ahead in classes.

Buuuuut, if Versailles didn't seem too hung up on not having to attend their last class, then maybe he could talk the haughty deer into some fun. "Really? So if you asked Zin to take you to, say, The Tulip Pub, she would know exactly where to go? Because if not, Xem will probably know, and I bet he'd be more than happy to lead the way."

Versailles sighed, rubbing their palm into their forehead. "You want to go to a *pub*?!"

"I want to go *anywhere* that's not the school." Denya huffed back, rolling his eyes. "We've been staring at these walls for months now, it's time we got a break! We've got free time today, so let's go be stupid for a bit."

"You do lead me on experience with stupid, I'll hand you that."

"Hurtful." Denya crossed his arms. "Have you got a better suggestion on what we should be doing?"

"Studying." Versailles nodded.

“*Studying*.” Xem agreed.

“I shouldn’t have asked.” Denya grumbled. He’ll take back what he said, Versailles is the *worst* friend imaginable. “Why do you even need to study? Aren’t you, like, top of the class?”

“Top *three*. That’s hardly *the* top.” Versailles spat those words out, like they were marks of shame branding his image. “We could be doing better.”

“We could be doing a lot worse, too.” The fox sighed. He shouldn’t bother; this deer was as stubborn as they come. It was an admirable quality, something Denya respected Versailles for immensely, but he knew that if he tried too hard to talk Versailles out of studying, he’ll just end up getting roped into-

“What about you, Denya? How’s your performance in class.”

Ah, shit, there it is.

“Just fine.” The fox cocked his head up, trying to look more confident than he felt. “The professor’s say my grades have never been higher.”

“Not exactly a high bar, but we’ll take it.” Versailles nodded. “Your note taking?”

“Just fine.” Denya patted his knapsack. “I got everything I need for the test next week. I’ll probably even get a few questions right.”

“Inspiring.” Versailles reached into their own knapsack, producing a single quill that he balanced on the flat of his hand. “And your lesser magic?”

The fox rolled his eyes, before holding out his hand, furrowing his brow. Remember the string, he thought to himself, trying his best to picture some floating, invisible line connecting the quill to his fingers. He waited until he felt a slight tingle at the tips of his claws, then clenched his fist. The quill darted forward off Versailles hand; not enough to make it to Denya's own, as the fox had to quickly crouch and step forward to catch it before it landed on the ground, but it was certainly more than enough to convince the deer it was more than just the wind that did that.

"Improving." Denya grinned, handing the quill back.

Even Versailles smiled at that, retrieving his quill. "Now your shields."

"Sheesh, you're drilling me on *everything* today. Do we have to do this in the hallway?"

"This is the last one, I promise."

"Yeah, yeah." Denya sighed, before closing his eyes. He felt for his mental connection with Xem, probing around until he could pinpoint the source of it, or at least the general direction. Again, this was more visualizing something that couldn't be seen visibly, a tricky aspect to magic control that made it so hard for Denya to even budge a quill with his mind, but with enough effort, he could see a crimson red airflow shifting through a tunnel, entering his mind.

Taking a deep breath, the fox imagined a door in his mind next, closing it shut by the tunnel. Immediately, he felt Xem's presence diminish in his mind; the red gas still seeped through the cracks of the door, but it was significantly less than before. "*Well done*," the dragon grunted in approval, his voice sounding distant and muffled, as if he were the one behind the door.

"Xem says I'm doing well." The fox smiled, opening his eyes. The second he did, however, he felt that mental door open right back up, the red gas pushing through yet

again, reigniting his connection to Xem. “But... yeah, I can only do it when I’m taking a moment to concentrate.”

Versailles grimaced, lifting the edge of his lips. “You know the enemy won’t give you the luxury to prepare beforehand. You need to learn to keep your shields up during battle, otherwise you could end up manipulated into making a fatal-”

“Hey, I’m a master of manipulation!” Denya scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. “You saw how I one-hit KO’d Meowscles, didn’t you?”

“I don’t think Meowscles knows how to read a picture book, let alone a person, Denya. Besides, that’s not the kind of manipulation I’m talking about. You’re excellent with the bow staff and in hand-to-hand, but once we’re allowed to start sparring with our powers, you’re going to fall behind *very* quickly unless you learn how to counter.”

That struck a chord with the fox, who found himself biting his lips in frustration. Fighting was the *only* thing he was naturally good at in this stupid school. Even then, he wasn’t the strongest, or arguably a good tactician; the fox was just nimble and keen at finding mistakes his opponents made. Of course, for a few minutes at a time, Denya *could* become the strongest for a while, but that was inconsistent at best, and definitely a story for another time.

“Hey,” Versailles voice was gentler, the deer offering a smile. “C’mon, let’s go spar a bit. We don’t have to study today if you don’t want to. I’d like to practice hand-to-hand, and you want to practice maintaining your shields in combat.”

Denya scoffed. “You’re gonna destroy me if I’m maintaining my shields the whole time, unless you plan on studying at the same time as well.”

Versailles opened their mouth to respond, but paused, raising a finger. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. I could pin notecards to your armor while we-”

“I was *kidding!*” Versailles wasn’t a friend at all; he was the fox’s mortal enemy!

It was a very, very brutal sparring match.

Denya never believed he would ever struggle with landing a punch or blocking a hit, yet here he was, struggling to hold his own. He felt like his mind was torn in two different places, struggling to continue visualizing the very choppy, hazy door in his head while also focusing on fighting the deer right in front of him. Most of the battle was purely internal, but the fox felt embarrassed knowing on the outside, he looked like he was stumbling around like some drunkard, fighting an expert combatant like Versailles who had time to reading the *fucking* notecards attached to the fox’s leathers.

As if Denya didn’t have enough on his plate as is, he had to deal with Xem’s voice constantly rumbling in his head as well. “*Jump up. Lay on your back. Roll over. Run away.*”

“*You’re not helping!*” Denya’s face flushed red, the fox barely bringing his right arm up in time to block a kick aimed at his shoulder.

“*I’m not supposed to be.*” Xem snorted. “*For this exercise, I’m playing the role of a psychic assault. You’ll know you’ve succeeded in shielding me out when you can no longer hear my voice. Now, oink like a pig. Cluck like a chicken.*”

Denya could practically see Xem’s smug face; the dragon was certainly enjoying tormenting the fox, even if it was for the sake of building his mental defenses. This was important, of course, but constantly hearing that low rumble in the back of his head was doing far more harm than good. Denya was running out of breath faster than he normally would in a fight, his heart hammering in his chest. Was Xem doing more than just speaking to him? Did the dragon actually know how to launch a psychic attack that caused his body to react this way?

The fox gritted his teeth, ducking his head just in time to avoid a fist that brushed the top of his head fur. Concentrate, dammit! If he can't fight a distracted first year like this, he was absolutely *screwed* if he went up against a fully trained assailant who knew how to get in his head. Focus on the door, focus on the door. Get them out of his head.

Get Xem out of his head!

Versailles let out a loud grunt as the bottom of Denya's foot suddenly impacted their chest, sending him stumbling back. The deer panted softly, glaring at the fox. "We're supposed to be moving at half-speed, remember?"

"S-sorry!" Denya muttered, but he was too bewildered to realize how hard he'd just struck. Xem's voice... it was gone!

Well, not gone-gone. He could still hear the faintest echo of the dragon's rumbling in his head, but whatever Xem was saying was completely indecipherable, it was like the dragon was never there. The door was holding firm, with only the faintest hint of the red mist spilling through.

The fox smiled at Versailles. "I think I've got my shields working!"

"Oh?" The deer asked, and even his angry look melted into one of satisfaction. "I'm glad it's starting to take hold. You're a fast learner."

"Thanks!" Denya beamed. That was an extremely rare compliment for the fox, let alone from someone like Versailles.

"If you're feeling confident." His battle partner crouched, holding their fists up. "Why don't we try moving to three-fourths speed, see how much punishment you can take before your shields come crashing down?"

The fox grinned, resuming his own stance. “Just try not to get distracted reading what year our country was founded in when I deck your schnoz, Ver.”

With that, the two launched into a faster bout, the fox smiling all the while. He still felt a tad sluggish, but the shields were still in place. That door was not budging. The fox never even registered Xem’s presence as he fought with the deer.

No, if anything, he felt himself improving! Without Xem distracting him, Denya was moving far more efficiently, blocking and countering everything Versailles threw at him and then some! Wordlessly, they shifted out of three-fourths speed and turned into a full on assault, each warrior trying to take each other down. Sparring with Versailles was always rather intense, as the deer never did anything half-assed if he could help it. Still, while the deer’s hand-to-hand was as impressive as his class grades, the fox found himself keeping up just fine.

“Heh, not like our first time we fought, huh?” Denya sneered, brushing Versailles’ kick out of the way and throwing it back, attempting to throw the deer off balance.

But his opponent simply used that momentum to perform a back handspring, landing onto their feet with ease. “Not at all. But keep talking and I just might break your arm again.”

“You talked more than me during that fight!” The fox scoffed, before bracing himself as Versailles came at him. Alright, fine, Versailles finally fought their way back into being “friend” status with Denya, but only because they actually took the bout seriously. Which, admittedly, would be quite hard to do if Denya had to fight someone who looked like they were covered in a textbook.

After a lengthy series of back and forth blows, the two finally collapsed onto their backs in a silent draw. Heavy gasping filled the air as the bruised and battered brawlers recuperated. His entire body was sore, but Denya still grinned triumphantly as he forced himself to sit upright. “Did you get your studying done, ya big nerd?”

“Hardly. It’s difficult to read with you jumping about.” The haughty deer huffed as they pulled himself up as well. Despite the annoyance in his tone, Versailles grinned just as much as Denya did, nodding in approval. “But it’s nice to see you’re improving, at least. You were keeping your shields up our entire bout, right?”

“Oh, yeah!” Denya nods. It was almost a little unsettling, going so long without feeling Xem’s presence. With a sigh, he allowed the door to open, feeling the red mist flow back in. “*Hey, Xem. You didn’t fall asleep, did you?*”

Xem snorted indignantly. “*Of course not. I’ve been constantly assaulting you with my words this entire time. Your rapid development of your shielding technique is admirable.*”

Hell yeah. Denya was starting to feel a little smug, receiving praise from the two strictest people in his life. Just to ensure that he really *was* learning how to shield properly, and that it wasn’t just a one-time fluke, the fox materialized the door once more, halting Xem’s connection with himself. “Yup! Xem told me he’s been trying to mess with me this whole time.”

“Zin just confirmed with me as well.” The deer nodded. Dragons couldn’t communicate with those who weren’t their partners, but they could speak to other dragons freely. Versailles attempted to roll onto their feet but winced, pausing to rub at their arm. “Your hand-to-hand has also improved as well. Drastically, I must add. I would have thought shielding would slow you down, not the opposite.”

Denya snickered. Alright, this was starting to get a bit much, the fox shyly rubbing the back of his head. “I mean... It is a lot easier to fight now that Xem’s not mentally attacking me.”

Versailles blinked, their brow furrowing. “I’m sorry. Mentally... what?”

“Attacking me. That’s what he’s been doing.”

The deer tilted their head. "What are you talking about? Dragons can't manipulate their riders. Sometimes, your emotions may get linked, but Xem was only to speak to you, not... mentally attack you."

Now it was Denya's turn to furrow his brows. "No, I'm pretty sure he's been mentally attacking me for a while now. Every time I hear his voice in my head, my face gets all warm, and my heart starts beating hard, and it gets really hard to focus, and my stomach gets all upset, and... and..."

The fox trailed off, recognizing that look on Versailles face. That was the look people gave him when he blurted out something really weird or inappropriate for the scenario. However, when Denya noticed that look, he was usually good at realizing what he said that was the issue and would be quick to apologize. Here, however, he was more confused than ever. "What?"

"Denya..." Versailles spoke slowly. "Are your shields up at the moment?"

"Yeah, I dropped them for a sec, but I just raised them. Wanted to see if I could-"

"Alright, keep them up. I've raised mine as well. I... don't think our dragons should know what we're discussing."

Ok, now Denya was *really* confused. The fox briefly forgot about his injuries as he stood back up, looking down at his friend. "Alright, you're scaring me here. Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, just..." Versailles took a deep breath. "Has this been happening to you just recently?"

"Uh..." The fox's eyes flickered up as he tried remembering. "No, it's been happening for a couple of weeks, actually."

“He’s been *attacking* you mentally for a couple weeks?”

“I thought he was just trying to help me make sure my shields were working.” The fox scoffed.

Versailles groaned as they stood back up, wiping their brow. “Is that when he started... *attacking* you?”

“No...” Denya sighed, wincing. Time to dredge up some bad memories. “It happened about a week after Bernant. I was having a really shitty day. I lost to you on the mat, got called out for sleeping in class, fell off my dragon during flight class-“

“You *fell* off Xem!?”

“He caught me, obviously.” Denya gestured to himself. “But yeah, like I said, a pretty shitty day. Xem told me to meet him at Sanctuary later, and I thought he was gonna scold me or disown me or whatever, but...” The fox paused. Why was his breath getting caught in his throat?

Versailles pressed on. “Buuuuut?”

“Buuuuut...” Denya hesitated. Xem made him promise not to tell anyone about that encounter, and the fox was afraid to break that promise, even with his shields up. For now, he’ll just have to skirt around that event and be as vague as possible. “But, he’d been very, uh... gentle about it. We just sat and talked with each other for a while, and afterwards I felt better.”

“I noticed you were looking much better the next day, yeah.” Versailles nodded in agreement. “What did you talk about?”

“The usual.” Denya shrugged. “Mainly, it’s Xem saying the same crap he says to me every day. I’m bad with assumptions, I need to be more honest with myself. That he’s not my dragon, I’m his rider, and he takes good care of his belongings-”

There it is again. Denya’s breath hitched in his throat, the fox nearly gasping at the sudden lack of air he felt. This was more severe than the last time, not to mention the feeling of his face flushing bright red, his heart pounding in his chest as though he was about to go a second round with Versailles. Slowly, he turned towards the deer who met his wide-eyed look, and it was clear they both came to the same conclusion.

“Denya... you have a crush on your dragon.”

What. The *fuck*!

“That’s... T-That’s ridiculous, c’mon!” Denya tried to laugh it off, his chest aching from how hard his heart was beating. “That can’t... I mean, i-is that even possible?”

“I guess so!” The deer raised their shoulders, looking just as lost as Denya. “It’s never been recorded anywhere of a rider sharing a... relationship with a dragon-”

“God dammit, and you’re the history nerd, too, so you’d know!” Denya groaned, wiping his hands across his face.

He forced himself to take a deep breath, his hands still wrapped around his slender muzzle. “Alright... alright, here me out.”

“Denya-”

“No, shut up... What if Xem is just *that* powerful, you know? Like-like I’m not that big for a fox, and he’s already huge for a dragon, and-”

Again, his breath hitched, and Denya swore. “Gods-*fucking*-dammit!” Even saying *that* causes him to get fluttery?!

No, this couldn’t be happening. The fox was pacing around the room now, his tail swishing wildly in agitation. “S-So, a-as I was saying... maybe this is, like... a side effect of our connection. He’s a lot bigger than me... m-maybe I just can’t handle his huge influx of power-“

His breath hitched again, and Denya began searching for the nearest window to throw himself out of.

“Denya.” Versailles tried again, routing Denya away from his fervent pacing. “I’m sorry to say, but this is definitely a crush. What you’re describing are exactly the symptoms others have said when they confessed themselves to me.”

“Stop it!” Denya cried out. Now was not the time to be reminded that Versailles was the pretty one of the two, what with their fair features on their muscular body. Not like Denya could think about wanting anyone to pine after him, now that he was too busy thinking about his crush with his *gods damned dragon!* Ugh, life was so much easier before this revelation, back when he thought Xem had just been psychically attacking him, before Versailles ruined this for him.

Well, Versailles was gonna fix this. “Alright, lover enby. Tell me how to get rid of this.”

Versailles frowned. “Get rid of what?”

“This *crush!*” Just saying it made the fox whine.

“I...” The deer sighed, shaking their head. “It’s always something with you.”

In one swift motion, they grabbed onto Denya's shoulders, holding him firm until the two shared eye contact. "Listen. You've got two options--"

"Is one of them jumping out the window?"

"-*three* options." Versailles held up a finger. "The first is you confess your feelings to Xem, and--"

"Not happening." Denya shook his head.

The deer rolled his eyes. "How about you let me finish one sentence today before you interrupt me. As I was saying, you confess your feelings to Xem. He'll probably... be a little put off, but you two have literally fought your way from the brink of death together. I don't think he'll be bothered for too long. In any case, you'll feel better after having gotten it off your chest, and you two can continue being partners as normal."

Denya's ears fell back. The fact that Versailles insinuated Xem wouldn't reciprocate the sentiment and turn him down made him feel worse than he thought. "Alright... and option two?"

"You wait it out. Crushes hit hard, but they can die out just as fast. Give it time, and it'll start to fade, and maybe you'll develop interest in someone else in the meantime. Someone closer to our height range."

Denya rolled his eyes, but he listened to Versailles regardless. "Use this opportunity to practice keeping your shields up more often as well. I know Xem's been speaking to you a lot more, but he doesn't need to be in your head every hour of every day. You're allowed your privacy, and as your dragon he'll respect that. If he notices your shields are down, he'll take it as an invitation to speak with you or make comments, but if they're raised, then he'll let you be."

Denya nodded and glanced down, rubbing at his bruised arm. Versailles was right, as always. Even now, with the fox's shields still raised, he couldn't even make out the quiet hum of Xem trying to speak to him. The dragon was leaving him to his own devices. Knowing he had that kind of power felt rather liberating.

And lonely.

"Denya." Versailles squeezed the fox's shoulders again. "You and Xem have both been through a lot together. I don't know what happened all those weeks ago, but you were clearly very vulnerable, and Xem helped you when you needed it. It's... not surprising you may have developed feelings for him, even if he is a dragon. He trusts you. Be honest with him."

The fox sighed and stepped back. "Yeah, that works... Sorry I flipped out, Ver. I wasn't really ready for that revelation."

"Neither was I, truthfully." The deer chuckled, shaking their head. "But I think you'll be just fine now. I'm going to lower my shields now, but if you need to talk about this again, let me know so we can do it without our dragons overhearing."

"Right." Denya nodded, and he did the same, letting the comforting presence of Xem return. He's fine. Just fine. A silly little crush, that's all. He had more important matters at hand to worry about anyways, like getting all these flashcards unpinned from his leathers. He sat back down, slowly working off the paper cards one by one, so as to not damage his armor.

"So." Versailles spoke up after a moment, a cheeky grin appearing on his muzzle. "Word down the street is you like strong men bigger than you-"

Maybe Denya should hand in his bow staff for throwing stars, because with an expert flick of his wrist, the fox managed to toss a flashcard directly into Versailles' nose.

“He’s fine. You’re fine. It’s just a silly crush.”

That became Denya’s internal mantra whenever he needed to raise his mental shields; which became quite frequently, as of late. A part of him really resented Versailles for making him realize his rising feelings towards Xem. After all, the dragon didn’t exactly announce his presence inside the fox’s head; when Denya’s shields weren’t up, he was just... there.

Before, Xem’s voice only caused Denya’s heart rate to rise a mite, or his face to flush. Now, it was so much worse. Suddenly it became hard to breathe, and the fox would picture the dragon’s large, red, scaly head looking over him from behind, those piercing, striking yellow eyes watching his every movement, wide and clear enough that the fox could see his own reflection in them, see himself get lost in them...

Shit, was there a way to keep his shields up 24/7?

Versailles told Denya he was allowed to keep his shields up whenever he felt like it, but the fox still felt like he was being an ass to his dragon; whenever Xem tried to speak, Denya would get those goddamned *feelings*, and there was no way he could hide them from the dragon without shutting him out entirely. The fox wanted to immediately fling open that door and apologize to the poor dragon on the other side, but he knew, just *knew*, his secret would be blown if he tried.

Those shields were there to keep Xem from entering his mind, but even when they were raised, Xem was *always* in Denya’s mind!

And unfortunately, the dragon responded to the sudden barrier between them by trying to initiate more comments whenever those shields weren’t up. The fox actually let out a loud squeak in the middle of one of his classes when Xem reminded him to take notes instead of staring out the window. At least then, it was easy to write off his red face as a result of being laughed at in class, rather than the *other* reason.

In short, Denya was a mess. A walking, struggling mess of a fox just waiting for the day when his crush would die out, waiting for the day he could throw open his shields and keep them open so he could invite the familiar, welcoming feeling of Xem's presence, of having that voice over his shoulder watch over him, offering advice and help. Not always good advice, mind, but it's the thought that counts.

But that day never came, and as Denya's shielding grew stronger and more consistent throughout the day, so too did his paranoia that this crush was damaging his relationship with Xem. The dragon hadn't made any comments on the constant shielding, but it was hard to tell if he was simply being patient, or believing Denya was just practicing, or if he was growing irate beneath it all. Like it or not, the fox couldn't keep hiding from his partner forever.

And nowhere was that more obvious than on the flight field, during class.

Oksana may as well not be there. Denya was standing, staring right ahead with wide, bloodshot, unblinking eyes. He couldn't have his shields up now, not when he's supposed to be riding his dragon in just a few moments.

The dragon he *crushed* on, who was currently standing directly behind him!

"Slow... focus on my breaths..." The fox breathed in and out, demanding every ounce of his attention being poured onto every breath he took. His instructor's voice was a blurb, another noise in the wind; right now, Denya was meditating.

"What are you doing, Fox?" Xem growled in his ear, causing Denya to clench his fists.

"Meditating." He answered truthfully. He can't lie to a dragon, but he can bend the truth. *"Versailles taught me it helps with... concentrating."*

"What are you trying to concentrate on?" The dragon chuffed.

"Just... maintaining focus on... things." Denya felt his forehead growing clammy. Totally not on the enormous, powerful dragon standing behind him, or the feeling of that warm breath washing over his fur, or those piercing, mighty eyes, or-

The dragon let out an indignant snort, looking away. *"If my breathing is bothering you, you can tell me. I wouldn't want to interrupt your 'meditation.'"*

Denya had to bite his tongue to let out a whine. Dammit, he hadn't meant to share that thought. The two of them used to bicker back and forth all the time, but now that things were so tense...

Fuck it, he had to tell him.

"Can we talk later today? The two of us, in person?"

Denya asked during flight lessons. Probably not the best time to ask, suspended hundreds of feet in the air on top of the dragon he was about to confess to, but the longer this went on for, the more problems this would cause. This crush was not going away anytime soon.

"Does it have to do with the shields you refuse to lower?" Xem asked, his tone unreadable for once.

From atop the dragon's back, Denya nodded. *"Yeah, it does."*

“*Very well.*” The fox grunted as the dragon shifted to the right, following sharply behind the green drake before them. “*I’ll permit you to enter Sanctuary. Don’t keep me waiting.*”

Now why did *that* make Denya’s breath hitch?

He went straight to Sanctuary after flight lessons. The evening sun had just begun its descent, but the fox needed this off his chest *now*. He needed to finally lower his shields *now*.

He needed Xem *now!*

The fox all but ran to the grassy field, scrambling up the hill that was quickly becoming their trauma dumping center, and made a beeline for the scarlet dragon. It wasn’t much of a jog, but he was panting regardless as he stood there, taking in the sight of the sun shining brilliantly off those ruby-red scales, those thick and sturdy limbs, that powerful tail that could crush a tree, those mighty wings that could strip a tree of its leaves with a single beat, and that mighty head that was turning to look at him.

Damn you, Versailles. Damn you, damn you, damn you!

Denya stood there silently, staring up at Xem... for all of 2 seconds, before looking away from the dragon’s golden eyes, focusing on something more mundane like those claws. Claws that had once held him close to that warm, muscular, sturdy chest, keeping him safe-

Shit!

“Fox.” Xem growled softly, clearly annoyed at his rider.

“Sorry... This is... this is really hard for me.” Denya scratched at the back of his head. He was just supposed to say it all out right now. *“Hey, I have a stupid crush on you. Crazy, huh? Anyways, let’s forget about it and keep going on awesome adventures!”*

But that never came out. Denya couldn’t even permit himself to lower his shields, that door firmly in place blocking the red mist from pouring through that tunnel. But this close to Xem, their connection was noticeably more powerful, and that mist was seeping through.

Be honest... just be honest...

Denya took a deep breath, and forced his attention back to Xem’s eyes. “You’re... kind of a pain in the ass. You lecture me a lot, and nag me when I don’t ask for it. And-“

What the FUCK?! Denya’s eyes widened dramatically at the words coming out of his mouth. This wasn’t supposed to be how it went *at all!* He could see Xem’s eyes widening as well from that sudden outburst, and for a second the fox thought his heart would split in two. Did Xem look... hurt?

“And... and...” Denya’s vision was growing cloudy. “And I couldn’t ask for a better dragon to be my partner.”

Better.

“I’ve never had anyone care for me the way you do. I-I mean, I know I give you a lot of sass for it, but, really, I appreciate it more than I can express with words.” The fox tugged on his arm, looking away. “For a lot of my life, I’ve kinda just been... given up on. You’ve never done that to me. You’re naggy and grumpy and always telling me I could be better... but you’re also the first person who made me feel like I could *be* better. You’ve went against your better judgement and saved my life, and...”

Denya shuddered, watching as Xem lowered his head closer to the fox. He was so close, perfectly within hugging distance. Denya could see his own reflection in those golden, glittering eyes, the poor timid little fox, with his tail curled around his leg.

"Why go through all this trouble to tell me this?" Xem asked, his deep voice now a gentle rumble, like waves washing against the beach.

The fox lowered his ears. "I... I don't want you to think I'm relying fully on you. You've done so much to help me, and I haven't been able to do much in return. I'm... I'm just this little fox." He chuckled, holding out his arms and gesturing to himself. "What can I do?"

"More than you think." Xem rumbled, before pulling his head back. Carefully, the dragon shifted onto his side, just as he did the last time they met on trauma-dump hill. *"Come. I can see you're struggling and need my help."*

"I can't-" Denya started, but was interrupted as the edge of Xem's tail wrapped around his back, pulling him in. The smaller vulpine stumbled, attempting to pull himself back, to fight against that tail, but soon he found himself planting against that warm, vibrant wall of scales all over again.

And just like last time, everything rushed out.

There were no tears, no screams, no sudden and violent bouts of anger or power. The vase remained intact for now, its contents safely contained. No, what broke was Denya's shields, the door he'd built to keep Xem out. That door shattered violently, nothing separating the two now.

Only it wasn't Xem that went into Denya's mind, but the opposite. The fox could *feel* every emotion pouring out of him, forcing its way into Xem. The sheer amount of affection, gratitude, care, how much he looked up to Xem, *everything!* Nothing was a secret anymore, and simply knowing that made the fox tense up dramatically.

The vase might break as well.

He felt Xem shifting beneath him, now doubt recoiling from the sheer emotional deluge he'd just been forced to experience. Denya shivered slightly, but he couldn't bring himself to tear away from pressing into Xem. The dragon was too comforting for his own good, dammit, even if Xem didn't return his feelings.

Closer. Denya felt Xem's breath on him again, a warm breeze ruffling his fur. The rider tensed up further, knowing what was to come. It wasn't the violent outburst of disgust he'd expected from Xem, but he knew the denial was coming soon. But that was ok, right? Then everything will go back to normal!

Closer. Xem's muzzle was inches from Denya's head, and the fox could hear the dragon's mouth parting softly. Was Xem about to *roast* Denya for this? Had the fox committed some heinous, horrible act that violated the sacred bond between Anthros and dragons? If he did, then he really wished Xem would just hurry up and get it over with already!

Suddenly, the fox felt a set of sharp teeth press into his ear. Teeth capable of biting a cow in two were also somehow capable of gently nipping into his pointy, furry ear.

As well as nipping it, causing the fox to yip. "O-Ow! What's that for?"

"For trying to keep secrets from me." The dragon chuffed. *"Do it again, and it'll be the other ear."*

"A-Alright, fine!" Denya muttered, rubbing his ear. Such sharp teeth Xem had, yet he didn't even pierce the skin with that nip! "I guess I'll take that over being knocked unconscious."

"You made me dance that time. Different crimes beget different punishments."

"That's... fair, I think." Denya sighed, raising his arms to press against the dragon. Not quite the "punishment" he expected, but he'll take it. This wasn't the confession he had in mind either, but again, he'll take it. He was alive. He was here. He was ok. And so was Xem.

At least, he *thought* Xem was ok. Dragon emotions were difficult to parse. "You're not... mad, are you?" He asked softly, slowly working the courage to turn and face Xem.

"Not mad." The dragon rumbled, and Denya could feel that big body raise and fall as Xem took a big sigh. *"Just disappointed you thought you could hide your feelings from me."*

Oh. Denya began burning up, and not just because he was pressed against the body of a fire-breathing creature. "What, uh, gave it away?"

"Your shields are coming along nicely, but they could still use work. I've noticed they tend to falter when you're flustered." Xem explained bluntly. *"Such as when I try speaking to you."*

Denya's ears folded back. Damn that Xem and his deep, earthy, bassy, rumbling voice! It's perfectly fitting for a massive 25+ foot dragon, and that was *not* helping the fox reign in his feelings. "Sorry."

"I do not accept apologies. Work on your shields, or be more upfront with me. Failure to do either, and you'll be able to wear earrings."

The dragon snapped his sharp teeth next to Denya's ear, causing the fox to yip and step away. "Alright, I get it! No more secrets."

"No more secrets that concern me. You're welcome to keep your personal matters to yourself. Your privacy is important, and I don't need to be made privy to everything."

"Gotcha." Denya nodded. Honestly, he was just grateful he could finally drop his shields. Raising them during combat was one thing, but having them stay up throughout the day, all day was simply exhausting. But since they were being so open with one another, the fox decided to risk another question. "Just... out of curiosity. If I had come and told you I was developing... feelings, how would you have reacted."

Xem snorted. *"I wouldn't be surprised. Dragons are the mightiest beings birthed from the sky. It should be expected some of you smaller, wingless beings would come to idolize us."*

"I'm not idolizing *all* dragons, you dork! Just..." The fox couldn't finish that thought, although he was certain Xem knew what he was saying from that alone. In any case, he breathed another sigh of relief. Finally, he felt normal again! Yeah, his heart was still racing, being in such close proximity to Xem, but at least he can *think* normally again. "You're right. I should have told you this from the beginning. I feel a lot better now, thank you." It was about time for the fox to take his leave. He couldn't begin to imagine how awkward this must feel for Xem... or how much this stroked the dragon's already overinflated ego. He wasn't sure which was worse.

But as he pushed off the dragon to leave, Denya felt a large claw suddenly wrap around his body, lifting him like a doll! He squeaked upon feeling the ground leave his feet, his body trapped into its new confinements, looking up in time to see himself brought closer towards the dragon's upper chest, right below where that long neck started.

"No. You're staying here."

"Xem!" Denya yelped, feeling himself press against the dragon's brisket. His face heated up so quickly, he was afraid he might explode for a second. "I-I'm trying not to fall for you, dammit!"

"I'm aware."

"This isn't helping!" The fox squirmed.

"But you like it."

"H-How long are you gonna keep me here?"

"As long as I want."

"Xem!"

The dragon suddenly let out a sharp growl, and Denya could feel Xem's throat vibrate from it. He'd heard the dragon growl numerous times in his head, and even once or twice in person, but to *feel* it straight from the dragon's neck sent a nervous shiver down the fox's spine.

That is, until the dragon spoke in his head. *"You're not the only one wrestling with complicated emotions."*

Oh... Oh.

There wasn't a proper response to that, was there? Denya stopped his squirming immediately, now laying still against his dragon. This certainly complicated things, didn't it? For a moment, he felt genuinely relieved, elated even, to know his feelings were reciprocated in some manner.

But that feeling was quickly replaced with a growing apprehension. What would this mean for the two of them? Was something like this even *allowed*? Versailles even

stated this kind of relationship had never been recorded anymore. What if the battle college found out? What of the other dragons? What if it-

"We're doing nothing wrong, Fox! Cease your worrying, it's stressing me out." Xem growled again, and Denya quickly stopped his train of thought; rather, that train of thought crashed and burned against the mighty backside of the dragon. *"My rider is stressed and in need of help. I am simply comforting him until... until we're both ready to move on."*

Yeah... that sounds right. This *was* their trauma dump hill, after all. This wasn't the time to parse through emotions, to make leaps of logic without putting all the pieces together. Xem always said Denya made terrible assumptions, after all. No, right now, these were just two friends, partners, basking in each other's presence and comforting one another. Yeah! He'd do the same to Versailles if they asked!

A low rumble erupted from Xem, his claws pressing deeper into Denya's back. A-Alright, maybe we'll abandon that train of thought for now as well.

No, this was nice. Denya's eyes fluttered shut, allowing himself to drift further into Xem, to be swallowed up in the dragon's embrace, and affection. He'd never felt more attuned to Xem than this; feeling that chest rising in and out, the heavy rumbling of the dragon's deep breaths, the powerful beating heart buried with in, the claws caressing the comparatively tiny fox against him, with a single thumb-claw rubbing up and down his back...

He was in heaven. It was beautiful. The fox almost wanted to cry, he was so content. Nothing else mattered right now; not the battle college, not his courses, not Versailles or any of his fellow riders, *nothing!* He would give up the very air of his lungs if it meant being able to stay close like this, so covered and protected. Those claws could squish him like a grape at any moment, yet Denya felt the safest he'd ever been in his life right here. It didn't matter what anyone else thought. Right now, what he was experiencing; this was *right!* This was where he was *meant* to be. No one else, not even another dragon.

Gods dammit, he *loved* his dragon!

Softly, Denya could feel the dragon start shifting, and soon that familiar warm breath began washing over him. With a bashful smile, the fox slowly turned his head back, looking up at that big, scarlet snout. Looking up at those beautiful golden eyes, catching the sight of him bundled up in those dark, slitted pupils.

It was an intense stare. The fox began panting, as simply breathing through his nose was just not providing his brain with enough oxygen. It's always been difficult to maintain prolonged eye contact with Xem, whether he was glaring through anger, hatred, affection, etc. He'd been told the day before Threshing to never look a red dragon in the eye, yet when the fox attempted to look away, a large thumb-claw would press into his chin, forcing him to maintain eye contact.

"Like what you see?" Denya muttered breathlessly, trying to diffuse the tension.

"No."

Denya snorted. "Let me go then."

"I don't take orders from you."

Xem's muzzle lowered closer to the fox, and Denya's breath did more than just hitch. His head was swimming, his entire body burning up as though he'd been sunburnt. This shouldn't be real. This was just a very, very silly fantasy of his the fox was dreaming. Any second now, he'd wake up back in his bed, squeezing his pillow tightly, just as Denya had begun squeezing Xem's claw against his chest.

"I-I..." Denya gulped. *"I have class today, still."*

"That's too bad."

"I'll get in trouble!"

"Anthros do not decide the actions of dragons." Xem growled right in Denya's ears, making the fox shiver. *"If I decide my rider needs my attention more than he needs his class, then the professors will just have to deal with it."*

That's... true, technically. The dragons weren't under the war college's rule, but rather a partnership. The two worked together to protect the country, their bonds allowing the two to become more powerful than the sum of their parts.

And *gods*, Denya was certainly feeling something powerful right now with his dragon!

Xem lowered his head further until those golden eyes vanished behind that large, boxy snout. Denya looked up at that enormous, beautiful muzzle, at the individual scales adoring that face like gems, at those sharp teeth protruding slightly from the reptile's lips to those cute nostrils widening softly with each gentle breath in, before washing Denya with that familiar warm air...

The fox blushed, realizing just now that Xem had been scenting in, taking in the fox's natural smell. Denya had never bothered to do the same; Xem just had a natural musk to him that made him smell like, well, a *dragon*. But now that he'd been so exposed to it so long, the fox could pinpoint a few familiar meaty smells: lamb, beef, hare...

Denya smiled. Xem smelled like beef stew. No wonder that breath was so comforting.

Soon, that snout was pressing into Denya's face ever so gently. Large, scaley, and a little soft, particularly around the lips. The fox gently leaned his head into that snout, his eyes slowly closing yet again. Nevermind before; *this* was where he was meant to be! He didn't need a mental link with the dragon to feel the overwhelming affection washing over him. He'd never felt so *cherished*, and though it may be a sin, he

never wanted it to end. This was everything he ever wanted, everything he never knew he *needed!* All wrapped up in a neat little red package, holding him close and-

-and licking him.

Denya grunted as a long, pink tongue suddenly slid out from the dragon's muzzle, enveloping the fox's torso and head. It was quite itchy and moist, like wet sandpaper; the fox appreciated the notion immensely, but he was afraid he'd be ground down into bone if that kept up.

But soon the dragon's head retreated, and those claws released him. "*Get to class, Fox.*"

What?! Denya took a moment to gather his belongings, watching as the dragon shifted away from him, standing back up on all fours. "But...but..." How was he supposed to return to class, return to a normal life, when he had *this* in front of him his whole life?!

But the dragon had already turned away, taking a few strides away. "*I'm needed elsewhere. I cannot disclose any details at the moment, but the matter is urgent. It shouldn't take me too long, but you should return to your school for now.*"

Denya felt his heart physically rip from his chest, thrown onto the ground, and stepped on. How... How could Xem do this to him!? That moment they exchanged, it was *everything* to him! To just call it off so quickly, to walk away like nothing happened hurt the fox far worse than any rejection ever could. Fine, he'll take being licked all day if that's what Xem wanted! Yes, it left his fur sticky and slobbery, but anything was better than... than being *away!* "C-Can I come?! I'm a rider, maybe I can-"

"*This is a matter for dragons only. I won't ask again: Return to the school.*"

The urgency in Xem's tone made the fox pause his line of thinking, if only for a moment. He knew he was being irrational, he knew this was important to Xem, and that he had no right to interfere in the dragon's personal affairs, just like Xem couldn't interfere in his unless permitted through the fox's shields. As much as it pained him, as much as every fiber in his body aching, yearning to run back and return to that glorious moment they had share, Denya would have to be content in knowing that the moment had happened. He had confessed himself to Xem, and the moment had been better than anything he had anticipated.

The scarlet drake turned his head to cast a side-long glance at Denya, and the fox swore he saw a hint of a smile on that muzzle. "*We'll finish what we started another time, Denya.*"

The dragon crouched, before launching airborne, and Denya watched as he became a crimson glow in the evening sky, their connection growing fainter before disappearing altogether.

"Denya!" Eperin gasped, the older wolf shaking his head. "What happened? I thought you'd finally beaten your tardiness habits."

"I'm sorry, sir." Denya sighed, shuffling into the classroom. "I've been... held back."

The lupine's glare softened, having just now noticed the fox's slumped demeanor. "What happened, son? Do you need a break today?"

"No! No, no I'm fine." Denya pulled his head back, chuckling softly. He knew the wolf could see the streaks across his furry face, not to mention how pink and puffy his eyes were. The fox cleared his throat, trying to maintain a smile. "It's just... relationship issues. I'd thought we could make it work, but we're just..." Denya sighed. "We're from different worlds. There's no hard feelings, but I uh... I'm still coping."

"Denya..." Eperin pulled the fox closer into a hug, giving a firm back to his back. "The life of a rider is a lonely one, I'm afraid. Not many of us live to experience old age, and those who do only end up seeing their companions fall in battle. I know they say 'it's better to have loved and lost but never to have loved at all,' but the truth is, some of us never fully recover from the heartache loss brings us. That's why we discourage relationships within the quadrants... heh, sometimes, it feels like the only ones we're allowed to become close to are our dragons, you know?"

Denya felt a fresh wave of tears cloud his vision. "I do, sir."

"Denny..." The wolf sighed, rubbing the fox's back. "Do you need today off?"

"No..." Denya sniffed, shaking his head. "I'm fine, sir. I'm strong." With a shaky nod and paper-thin smile, the fox slowly broke from the hug. "Thank you, sir."

"Of course, son." Eperin smiled as he gestured for Denya to enter. But as the fox moved, the wolf sniffed the air, wrinkling his snout. "Say... why do you smell like dragon breath?"

Chapter 4

“A toast!” Adrian stood up suddenly from his seat, the large badger clinking the side of his mug with his claws. “Here’s to hell... that our stay there will be as fun as our way there!”

A steady roar erupted from the rest of the table, a few cries of “here here” echoing around as well. Even Denya had to raise his mug to that, taking a deep draught of his beer as Adrian retook his seat next to him.

This was easily the most fun Denya has had since enrolling in the war college. The stress of their exams were behind them, which meant the fox could finally take a night out on town to celebrate surviving his first year. It was about time he stopped studying and being smart; now it was time to get drunk and stupid!

Surprisingly, this hadn’t even been his idea to begin with. Adrian was the one who organized the event, inviting many of the first years in his quadrant to party at The Tulip Tavern. To his delight, the fox had been one of the students invited. He would have thought his shenanigans at school would have made him a less popular pick, what with him constantly being a distraction in class- even if Versailles had helped him curb his more fidgety habits. Maybe they wanted to bring him along as a joker, someone to laugh at and flick foodstuffs at, he thought at the time

But no, this was turning into a genuinely good time! Warm food, cold beers, and plenty of happy faces were the perfect way to unwind after a very intense series of exams. The fox’s face was starting to ache, how much he’d been laughing and smiling. It felt great being able to mingle with other students, with other friends, without standing out as the butt of a joke or the awkward, silent one to gawk at. It felt great being able to *belong*.

They weren’t the only ones from their school who thought to drown their post-exam sorrows and joys in beer. Occasionally the front door to the tavern would open, and Denya would spot a familiar face stepping in, with the snowy cold air following close by. Unfortunately, one of those faces belonged to Zeak, but the lion had

thankfully taken a seat far away from their table. Good; the fox didn't want to think about the anthros who *didn't* like him today.

Because right now, he was too busy making friends! Adrian, of course, being one of them, the brawny badger easily being one of the most charismatic and outgoing of their quadrant. He was often the loudest one in any group he was in; a trait further enhanced by the amount he's already had to drink tonight. It was a bit of a challenge to talk to him one-on-one, however, as he was the type to always have a friend around to challenge his attention as well, but whenever they did speak directly to each other, the badger was nothing but genuine and supportive, two rare traits in a war college meant to forge you into the mightiest weapon. Take that and combine it with the badger's surprising skill on the sparring mat, and it wasn't a surprise he was one of the most popular riders of their year.

It wasn't just Adrian that Denya was becoming chummy with, either. Jace, a raccoon Denya shared most of his classes with, also chose to sit next to Denya and talk. It very quickly became apparent to the fox that he was using Denya to try and learn more about Versailles; the raccoon was absolutely smitten with the deer, and lately Versailles had been spending plenty of time with the fox for sparring and studying. Unfortunately, Versailles couldn't join them; the deer wasn't much for big social gatherings, and while Jace claimed that it didn't bother him too much, Denya noticed the raccoon stealing glances towards the front door every time it opened, as if hoping a certain someone would come through.

Alas, not everything was perfect; the fox felt his stomach churn whenever he noticed the snowstorm brewing outside. They couldn't exactly fly their dragons directly before the tavern, as the local population may not take too kindly to seeing a bunch of enormous, fire-breathing reptiles clogging up the streets. The riders had to leave their dragons out of sight some distance away. The trek to the tavern was already rather strenuous, before the snow and the alcohol had time to pile up. Denya didn't want to imagine how difficult it will be to hike back to where he parked his dragon-

"You didn't park me anywhere! I'm not some vehicle you can leave at your leisure!" Xem growled in Denya's head.

"I know, I know." The fox stifled a snicker as he silently thought back to his dragon. *"You're not parked, that's just our rendezvous point. You're off doing important dragon things now."*

"Hunting, but yes."

"How's that going?"

The dragon let out a low rumble. *"I've just picked up the scent of a particularly plump sheep--"*

That was all the fox needed to hear before throwing up his shields, closing the mental doorway connecting himself and the dragon. Alas, the alcohol was taking its effect, and the fox couldn't quite close the door all the way, meaning he was forced to listen to some rather... graphic noises. Xem was such a messy eater. He needed a distraction.

Thankfully, that distraction came soon enough as Adrian suddenly let out a very loud shush directed at everyone at their table. "G-guys, guys, shush!" He snorted, pointing with a claw. "Keygan's going for another one."

Oh, this he had to see! Denya turned his head, along with the other 8 riders sitting at their table, to watch as a white-furred fox stood talking to one of the tavern maids, his cheeks flushed pink. Everyone watched in bated breath as if trying to eavesdrop on their conversation; Keygan's dopey smile widening while the ferret maid nodded along, holding onto a platter of half-drunk mugs of ale.

"He's lasting longer this time," Jace whispered beside Denya. "You think this is the one?"

"Maybe," Denya muttered back. Soon, he found himself taking a half-gasp as Keygan offered his paw.

Before bursting out in laughter as the ferret took one of the mugs of ale, splashing it on the white fox's face.

It wasn't just Denya; the entire table erupted in teases and jeers as Keygan slumped his way back. The other fox's ears were folded and his tail curled, but there was no hiding that dopey grin on his face. "I thought I had it this time," he said as he took his seat, his words slightly slurred.

"We thought so too!" The rider beside Keygan patted his back, a maned wolf named... Richard? Denya couldn't remember. "What'd you say, mate? You looked like you were doing good, up until the end, at least."

Keygan snickered loudly, slumping back in his seat. "I was just telling her how I feel, ya know? She had a great voice, a pretty smile, cute eyes, a perfect body... and I wanted her to sit on my face--"

"Noooo! You fumbled it, idiot!" Yet again, the table erupted into teasing, with the maned wolf possibly named Richard shoving Keygan so hard, Denya was afraid the other fox was about to fall out of his seat. Finally, a *different* fox for everyone to bully! At the very least, Keygan brought it on himself, although Denya couldn't help but wonder if others thought the same way when he himself got in trouble.

At the very least, Keygan could certainly handle being teased better than Denya did, the arctic fox laughing nearly as loud as the rest of the riders as he waved his paws. "Whatever, whatever! I don't want to hear shit from you, Rikard!" Ooooh, that's his name. "I saw how you tight your breeches got when Melissa lifted her leggings--"

"Shut your mouth!" Rikard practically lunged at the snickering fox, trying to force shut that muzzle. Before the two could start a full-on brawl, alas, one of the tavern maids visited their table, warning them that rowdy behavior wouldn't be tolerated. Just like that, everyone returned to their seats, apologizing so quickly, even the maid was taken aback. They were all riders at a war-college, after all. Respect for proper authority figures was one of the first lessons ingrained into each and every one of them.

How else could they earn their dragons' respect?

But that wasn't enough to ruin anyone's buzz or good time, because with that last outburst, the topic of someone's ideal partner came out. Rikard begrudgingly admitted that, yes, thick thighs were his passion, and even went far enough to describe his fantasy of getting crushed by them. Next to him, an otter named Brianne claimed her dream man was someone over 6' tall, to which many of the males at the table stood up afterwards, just to compare heights. Next came Jace, who quickly blurted out that his ideal partner was "anyone with a pulse." The table had a good laugh, and Denya shared a knowing wink.

But then it was Denya's turn.

The fox had planned on hand-waving that question aside, make some generic answer like "I like strong men," or something of the sort. However, he felt a very familiar stirring in his head; Xem was paying close attention. Either the dragon had just finished his hunt, or he was pausing just to listen to what his rider would say, he didn't bother hiding the fact he was listening aptly.

Which meant Denya had to be more specific. "Alright then," the fox muttered, glancing down at his third mug. "I like a man who can kick my ass." He lifted the drink to his muzzle for a sip. "So, in other words, I don't like many guys."

The fox grinned behind his drink as he heard a couple "oooh's" at his bold claims, as well as a soft rumble of approval from Xem. "*Confidence suits you.*"

Alas, Adrian had to ruin the moment with his next few words. "So, Eperin, then?"

Denya nearly spat out his drink on the table, the fox forced to hold it back in and drink it down. His eyes watered as he felt the carbonation rush out of his nose as he frantically rubbed his face. "E-Excuse me?"

“Eperin!” Adrian exclaimed in that loud, friendly voice that Denya *really* wished wasn’t so loud right now. “He’s been training you on how to wield your staff ever since we first enlisted, way before any of us were even picked by our dragons at Threshing! And I *know* you didn’t get as good as you are overnight. He’s definitely kicked your ass a couple times... probably still can!”

“I-I guess?!” Denya coughed, his face reddening for more reasons than just the alcohol. He could feel Xem growling in his head. “But, like... he’s a professor!”

“So?” The badger snickered. “This isn’t high school, and I’m not saying you two have a thing going on. I’m just asking if he’s your type.”

The fox folded his ears. “I mean... kinda, yeah.” It was horrifying, how right-on-the-money Adrian got. Truthfully, Denya did hold a bit of a crush on Eperin during their sparring practices. It wasn’t nearly as dramatic as the crush he had on Xem; the fox was still able to interact with the battle-hardened wolf naturally. He just... got a little short on breath every time he felt Eperin wrap those burly arms around him from behind, showing the fox how and where to properly grip his staff for different stances-

“I’m going to kill him.” Xem snarled. *“I’m going to trample him, burn his corpse, and devour what remains.”*

“For gods’ sake, Xem, this was MONTHS ago. Please don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

“Of an Anthro? Never.” The dragon muttered back, but Denya could still feel the frustration through their link. He could use another drink.

Jace must have read the discomfort on Denya’s face, for he quickly looked over at the badger. “Alright, your turn. Who’s your ideal partner?”

“That’s a goooooood question.” Adrian smirked, taking a long drought of his mug; no doubt just building up suspension. Well, it definitely worked; Denya noticed many riders leaning closer in their seats, with the fox himself sitting up straighter.

But then, the badger set his drink down, and the fox felt his breath get caught in his throat when the two suddenly shared eye contact. “I think I share the same tastes as Denya. I like a guy who *thinks* he can kick my ass.”

The room began spinning, and Denya was *somewhat* certain it wasn’t the alcohol doing it. Was this really happening? The wide-eyed, smirking faces looking his way certainly convinced him it was. Was this a genuine pass at him, or was Adrian just messing with him?

The fox sat upright in his chair, leaning his arm against the table to stabilize himself better. “Is that a challenge?” He muttered as boldly as he could, trying to hide the fact he’d been *completely* caught off guard.

From the corner of his vision, he could see Rikard frowning into his mug, shaking it around. “What the hell?” The maned wolf muttered.

“It just might be.” Adrian chuckled, leaning against the table as well; coincidentally towards Denya. “Been a while since I’ve seen you fight, Den. It’d be a shame if that’s all hot air inflating your ego.”

Denya scoffed at that, before returning the grin. “Alright, challenge accepted. Just don’t complain if it’s more than just your own ego that’s bruised afterwards.”

“Fine with me.” The badger lowered his eyes slightly. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeves. Tricks to get you on your back, one way or the other.”

Before the fox could reply, he was suddenly overcome with a violent, near-uncontrollable bout of rage. It took the beer-addled vulpine a moment to realize

this wasn't his own feelings but Xem's, the dragon roaring in his head. Gods, he thought he had his shields up. Maybe he *didn't* need more beer after all-

THUNK!

The sudden sound made the fox jump in his seat as everyone swiveled to the source of the noise. There, they found a wide-eyed Rikard sitting with his frosted mug overturned, a frozen-solid cylinder of ale plopped onto the table, slowly sliding along the wooden surface. For a moment, the table stayed silent as Denya began pondering if The Tulip Tavern took its promise of "ice-cold drinks" a little too literally. But then, his eyes locked on to the faint light-blue light emanating from the maned wolf's paw, and suddenly it all made sense.

"You've linked!" Adrian called out, voicing everyone's thoughts with a grin. "You're an ice-wielder!"

"I-I did?" Rikard muttered, staring at his paw with shock. Slowly, he reached out towards Keygan, who shivered and flinched away, a new layer of frost coating his jacket. "Y-Yeah, I did! I Linked!"

"Great! Can you Link somewhere else? You're giving me the cold shoulder." The white-furred fox shivered, brushing the ice from his coat.

From next to Denya, Jace pushed his mug forward. "Here, please. My ale's lukewarm."

The maned wolf held his paw out, the light-blue light intensifying for a moment. Soon, a second frozen cylinder of ale floated across the table, along with plenty more cackling. Linked powers are hard to control when they first manifest.

"I'm happy for you, Rikard! Ice is really versatile." The badger reached for the frozen clump of ale and plopped it into his own mug; either to avoid making a mess or to

drink it himself when it thawed. “Now we just need Zeak, Dylan, and Denya to manifest theirs, and then we’d all qualify for the War Games-“

“Uh, actually.” Denya cleared his throat, raising a paw. “I manifested mine last month.”

“What?!”

The fox’s ears folded back as he became the center of attention yet again. He even noticed other eyes turning to look at him, eyes not just belonging to this table, likely other riders. Dammit, him and his big mouth. Now he was back to needing another drink. He reached for Jace’s frozen ale-cylinder instead, plopping it into his own mug while ignoring the hurtful look from the raccoon. “That was mine!”

“It was making a mess.” Not like anyone else seemed to care at the moment.

Adrian leaned in closer, his eyes still wide. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“It never came up!” The fox shrugged. Was it that big of a deal? “And I only manifested it once. It’s... not something I can call upon at will yet.”

“Oh, so it’s a *strong* Link!” The badger’s face split into a wide, toothy grin. “Tell us, what is it? How’d it form?”

Denya winced. Bernant was supposed to be mainly a secret for now; the fox knew he shouldn’t have mentioned his Link forming. But dammit, he’d been having so much fun up till now, and was enjoying letting his tongue get looser with each drink he had. But this wasn’t like Keygan making an ass of himself in public. If Denya wasn’t careful, he could let important information slip.

"I, uh..." The fox scratched at the side of his muzzle. "I was just having a really... really emotional moment. And then I just... got really strong." Denya slurred his words a bit, intentionally this time. Hopefully the alcohol was a good enough excuse as to why he was being so vague.

Adrian tilted his head. "Alright, your Link makes you strong... anything else?"

"Not really." The fox's ears fell back. "I just got really strong. Like, I thought I could lift a dragon, strong."

That got a couple of snorts from the table, and Denya allowed himself a silly, drunken grin.

"I like getting stepped on." The tiger sitting next to Adrian blurted out.

That definitely caused a commotion; Denya nearly spat out his drink, and Jace started coughing loudly next to him. Adrian stared back. "Where the hell did *that* come from!?"

"I've been waiting for my turn forever!" The tiger grumbled. "Adrian said what he liked, then he and Denya started eye-fucking each other, now Rikard's freezing everyone's drinks. Well, I like it when strong women step on me. There, just wanted that off my chest."

"Would you like something else on your chest instead?" Brianne the otter teased, lowering her head onto her paws.

"S-Shut up!" The tiger went beet red, and quite a few chuckles and shoves were thrown his way.

That is, until the mongoose next to *him* spoke up. “Are you all serious? Keygan wants to get sat on, Rikard wants his head popped off like a melon, Brianne wants a *giant*, Jace will take anything, Denya and Adrian want someone to beat the shit out of them, and now Tony wants to get stepped on? What the hell did this college do to you people to turn you all into fucking masochists?!”

And that caused a roar of commotion, before laughter and shouting. Denya laughed heartily along as his comrades descended into chaos, grateful the shift of attention wasn't fully on him anymore. He would have chimed in with some half-hearted defense along with the rest of his tablemates, but alas, he caught sight of the maids glaring at their table. Something told him there would be no amount of groveling that wouldn't get them kicked out from the tavern.

Just as Denya feared, the walk back to their dragons' rendezvous point was miserable. The sun had set long ago, and the snow storm hadn't let up during their time inside. Fortunately, they had a fire-wielder among them, producing a steady stream of flames from his hands to melt a path out of town for everyone to follow.

Unfortunately, that fire-wielder was Keygan, who needed to be watched by Rikard to ensure he didn't accidentally set himself on fire.

For now, Denya paid careful attention to his footing as he followed the trail out, his arms raised slightly for balance. The fire ensured they wouldn't have to wade through knee-high snow, but the dark slush beneath his boots was just as treacherous. The flames couldn't melt everything, and a sudden patch of ice could be dangerous for any dragon rider. They were marching uphill, after all, and all it would take was for one rider to slip and fall to knock everyone else down like bowling pins.

What a silly sight they must be to the village locals. A pack of drunk anthros using fire to clear their way into the forest, disappearing behind the trees, only to reappear weeks later to get drunk once more. Of course, the village was well aware of the dragon-riding college not too far away, but the thought of someone seeing the sight

and wondering “where the hell are these idiots waddling off to,” brought a snicker forth from the fox’s muzzle.

“You have a nice laugh.”

Denya chanced a glance behind, noting the badger’s smiling face right behind him. Even marching uphill and several steps ahead, the two of them were perfectly eye-level.

The fox huffed, turning back to stare at his feet. “You’re a tease.”

“Am not.” The badger muttered. “But if I am, it’s only because your reactions make it funny.”

“That’s not nice.” The fox muttered, pausing for a second to regain his balance. “You’re just saying crap because you’re drunk.”

“You’re drunk, too. Sounds like we’re on even ground.”

“We are not. I’m higher on this hill than you.”

The badger snorted behind him, and Denya felt a smirk tug at his lips. About time someone appreciated his terrible jokes, even if that someone wasn’t fully sober.

Although, with how clearly Adrian enunciated his next words, Denya could be forgiven for thinking he was sober. “You should try out for the War Games with us, though. You’d do great.”

“Are you sure?” Denya raised a brow, as if the badger could see it from behind. “You sounded a bit disappointed when I told you what my Link was.”

"I was expecting it to be flashier, I guess, since our Links are supposed to match our personalities, but I'm not disappointed in the slightest." The fox didn't need to turn around to picture the warm smile on Adrian's face. "I mean it. If you can make yourself strong enough to lift a dragon, we'd win for sure."

"I said I *felt* like I could lift a dragon. I never actually tried, and the only available dragon near me at the time wouldn't have been too thrilled if I demonstrated on him." Denya grunted, furrowing his brow. Walking and talking was difficult. "Besides, I've only really Linked once, and that's because I begged Xem for his power. I doubt I could do it again on my own, even if I wasn't four or five beers deep."

"You won't know until you try." Denya heard Adrian's coat ruffling as the badger shrugged. "But we'd love to have you on board. Same with your giant ruby dragon!"

Denya snorted. "What are you, the captain of the team or something?"

"Actually, yes. I am."

"Oh." Somehow, that slipped Denya's mind. It wasn't like the fox really paid the badger much heed to begin with. Adrian was always surrounded by other anthros, anthros who were all... *better* at something than Denya was. Better grades, better looks, better personality. It felt a little surreal, having a one-on-one with Adrian like this, being told from the badger he'd be welcomed on the War Games. This wasn't like when he invited the fox to the tavern earlier either, where it just felt like a blanket invite to get as many riders to a party as possible. This felt a bit more personal, and it made the fox's heart skip a beat.

Just in time for his feet to slip on a patch of ice.

"Shi-" Denya felt himself falling back, his feet flying up before him. Dammit, he was about to crash into Adrian and send everyone sprawling down the hill, all because

he got distracted from a stupid compliment! He'd be lucky to be invited *anywhere* after this!

As the fox flew past the point of no return, bracing himself to impact the ice below and start sliding, he was caught by a pair of firm, mighty arms, strong enough to stop Denya's momentum entirely, despite the treacherous ground beneath them. "W-Woah! Are you ok?"

Denya gasped, relief flooding into his system. He looked up at the badger's concerned face, taking into account the worry lines above those dark brown eyes, illuminated by the steady stream of fire up head. "Y-Yeah... sorry."

"You're fine. I got you." Adrian smiled softly, his worry melting like the snow before them. "Although I gotta say, if it's that easy to get you on your back, our match won't last very long."

"Give me a break." Denya rolled his eyes, snickering. "I'm drunk."

"So am I." The badger teased. "See, we have so much in common."

The fox chuckled at that, looking up at the larger Anthro. At some point, he forgot he was supposed to be looking for purchase on the ground, content to just lean into the badger's firm, sturdy frame. It's not like Adrian looked like he was struggling or anything. Hell, he could probably carry Denya the rest of the way there-

"You have two seconds to tell the striped one to release you before I grind his bones into dust."

Oh shit.

Denya flicked his head up in time to see Xem stomping through the snow towards them, his ruby-red scales illuminated by the fire. Fire which went out immediately as Keygan stumbled and fell to the side, letting out a string of swears as the dragon marched right by.

The fox sighed, before planting his feet on the ground, ensuring he was stable before patting Adrian's shoulders. "I'm fine, thank you. You can let me go now."

"O-Oh, yeah. Sure." The badger carefully released Denya, stepping away when the fox stood on his own. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Denya said, looking back up at the dragon. They were still several minutes of walking away from reaching their rendezvous point, the fox hoping it was dark enough outside that no one in the village below would see a giant red dragon standing on the hill. But, it's not like he could tell Xem to head back and wait for them where they agreed on, not when the dragon was *this* pissed.

Denya sighed through his nose, before speaking with his dragon telepathically. "*Enjoy your hunt?*"

"*It was rather successful, yes.*" Xem grunted, and Denya noticed the dragon was still chewing. "*And did you enjoy fraternizing with the striped one?*" Those slitted, golden eyes shifted briefly towards Adrian, and Denya saw the badger step back and look away.

"*It's not fraternizing! We're talking about Links and the War Games. All school related topics.*" Denya frowned.

"*While he holds you like a whelp and speaks of putting you on your back.*" Xem glared, leaning his large head closer to Denya.

“What’s... What’s going on?” Denya heard Jace ask someone behind them. “That’s Denya’s dragon, right?”

“Yeah, it is. I think they’re fighting?” The tiger from earlier muttered.

“He saved me from falling, and we’re bantering about fighting!” Denya crossed his arms. *“I didn’t give you this much trouble when you went off to your secret dragon meeting.”*

“Do not lie to me, Fox.” Xem bellowed, revealing his sharp, bloodied teeth. *“It’s for that reason alone you refuse to lay with me again.”*

Dammit, now Denya’s face was heating up again, and in front of all these people!

“Is Denya... you know, gonna be alright?” The fox heard another voice behind him, painfully realizing that it was more than just their table group witnessing this back and forth. The other dragon riders had caught up as well, using Keygan’s fire trail to make their way. Wonderful.

“I-I don’t know? Should we, like, help?” Another hushed voice.

“Help with what? That’s a bigass *dragon*! If he wants to eat Denya, we kinda just have to watch and hope we’re not next.” Gods, this was getting embarrassing.

The fox sighed again, trying to compose himself. *“At least I’m keeping myself honest, here. I don’t have a clue what you’re doing with your dragon friends.”*

“Matters I am not at liberty to discuss, least of all with you.”

“I thought we agreed not to keep secrets from each other anymore.”

“There are some secrets not even I can share, stubborn fox!”

“You could have at least said something before we decided to... lay with each other, so I wouldn't think you were making excuses to leave me!”

“Like you've made excuses to avoid me, when you're my rider?!”

Denya and Xem were practically inches from each other, the fox knowing damn well he wouldn't win this stare down with the most stubborn dragon in the continent. But dammit, he was drunk and foolish and he wanted to *try*! If Xem didn't see him as a potential partner in life, then fine, but the *least* he could do was let Denya mingle with others from his year, and *not* make a scene with everyone watching behind him! The mutterings and whisperings were only increasing, and the fox wasn't sure how to break away from this argument to ensure everyone he *wasn't* about to become dragon food, at least not without angering Xem further.

But before he could think of anything, a familiar, grating voice broke out from the crowd behind him. “Honestly, this doesn't surprise me.” Zeak exclaims loudly, loud and bold from his own share of booze. “Denya's good at pissing off everyone around him. No wonder his dragon can't stand his fucking guts. Can it hurry up and torch the stupid fox so we can go home?”

And then, Chaos erupted.

Denya felt a flash of pure rage enter his mind as Xem suddenly leapt from where he stood, kicking up snow with his step. “Xem!” The fox cried out, but he was helpless to watch his dragon barreling down the hill. Cries and yelps of various riders rang out as they leapt out of the way to avoid getting trampled by Xem.

But no one cried as loud as Zeak, who stumbled on his back with an expression of pure horror at the dragon charging towards him with murderous intent.

“Xem, stop!” Denya tried again, just in time to hear the sounds of trees cracking and snapping. From the nearby woods, a flash of green erupted out to stand between Zeak and Xem: The lion’s emerald-green dragon, alert to the peril their rider was in.

But not even another dragon was enough to stop Xem’s charge. With a furious roar, the scarlet dragon collided with the other reptile, and their size difference became all the more obvious. With the force of his blow alone, Xem was able to push back the green dragon, and in a flash of teeth, he had his foe’s neck in his mouth.

“Xem!” Denya yelled, stumbling after him as fast as his legs could carry him. “Let them go!”

“He does not speak like that to my rider!” Xem let out a muffled roar, his teeth pressing into the green dragon’s neck, who continued to squirm and fight beneath its red oppressor.

“Xem!”

“The maned one needs to grovel! Tell him to grovel!”

But Zeak was doing far worse than that. The lion was laying on his back, his face frozen in fear, his torso barely even propped up by his elbows to watch what was taking place mere feet before him. And from that angle, Denya could see his snow pants were damp against his legs; and not because of the snow.

“Xem, please, he looks like he’s about to pass out! He’s learned his lesson. I’m begging you, let his dragon go!”

Xem was snarling, breathing heavily through his mouth, but Denya could see his words were finally taking effect. The scarlet dragon finally opened his mouth and

retreated, releasing the lion's dragon from his mouth. The green drake spit back with a quiet, angry roar, but knew better than to retaliate, instead returning to inspect Zeak.

Just as Xem did to Denya, lowering himself to the fox. *"We're leaving."*

Denya sighed, shaking his head. He couldn't have one outing, *one* outing, without something going wrong. This night had almost been the perfect break from his hectic life at the war college, the chance he had to finally make friends other than Versailles, who was surely getting sick of the fox asking him for study/sparring sessions. It'd be a miracle if he'd be wanted into the War Games now, with his volatile dragon.

"Sorry, everyone. We're going now." Denya sighed, before clambering onto his dragon, the drunkenness having left his body after that outburst. The fox barely had time to find his seat on the dragon's back before Xem launched himself into the air, knocking the breath out of his lungs.

It was the worst flight of Denya's life.

The two of them had ridden together in silence before, but it'd never been this quiet. And not just because the snowy landscape was muffling the sound of Xem's powerful wingbeats, the air was practically suffocating. Denya could easily feel how tense the dragon's muscles were beneath him; or maybe that was his own body pressing against Xem. In any case, he couldn't stand a thirty minute flight with his atmosphere.

So, he tried breaking the ice. *"Could you... fly a little slower? The bobbing is kinda upsetting my stomach."*

"Why don't you fly, and I ride on your back and complain in your ear."

Denya sighed. So much for that. *“Look, Xem, you didn’t have to do that-”*

“Yes I did.”

Gods, it was like arguing with an enormous toddler. *“Zeak talks shit about me constantly. I can handle it.”*

“You expect me to sit idly by while my rider is insulted right before me?”

“I expect you to let me fight my own battles, yes. And Zeak isn’t even worth it.”

Xem snorted. *“You’re very capable of fighting with your stick-”*

“-My staff-”

“-Your toothpick!” Xem growled. *“But when you’re unarmed, the antlered one consistently defeats you. And when it comes to a battle of words, you’re hopelessly outmatched.”*

“I don’t always need the last word.” Denya huffed. They were gonna wind up going back and forth again, until they’re absolutely miserable by the time they made it back to the college.

The fox sighed and leaned further into Xem’s back, his head throbbing softly. Despite the headache of the alcohol and his overprotective dragon, he still found some enjoyability in this flight. It was quiet, and the snowy forest below them was a breathtaking sight. On their way to the tavern, Denya flew with numerous other dragons and their riders. Now, after having left in *that* fashion, the two were the only ones aloft for miles around, save for the unlucky birds who decided to take flight near Xem’s mouth.

Denya rubbed at the base of Xem's neck, tilting his head. *"Can we talk about that night?"*

"Only if you're ready." The dragon grumbled. *"I'm at my last nerve having you constantly shy away, and after claiming to have feelings for me, no less."*

"I DO have feelings for you. Strong ones at that!" The fox mentally pleaded. They were supposed to be fully honest with one another, right? *"That was one of the best moments of my life, laying with you."*

"Then why are you so determined not to reenact it? Would you rather lay with the striped one?"

"No!" Denya called out, breaking the still air between them. The fox flushed at that, especially as he saw Xem raise his head, turning back to give him a sidelong glance.

Denya shook his head. *"That's not it at all. I just want to know that... I'm not being stupid."*

"Stupid for liking a dragon?" Xem growled at that; Denya could feel him heating up beneath him.

"No!" Ugh, Xem was right. Denya could *not* win a battle of words. *"I'm saying, I don't know how you feel about me. You made a few comments that I didn't think about at the time, but... I don't know. You held me when I broke down crying, and you also held me when I had another... vulnerable moment. Then you left me without any warning, after I'd calmed down, so... It-it feels a little convenient, that's all. Like you were looking for an excuse to leave when you noticed I was doing better."*

It was the full truth, and something Denya had been grappling with ever since he watched Xem fly away that evening. The dragon was so ready to just drop their session,

to soar away, right when the moment between them was reaching its peak. Denya had no idea that was something dragons had to deal with: suddenly receiving summons they couldn't ignore. He knew Xem would never lie, but it just felt so convenient, just thinking back on it made his heart ache. He poured *everything* into Xem at that moment, and the dragon reciprocated! They were so close to one another...

From beneath him, the fox could feel Xem heating up further, enough for snow to start sizzling off of his wings. *"You'd think I'd LIE to you?"*

"Of course not!" Denya winced. *"But you're keeping secrets from me, and we promised-"*

"FINE!" The dragon let out a piercing roar, the noise echoing throughout the mountain. *"Twenty years ago, my last rider DIED sitting where you are now, and I was powerless to do a damn thing about it. Not a day passes where I wish it had been me instead, as I was the one who brought him to that damn battlefield instead. I thought I've moved on, but now I have a new rider, who is not only great at making enemies, who not only needs help taking care of myself, but somehow, SOMEHOW, he has found a weakness in the armor I've built around my heart, and despite my better judgement, despite knowing what fate befalls you reckless riders, I can't help but want to keep this one close to me forever!"*

Oh.

The air became silent yet again. Denya wasn't sure he could even hear Xem's wing beats anymore. Suddenly, it didn't matter if Xem's summon was an excuse or a coincidence. This relationship they shared was hurting the dragon far, far more than he let on. This was the first time Xem admitted to returning the feelings he had for Denya, and just...

Fuck, the fox was crying, his tears burning his eyes worse than Xem was burning his seat. He was an asshole! How could he forget about Zander? The fox never even assumed Xem could be afraid of anything, but the dragon was certainly terrified of losing another rider...

“Xem, I-“

“I do not accept apologies.”

“I know...” Denya sighed. Xem was starting to cool off, and the fox allowed himself to lean against the dragon’s neck, giving it a gentle hug. *“But I can at least acknowledge I was wrong for assuming; which, yes, I’m aware I’m terrible at.”*

The dragon snorted. *“I appreciate the honesty.”*

And they rode on in silence, the snowy skies above them finally parting, revealing the beautiful jewels of stars above.

Chapter 5

“War Games, huh?” Versailles grunted as they caught the medicine ball between their palms, lowering themselves onto their back on the training mat. With a quiet huff, he rolled upright, before throwing the weighted ball over their head (noticeably lacking antlers) towards Denya. “I’m surprised you weren’t interested before now, Denya. I would have thought this would be right up your alley.”

“I guess.” Denya caught the ball, going through the same motions. Urf, this workout always hurts his abs. He was thankful there weren’t many riders at the college gym today; he didn’t need them to hear him grunt and huff with every workout. *Someday* he’ll put on enough muscle that he could look like the rest of the eye-candy wandering around, with their shredded abs, strong pecs, etc.

Little steps. The fox sighed as he lowered himself, then rose, holding the ball over his head as he did so. “I’ve never really given it much thought before, but Adrian managed to convince me. Just gotta work on my magic some more before I can actually apply.” With a huff, he twisted his upper torso, facing and tossing the weighted ball towards Jace.

It was Denya’s idea to invite the raccoon to their training sessions. After all, Jace’s crush on Versailles was probably only a secret to Versailles at this point, so it was only natural the two might grow closer to each other if they interacted more. Besides, Denya *really* wanted a new face to bounce his thoughts and ideas off of. Versailles was a great training partner, but the deer’s haughty nature made them a little off putting at times. Jace at least put in a modicum of effort to think before speaking. Plus, he was rather sharp, and also scored close to Versailles’ level on his tests. Maybe if Denya kept surrounding himself with people smarter than him, some of their intelligence would rub off on him.

The raccoon caught the medicine ball with relative ease, proving he also had some brawn to go with his brains. “I’m pretty jealous, honestly. I wish my Link was useful for War Games.” With hardly a grunt, he performed his crunch, tossing the ball to Versailles.

“No you don’t.” The deer scoffed, catching the ball. “War Games are a barbaric waste of time.”

“Yeah, I agree. War Games suck. There’s way better things to do than War Games.” Jace blurted out.

Versailles paused mid-crunch, furrowing his brow at the raccoon’s sudden 180, before continuing with his set. “Not trying to burst your bubble, Denya, but the games really are pointless. Maybe in the past, they had some integrity, but from what I’ve heard, it’s full of meat-headed morons who will crawl over each other’s broken bodies for a chance at glory. They’re *supposed* to inspire cooperation and teamwork, but you know how us riders get the second we have a chance to show off.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Denya grunted, catching the ball. Versailles wasn’t exactly wrong; dragon riders were rather notorious for their egos. Hell, the fox was guilty of this as well; he knew how arrogant he was when it came to weapons training. “But I still want to give them a try. I’ve had my snout buried in books for so long, just trying to pass our classes, I’m starting to get rusty at everything that *doesn’t* involve a quill. Xem wouldn’t be too happy if I never learned how to properly Link with him, and War Games seems like a great way to light a fire under my ass.”

“I’m more than happy to light fires beneath you if that’s what it takes to get you to properly train.” Xem grumbled within Denya’s head. *“Though, truthfully, I’m still pleasantly surprised you passed your classes.”*

Denya closed his eyes before rolling them, hoping that would somehow mentally transmit the image to Xem. Based on the dragon’s low growl, the message was received.

When he opened his eyes, the fox caught sight of Versailles staring directly at him, narrowing his own eyes. Together, they slowly nodded, a sign they’ve developed together. It was time to raise their mental shields, blocking their dragons from reading their thoughts.

It was time to talk about Denya’s love life.

“Hey, Jace.” Versailles spoke to the raccoon, who quickly shot up with the medicine ball still in hand. “How well can you shield?”

“Not that well.” The raccoon grumbled, tossing the ball to Versailles. “It’s my weakest magic, unfortunately. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” The deer nodded, catching the ball and leaning back. “I wanted to ask Denya something personal, regarding his... relationship issues, but I know he prefers if fewer people listened in.”

Denya waited for his turn, this time snatching the ball with one arm and tossing it to himself. His abs were killing him; time to work on his forearms. “I don’t mind if Jace listens, or his dragon. We’re all friends here. But that’s only if you don’t mind us switching topics to something boring.” The fox brought the ball to his chest before pushing up, letting it arc high in the air towards Jace.

“Not at all.” The raccoon caught the ball, bouncing it in his arms just as Denya had earlier. “I didn’t know you were having relationship troubles. Is it with Adrian?”

“No.”

“Eperin?”

“No!” Both Denya and Versailles shouted in unison. Thanks a lot, Adrian, now everyone thought the fox still crushed on his battle teacher. “No, it’s neither of them. But, uh, I’d rather not name names right now. It’d be kinda weird if I did.”

Versailles caught the ball next, the deer rolling onto their back to push it up and catch it. “Have you two finally worked something out? I understand it’s been rather... tense, between you both.”

“Yeah, well it’s gotten a bit more tense.” Denya sighed, waiting for his turn before doing the same. “Honestly, things would have been a lot simpler if he’d just rejected me when I first, eh, came out. But no, he had to cuddle me, hold me to his chest, listen to his heart. Everything felt *perfect* then, like we’d be with each other forever, like I was *made* to be in his arms. I felt ready to freaking *propose* to him, but then...”

“Then...?” Jace tilted his head as the fox’s voice trailed off. “What, he came early?”

“*What?!*” Denya gasped, nearly dropping the medicine ball on his head. “N-No, it wasn’t... I mean, I *guess* there was an emotional climax, but I’m not interested in sex, no.” And even if he was, there was *no* way they could make that work, at least not in a way that wouldn’t either leave Xem extremely unsatisfied, or Denya extremely dead.

The fox didn't bother rolling back into a seated position before tossing the ball to Jace, instead choosing to cross his arms while looking at the ceiling. "No, he had to go suddenly. Said it was urgent, and sorta just... left me there. I'm sure there *was* something urgent, but dammit, if that didn't make me paranoid that he really didn't see me that way... or that he does, but he sees no future with us." He turned his head to face Jace. "You know, because riders have such short lives." Especially compared to centuries-old dragons.

"That's why you need to *talk*, Denya!" Versailles grit their teeth before the ball even made it back to them. "You tried keeping your crush to yourself, and that caused more harm than good. If Plan A doesn't work, you switch to Plan B. You'll just keep torturing yourself otherwise."

Heh, spoken like someone who *didn't* crush on their own dragon. The fox lazily caught the ball with an arm, flicking it up with his wrists rather than tossing it with both arms. "I've been trying to talk with him about it, but everytime, we end up bickering and nothing gets accomplished. I was trying to convince myself that what we had was over, but you should have seen how *furious* he got when Adrian started flirting with me."

"Was he at the bar with us then?" Jace asked, tilting his head. "Your, uh, partner I mean."

Shit. "He, uh, learned about it after the fact." Denya muttered, quickly tossing the ball over. "Point is, he's still extremely possessive, and it's pissing me off because it's really damn *hot*."

"Alright, keep it in your pants." Versailles rolled their eyes, shaking their head. "Regardless of... that, he clearly thinks you're still together, so-"

"Not anymore." Denya flopped onto his back, and instead of catching the ball when it was tossed his way, the fox simply slapped it from his face, hearing it roll to the side. "We yelled a lot that night, and then he mentioned how his last rider died twenty years ago."

"*TWENTY* years ago?" Jace sat upright, the raccoon's eyes wide. "I didn't know Eperin was that old."

"It's not Eperin!" Denya really needed to kick that badger's ass the next time he saw him. "My point being, we agreed to sorta... step back a bit. I'm clingy as hell, but so is X- I mean, my partner. We're both wrestling with stuff, so... yeah. We're still close,

don't get me wrong. Just, no more cuddles until I know he won't suddenly leave me, and he won't feel conflicted or guilty holding me."

This was what Denya wanted anyways, right? To break off his crush from Xem, to have things return to the way they were. The fox no longer became flustered when the dragon's rumbling voice suddenly entered his head, or felt short of breath when they interacted for flying practice. Things *were* back to normal, but now that he knew the feeling of being *held* by the dragon, of feeling that powerful throat rumble when Xem growled, of feeling how warm that chest had been, how full of affection those golden eyes had been... that couldn't be undone, not with words alone.

But it never would have worked out anyways, right? Xem's a *dragon*! They're completely different races, from two different worlds. Could they even get married, or hold a wedding? Own a house? Raise children?

The fox's face reddened, realizing that, even after breaking things off with Xem, he couldn't imagine living the rest of his life without the dragon by his side.

Eventually, he noticed Versailles' face popping in from his peripheral vision, the deer holding out a hand. "Why don't we change the subject. I'm sure Jace is about ready to pull his fur out, trying to follow along with our conversation."

"Took the words right out of my mouth." Denya grabbed Versailles hand, then grunted as he was hoisted onto his feet with shocking ease. Sheesh, the deer was strong. "We could switch it up and talk about *your* romantic life." He said this while casting a sideways glance at Jace, noticing the raccoon had jumped to attention.

But unfortunately for him, Versailles shook their head, crossing their arms. "I don't have one. Relationships are discouraged between riders for a reason, Denya. They're distracting and bring with them more trouble than they're worth."

Damn, Denya thought Jace had just been poked full of holes, how quickly the poor raccoon deflated after hearing that. "C'mon, Ver. Not *everything* fun is bad. I mean, look at War Games! We get to practice battling *on* dragonback as first-years! And the best part: There's not a stupid textbook in sight. It's perfect."

"I agree. The more battle experience you accumulate, the faster you'll grow."

Denya suppressed a gasp upon hearing Xem's voice in his head. Shit, had he dropped his shields? He thought he'd been keeping them up-

“Relax, fox. You only lowered them recently, and I happened to pay attention at the mention of War Games. If you were worried about my opinion, rest assured I support your decision.” The dragon grumbled; the fox swore he heard a bit of frustration in Xem’s voice.

“Back to this again, are we?” Versailles shook their head, before turning and walking towards the discarded medicine ball. “Jace, do you mind if we take a quick break from training? I want to show Denya something.”

“Not at all. Go right ahead, Versailles!” Jace nodded enthusiastically; honestly, Versailles could ask him to swim across a frozen river, and the raccoon would just ask if he should do breaststroke or butterfly.

Versailles flashed a quick smile while picking up the ball, and Jace looked ready to faint. “Grab your staff, Denya.”

The fox grinned, glancing back towards where it lay resting against the wall. Holding out his paw, Denya visualized the string connecting the two once again, feeling power build up in his claws. A quick yank back, and the staff suddenly shot forward, tumbling towards him. It wasn’t a straight line from the wall to his paw, as it bounced against the ground numerous times, but it flew by fast and high enough that the fox didn’t need to bend over to catch it. Giving the staff a whirl, he turned back towards the deer. “Are we practicing Magnetism?”

“That’s correct.” Versailles tossed the ball up and down with their wrists. “You’ll need to learn it if you want to compete, obviously. Do you need a refresher? It’s a 2nd year spell, after all.”

“Nah, it’s pretty simple.” The fox lowered himself, gripping his staff close to his chest as though preparing for battle. Magnetism may be a 2nd year spell, but the concept wasn’t too complicated to grasp. He just had to picture the string again, this time connecting from his staff to the ball Versailles was tossing. Sure, the feel of it was a lot different; Denya couldn’t exactly tell when the tip of his staff was primed with magic, as opposed to the tingling sensation he experienced on his claws. But the fox was getting pretty good at Telekinesis already; surely the skills were transferable, right?

“Alright, then.” The deer wound up, stepping back to bring his arm back. “Catch!” And with that, he threw the ball at Denya. Hard.

Denya's smile dropped instantly.

He had no time to build power in his staff, or to imagine the string, or to even *think!* Acting purely on instinct, the fox brought the edge of his staff up to guard his face, and even then, he barely made it in time. The ball deflected off the staff, its course redirected into the wall behind him with a mighty thud. Denya barely even nudged the ball away from striking him, and yet his wrist began cramping instantly. Versailles wasn't just strong. They were *strong* strong!

Meanwhile, the deer simply clicked their tongue and shook their head. "You're supposed to catch the ball with your staff, not deflect it."

"Are you freaking insane?!" Denya gasped, flicking his wrist. "You nearly took off my head with that throw!"

"The balls will be flying *much* faster during War Games." Versailles flicked their wrist back, the medicine ball flying straight back into it. "Not to mention you'll be on dragon back, fending off attacks as well as a myriad of other distractions and factors to keep into account. Are you still sure you want to attend?"

"Shit..." Denya sighed, wiping his suddenly-sweaty brow. Of course Versailles was right. Watching War Games was a far, far cry from actually *experiencing* it. And that was just a medicine ball thrown at him too, not the balls they use at the games. "*Is this why you want me to join War Games? To watch me get absolutely pummeled?*"

"Of course not." Xem growled. "*No dragon wants to watch their rider beaten and humiliated. You need battle experience, but more than that, you need a reason outside of myself and the antlered one telling you to train.*"

Denya's ears folded at that. That really was how he got through his first year, wasn't it? Relying on Xem and Versailles to train him, to demand he study, to drag him around when he wanted to just goof off and play games. It was about time he improved on something without being forced into it for once.

"Yeah, I still do." Denya squared back up, gripping his staff tighter. "Throw another one. I think I got it."

Versailles raised a brow, before shrugging. "If you're sure."

"You're amazing."

Both Denya and Versailles paused to glance towards Jace, the fox's ears folding. Oops, he'd forgotten about the raccoon in that heated moment.

Jace's tail curled around his leg as he reached up to scratch at his muzzle. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I just mean you're such a good friend, Versailles."

Denya couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Hah! Versailles doesn't help me out of the goodness of their heart. I'm just their little pet project, isn't that right, Ver?"

The deer returned the fox's laugh with one of his own rare chuckles. "It's true. I'll never become Headmaster if I can't make someone like Denya to pass his classes, or to survive War Games, for that matter."

Chapter 6

Bruises. Aches. Limps.

Denya was beginning to question his decision to participate in the War Games. To think, their exams were finished, and the riders finally had some semblance of free time. Many were even given leave to visit family during this period of free time, although this was often used as an excuse to party at the nearest set of towns. Surely they would have room for one more fox to join them, right?

Bruises. Aches. Limps.

These were common occurrences in any war college, most of all one for dragon riders. However, the sight was much less common during their respite week, given how much emptier the college was in general. Those who did stay behind preferred to keep up their training and skills, as once that period ended, they would graduate into their next year, and thrust into a whole new set of courses meant to push them further along. It was generally up to the students how they chose to prepare for their next year, whether it be sharpening their skills or relaxing their mind; Denya certainly preferred the latter.

Bruises. Aches. Limps.

Why did Magnetism have to be so *hard*?! The fox could be spending time with Adrian or the other friends he made at the Lotus Tavern, or read the books he was falling behind on, or even just travel the area with Xem, just to get out of the college's walls! But no, he was left behind, either playing the world's most dangerous game of dodgeball with Versailles or sparring with the deer in repayment for being pelted with heavy medicine balls. There weren't many others available to help teach him Magnetism, at least in a setting that would best simulate War Games. Even Jace wasn't around as often, the raccoon having his own matters to attend to, only occasionally appearing when he knew he could be alone with Versailles and Denya.

Bruises. Aches. Limps!

Denya was getting so sick of the constant pain, he actually, willingly chose to visit the library, just to look for any resource on how to learn Magnetism quicker. To think he would ever look through a textbook on his own, without Versailles or Xem nagging him to do so. He poured through any resource he could find, anything that could offer some insight or trick on how to learn this magic faster. But alas, the fox didn't find much that was particularly helpful. The only relevant information he uncovered was that Magnetism was easier to learn on objects the wielder was attuned to. Given that Denya was allowed to bring his staff into War Games, while most other riders would need to use practice variants of their preferred weapons, Denya would be granted an advantage.

Not like it seemed to be helping him much!

BRUISES! ACHES! GODSDAMNED LIMPS!

The fox grunted loudly as the medicine ball collided with his staff, bouncing off and landing into the back wall yet again, as it'd done numerous times today, and yesterday, and the day before. This time, however, the staff went with it, as Denya's temper had finally reached the boiling point needed to chuck the damn thing as hard as he could after it. "*Fuck!*"

He was tired. Tired of being hit by the ball, tired of deflecting the ball, tired of having to dodge the ball, tired of doing *everything* to the damn ball but catching it with his staff! Just as much, he was tired of being in near constant pain, of the constant failure without any sign of improvement.

He was tired of looking so *weak!*

And weak was all he felt as he stood there hunched over, panting heavily as he stared at the ball and staff, as if trying to hatefully intimidate the pair into properly

sticking to one another. Any moment, he'd hear Versailles tell him to try again, or hear Xem within his head tell him to stop acting like a whelp and get his act together.

"Denya." There it is. He turned towards the deer, who was almost looking as pained as Denya felt. Even Jace was looking up from where he sat against the opposite wall, his book laying forgotten on his lap. "We don't have to keep doing this."

"Yes, we do." The fox muttered, pulling his staff from where it lay against the wall back into his hand with a flick of his wrist. Perhaps the only good that came from this training; Denya's Telekinesis had improved dramatically. "Tryouts are tomorrow. There's no way they're letting me join if I can't stick the ball to my staff."

"That's what I'm saying!" Versailles pressed. "You don't *need* to join War Games. It's only worth extra credit for your riding and combat courses, and you're already acing those! For Gods' sake, you can barely even stand straight anymore."

The fox bit his lip. Hearing that from Versailles did not reassure him one bit. How dare the deer start taking it easy on him? *Nothing* had come easy for Denya up until this point, so why start now? "Adrian asked me to join."

"If Adrian asked you to cut off your own arm, would you?"

"I'd probably consider it!" Denya knew he was irrationally angry, but dammit, it felt good to just yell and get it out of his system. Of course Versailles wouldn't understand him, the freaking deer was great at *everything* they did.

"Denya..." Versailles sighed. "This is going to sound harsh, but I think Adrian suggested War Games because he thought your Link would be useful. I don't think he took the fact you're a first year into consideration. Plus, you mentioned he was drunk, and-

The fox was tempted to throw his staff back into the wall again, his grip tightening on it until his knuckles turned white. “So it was a *mistake* that he thought I could join? That he thought I was capable?”

“For fuck’s sake, Denya, *take a breath!*” The deer pleaded. “There’s a reason so few first years join War Games. Magnetism is a second year spell.”

“I’ll have to learn it eventually, then.”

“Yes, but you can learn it *in class*, with a professor who can give a proper demonstration and offer real help if you need it. I know you’re better at learning through demonstration rather than reading, and unfortunately, I can’t show you how to use Magnetism because even I’m barely capable of doing it myself.”

“Well, I’d still rather learn through textbooks than in class. Fuck it, I’d rather keep getting pelted by balls than make an ass of myself in front of everyone in class, *like I always do!*”

Shit, Denya’s voice cracked with that last part, and the fox felt his eyes start to sting. These were some deep emotions he was bringing up, so deep he never even knew they were there to begin with. To think, he’d been brushing off the feelings of embarrassment for his constant mess-ups in class for so long, they’d been routine. It took days of being pelted with projectiles, of failing at a spell again and again, that brought all of this out. His insecurity, jealousy... Gods, his anger. He knew it was bad when he could even feel Xem’s discomfort through their connection.

It just wasn’t fair. Adrian said he’d be good at War Games, and Denya really, really wanted to believe him. Denya liked being good at things...

“Why don’t we take a quick break, then?”

Both Denya and Versailles turned towards Jace, who stiffened up a bit at the sudden attention. "I mean... I'm not trying to insinuate anything. I'm just saying it's harder to perform under stress, you know? Why don't we head out to the lake for a bit, get some fresh air and cool off before trying again?"

"It's snowing outside." Versailles raised a brow.

"I didn't say we *swim*! I just meant we walk around and enjoy nature for a bit. Maybe we could go fishing if we find a spot in the ice for it."

That did sound nice, actually. In fact, just picturing a hike by the frozen lake steadied Denya's breathing. He lowered his shoulders he just now realized had been raised and stiff, that intense anger shimmering down to a mild embarrassment. He didn't mean to explode like that in front of either of them, especially not Versailles who was only trying to help, even if that help was what contributed to the fox's battered and bruised body, and ego. Yeah, a nice walk sounded perfect, as did fishing. When was the last time he'd gone fishing anyways-

Denya's eyes widened. "Ver, throw the ball at me one more time. I think I know what to do!"

"A-Are you sure?" Versailles furrowed their brow, looking from Denya back to the raccoon. "I agree with Jace's logic. Forcing yourself to the point of frustration won't teach you any quicker."

"I know." Denya nodded, and he really wanted to take a break too, especially when he noticed how much Jace's face lit up when Versailles agreed with him. "But I just want to try one more time. If I can't do it this time, then I'll give up applying for War Games."

Versailles blinked. "I know I just asked this, but are you absolutely sure about this?"

“Totally!” The fox gave a slight smile. “‘Magic that’s been deemed improbable to near impossible has been accomplished on numerous recorded cases in which the caster was in a perilous situation.’ If I put my application on the line, then my magic will be stronger.”

“In theory, I suppose.” The deer returned the smirk. “And here you thought all that studying wouldn’t help you. Look at you, quoting ‘The Essentials of Magic’ back at me.”

Versailles flicked their wrist back, and the ball flew straight into it, whizzing by Denya’s head. “Very well, I’ll throw this one with everything I have, on the condition that we’ll stop if you fail. If not for our sake, then at least for yours.”

“I accept.” Denya nodded, raising his staff. “But I’m not going to fail, not this time.”

As the fox stared down the ball in Versailles’ hand, he could feel Xem stirring, the dragon’s discomfort becoming more apparent. *“There is no shame in admitting defeat, so long as you vow to return stronger another time.”*

“No, but there is shame in knowing my dragon doesn’t have any confidence in me.” Denya mentally thought back.

“Confidence has nothing to do with this. You do not need to seek out my approval if it involves putting your body in harm’s way.”

“No, but I want it, regardless. Wants and needs are very different things, and you should know I’m a very selfish fox.”

Xem snorted in response, but stayed silent as Versailles wound up. And then, the ball was in the air.

Compared to how it felt when Versailles threw that first medicine ball, this one appeared to move in slow motion. All this training had sharpened the fox's reaction times as well, he figured.

Still, he had to fight back against instinct. For a week now, Denya had been bringing his staff close to his body, bracing to deflect the ball despite his goal being to catch it. This time, he did the opposite, flicking the tip of the staff towards the projectile instead.

As if he were casting a fishing rod.

The ball slammed into the staff, and Denya grunted in exertion, his eyes and teeth clenched. Pain shot up through his arms, focused mainly in his wrists and shoulders. A part of him wished he listened to Jace's advice to take a break, as his body was still *incredibly* sore, the fox staggering back half a step.

But he never heard the ball slam into the wall behind him, and his staff was feeling suspiciously heavy.

His heart pounding with hopeful anticipation, the fox slowly opened his eyes, his breath catching in his throat. The ball was sticking perfectly to the tip of the staff; in fact, it was sticking to the *underside* of it, completely defying gravity!

"Look!" The fox cried out in joy, forgetting his previous injuries and bouncing on the balls of his feet. The second he broke concentration, the ball plopped out from under the staff and landed by his feet. But who cares? "It stuck! I did it!"

"You stuck it!" Jace echoed out from the other side of the room, the raccoon leaping up to his feet and running over to the fox. Denya grinned and raised his arm, and the two slammed their paws into each other with a deafening high five. Instantly, Denya regretted the action, because his wrists were still *really* hurting, but who cares? He did it!

"You did it." This time, it was Versailles' turn to copy the fox, though they did it with a subdued chuckle, shaking their head. "Although truthfully, I wish you hadn't."

"Why's that?" Denya crossed his arms with a smirk. "Jealous I was able to learn something before you?"

"Hardly." Versailles scoffed, waving their hand dismissively. "This just means you won't stop talking about War Games during our walk."

They weren't wrong.

It was the kind of excitement, of satisfaction, that made the constant pain and failure worth it. The walk around the lake felt like a victory lap for the fox, who insisted on bringing his staff with him. Why wouldn't he? The rider felt renewed love for his weapon, and chose to demonstrate his new ability all throughout their walk, picking up small rocks and branches with it. To really demonstrate his "mastery" of Magnetism, Denya even struck his staff into the snow, producing a clump of leaves hidden with the white powder. With a mischievous grin, he swung his staff around, focusing on the bundle of leaves stuck on it like the end of a broom, until he "accidentally" lost his concentration and the leaves "accidentally" pelted Versailles in the back of the head.

Versailles didn't seem to think it was an accident, weirdly enough. "Dammit, Denya!" The deer scowled, removing their antlers from their head to pick them clean of leaves. "If you're going to throw shit around like a cantankerous child, at least do it away from us!"

"Alright, alright, my bad. Just making sure it wasn't a fluke that I stuck the ball." Denya relented, backing up until he was several paces behind his pair of friends. He wasn't done picking up and tossing things around with his staff, not by a long shot. Besides, it might be best to give some space to Versailles and Jace. The pair rarely got to interact one on one, and he wanted to give the raccoon any chance he could to confess his feelings.

But given Jace's constant awkward ear-scratching and nervous glances back towards Denya, that day was not today.

That eager anticipation for tomorrow's tryouts continued well past their "relaxing" hike as well. Xem actually had to remind Denya to come down to the mess hall and eat instead of spending time in his room throwing pillows around.

"No wonder your body is smaller compared to your peers. You never eat!"

"Can't it wait another five minutes?" Denya teased back, attempting to stick a pillow to each end of his staff.

"You said that five minutes ago as well. Eat something, or I will personally remove you from your school, shatter your precious toothpick, and take you hunting!"

Denya raised a brow at that. *"Wait, that's not fair. You eat raw sheep and cows!"*

"If that doesn't suit your palette, then I suggest you get moving downstairs."

"But Xem-"

"I'm flying over right now."

The fox groaned, before hopping onto his feet. He knew better than to test Xem's threats; the dragon had proved himself to be quite capable of causing a scene if he believed it was to his rider's best interests. *"Okay fine, dad."*

"I'm not your father."

"You sure are acting like one." At least, from how Denya had been told fathers act. Whenever the fox overheard talk about how someone's father had been overprotective and caring, it was hard not to imagine their parent being an oversized, ruby-red dragon.

The fox hid a smile as he left his room. Maybe he would have learned how to take better care of himself if Xem had been in his life earlier.

The excitement persisted long after dinner and into the night. Denya tossed and turned in bed, struggling to fall asleep as he ran countless simulations in his head. When he did sleep, they were all dreams relating to War Games, of flying with his dragon amidst the cheers of the crowd. He may not have received a full night's rest, but the fox wasn't going to let a little morning grogginess damper his spirits. Nor was he going to let breakfast slow him down on his way to the tryouts-

"I WILL fly over there!"

Ok, maybe breakfast can slow him down a little.

But not even breakfast could hold back the giddiness the fox felt as he stepped onto the field, the snow cleared away to make room for the browned grass beneath it. That grin of his was hard to suppress as he made his way to the group of other tryouts: Mainly third and second years, but he spotted a couple familiar first years as well, such as Rikard; the maned-wolf friend of the drunk fire-wielding fox he'd met at the Lotus Tavern.

And Zeak.

That was a surprise, and not a very pleasant one, admittedly. Denya was not necessarily looking forward to working with the lion who actively wished harm upon the fox, and given the effort Zeak went through to avoid eye contact with the fox, neither did he. Denya hadn't run into the broad-shouldered lion at all after their last encounter outside the Lotus Tavern; it was his assumption that Zeak had gone home for the week, like many others had. To think the lion had stayed behind at the college this last week to train for War Games like Denya had; the fox couldn't help but give a bit of respect for him. Just a bit.

"If the maned one so much as scowls in your general direction. I will have his head." Xem growled. *"I ensured that he and his dragon know."*

"Wonderful." Denya sighed internally. Zeak avoiding Denya instead of insulting the fox was an improvement, for sure, but not if it was due to Xem threatening them. So much for trying to find common ground; he was more certain than ever the lion wanted him dead. And just when Denya had been thinking of congratulating Zeak for awakening his Link. The lion needed one to even try out for War Games, otherwise why else would he be here-

Oh shit. *Links!*

Denya slammed a palm into his forehead, ignoring the confused glances thrown his way. How could he have forgotten?! He was supposed to manifest his Link properly by this point. That was meant to be the second part of his training with Versailles, but the fox was so obsessed over mastering Magnetism, he'd completely forgotten about Link control. What was he supposed to do?!

"Calm yourself!" Xem growled into his ear. *"You're irritating me."*

"How can I stay calm? I still don't know how to Link!" The fox mentally groaned. *"That was the whole reason Adrian asked me to join War Games to begin with!"*

"I will manually lend you my power when you need it. As much as I believe you can safely handle, that is."

"Thanks, Xem." But would that be enough? Would the other riders be able to tell his dragon was funneling power into him, and not an actual proper Link?

"It will be weaker and more unstable than a standard Link, but for the purposes of this test, it should suffice." Xem snorted. *"Do you need me to come over?"*

Denya hesitated for a moment. This was the third time in the last twelve hours Xem mentioned flying to Denya, only this time it was to comfort the fox, rather than to kidnap him. Having his dragon near him would do wonders for his nerves; it was hard to feel anxious between the two massive forearms of a dragon the size of a house. However, the fox really wanted to prove he could be capable in a crowd without having Xem scaring half the people to death with a sudden, violent outburst, as he's done in the past. *"Not this time. Some battles I gotta fight on my own."*

"If the maned one fights you-"

"Xem, he pissed himself when you ran at him. Zeak is not gonna fight me."
Dragons, man.

Disregarding Xem's continued attempts to find excuses to maul Zeak, Denya forced himself to take a deep breath, centering himself. *It's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine.* So Denya's Link hasn't fully manifested, so what? Maybe they won't even have to show it off today. Links weren't *that* important, were they? No, it was combat ability and spells like Magnetism, and Denya could do *wonders* with that, now! He just had to catch a couple balls *and* bash a couple skulls with his staff, and then everything will be-

"Alright!" Adrian's voice cut through the fox's inner dialogue like a hot knife through butter. The fox turned towards the source of it, as did everyone else, in time to watch the badger walk out onto the field towards the group. "Gotta say, I'm loving tonight's turnout! Unfortunately, I can't bring everyone onto the team; only the best. So,

to save everyone some time, we'll be demonstrating our Links one at a time, so I can cherry pick who to add."

Wonderful.

Adrian's eyes locked over Denya's, and the badger smiled. "Would you care to start us off, Denya? I've been dying to know what a 'strength' Link looks like."

"I. Would. Love. To." Denya punctuated every word, putting on the biggest *fucking* smile possible as he felt all eyes turn to him. Bad enough Adrian was the reason half the school thought he still crushed on Eperin, but now the badger was just giving himself more and more reasons why he needs a swift kick in the back of the head.

"*Can I destroy the striped one?*" Xem asked, clearly eager to find an excuse to destroy someone lately.

"*I'll get back to you on that.*" Denya muttered as he stepped forward.

A problem very swiftly arrived: How could Denya show off his strength? Of course, this wasn't a problem for Denya, as he was grateful he had an excuse *not* to go first, but this was something the fox would have to figure out soon. What could he do out here? It was like what Adrian said back at the bar; *strength* wasn't very showy. He couldn't shoot fire or icicles from his hands, conjure illusions, or teleport small objects like many other applicants here.

Denya could try throwing something really far, but with how sore his shoulders felt, the fox was afraid he'd dislocate them. He could try arm wrestling the burliest guy person, but that might be hard to do without dislocating the *other* person's arm. He could pick up and throw Adrian into the sun, but... no, actually, he'll hold onto that idea for now.

"I wanted to do that." Xem pouted when the idea crossed Denya's mind.

Alas, the only idea the fox could think of was just to pick up something unreasonably heavy. Which meant that while the others were demonstrating their powers, Denya was scrounging around the frozen landscape, looking for a boulder large enough to be impressive, but not too big that the fox ended up snapping his spine in two on accident.

"As I've mentioned before, there is no shame in retreating for now, so long as you vow to return stronger." Xem reminded Denya as the fox shuffled through the snow. *"You will make for an excellent War Games candidate next year."*

"You said the same thing when I was struggling with Magnetism, but I still figured out a way, didn't I?" Denya furrowed his brows as he searched. *"I made it this far, haven't I? I'm sure I can make it a little further."*

"I'm noticing a dangerous trend with you, fox. Perhaps I was in error to discourage you from your lazy ways. You have a terrible habit of jeopardizing your body when you're motivated."

"I do not." Denya perked up, running towards a gray mound sticking out from the snow. *"Aha, this one should work! What do you think, Xem?"*

The dragon snarled in his head. *"This is precisely what I mean! That boulder will crush you if you're not careful! This goes beyond foolishness!"*

"I liked it better when you were threatening to eat Adrian." Denya muttered, squatting down to wrap his arms around it. The rock was cold to the touch, even through the fox's winter gloves, but the rough and bumpy edges made it easy for him to find purchase. This will have to do. Any smaller, and Denya's strength wouldn't look much more impressive than someone whose ability is to shoot harmless sparks from their fingertips.

So, with a deep breath, he called Adrian over.

Moments later, and the fox felt plenty of eyes on him again. Less than usual, at least; it looks like some of them had been weeded out by now already. The badger wasn't kidding when he said he wanted tryouts to go as quickly as possible. Well, that was a relief; if Denya failed, at least he wouldn't have to wait long before being told he didn't make the team.

If his body doesn't snap like a twig beneath this boulder, first.

"Alright, Xem. Please give me your power."

"Very well. In doing so, I trust in your judgement. But injure yourself, and no amount of broken bones will compare to the sheer wrath I will bring down upon you when I next get my claws on you."

So, no pressure.

The fox felt power surge throughout his body, and a broad grin spread across his muzzle. There it was, that familiar sensation of weightlessness, of elation, that feeling that made him want to jump and dance in joy. It wasn't nearly as potent as during his battle at Bernant, but that didn't make it any less enjoyable.

Focus. Denya crouched low until the top of the boulder was eye level with him. With a grunt, he wrapped his arms around it, finding the familiar grip from last time, and hauled.

Lift with the legs, with the legs! Denya winced and struggled, the boulder hardly budging. Bad enough his body was still brutally sore from training with Versailles, but the pull confirmed the rock was *bigger* than he thought. No, it was partially buried in the

ground! Dammit, no wonder he was struggling, but what was he supposed to do now? He *picked* this boulder to lift, and now everyone was watching him *not* lifting it!

"Xem, please. I need more power!"

"Your body can't handle more. The strain will be too much!"

"You said that at Bernant too, and I still lived."

"And do you remember how long it took to mend your wounds, even with magic? Because I remember the pitiful sight of a broken fox who could barely walk up a hill!"

"Xem! I can't do this without you!" Denya mentally pleaded, but he knew it would be in vain. This wasn't a life-or-death battle, this was the fox trying to show off to a group of riders so he could compete in a sport. A sport that he could always apply for next year, when he had a better grasp of both Magnetism as well as his own Link powers. If Xem didn't want to, then that was the dragon's decision, and Denya will just have to deal with it. The fox wasn't looking forward to the embarrassment of turning towards that group of expectant eyes, but-

Woah

WOAH!

The fox's eyes widened, and his tail began swishing maniacally. Denya's heart began pounding, each pulse sending fresh life throughout his veins. This was almost *too much*, but the sheer rush was exhilarating! His vision blurred, his senses were dulling, and suddenly Denya was completely alone. All he could see or even feel was himself and this damned rock that *dared* to stay buried in the ground in front of him. How *dare it!*

With a roar, Denya's palms pressed further into the rock, and he felt the damn thing crack in his grasp. Slamming his feet into the ground with enough force to crack that as well, the fox threw his head back and *lifted* the damn rock high, high above his head! Blood pounded in the fox's ears as he stared up at the giant gray mass before him; damn right, that thing was half buried.

But Denya wasn't done with it yet.

Another grunt, and he began pressing his palms further into the rock, harder and harder until his whole figure began shaking. Cracks spiderwebbed out further, snaking their way around until they entered Denya's vision.

"Control yourself, Fox!"

But how could he? This felt euphoric! This was what he was *made* for! This was... this was...

The boulder shattered in a violent explosion, sending debris crumpling down before Denya. Behind the fox, he could hear plenty of surprised gasps and mutters, and perhaps even some praise came from Adrian. Perhaps.

Denya couldn't tell, because he was struggling to remain standing. All of that power left him in that fleeting instance, his shoulders trembling violently, his body swaying softly. A terrible headache pounded in his head, his heart feeling ready to burst from his chest. Xem was right, that *had* been too much, and the fox felt embarrassed for a whole new reason. Who cared about the cheers and support he felt behind him? He gave into that power *again*! No wonder he couldn't properly Link if this was what it did to him.

"Hey, are you alright?" Adrian asked gently as he stepped beside the fox, placing an arm on his shoulder. "You're trembling. Are you going through burnout?"

"I-I think so." Denya nodded. His soreness accumulated from the last few weeks were amplified immensely, his arms hanging limply on his side. Everything hurt; a visit to the infirmary might be in order, just to make sure nothing was actually broken.

Slowly, Adrian began rubbing the fox's back, and Denya sighed as he felt some proper feeling returning to them, his shoulders slowing their trembling. The badger must have had a lot of experience dealing with burnout; maybe he shouldn't get thrown into the sun after all. "That was something else, Den. I know you said your Link was strength, but I didn't think you'd lift a small mountain and *break* it! Get some rest, and welcome to the team."

And there it was again, that feeling of satisfaction that made the pain and aches all worth it. The fox smiled softly as he limped away, taking care to watch his step as he did so. There were plenty of sharp rocks on the ground now, thanks to him. With gentle strides, he managed to step through the small spikey minefield, noting silently how pretty the reflective surface looked on the broken rock shards and-

He paused, frowning, then stepped back. That didn't look right. The fox leaned forward as much as his poor back would allow, shifting his weight. No, his back looked fine, as did his tail; at least, as fine as it had any right to be, after pulling *that* off with his Link.

"Is something wrong, Den?" He heard Adrian ask behind him.

"No, not at all." Denya shook his head before stepping away. It was too silly to voice out loud, but when Denya first saw his reflection on one of the rock shards, he swore he saw himself with a set of dragon wings sprouting from his back.

Chapter 7

“Again.”

Denya sighed before scooping up another small rock from the pile beside him. The fox took a deep breath, rolling the rock between his fingers as he looked straight ahead, down the snow-covered field before him. *Reach for Xem’s power. Take it, add it to your own.* He recalled the sensation of being imbued with the dragon’s magic, of feeling overwhelmingly powerful, an unstoppable force.

He stepped forward, winding his arm back and threw the rock. His eyes followed as it arced through the air, landing a good distance away in the snow. A nice throw, but nothing anyone else couldn’t do. If anything, it fell a bit short of his previous throws.

Xem must have thought the same, the dragon’s gold eyes flicking towards where the rock landed before focusing on the fox. *“Again.”*

“My arm’s getting sore.” Denya complained, giving his shoulder a rub. But he did as he was told, reaching for another rock and repeating the process again.

It was quite a new experience, training with Xem by his side instead of Versailles for once. Of course, the deer was the first person Denya went to when it came to learning how to manage his Link better, but for once he was denied. “Everyone’s Link works differently. This isn’t a universal skill I can teach, like Magnetism or basic history.” The deer had explained in their typical haughty way. “My Link, for example, is an internal ability, while yours is purely external. If you want to ask anyone for advice, it should be Xem, seeing as he’s the one you’re Linked with.”

And that was the story of why Denya was up at six in the morning, throwing rocks before the sun had even fully risen, while his dragon lazily watched.

"Call me lazy again, and I'll be the one throwing you next." Xem grunted. *"Again."*

"Come on, Xem. This isn't working." The fox pleaded, turning to face the ruby-red drake. "Can we try something else?"

"I don't recall you complaining this much when the antlered one was teaching you Magnetism. If you think I am willing to go easy on you because you are my rider, you are sorely mistaken."

Denya huffed. "Of course not. But while Versailles was training me, we also got to spar a lot, and if I was particularly frustrated, I'd take it out on them. I can't really take it out on you without, uh, retaliation."

"An astute observation."

"And even then, at least I *knew* what it was I wanted to do! I've seen Magnetism done before, and I knew the basics of Telekinesis beforehand as well." To prove his point, the fox held out his wrist and pulled back, his staff rising from the ground nearby straight into his open palm. "I don't know what I'm *trying* to do with my Link! It makes me strong, sure, but I don't know what to picture, what to feel... I'm literally throwing stones at nothing here!"

Xem's golden eyes narrowed. *"This is why I didn't want to Link with you when we did, fox. It awakened your power prematurely, and now you're struggling to manifest it on your own. This power won't come to you naturally or spontaneously, as it did with your peers. You will need to learn how to call upon it on your own, and even then, the process will be arduous. This may take you months, years... and there is a chance you may go through life without ever learning to manifest your Link at all."*

Denya's chest sank at the realization, the fox's gaze drifting down to his dirty hands. Why couldn't anything ever come easy for him? He struggled just to learn Magnetism, something he was supposed to have the upper hand with due to his choice

in weapon, and even then, it took several days of being pelted by medicine balls and a revelation from Jace to unlock that ability.

"It will take more than just a revelation to unlock your Link, fox. You won't come to a sudden understanding and be able to wield that power expertly. It will be more as if you had been born with an underdeveloped limb: Weak and feeble, but through hard work and dedication, you can overcome your handicap."

"I don't *want* to be handicapped!" Denya clenched his teeth. Gods, he sounded like a toddler pouting right now, and in front of his dragon, no less. But how else was he supposed to take the news? He was a slow learner already, even for something he was *good* at. Now he's learning it might take years to gain proficiency in something his fellow First Years could already manage?

He quickly turned towards Xem. "Can you just keep manually Linking with me, then?"

"I can, but I won't." The dragon snorted, ruffling the snow beneath him. *"It's dangerous and unstable. You've felt the damage it's inflicted upon your body."*

"Yeah, but it works!"

"Until it kills you!" Xem growled, baring his sharp teeth. *"This isn't the same as you channeling my power through our link and making it your own. I am directly injecting you with raw magic through a separate conduit. Your body is not meant to handle such raw, unfiltered power. You are lucky your heart or brain haven't completely shut down from the two separate occasions I forced more power into you than I thought you could handle."*

"What are you talking about? I'm never lucky." Denya scoffed, tossing his staff away. He looked for something to kick, to vent his frustrations on, but between the pile of rocks and the looming dragon, he didn't exactly have a lot of options.

“That’s not true.” Xem rose from where he lay, briefly shaking off the snow that gathered on his limbs. Taking a step forward, the dragon leaned his large head down, staring at Denya with those great golden eyes of his. *“You’re lucky you’ve paired with a dragon who is willing to Link with you. No other dragon in your year, perhaps your entire school, has offered their power in the same way I’ve offered mine.”*

Denya wanted to retaliate, to make some other remark about the unfairness of it all, but even he struggled to think of a reply as he stared up at his dragon. That wasn’t fair! Of anyone whose presence could calm the frustrated fox down, why did it have to be the giant red fire-breathing dragon? Even now, Denya struggled to not just wrap his arms around that large snout and squeeze, to close the distance between them so their mental bond could be at its strongest.

“Your shields aren’t up. I can read your thoughts freely.” The dragon chuffed, blowing back Denya’s fur. *“Unless this is your way of requesting another hug.”*

“If I hugged you now, I wouldn’t want to let you go.” Denya thought back, his tail swishing. *“And I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”*

“I can decide that for myself, fox.” Xem’s mental voice lowered to that of a low whisper, and Denya felt goosebumps erupt across his body. Suddenly, he wasn’t so frustrated about his Link situation; there were *other* things on his mind. One of them, of course, being the giant dragon muzzle looming closer to him, Xem softly clicking his teeth, as if preparing to nip the fox’s ears.

But alas, those golden eyes widened, and the dragon quickly stepped back. *“The striped one approaches.”*

“Oh.” Denya sighs. Great, raise his hopes up, only to leave before anything happens, again. Not that the fox was upset with Xem; he would have done the same if the roles were reversed, most likely. It was just another disappointing reminder that their relationship would never become more than just dragon and rider.

In any case, the fox took a moment to unzip his jacket, letting the buildup of hot air within get washed away by the cold winter morning. And with that, he was back to throwing rocks as usual with Xem laying nearby; nothing out of the ordinary.

Within a few minutes, the fox's ears flicked back as he heard the sound of boots crunching in snow. "Heya, Den. What are you and Xem doing up so early?"

"I'm teaching Xem how to fetch." Denya glanced back at the badger before throwing another stone. "He's not very good at it."

The snarl from Xem made it really hard to keep a straight face.

"I see that..." Adrian muttered, stopping beside the fox, away from Xem. "Have you considered he's just waiting for the chance to throw you instead?"

"The striped one is insightful."

Denya snorted at that, before turning to Adrian. "Yeah, probably. To be honest, I'm just trying to get some last minute Link training in. I-" He paused, his mouth hanging open. He couldn't reveal that Xem had forced his power into him, especially while feeling the dragon's anger bubbling up within him. Was it anger Denya was feeling from Xem, or embarrassment? Maybe this 'forced Link' thing was a bit more... intimate than Xem let on.

"I mean..." Denya stammered, trying to pivot the conversation around. "It's... hard to pace myself, you know? I can't really, like, give myself a constant, steady stream of power. I have one or two explosive rushes, and then I'm dealing with Burnout. I'm trying to balance it out a bit."

"I understand completely." Adrian nodded, reaching for the pile of rocks. "I wasn't happy with how my Link worked either. I thought it'd be more useful for cheap party

tricks than something I can use in combat.” The badger stepped back and threw the stone, sending it flying past the ones Denya had thrown earlier.

“But,” he turned to Denya, grinning. “After a bit of time, I figured out a few unique uses for it. Sometimes, bewildering an opponent is the perfect way to give yourself an opening.” With that, the badger held up a stone; the exact same stone he threw.

Denya smiled right back. “I don’t care how many times I see you do that. That’s cool as shit.” Party trick or not, it was the perfect ability to use in War Games. No wonder Adrian was team captain.

The badger chuckled, tossing the stone back into the pile. “It took me some time before I agreed. Sometimes our Links come with limitations that we can’t overcome with brute force. And sometimes, those limitations inspire us to get a little creative.”

“I getcha.” Denya nodded. It was the “fishing pole” idea that got him to finally understand Magnetism, after all. Since then, the fox could trick anyone into thinking his staff was coated in honey, how easy it was for him to stick random objects to it.

Adrian smiled. “I know you’re upset that your Link can only be used a couple of times, but honestly, that’s one of the reasons I think you’d be perfect for War Games. I can’t think of anyone better to be a Striker than you.”

“What?!” And just like that, good feeling gone. Denya stepped away from the badger, his fists clenching. “Why Striker? I’ve been practicing to be a Fighter, like you!”

“I know, I know.” The larger badger sighed, raising his paws as if anticipating the blowback. “You’re a fantastic Fighter as well, Denya. If your Link could be used continuously without Burnout, I’d have no problems switching you. And hey, being able to defend yourself is a great skill to have as a Striker.”

“Yeah, but...” Denya bit his lip. “I’d still be better as a Fighter. I could use my Link for fighting!”

Adrian raised his brow at that. “Your Link is *far* too volatile for that. Killing our opponents loses us points, remember? I hate to say it, Den, but you’re either a Striker, or you’re benched.”

“Ugh!” Denya threw back his head in frustration. Dammit! Adrian did such a good job of either being a lovable friend or the biggest jerk on the continent, with literally 0 in between! The fox was *good* at fighting, he *liked* fighting! Being a Striker was hard, complicated, and it required pulling out of the fight and waiting instead of being proactive. Adrian made such a good speech earlier too about working around the limitations of their powers, but right now Denya’s power was funneling him into a role he did *not* want to fill.

He even turned towards Xem, a last-ditch effort to try and convince the dragon to “persuade” Adrian otherwise. “Can you believe this?”

“Honestly, this ‘game’ of yours is complete nonsense to me. I only agreed to participate because I felt it would encourage your growth.” Xem chuffed. *“However, from my understanding of this situation, the striped one’s logic is sound. You need to play the role that benefits your squad the most, even if you don’t believe it to be your most proficient one.”*

Denya sighed. Again, it was hard to stay mad or even frustrated around Xem. He turned back towards Adrian, defeated. “Congratulations. The dragon agrees with you.”

Adrian chuckled. “Wonderful. I guess I get to live another day.”

“For now.” The dragon noted.

“For now.” Denya verbally agreed.

Adrian sighed at that, stepping towards the fox. "Hey, you'll do great, alright? There's no need to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous." Denya reached for another rock, before winding it up and throwing. It soared farther than his previous rocks, but still fell short of where Adrian's landed. Or, where it should have landed.

The badger raised a brow, smiling. "Not at all?"

"Nope." Denya picked up another rock. "Not at all. I'm gonna kick ass."

"Confidence suits you, fox, but not arrogance. You're acting like a petulant whelp right now for not getting your way."

"I am NOT a petulant whelp!" Denya thought back, and he was grateful he did. Had he said those words out loud, his voice absolutely would have cracked.

"A shame." Adrian sighed, picking up a rock and tossing it as well, this time letting it soar fully. "And here I was, preparing for a grand speech about having confidence and believing in yourself. Don't I look like a fool."

Denya snorted at that. "That's not a bad thing. It just means I saved you a bunch of time."

"That you did," Adrian nodded. Suddenly, the badger turned to glance at the fox, a playful glint in his brown eyes. "Enough time to, say, do some last-minute sparring with me? If you knock me off my dragon, I'll consider moving you to the Fighters."

"Really?!" Denya's ears shot right up; the fox's face practically glowing. And just like that, his opinion of Adrian swung straight back into pure adoration. "You mean it?"

“Mhm.” The badger nodded, his eyes flicking briefly towards the dragon behind Denya. “But only if Xem is willing to catch me if I do fall. Now saying I *will*, mind, but this isn’t something I’m willing to wager my life over.”

The fox whirled around to look up at his dragon, his tail swaying excitedly behind him. “Please, Xem?” He asked, fully aware that he looked like a child asking for his parent’s permission.

And after an uncomfortably long time, Xem finally sighed. “*I accept... begrudgingly.*”

Barely containing a squeal, Denya turned back. “Xem says he accepts... on the condition you make me a Fighter right away instead.”

Adrian snorted. “Nice try, Denya.”

Well, it was worth a shot.

Training with his teammates for the War Games had been the most fun Denya had in his life.

The simple fact alone that his teammates were his direct seniors, second or third years, was a relief off the fox’s shoulders. Keeping up with those more experienced than him when it came to drills and sparring was something to be congratulated for, not expected, as it was in the classroom. Best of all, there wasn’t a textbook in sight, and none of the fox’s training partners cared what his grades were or how well he understood basic mathematics. If Denya held his own, he was considered skilled, as he was the only first year who made it on the team.

Well, he and Zeak.

He never interacted much with the lion; perhaps that was for the best. The two first years rarely ever made eye contact, and when they did, Denya would notice a rather scornful, hate-filled stare. It wasn't like the fox could blame him, his dragon humiliated him and his dragon in front of all their peers. Denya wanted to apologize, but every time he got close, Zeak would quickly hurry away, mumbling some excuse under his breath as he did. In a way, Denya preferred their old exchanges where the lion was an arrogant bully. The fox could handle bullies just fine, but now *he* felt like the bully.

Well, maybe forcing an apology wasn't the best way to go about it. He wouldn't want to hurt Zeak's pride any more than he already had. War Games were supposed to foster teamwork and cooperation; maybe some spark will form between the two during the games. Maybe they could come to an understanding and even form a friendship of sorts. It would be nice to add a fourth to their study/sparring group.

But this was all hypothetical, of course. Denya didn't know a thing about Zeak, outside of his brutish love of fighting. He didn't even know what the lion's Link power was!

Outside of those occasional feelings of guilt, Denya looked forward to every War Games practice session. Yes, that meant missing out on study sessions with Versailles and Jace, but the two had become familiar enough friends that they could interact without Denya being the glue between them. Right now, the fox was enjoying being a part of a great team, of feeling capable in the two activities he was most confident in: weapons combat and flying.

Hell, right now he was doing both at once!

"Eyes on me, Den. Don't look at your feet." Adrian called out, his voice carrying in the wind. "I know Shey's back isn't as broad as Xem's, but you need to learn to familiarize yourself quickly."

“Easier said than done!” Denya called back, carefully stepping around the ice-blue dragon’s back. Indeed, Shey was smaller than Xem, but Denya was struggling to adjust to a slew of minor details: The slickness of the scales beneath him, the different wing-beating patterns, not to mention the fact he wasn’t exactly *riding* the blue dragon, so much as standing on her back, weapon in hand, while fighting off Adrian!

Despite the difficulties, the fox’s smile wouldn’t slide from his face, even as he braced for impact from the badger’s practice sword. Talk about a rush! Flying had always been a thrill, to see the landscape change so quickly beneath you while the cool air whipped past your face, threatening to steal your breath away. To do so while locked in combat, while squaring off with an opponent while a dragon carries you off hundreds of feet above the ground, came with it a level of danger and excitement that gave the fox a feeling of elation almost comparable to when Xem manually Linked with him!

Of course, they weren’t in any danger. Xem followed along after Shey, flying close and much lower to the ground, ready to swoop in and snatch either of them should they actually fall. Fighting Adrian would be a lot easier on the ruby dragon’s larger back, but Xem hadn’t exactly been the most agreeable to having other riders on his back. It’s not like he outright said so, but whenever another rider approached, Xem would release a growl that grew more intense the closer the invader was.

“I agreed to War Games, not to be crawled on by a bunch of anthros!”

Ugh, and Xem had the gall to call Denya the petulant whelp.

For now, Denya chose to focus on his opponent, twirling his staff before launching into a series of jabs to probe for weaknesses. Alas, the badger side-stepped or parried each one with lethal precision, his own smile present on his broad muzzle. The fox knew he was being toyed with and he did not appreciate it one bit. Adrian was already a skilled fighter on the ground as is; fighting atop his own dragon, the gap between them only widened.

With a grunt, Denya ducked beneath the first swipe at his head, blocking the second with his staff. He raised the other end, spying an opening by the badger’s side,

but Adrian lunged expertly to the side in a maneuver that would have had Denya falling on his ass if he tried that on a dragon. Pivoting his feet, Adrian spun and swung his sword upwards, the fox forced to bring his staff close to block the attack. Even so, he had to step back; sheesh, Adrian was strong-

Denya gasped, his heart getting caught in his throat when the space behind his foot wasn't where it was. Instead of stepping higher, the fox's foot slammed down on a lower portion of Shey's back, the fox throwing his arms up as he began stumbling back. Oh, Gods, he was about to fall!

But in one swift motion, Adrian leapt forward and grabbed onto Denya's staff, the fox gripping it tightly from his end as well. Panting and huffing, he carefully pulled himself back up, huffing. "Th-Thanks, Adrian. Shit..."

"Of course, Den." Adrian sighed, looking just as relieved. "I should have said something. I've been pushing you back for a while now; I should have let you regain some ground."

"No, it's fine. That's something I should keep track of on my own." The fox muttered, scratching at his ear nervously. Maybe fighting on dragonback was a little *too* exciting. Denya was struggling to catch his breath now, as well as still his pounding heart.

"I don't like this exercise!" And based on Xem's tone, he was just as anxious. *"In what realistic scenario will you ever be fighting on another dragon's back?"*

"I don't know! But it could happen, right?"

"There's no reason any dragon would allow you to stay on their back for long." Xem growled. *"Because the second another dragon touches you, I'll bite their head off."*

Denya swore he felt Shey flap her wings a little harder.

"You're way too overprotective." The fox sighed. Despite this, he noticed Xem fly in closer, gliding beneath the light blue dragon.

Before he could continue chastising his dragon, the fox felt Adrian's strong paw rub along his back. "Feeling alright? We can call this practice early if you're still shaken up."

Denya glanced up at the badger, smiling. "Nah, not the first time I've almost fallen. Or actually falling, for that matter. I'm just pissed that I won't be playing as a Fighter."

"Hey, I just said you needed to knock *me* off Shey. You can fall off all you want." Adrian laughs.

"Is that right?" With a grin, the fox checked his surroundings carefully before hopping back. "You better not regret this, Adrian." Denya sneered, twirling his staff above his head before lowering it for battle.

"Oh, I won't." Adrian smirked, raising his sword. "I told you I'd get you on your back, one way or another."

A sudden roar from below them told the badger now probably wasn't the time for comments like that.

Denya had been so looking forward to the War Games, but as the date drew closer, the fox began to dread it.

The fox didn't want to admit it, but he was actually a bit nervous for the actual event. The stands had finally arrived around the field, and knowing they would be full of

people witnessing the spectacle formed a lump in the fox's stomach. It was only due to Xem's constant threats of force-feeding him raw sheep that he even went to the mess hall.

Of course they were going to be watched. This was Soldastra's greatest spectacle, the game that wowed the entire country and encouraged others to become dragon riders, despite the low acceptance rate. It certainly worked on Denya when he was but a young kit, and despite everything he went through, he didn't regret it one bit. He was *meant* to be a rider!

Although his powers didn't seem to agree.

Despite countless hours with Xem, Denya was simply unable to manifest his Link naturally. Nothing he tried worked, and he was forced to accept that he may need to borrow Xem's for a Manual Link instead. A Manual Link wasn't nearly as effective as a natural one, and given that he was only one of two Strikers, the fox was really feeling the pressure. If only he could play as a Fighter instead, he'd be much more confident!

It's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine.

Denya was so nervous for War Games, he had completely forgotten that was also the same day their final exams were graded and sent out. He only remembered when Versailles practically dragged the fox away from breakfast that morning, a rare look of excitement and eagerness crossing the deer's features. "Come on, Denya! With how hard I worked with you, I'm just as eager to see your results as well as my own."

"Alright, alright, but if Xem makes me eat a raw steak because of this, I'm kicking your ass." The fox grumbled, finishing his spoonful of applesauce as Versailles hauled the fox over his shoulders. What did he do to deserve such *weird* friends?

Denya's feet weren't allowed to touch the ground until the two made it to the great hall, and even then, Versailles kept a firm grip on the fox's wrist, as if afraid Denya would start wandering around and getting lost. To be fair, the crowd of riders filling the

hall was easy to get lost in; if Versailles weren't wearing their antlers (and crushing Denya's hand), the deer would have easily disappeared.

But they didn't; instead, they navigated the group with ease until the two were standing before the postings, looking for their final scores for the year. Great, another reason to stay anxious. Denya felt his breakfast shift in his stomach as he searched for his name. D... Den... Denya, there we are...

He wanted to collapse.

"You passed all your classes!" Versailles cheered, again startling the fox with the sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"Yeah, I guess." Denya rubbed his ears. "Can you stop sounding so excited? You're making it sound like you doubted me."

"Of course I didn't doubt you. I tutored you, after all." Ah, there was that haughty tone that was oh so familiar. "I'm merely expressing the excitement you *should* be feeling. You've been so obsessed with War Games, I've been worried you've forgotten what *really* matters here."

"Right, right. I getcha." Denya said, allowing himself a smile. He was happy, really. He wouldn't have to repeat a single class, or even stay for remedial courses. Of course, his scores for Battle Training and Flight Class were exceptional, and his history was dangerously close to failing, but in the fox's eyes, not failing was a pass.

After today, he'll officially be a Second Year.

"And if I may direct your attention here." Versailles gave a cocky grin, pointing towards the V section.

Denya rolled his eyes... before feeling his eyes widen on their own, nearly popping out of his skull. “No way... No freaking way...”

It was nearly flawless! Denya didn't even know it was possible to *score* that high in anything, let alone *everything*! Versailles was a freak of nature! Just feeling the deer's smug look boring into the side of his head made the fox shake his head in frustration.

But not as much as reading Versailles' Battle Training scores. “How the *fuck* did you get a higher score than me?”

“We're graded based on improvement as well, you know.” The deer crossed their arms, smirking. “But I do have you to thank for that. Your insight has been very helpful.

“You know, it's hard to feel your gratitude when you're looking at me like that.” Denya scoffed, waving away the deer. Still, he smiled inwardly. Versailles worked harder than anyone in the school. They deserved those scores. Out of curiosity, the fox looked for Jace's scores, and was pleased to see the raccoon's academic scores were also incredibly high, almost rivaling Versailles'. Unfortunately, his Battle Training scores held him back. Maybe they should focus on that next time they meet.

The fox felt someone nudge at his shoulder, and he quickly began shuffling out from the crowd. There were plenty more riders who wanted to read their scores, and he didn't need to stand in the way. Squeezing his way out, Denya waited for Versailles to step back out. “You're acting pretty calm for someone who probably just broke a new record.”

“Why would I be surprised by something I already knew?”

Denya raised a brow. “Wait, you knew already? You just wanted to drag me over to gloat?”

“Of course not.” Versailles rolled their eyes. “I just wanted to show you your scores. I thought you’d be happier, Denya. You were failing nearly every class when we first met.”

“I am happy!” The fox responded in a very not-happy tone. When he realized it, he sighed and shook his head. “Sorry. War Games is stressing me out a little, to be honest. It took so much work just to get where I am now, I’m just afraid I’m gonna blow it in front of thousands of-“

“Denya.”

The fox paused as he felt the deer’s hands grip his shoulders, holding him firmly in place. Denya paused, mouth open mid-sentence as he looked into the fierce orange eyes of his friend. He was expecting an inspirational speech, something like what Adrian said he wanted to give the fox earlier this week.

But something different came from Versailles instead. “I’m going to become Headmaster one day.”

“I... yeah, I know.” Denya nodded, confused. “With those grades, you definitely will be.”

“I can’t become Headmaster if I can’t even get my friend through college.” Versailles’ tone changed, his expression softening. Were they scared? Sad? “Please be careful, Denya.”

“What?” Denya blinked. Since when had Versailles been this worried for him? “Ver, I’m gonna be fine. No one’s died in War Games in five years, and I can kick a lot of ass.”

“I-I know.” The deer’s arms tensed, and Denya wondered if the deer was about to pull him into a hug. But instead, they pushed off, shaking their head. “Good luck on War Games. Jace and I will be watching. Actually, I need to go see him for something.”

“Right, I appreciate it...” The fox muttered. Again, what did he do to earn such *weird* friends...

A thought crossed his mind, one that made his eyes widen. Versailles just now acted like he knew something Denya didn't. In fact, the deer knew he had near-perfect grades before even checking. “H-Hey, Ver? What's your Link power again?”

But the deer had turned to leave in a hurry, waving away the fox while muttering something about looking for Jace.

Denya should be happy the deer and raccoon were becoming good friends, but he felt a horrible, gnawing pit fester in his stomach. Suddenly, he was more worried about War Games than ever before.

Chapter 8

Denya fidgeted. He swung his arms, shook his wrists, swished his tail, flicked his ears, and cracked his neck; and when he finished with that, he tried looking for other ways to bend or twist his body parts to pass the time.

This was actually torture. It was bad enough when the fox was expected to sit still and stay silent in class, but to stand still in a wide open field, with possibly thousands of eyes on him, mere moments before being expected to mount his dragon and participate in a brutal competition was nothing short of agony. This was called *War Games* for a reason; were they supposed to play the role of soldiers here, lined up and staring straight ahead at their opponents, preparing for battle?

No wonder Versailles hated War Games. Being forced to stare down the other team and their dragons was nerve wracking. They didn't feel like fellow riders at the same war college Denya went to; they were opponents, enemies, foes to vanquish.

Versailles. Denya still hadn't forgotten the deer's strange actions earlier today. He never got to clarify with them why exactly they were so concerned. The fox had hoped his friend would have been a bit more... encouraging, maybe saying something along the lines of "if anyone can brute force their way to victory with sheer bull-headedness and determination, it's you," or some other haughty, arrogant mannerism, but the look of genuine concern was gut-wrenching. Suddenly, the fox wished the massive field they stood in wasn't surrounded by heating wards. Yes, they were there to melt the snow and make the area more comfortable for the riders and spectators alike, but they were not helping the feeling of sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"You're not the only one suffering through this."

Denya heard Xem speak in his voice, followed by a rush of warm air along his head and shoulders. Perhaps the only thing that kept Denya from panicking was the feeling of his dragon standing right behind him. It was hard to feel anxious when being backed by an enormous fire-breathing creature, and given the sudden chuff he heard, that enormous fire-breathing creature was proud to be that source of comfort. Suddenly,

the fox felt a little silly for being so anxious under the scrutiny of so many faces from the surrounding stands. Many of the people present had never even seen a dragon before, so naturally all eyes would be on them, specifically the giant Ruby dragon behind him.

Denya sighed. Xem hated attention even more than the fox. He'll need to find a way to make it up to the big guy.

"I do not need your sympathy, nor do I need you to compensate me." Xem snorted. *"You need experience, and these 'games' will provide it to you. Your growth as a rider is all I need to endure the stares from these... Anthros."*

"You're doing something for me that you would never willingly do otherwise." Denya thought back, wanting so desperately to risk a glance back at Xem. Alas, it had been made very clear that he was to maintain professionalism at all times, as they were to represent the best of the best the war college had to offer. *"At least let me offer something to you. I don't want you to think I never do anything in return."*

From behind him, Denya heard Xem audibly rumble, as if pondering the proposition. *"Very well."* He finally said. *"Crush the enemy and prove to the fools around us the superiority of my rider. Do that, and your debt will be paid."*

"Great." Denya sighed again, forcing the air in and out of his lungs. Just crush the enemy. The enemy who, in general, had a year's worth of experience over him, a year's worth of training in combat, magic, dragon riding, etc. No pressure. It's fine. He's fine. Everything's fine...

"You alright, Den?"

The fox barely managed to keep his head facing forward, but he shifted his eyes to glance at the badger beside him, who was currently offering a friendly smile. "You know, I still have that motivation speech prepared if you need to hear it."

Denya snorted at that. "Thanks, but I still don't need it. I'm just looking forward to showing off, that's all."

From the corner of his vision, he could see Adrian raise his brow, before flicking his head back, gesturing behind. "The dragons don't like it when we lie."

"The striped one speaks the truth."

Denya huffed. Fine, he'll be honest, even though the fox would much rather build up his confidence than voice his concerns. "It's just... what do you do when you know you're *probably* fine, but you have this terrible, horrible feeling in your gut that just won't go away."

"Like indigestion?" The corner of Adrian's muzzle lifted into a teasing grin.

"No, that was earlier." The fox muttered, ignoring the joke entirely. *"Thanks again, Xem, for forcing me to eat before we got out here."*

He sighed. "I mean... actually, I don't know what I mean. Fuck it, I'm just nervous."

"Hey, don't stress it." The badger nodded. "I know what you mean. You've been through the drills, and you're afraid something will happen that you're not expecting. And to be honest: odds are, something *will* happen. But stressing out over every little possibility won't help you at all; if anything, it'll just distract you from what's happening right now."

Denya nodded along. It was hard to believe Adrian was in the same year as himself. Technically, the badger was a year older, having been held back his previous year. But how could anyone with such confidence and calmness ever be held back? "What should I do, then?"

“Regarding the bad feeling you have? Nothing!” The badger chanced a small chuckle. “We’re riders, Denya. ‘Ride or die’ is literally our motto. We charge straight into danger, and either we come out stronger.” Adrian shrugs. “Or suddenly it’s not our problem anymore.”

That was a little *less* reassuring. Denya didn’t exactly feel *stronger* after Bernant. And yet, thinking about that disaster actually helped the fox’s nerves, as strange as it sounded. No matter how bad War Games went, it could never compare to Bernant. And that alone will have to do to get him through this.

Denya’s ears perked up, and he let out a sigh of relief. Finally, the Headmaster had finished his long speech regarding the history of the war college, of the Anthros forming a relationship with the Dragons, uniting to purge the country of evil and protect its citizens, blah blah blah. Now that the topic had switched to War Games, the fox found he could finally pay attention; given how Adrian stiffened beside him, the badger must have felt the same.

“And with that,” the older wolverine spoke, his words magically enhanced to sound out across the entire field. “It is my greatest pleasure to introduce the fine riders representing our great college here at the War Games. They represent the best of the best among us, the bravest and most capable, the strongest and the most intelligent.”

No pressure. What stopped Denya from blacking out wasn’t Xem’s presence, for once, but of the knowledge that Versailles was in the stands watching him. What he wouldn’t give to see the deer’s face upon hearing that.

“For those of you who are joining us for the first time today,” their headmaster continued. “Allow me to elaborate the rules of the War Games. Our lovely school is split into four separate quadrants, all of which shall be competing today.”

Denya was grateful his quadrant would be among the first to start, as it meant getting this over with all the quicker. For once, luck went his way.

“Behind each team, you will notice a large podium, with an obsidian relic resting on the middle. The goal of this battle exercise is for each team to protect their relic while trying to destroy the enemy’s relic. However, I say ‘destroy’ in a very loose sense, as I imbued them all with very powerful protective wards. I’d be quite surprised if anyone manages to so much as crack them.” The headmaster chuckled softly.

“Only because it’s the riders who will be attacking them.” Xem growled. *“Give me five seconds alone with that rock. I’ll turn it into gravel.”*

The wolverine continued. “Of course, they will not be attacking the relics directly. Rather, they will strike them with the use of projectiles, such as this.” With a flick of his wrist, the headmaster produced a dark-gray sphere, holding it above his head as though anyone could see the medicine-ball-like object from such a distance. Denya had seen War Games numerous times, and it had only been recently that he even learned what the ball even looked like.

“These orbs, you see, are also imbued with protective wards, as well as a specific selection of runes designed to react when struck against the obsidian relics. When this occurs, I will receive vital information about the blow, including the strength and accuracy, to which I will grade in numeric form.”

Points! Just call them points! That’s how Denya and his team referred to the “numeric form” when they trained together, at least.

“The team with the highest total score at the end of the time limit wins.” The headmaster remarked. “But there are other conditions for victory as well. Riders who are disarmed or who touch ground after taking flight are disqualified. Riders who willingly attempt to carry the orb through means outside of Magnetism are also disqualified. And as the War Games are meant to test a rider’s strength and strategy, it shall also test their control and precision as well; excessive force is unallowed, and any rider who slays another is also disqualified. Should an entire team become disqualified, the other team will automatically be declared the winner, but bear in mind that a squad is only as strong as its weakest link. Even a single disqualification could be enough to sweep the tide of battle in the opposing team’s favor.”

The fox forced a heavy sigh. Winning would be fantastic, but if he could get through without being disqualified, that would also be fine.

“Each team is comprised of seven members, split into three separate but vital roles. Defenders are marked with a red stripe on their arm. Their role is to guard their team’s obsidian relic through any means, whether it be through clever uses of deflection, deception, or even taking the blow themselves, if need be. Their role is a lonely one; perhaps they bear the greatest burden on their team, but no squad can function at their best without the support of a mighty pillar.”

Denya couldn’t think of a better pillar for the role than Terrace. Their pangolin Defender’s Link allowed him to harden his scales until they were as tough as iron. It was hard to imagine anything getting through him or his silver-scaled dragon.

“The strength of the team can be found in the role of their four Fighters, represented by their green arm bands, whose responsibilities are numerous. They make up the vanguard of the squad, the swords *and* shields. Their roles not only consist of engaging the enemy head on, but also to guard and support their comrades. They will be expected to make up the most ground, to assist where they are needed, to fight for the sake of others.”

Denya noticed Adrian’s chest puff out, the badger grinning widely. The fox could only wish he would be just as confident when he heard his role come next.

“But even a team with the sturdiest Defender and mightiest Fighters can never hope to claim victory without the use of their Strikers.”

Shit. Denya wished he could take just one step back. He could really use the support of Xem right about now, literally.

“Marked by the blue bands on their arms, Strikers are the only ones permitted to attack the relics with the orbs. Fighters may set up opportunities to attack, but it is up to

the Striker to take that opportunity, to strike with the hopes of their entire squad on their backs.”

Ugh, no wonder Versailles was hellbent on becoming headmaster. The two of them were both equally obsessed with the sound of their own voices!

Denya shook his head softly. Focus. He was fine. Everything was fine. Yes, he was playing a role he wasn't as confident in; the fox would much rather fly about and engage in random battles than throw a ball with pinpoint accuracy. However, he wasn't alone in this; the other Striker was a ferret whose Link allowed her to alter air currents. Her “attacks” in this case weren't particularly powerful, but in their practices, she never missed a shot, no matter where she threw it. As opposed to Denya, who was lucky if the ball glanced against their practice relic.

Still, this wasn't all bad. The fox glanced down at his blue arm band, giving it a rub. Blue looked good on him; it contrasted well with his dark flight leathers, as well as his black fur beneath it. Maybe when this whole situation was over with, when Denya could look back on today and laugh, he should have a blue stripe tattooed somewhere on his body.

“Win or lose, may luck shine down upon you all, and may our ancestors watch over us.”

Denya's heart jolted, the fox crouching where he stood. He heard the badger beside him tense up, watching as their opponents did the same. It was time.

“Let the War Games begin!” The headmaster called out, the gray ball rocketing out from his outstretched palm towards the field.

Denya wasted no time. Gripping his staff all the tighter, the fox turned and sprinted to Xem, who stood crouched and ready to take off. Several quick leaps and pulls, Denya flung himself into his seat in the dragon, before grunting as Xem leapt into the air, the G-force pushing Denya down.

“Sara, far right!” He managed to hear Adrian call out, projecting his voice through magic as well while ascending with his dragon. “Tarles, stay back for now. Denya, up high. The rest of you, with me!”

And with that came total chaos. Denya clenched his teeth as he held onto Xem, the dragon’s wings pounding into the air as they flew in a tight corkscrew position, spiraling up. All around, he could hear the shouting of fliers preparing for battle, the whiz and whirl of Linked abilities being hurled at one another, and even the clang of weapons clashing already. The fox’s heart thrashed within his chest, his lungs struggling to swallow the air as it rushed past him.

Watching War Games, the fox had assumed it looked like such a fun game to play. Participating in it, he realized it was more like *war*!

“Fox! To your right!”

Denya glanced to his right, just in time to see the glint of metal slashing in his direction. Gasping, the fox threw himself back against his dragon, feeling the practice blade just barely whiz over his head, brushing against his nose!

Forcing himself back up right, he raised his staff to his chest, preparing to fend off the next assault from the tiger swordsman. But before Denya could parry the next attack, Xem let out a roar, and veered left, before shoulder-tackling the tiger’s dragon, causing the feline to yelp in shock before stumbling back, the rider-and-dragon pair forced to retreat.

“T-Thanks, Xem.” Denya sighed heavily. Seconds in, and he’d only just barely managed to avoid getting taken out! Playing on the defensive was nerve wracking.

“Focus!” The dragon growled in Denya’s head. *“Remember, you chose to be here.”*

"Yeah, I know." The fox muttered breathlessly. "Starting to regret my decisions."

"That's not what I meant." Xem veered sharply to the left, avoiding an enemy Fighter rising towards them, pursued closely by Denya's teammate. "At any point, you could have given up. With your Magnetism training, with your malformed Link, even when the striped one informed you of your role. You chose to persevere through it all. You are here today because of your actions, and I am proud to call you my rider."

If only Denya wasn't dealing with the adrenaline coursing through his veins to properly appreciate Xem's words. He wanted to cherish every single letter, to bottle it up for emergency situations where the fox felt incompetent. Gods, a part of him wanted to forget about War Games entirely and just hug his dragon. Today has been an absolute whirlwind of emotions. When this was over, a long nap would be in order.

"Xem." Denya huffed, bringing his staff close. "Next time we're free, remind me to make you a large pot of beef stew."

"I don't need your stew. Unlike you, I am capable of feeding myself."

"Shut up, you're getting stew." And it's going to be fucking delicious, too.

With the frantic first seconds out of the way, the fox felt a sense of control at being able to circle above the battlefield, eyeing the chaos below. It was just like training, he thought to himself; his job was to wait for an opportunity to swoop in and steal an orb for himself, either through a blind-side attack at the enemy, or waiting for his Fighter to break away from the chaos towards him. A part of him despised the badger for placing him on the outskirts of the fighting, away from being able to assist the team. Even Sara, Denya's fellow Striker, participated in the skirmishes, as her wind control was excellent for both disrupting the enemy team as well as attacking their enemy's artifact. Relegated to just another spectator, Denya felt helpless, knowing he would only get in the way if he tried to help.

“Neither of that is true, and you know it. Here I was hoping your assumptions had improved.” Xem grumbled from beneath Denya. *“You have your role, and they have theirs. If you value the striped one’s judgement, you will carry yours out.”*

But what if he could be doing more? What if Adrian had made the wrong call? What if-

Denya gasped. Through the conflict, he noticed the badger make a break away, the ball stuck to the edge of his sword, while being pursued by two of the enemy team’s Fighters. *“Dive, Xem! After him!”*

The ruby dragon folded his wings, and Denya felt his stomach hit the back of his throat as Xem dove faster than the fox had ever experienced. The wind howled in his ears, punctuated by the deafening wingbeats of a dozen dragons. Even with his flight goggles on, he struggled to see properly, but he focused on the badger with all he had, the fox keeping his staff clutched to his side to avoid the wind force tearing it out from his hand. “Adrian!”

The badger didn’t even look up, but he lowered his sword; he was going to toss it up! Gritting his teeth, Denya raised the bow staff-

THUNK! A sudden slam, and Denya felt the orb strike his staff, sticking to it! Sheesh, and he thought Versailles threw hard; although Xem’s speed also attributed to the sheer force he felt in his wrists.

But Denya had practiced for this. The ball came at him faster than he expected, but his Magnetism held true. It was stuck to his staff.

“Go!” Adrian called out before slowing behind Denya, prepared to engage with the dragons pursuing the fox now, no doubt. The fox panted heavily as Xem flew blisteringly quickly, steering away from any dragons along the way, friend or foe. The ball was only a couple of pounds, yet it felt impossibly heavy attached to Denya’s staff. Come on... Come on...

There! The fox spotted the other artifact, as well as the other team's Defender: a burly pine marten atop a brown dragon. It was pointless to try and fight him in a head-on battle; the pine martin would have ample opportunity to steal the ball from Denya if they clashed, not to mention the time it would waste for their reinforcements to show up. He would have to throw it now, while he had a clear shot.

"Xem, give me power."

"Very well, but only a miniscule amount. You may need more later."

That's perfectly fine. Based off the empowering sensation, the fox was sure this swing had the force to score quite a few points. Leaning back, Denya gripped the other end of his staff in both arms, before shouting and *swinging* it like he practiced, ending the Magnetism at the apex of his swing like he practiced, the ball hurtling towards the artifact like he practiced.

Before the ball suddenly snapped back in the opposite direction, hurtling back towards Denya. Not at *all* how he practiced!

The fox barely had time to even duck as the ball whizzed ahead of him, back into the fray of dragons. Denya's fear for his own life was only rivaled at his disappointment. He failed!

"Snap out of it, Den!" Adrian's voice called out, the badger flying overhead. "It was a good attempt. Get back into position."

"How the hell do we fight against that?!" Denya cried out, grunting as Xem began his spiral up.

“We think it's a burst Link like yours, not a Link he can sustain. The plan is to have Sara wear him down and force him into burnout, then you'll come in for another strike!”

“Alright, sounds goo-“ But Denya's voice was caught in his throat, his eyes widening at the sight before him.

A dragon was charging straight at him. This was to be expected, as he was easily targetable now that he wasn't above the battlefield. But what startled Denya was the fact the dragon charging him was flying *upside-down*! Most bewildering of all was the hyena sitting upright, *underneath* the upside-down dragon, as if he were actually right side up! What the actual hell?! Was this Magnetism, or another technique entirely?!

“Fox!” Xem cried out, and Denya snapped out of his confusion, raising his staff to defend himself. Alas, he realized too late that was a critical mistake, as the hyena rider's weapon was stowed by their side. No, the hyena's arms were held straight out, snatching Denya's staff.

Along with Denya.

The fox yelped in pain as he was forcibly, painfully flung off his dragon, his shoulders feeling ready to give out from the sheer force. But even through the pain, Denya was terrified at watching his dragon flying off without him, Xem quickly banking left in an attempt to pursue him. The fox was left dangling high above the ground, his legs and tail swaying in the wind, hanging on for dear life by his staff.

His staff, which was also in the clutches of the upside-down hyena, who looked equally surprised at the exchange.

“Shit, you've got quite the grip!” The hyena cackled. “I just wanted the staff, not the whole damn package! Just hold tight, foxy, we'll get you on the ground soon.”

Denya gritted his teeth, glancing up at the hyena laughing at him. Gods dammit, he was going to be disqualified before he could even do anything! The second his feet touched the grass, he would be removed from the games. But what the hell was he supposed to do in this situation? He couldn't exactly *barter* with the opponent here. It was only thanks to all the strength training he did with Adrian and the other War Games squad that the fox's arms didn't simply tear right out from that exchange, or at least dislocate!

Well, strength training was what kept him in the game this long. Now, strength training was going to get him out.

The fox swung his legs slightly, testing his grip on the staff. He held his breath, and with one mighty shove, he shoved himself up, as if doing a pull up on a bar. With a painful *THUNK*, his head crashing into the hyena who let out a pained scream. Stars exploded in the fox's vision, but his plan worked, for he and his staff were free from his opponent's grasp.

He was also free falling.

Denya spread his arms and legs out, just as he'd been taught to do should he ever fall from his dragon. He needed to slow his descent as much as possible, but the fox was struggling to breathe. He failed to take into account that the hyena had been descending towards the ground since abducting Denya. And now, the grass was getting closer... too close... **TOO CLO-**

The fox gasped, a set of ruby claws snatching him up right as he started noticing individual tufts of grass. "*You court death!*" Xem let out a roar, both out loud and in his head. "*You foolish, foolish fox! Is participating in these games worth your own life?*"

"*Kinda!*" Denya thought back, squirming in Xem's grasp. It had just now occurred to him how *close* he'd come to actually dying in the games, a fate perhaps even more humiliating than being the first rider disqualified this set. "*You told me that you wanted me to win. Well I'm doing whatever it takes to win, dammit!*"

"If it means throwing your life away, then I retract that statement."

"Too late! We're winning this thing." Oh yeah, the adrenaline mixed with the surge of Xem's power earlier left him acting more foolish than ever, but Denya didn't care. He made it this far, and he damn well knew he could take this game a *lot* farther!

He was brought up before the dragon, forced to stare into those angry, slitted eyes. With a huff, Denya was thrust onto Xem's back, the fox quickly taking his spot as the dragon began his ascent. *"I expect a copious amount of stew in return for tolerating your recklessness."*

"As much as you can eat, big guy." Denya grinned. A perverse thrill shot through the fox's body, some mixture of pride and excitement radiating off of him. This must be what Adrian said when he mentioned diving straight into danger. It was this electrifying feeling that made him want to become a dragon rider all those years ago, when the young fox watched the War Games for the first time.

If only his younger self could see him now.

Despite the rush he felt, Denya made sure to stay with the plan, circling above the dogfight taking place. More than ever, he wanted to dive back down and take part in the action, to shrug off his Striker role and join in the melee. The anxiety and fear that gripped him earlier had long dissipated, and now not even the distant crowds watching from the stands bothered him. But alas, Adrian's orders remained, and the fox didn't question them. The badger was the most confident and skilled rider he knew, who wasn't a professor, that is. Denya will conserve his strength for now; but when the time came for him to strike, he'll do so with everything he had.

That is to say, it wasn't completely uneventful. On more than one occasion, Xem would warn that a dragon was approaching from behind, trying to catch the pair unguarded. Denya would clash his staff against whatever weapon the Fighter wielded, but their skirmishes never lasted longer than a couple blows before they disengaged willingly, or Xem would force control over their airspace using his large body to his

advantage. *“A shame I’m not allowed to bear my fangs or wield my flames in this contest. Not that I need them.”*

But time was running short, and Denya knew his team was behind. They only managed to strike once at the other team’s obsidian relic, where one of the Fighters flew within inches of the other team’s pine martin Defender, obstructing his view and startling his dragon, while Sara struck with a wicked curve ball. It was a good strike, but it did little to offset the three strikes the other team made against their artifact. The Pangolin shrugged off any attack he could throw himself in front of with ease, but alas he couldn’t be everywhere at once. Some strikes were bound to slip through.

“Xem,” Denya muttered, staring down at the combat below. “If we get another chance to strike at their artifact, I’m gonna need you to pour all of your power into me.”

“I will grant you only what I deem you capable of handling.”

“You’ve said that already, but I’ve handled more than what you thought twice. I don’t care if I end up a little sore, I want to win this!”

The dragon growled audibly. *“If you hadn’t almost fallen to your death earlier, I might consider it. The fact remains you’ve already risked your life for these games, and if you won’t keep your recklessness in check, then I will!”*

Denya bit his lip but said nothing in response. How can he argue with the dragon who just saved his life? In fact, he was lucky Xem would even grant him *any* power. He’ll just have to take what he can get and hope it was enough.

The dragon’s muscles tensed beneath him. *“Shey is requesting our presence. It appears the striped one has formulated a plan.”*

“Shey?” Denya asked, before his eyes widened. “Right, Adrian’s dragon.” It must be an important plan if the badger is communicating through their dragons; this way, the enemy can’t overhear. “What’s the plan?”

“Their ‘Defender’, in your terms, is showing signs of Burnout. They are currently fighting for the orb, but once they’re in control, we are to take it and-“

“Strike.” Denya grinned, leaning forward. “Let’s go, Xem!”

The ruby dragon let out a roar before diving down yet again, the fox grinning as the wind whipped past his face. Time was surely almost up by now. The knowledge that the War Games may be decided by his single strike was nerve wracking, to say the least, but Denya had no intentions of failing. He worked too damn hard to get where he was to let something as silly as nerves get in his way now!

Fighting against the wind, he narrowed his eyes as they approached the mess, trying to make out the action. It looked like Zeak had control of the ball for now, the lion gripping his broadsword tightly...

Denya blinked. Why was it so heavily bandaged? Did it break, and the lion had to make some last minute repairs? If so, when did he find the time to do that? Hell, it was so heavily bandaged, the fox couldn’t even see the “blade” itself-

Argh, now’s not the time to focus on that! He forced himself to focus, watching intently while Xem relayed the plan into his head.

“Focus on the striped one. He’ll be the one to relay the orb.”

Denya nodded and looked to his left; Adrian was flying along the edge of the field, as if avoiding the other riders. The fox felt Xem shift beneath him, gliding closer to the badger and his dragon, but he couldn’t help but watch as Zeak leaned forward and held his sword out, ball right beside his dragon’s mouth.

The green dragon suddenly opened wide, wrapping his maw around the tip. And when he pulled back, the ball had vanished.

Denya wanted to laugh as he heard the other team yelling in confusion, their dragons pulling back to try and assess the situation. Cries for disqualification rang out, as surely a dragon *eating* the orb was considered carrying it without a weapon. It was a nasty trick, the fox agreed, and if he were on the other team, he would have been just as confused.

But he wasn't. Instead, he turned to look towards Adrian, who grinned right back at him, carrying the ball with his sword.

The badger's Link was one of Denya's favorites that he's seen. So long as nobody could actively see an object, Adrian could recall that object if he's recently seen it onto his person directly. They had practiced this trick several times during practice, but alas, it was a trick that could only be used once. After all, a sharp eye would notice the ball disappearing and reappearing by Adrian, and all it would take to diminish the surprise effect of that Link would be to station another Fighter to shadow the badger for the rest of the Games.

But there was no time for that, now, was there?

With a flick of his wrist, Adrian launched the ball out from his sword, and Denya caught it with his staff. His heart pounded in his chest; there was no one between him and the artifact, save for the pine marten defender. He didn't need to worry about other riders nipping at Xem's heels, or of retaliation after he made his shot.

His only shot.

"Xem, it's time!" Denya rose from his perch, now standing atop the dragon's back. The wind resistance was crazy, but the fox knew with his increased strength, he should be able to fight back against it. Shouting filled the air, and the fox knew he'd

been spotted, but it was far too late now. Nothing mattered but striking the artifact, not even the pine martin and his dragon flying in the way.

One shot... One shot...

The fox stepped his right foot back, both hands at the edge of his staff. His muscles coursed with power to the point he almost felt like trembling, his breathing quick and heavy. No, **THIS** was the reason he became a rider. It wasn't just for the thrill, it was with the opportunity to work with a team! His squad was watching him right now, counting on him: Adrian, Sara, even Zeak, all of their efforts were for this one moment. This wasn't just for them, either; Jace and Versailles were watching from the stands, and truth be told, he *really* wanted to knock the deer's ego down a peg after seeing those scores earlier.

But most of all, this was for Xem, the dragon who believed in him from the very beginning, the literal source of his strength. The one who never gave up on him, for always encouraging the fox to be better than he was, for making the fox believe he *could* be better than he was! What kind of rider would he be if he disappointed his dragon now, after all that Xem had done for him?

No, he'll be strong for Xem. He'll be strong for all of them. He'll be strong for *himself*! Denya. Will. Be. **STRONG!**

Yelling at the top of his lungs, Denya brought his arms back and *swung* with every might of his being.

And then chaos erupted.

What felt like a small explosion burst forth from the edge of Denya's staff, knocking the fox onto his back. He gasped, barely able to maintain a hold on his staff as his shoulders spasmed and shook uncontrollably. He'd experienced Burnout before, but this was far different than the usual soreness and sickness. In previous cases, he felt like he couldn't move; now, he couldn't *stop* moving!

But the game wasn't over yet; what if the ball came right back at him like it'd done before? If he was quick enough, Denya could catch the rebound, maybe even make another attempt at a strike! The other riders should still be catching up to him; he might have time for one more strike!

With a grunt, Denya flung himself forward and forced himself into a seated position, panting heavily. Why... Why were they all just floating there? The fox tilted his head, watching as the other riders hovered with their dragons, making no attempt to come after him or the ball. What was happening? Was the game over? Did he at least hit the artifact?

Panting, the fox twisted his seat, trying to catch a glimpse of the artifact. And he paused, his jaw hanging open.

The pine martin looked *mortified*, the whites of his eyes easily visible even from this distance. Gods, it wasn't even just the martin; his dragon was *squawking* as it desperately attempted to fly away, leaving the artifact completely defenseless.

Or rather, what was left of it.

What had once been an obsidian crystal on the podium was now a pile of broken glass-like shards spilling out onto the ground. Denya couldn't wrap his head around what he was seeing. He'd seen this artifact take all manner of abuse from the balls before, struck with enough force to level an entire building. But at its current state, it looked no stronger than a stained-glass window.

No wonder everyone was so quiet.

The deathly silence was almost too much to bear; Denya was suddenly very much aware that all eyes were either on him, or the destruction he caused. There weren't any cheers for a successful strike, or jeers for a disastrous miss. This was a third option Denya never even considered, one that was far more uncomfortable than

the other two. He glanced up at the crowd, desperate for the familiar face of Jace or Versailles, hoping for some form of comfort to relieve him of this tension.

But as he searched, he wound up locking eyes with the headmaster who looked... terrified? Or furious? The fox swallowed nervously. He did something very wrong.

"You did nothing wrong, Fox!" Xem let out a mighty roar, shattering the silence immediately. *"I wouldn't have picked you if you weren't the strongest!"*

"Th-Thanks, Xem." Denya muttered. Gods, he loved this dragon. Just knowing there was *someone* on his side helped immensely. Clearing his throat, the fox tried raising his voice to something more audible than a timid squeak. "I'm, uh... I'm gonna go get the ball, everyone."

And with that, Xem immediately took off in the direction the ball went, taking Denya away from that disastrous scene.

"You have no reason to feel shame, Fox."

This wasn't the first time Xem tried reassuring Denya, but the fox couldn't bring himself to respond regardless. His eyes were focused on the snowy ground below, searching for the ball he knew would be next to impossible to spot. The ball was a dark gray, after all, not so differently colored from the various snow-covered rocks and boulders that passed them by. Who's to say there hadn't been a strong gust of wind at some point as well, burying the ball completely?

But then again, Denya didn't really expect to find the ball in the first place. He just wanted an excuse to be alone. Thankfully, Xem didn't call him out on that lie.

They had been flying in a straight line for nearly thirty minutes, but Denya could still feel those stares on his back. They weren't looking at him like the hero of the War Games, who defied all odds and brought about a turnaround victory. Gods, Denya would have preferred to have *missed* at this point; the disappointment would have felt terrible, but at least it would have subsided, and surely the others would have understood that the fox was likely to make a mistake under so much pressure. They'd come around eventually.

But they didn't look at him with high regards, or disappointment. There was shock and fear in all of their eyes.

They looked at him just like how his previous friends looked when they spotted the Wyvern and the Amalgamations for the very first time.

"Speak to me." Xem pleaded, and Denya finally forced himself out from his thoughts, looking away from the rolling white landscape and back at the concerned dragon looking back at him.

"I..." Denya sighed, rubbing his shoulders. At least the trembling had finally subsided. "I fell over after I threw the ball. What happened?"

"Nothing unexpected happened, Fox." Xem explained. *"You threw the orb at the object and shattered it, something only a dragon could do."*

"Right..." Denya scratched at his head. "I know I asked you to give me as much power as you can, but... how *much* did you give me?"

"The same amount I gave during your previous attempt. It may have given you a slight boost, but most of that strength was your own."

Denya's eyes widened. "I don't... I don't understand."

“Yes, you do.” Xem assured. *“Your Link has awakened.”*

The fox’s breath caught in his throat. He set his staff down beside him, looking down at his paws, as if expecting them to change. No, they were still his; there was no special glow or mark that came with certain other Links, not even a special feeling. “But I thought you said it could take months or years for it to manifest.”

“I did, and we are still within that timeframe. This is only a partial awakening, unlike that of your peers, who can access their full powers immediately after their awakening. Your Link is still underdeveloped, and will require extensive training to properly develop, much like the weakened limb analogy I gave you previously.”

“Underdeveloped?!” Denya rose in his seat, now standing atop Xem. “Everyone looked at me like I was a *monster*! Like I’d just *slain* someone! This isn’t just enhanced strength, Xem. *What did I do?!*”

“You demonstrated your Link, Denya.”

The fox paused, taking it all in. It was strange, hearing his name spoken with Xem’s voice instead of being called “Fox.” In fact, he could only recall one other time the dragon had referred to him by his name.

“Xem. What is my Link.”

There it was. Denya knew he found the right question when not even Xem could answer it right away. He could feel the dragon’s apprehension through their connection, and now he knew Xem was hiding something from him. Well, now Xem knew that Denya knew.

“Fox.” Xem started. *“Your Link isn’t strength, but rather, strength is a byproduct of your Link. The truth is, you’re-“*

But Xem stopped, and Denya swore he heard a gasp from the dragon. He'd never felt such a strong sense of shock from the dragon; he knew they were in trouble before he even heard that voice, that familiar, wicked voice.

"Hello, Denny."

Denya whirled back, startled to find none other than Zeak standing on his dragon.

The fox's jaw lowered, unable to even process a proper thought. Zeak was here; not back at the War Games field, but *here*, thirty minutes of riding out, standing on *his* dragon! Denya couldn't even make out a sign of the lion's own dragon, not even a glint of green from the emerald beast.

"What..." Denya swallowed. "What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like?" Zeak laughed, bouncing his blade off his powerful shoulders. "I'm here to kill your dragon."

Chapter 9

This had to be some sick joke. Some terrible, horrible prank someone was pulling on him. A prank that involved the *entire* school, as well as his own dragon somehow, who hated lies more than anything.

"If only it were that simple." Xem spoke quickly in Denya's head, and that's how he knew the situation was urgent. *"I've only just now felt the presence of the maned one's dragon, but he's far. Five minutes away, maybe more, and maintaining distance."*

But Denya couldn't even focus on the dragon's words. He was too busy staring at the large broadsword Zeak shouldered, the lion having clipped off one of the wrappings, and letting the white pieces of fabric fly off into the wind. The fox's stomach dropped into his feet; that wasn't a training sword.

No, it was a real weapon, the black steel etched with glowing purple runes. Denya's rune-making skills may be just as terrible as his ability to retain anything from History class, but there were markings on that blade that even Denya could recognize at a glance.

Zeak's sword was imbued with dragon-slaying magic. One good swing could lop off even Xem's head with ease.

"Like the blade?" The lion smiled cruelly, holding it out for Denya to see. "It's not often I get to use it. We're not all privileged to use our actual weapons in sparring like you, *Denny*. Oh, but I assure you, this is the real thing. Tyr was *terrified* when I held this to his mouth; he only went along with it for the sake of revenge."

"W-What?" This was becoming a little too much for the poor fox, who was still processing earlier events. "Revenge? Zeak, we're on the same team—"

“We’re not on *any* team!” Zeak roared, stepping forward. “This isn’t about War Games, you stupid fox! You and your dragon have both humiliated me for the last *fucking* time! I was hoping to slice open his side during the games when everyone was distracted, so *everyone* could watch and laugh as he bled out on the grass, but I have no problem going with the *direct approach!*”

With that, the lion lifted his blade up, before shoving the edge directly into Xem’s back.

“*No!*” Denya shrieked as Xem let out a roar of pain, bile building up in the back of his throat. Terror and anguish gripped him like a vice as he watched a third of the blade disappear into his dragon’s scales, blood pooling out from around the edge. “*Xem, shake him off you! Don’t worry about me!*”

“*Nor should you worry about me!*” Xem growled in Denya’s head. “*I’m fine! A little prick is hardly enough to bring me down. I’m altering our course to return us to the school, but you’ll need to buy us time. I’m trusting you, Fox!*”

Denya shuddered, unable to tear his eyes off the sword impaled into his dragon. No, Xem was right. Shaking off Zeak would be the wrong call. The lion’s paws were still on his sword; if they moved too suddenly, Zeak could rip out a large chunk of Xem. The dragon wouldn’t be able to survive the flight back, at least not when Zeak’s dragon was hovering a few minutes away, ready to strike a finishing blow.

The ball was in Zeak’s grasp now, and Denya was no Defender. They had to play by the lion’s rules now if they were going to survive this.

“Zeak, please!” The fox pleaded, finally tearing himself from the sight. “Don’t do this. I’m *begging* you!”

“Oh yeah?!” Zeak growled, that grin growing more sinister by the minute. “You weren’t exactly *begging* when your dragon’s jaws were around Tyr’s *neck!* Here, why don’t I share with you how I felt then.”

The lion yelled, and he sunk the sword an extra inch deeper into Xem's back. The dragon shuddered violently, and Denya felt like he was going to be sick. "*I'm fine!*" Xem cried out, but the pain in his voice sent Denya over the edge.

He saw red. Not the ruby red scales of Xem, or the darker red blood pooling around them, but a third shade that set every fur on Denya's body raised. Without looking, he summoned his staff into his palm, gripping it so tightly he felt it might break beneath him. "Get your sword out of his back." Denya snarled, his body trembling with barely suppressed rage. "Before I tear you in half!"

Zeak let out a sharp cackle, before slowly sliding the sword out from the dragon's back, crimson coating the black metal. "Fine. I don't care if you want to die first. If you want to run into my blade instead, so be it. I'll just be known as the hero who slayed the Demon Fox when I return."

"*Cease, fox! I can withstand his attacks! He's baiting you into a trap!*" Xem cried out, but Denya ignored his dragon. Nothing else mattered right now, not the chance that this was indeed a trap, or even what the nickname "Demon Fox" implied. War Games didn't matter, nor did the fearful looks he received afterwards.

That was Xem's blood on Zeak's sword, and Denya wanted to wail on the lion until it was *his* blood on the end of the fox's staff!

Denya leapt forward, leaping into the air before slamming his weapon into Zeak's raised blade. The fox may be suffering through Burnout, but this wasn't the same fight against the Amalgamation at Bernant, struggling against an impossibly powerful monster. He was fighting a bully, someone who delighted in targeting those who couldn't fight back for one reason and another, and if there was anything Denya was confident in, it was his ability to fight.

He stepped back in time to avoid Zeak's counter, leaning away from the horizontal slice. Just as quickly, Denya rushed in, raising his staff to feint with an overhead strike. The lion quickly brought his blade up to protect himself, letting the fox

transition to a quick jab to Zeak's ribs. The lion gasped in pain, and when Zeak's arms lowered to instinctively cover his chest, Denya raised his staff high, ready to *slam* it into his foe's head.

But he missed entirely, swinging at the empty air where Zeak had stood mere seconds, *milliseconds* ago.

Denya gasped; the force of his swing almost enough to send him off balance. How was that possible? Zeak was strong, sure, but he was certainly not fast. Especially not fast enough to dodge faster than Denya could see-

"Behind you, fox!"

Denya didn't think, instead acting purely based on the command, whirling around and bringing his staff up to defend. He felt the broadsword slam into his staff before even he saw it, or Zeak's sneer for the matter, the vulpine stumbling back as the impact rattled his bones.

"You..." Denya panted softly. "You can teleport!" Suddenly it made sense how Zeak appeared on Xem's back, even with his dragon flying so far away. No wonder he got onto the War Games team as well. The fox really, *really* wished he'd been paying more attention to what everyone's Links had been. All this time he assumed Zeak had a similar strength-boosting Link as his, only it could handle more sustained use instead of a quick explosive flash like Denya's.

Why couldn't Denya ever have a correct assumption?

"Very good, Denny!" Zeak jerked his head to the side, cracking his neck. "I was hoping to kill you or your dragon before you found out, not that it matters. You're dealing with Burnout and I still have *plenty* more in me."

"If you think I need a special power to kick your hairy ass, you're sorely mistaken." Denya crouched, preparing himself. "I didn't even need my staff to lay you out last time."

That struck a nerve, and that condescending grin on Zeak's face quickly turned into a hateful scowl. Good, he wanted the lion to feel the same rage he was feeling. And to think, he'd actually tried *apologizing* to this monster in the past.

With another cry, Zeak ran at Denya, both arms raised. The fool. Obviously, the fox couldn't catch him off guard with a sudden kick to the chin, but he could easily side-step that swing and counterattack with-

Denya's eyes widened. No, he *can't* dodge! If he did, that blade will hit Xem's back!

At the last minute, Denya raised his staff to deflect the attack, although the force of it was enough to stagger the fox's balance, his shoulders crying out in pain. He could barely even look up in time to see the elbow swinging right at his face, sending him falling back. The fox quickly leapt back up, wiping his cheek and feeling blood stain the back of his hand. Yeah, his skin tore from that one.

"I think it's *very* apparent this fight is going differently than that time." Zeak laughed again. "I didn't even use my Link and you're on your knees, bleeding like your dragon. Where's that cocky, shit-eating grin of yours, Denny?"

"Just wait a bit." Denya stood back up. "You'll see it soon enough when I break your nose again."

And with that, the fox reengaged with the tiger, striking back with a series of strikes. It was frightening how much Zeak had improved since their last bout, Denya realizing with dread that his own combat skills had stagnated. He'd been so focused practicing on Link training, Magnetism, and even studying for his exams, the fox had grown somewhat complacent with trying to improve his fighting. His spars with Versailles had been simply running down the basics; he'd believed they'd been for the

deer's sake, so the fox focused on improving his friend's swordplay, rather than his own strategy. What kept him in the fight right now were the few bouts of sparring he had with Adrian, the only practice he had battling on dragon back.

But Denya would be *damned* if he let Zeak get the better of him. It didn't matter if the lion's skills had improved; he still had the same brutish mindset that Denya could exploit.

The rules of combat never changed. Get into his opponent's head, figure out their next move before they do, and throw them off their internal rhythm. Zeak moved faster, his strikes more predetermined, but his pattern of attacking was still just as predictable as ever. Even knowing he can't dodge those vertical slashes without damaging Xem, Denya knew where to sidestep, where to dodge, where to deflect. He knew where to slash at Zeak's sword to force him off balance, where to jab to lower the lion's defenses, and where to strike right after.

But he didn't know how to handle that god-damned teleporting!

With every good jab, with every opportunity to strike hard at the lion, Denya would only swing at empty air instead. The second Zeak was in a disadvantaged state, he would simply disappear, turning the tides of battle back into his favor. Sometimes he'd reappear further away to catch his breath, othertimes the lion would immediately strike at Denya's exposed back; either way, the fox's guard was constantly up, and it was absolutely draining.

Denya could never get in total control of the fight, at least not for long. He knew his jabs were hurting, but he couldn't land a definite blow yet. Meanwhile, Zeak all but needed a single slash, a mighty swipe of his blade, and Denya would lose a limb.

"Come on, Denny. You can't be tired already. We've just gotten started!" Zeak cackled again, swinging his blade from the bottom left corner, forcing the fox to leap to the right.

The stress was getting to him, not to mention having to deflect those overhead swings. Zeak didn't even need to land a clean hit on him. The lion was wearing him down bit by bit, toying with his prey. Denya wasn't going to last the flight back to the school; eventually his guard will be lowered, and that will be that.

Sorry, Xem, but Denya was going to have to be reckless a second time.

"Do NOT die on me, fox!" Xem warned, but the rider ignored his dragon. He held his arms out as Zeak swung out yet again, letting the sword hit his staff.

Time slowed to a crawl as Denya's weapon flew out of his hand, the fox focused purely on every move he made, no matter how subtle. He reached out, as if desperately trying to recapture his staff, letting Zeak believe he'd disarmed his opponent.

The perfect feint.

With the same momentum, Denya struck his leg let out, roundhouse kicking the lion in the jaw. Zeak let out a pained gasp, but the fox knew that wouldn't be enough. He needed to move fast, before the lion caught on he wasn't in control anymore.

A flick of his wrist, and Denya's staff came flying right back into his hand, just in time for the fox to complete his pivot, rotating fully to slam the weapon fully into Zeak's snout.

The lion let out a shriek of pain as he flung himself back, stumbling off the flying dragon. Denya wanted that to be it, for Zeak to have been so stunned from the blow, he couldn't continue the fight and landed in the snowy depths below.

But the fox's luck was notoriously terrible.

Denya turned around in time to see Zeak reappear on the dragon, gasping and holding his nose. “You little *shit!*” He cried out nasally, blood spurting from his nostrils.

The fox allowed himself to grin, holding out his staff and noting the splatters of red at the tip. “You gotta stop looking at my staff, mate. It’s how you lost last time. You should be more afraid of *me*, not the stick.”

“You’re wrong.” Zeak let out a chuckle, and Denya felt fear grip his heart. “You should be afraid of me!”

The lion raised his sword above his head, and Denya began running towards him before he even realized what was happening. Zeak was going to bring his blade down upon Xem, and a slash with that much momentum would make his previous stab look like a pinprick in comparison!

“*Leave me, Fox!*” Xem begged, but Denya ran regardless. Time slowed down again as the fox struggled, fought to devise a plan, but there wasn’t any. The sword was coming down, and he couldn’t get there in time to deflect the blade or attack Zeak. He had no choice but to dive for it, twisting himself midair to land on his back, raising his staff-

CLANG!!

Denya *screamed* in pain. He’d only *barely* managed to bring his staff up in time to block the strike, the sword stopping inches from the fox’s face. Yet his shoulders cried out at sustaining such a tremendous blow. Worse, the fox could feel the tip of the broadsword embedding itself into his thigh, a warm trickle flowing out from the wound, coating his fur.

The sword raised, and Denya caught sight of the lion looming over him, before the bottom of Zeak’s boot rushed down, filling his vision. A deafening crack, and Denya didn’t need to feel the agonizing throbbing or the blood flowing into his mouth to know his nose had just broken as well.

“An eye for an eye, a nose for a nose.” Zeak teased, and Denya fought through the blurriness settling in, weariness tugging at his consciousness, to watch the lion circle around him, smiling at him, licking his bloodied chops. “Tell me again who I should be afraid of?”

“Me.” Denya spat back, literally, the wad of pinkish-red landing on the lion’s leather chest armor.

Zeak sighed and shook his head. “Disappointing. I was hoping your last words would be funnier.” Then, taking his broadsword, he swung it overhead once more, slamming it down on the fox.

Denya gasped and brought his arms out, blocking the next attack yet again. Thankfully, the tip didn’t pierce him, now that Zeak was standing right before him, but that meant all that force was transferred directly into the shoulders again, the fox yelping in pain.

Zeak’s smile grew crueler, and he lifted his blade to attack again. And again. “C’mon, Denny. Make another joke! Give us something to remember you by before you go to your ancestors!”

But it was all Denya could do to even breathe at this point. *Wham! Wham!* He was at his breaking point, and with each strike, the fox’s grip grew weaker. The staff may be indestructible, but his shoulders certainly weren’t! His back dug heavily into Xem’s scales, the fox feeling paralyzing aches break out across his entire body. Zeak could end this all in an instant, and he was *delighting* in the pain he was causing!

“Please, Denya, leave me!” Xem begged in his ear, the dragon never sounding more vulnerable. *“Roll off me, now! We’re low enough that you’ll survive a drop in the snow. I’ll handle the wretched one on my own. Just don’t die!”*

A loud popping sound mixed with the various clangs; Denya's shoulders were dislocating. The fox shrieked and shuddered, his arms finally falling limply to his chest. He couldn't do it anymore. One more strike like that, and his arms would snap right out of their sockets.

But he couldn't leave Xem, either. He couldn't be weak! He'd been weak once before, and that had caused the deaths of many of his friends at *Bernant*. He refused to watch his weakness get more of the ones close to him killed. It was selfish and stupid of him, yes, but he'd rather Xem live to hate the fox for the rest of his life!

"Don't worry, Xem." Denya gasped, his chest heaving in and out. "I've got him, hrrrf, right where I want him."

Zeak let out another savage cackle, staring down at the staff hanging loosely in Denya's limp arms. "There we go. There's the joke I've been waiting for." The lion stepped closer, raising his sword high with the tip pointing down, ready to thrust and skewer it straight through Denya and into Xem.

Right where the fox wanted him.

Denya swiftly raised his leg and kicked into Zeak's knee. Hard. A piercing *crack*, and suddenly it was the lion screaming out in pain, lowering an arm to clutch at it. The fox tucked his legs in and rolled himself up; he only had one chance at this. Ignoring the agony, Denya wrapped his arms around Zeak's legs.

And the world around them vanished.

Everything around him was a blur of colors, noises, *sensations!* It was far more disorienting than when the fox first fell off Xem, tumbling blindly in the air instead of learning how to level out. He was everywhere and nowhere all at once, speeding off at breakneck speeds yet somehow stuck firmly in place. Gods, was this how Zeak felt every time he used his Link? The only feeling he knew was real was the pain coursing

throughout his body as he gripped firmly onto Zeak. He wasn't going to let the lion go, to distance himself and recover from that attack. He was going to *finish* him!

A sudden impact at his side, however, caused Denya to gasp, his grip weakening. He fell onto the scaly surface below, grunting as he rolled onto his knees. They had stopped teleporting, but something was off, and it wasn't just the fox's sense of balance. No, they were elsewhere; the scales he stood on were green.

They were standing on Zeak's dragon.

"I've. Fucking. HAD IT!" Denya looked up in time to see Zeak swing his sword blindly, the fox rolling back just before the blade could hit. He shifted back onto his feet, wincing as he looked up at the lion. Zeak's face was red, and not just from the blood spilling from his nose, his left leg wobbling unsteadily. "Just stay down and die, damn you!"

Denya knew he didn't look much better. He was constantly spitting blood from his mouth, the staff in his hand feeling as though it were made of lead. Moving his arms in any amount was excruciating, but the fox raised his staff regardless, purely to spite the lion.

"What did I say about staring at my staff?" Denya grinned, pointing said staff at Zeak mockingly. "That's the third time you've let me kick you because you thought I was disarmed."

That furious face was absolutely worth the possibility that he was about to die.

"You will NOT die! That's an order!" Xem screamed in the fox's head. *"Four minutes. Last for four minutes, and I will personally feast on their entrails!"* Gross.

Really, Denya was living on borrowed time. At any point, Zeak's dragon could shunt him off, flick him towards a rock or tree and let the impact do the work. This was

the lion's territory, not his... Heh, Xem must really be stressed if he's not bothering to scold Denya for calling the back of his back his territory.

In any case, Zeak was likely speaking to his dragon right this moment, demanding to fight him one last time on their back, no doubt wanting to see the light of life leave the fox's eyes himself. Not like Denya could blame him; he felt the same way. How anyone this cruel, this monstrous, could exist in this world was horrifying. It didn't matter what stares the fox received at the War Games. Zeke was the real monster.

The lion limped towards him, his sword glinting in the sunlight. Those broad shoulders were shaking, a telltale sign of Burnout. Denya didn't need to engage directly, just dodge around until Xem arrived.

But this matter was personal. That wasn't just Xem's blood on Zeak's sword anymore.

Denya stepped forward, and the two continued their fight once more. As long as Denya ignored the pain of his stab wound, he could stay light on his feet, the more mobile of the two. He could keep dodging those slashes, probing at weaknesses, keep the lion on the backfoot.

But the fox couldn't attack. His arms were next to useless; it was all he could to raise his staff in a battle pose, in hope the lion *still* hadn't learned his lesson and continued staring at the weapon, rather than at himself. Maybe he *shouldn't* have teased Zeak so much.

But Zeak had to be careful with his slashes; Denya had no need to block them, as the lion would only be injuring his dragon instead. The fox could lean in, land a kick at Zeak's side, jump back.

And that was *it!* A sudden upward slash from Zeak, and Denya's staff flew out of his hands. The fox couldn't even bother retrieving it with his magic, he didn't have time. He had to put Zeak *down!* He ran in, lowering his head, and *jumped*, feeling the top of

his head slam into the bottom of Zeak's chin. Fuck, it hurt! Everything hurt, but that was everything he had!

But Zeak. Just wouldn't. Go down!

A roar of pain, and Denya looked up in time to see the back of the lion's hand slam into his face, right above his right eye. The world went blurry, and the fox couldn't keep himself upright. He fell on his side, then fell some more, sliding off the side of Zeak's dragon. No, it couldn't end like this!

With everything he had, every ounce of magic remaining within the battered fox's body, he channeled it all into his hands, into the Magnetism ability he struggled so hard to learn. Somehow, the spell worked, and Denya was able to hang off the side of Zeak's dragon, for better or worse.

The fox *screamed, shrieked* even, as his broken arms were forced to carry the entirety of his bodyweight. He wanted to let go so badly, to fall into the forest below and let the pain end, but even as tears filled his vision, he held on. Xem told him not to die, dammit, and he won't! He will bear this pain for the both of them. *He. Will. Be. Strong!*

Zeak took an agonizingly long time in limping over towards him, the lion moving at a snail's pace. Fighting back the black filling his vision, Denya found some satisfaction in knowing he was the one who did that to Zeak. The lion had every advantage in this fight, from his teleporting Link to even holding Xem hostage, yet the feline was clearly on his last legs. Limping, with a bloodied and scarred face, his blade dragging across the back of his own dragon.

His dragon. Denya shifted his gaze slightly, just now noticing the green drake had turned his head towards him while flying. That jaw opened, his tongue running along the rows of vicious sharp fangs, and Denya didn't need to be able to speak to the green dragon to know what was going through his mind. When the dragon was done with him, there wouldn't be a body to bury.

Denya stayed strong. He stared back into the eyes of the other dragon, a cardinal sin amongst riders. He wasn't scared, not of Zeak and certainly not of the dragon's threats. Because past the dragon and his snarling grin, he saw a familiar ruby-red glint in the sky approaching them, filling him with hope.

Xem made it.

The scarlet dragon didn't just attack Zeak's dragon, he *collided* into him with all the force a pissed off *Xem* could manage. The fox was flung from where he held on, the world a blur around him before darkness filled his vision. He just barely noticed a dislodged fang flying by before letting his consciousness leave him.

He was fine. Xem was here. And that green dragon was *fucked*.

The next several days were a very, very hazy blur. Flash of light and hazy images implied Denya *did* maintain consciousness occasionally, but the second he closed his eyes, he would forget anything that transpired. Voices swam in his head as well; his name being prevalent. Sometimes he'd hear them shouting his name, other times whispering delicately. It was becoming rather irritating. Couldn't they just let him sleep a little longer?

No? They're going to just keep talking? Fine, he'll wake up then. Assholes.

The fox peeked an open, before wincing at the blinding light filling his vision. Really? They had him laying in the only bed directly beneath the window *again!*? The fox groaned, and waited until it was tolerable to open his eyes a little more, peaking out.

"Shut up, he's waking!"

Denya blinked away the blurriness of his vision. What a strange sense of Deja-vu. He was back in the infirmary, his arms wrapped in a cast and hanging from a sling around his neck, just like that day all those months ago. Only, his arms were still *throbbing*, his thigh had been heavily bandaged, and a cloth pad had been bandaged around his nose.

But his friends were here as well, so it evened out.

“Guys.” Denya muttered, and the look of relief he saw on everyone’s faces melted the fox’s heart. Versailles, Jace, even Adrian.

“Guys.” Denya repeated softly, before groaning again. “Couldn’t you have picked a different fucking bed for me?”

“Yeah, he’s back this time.” Versailles grinned, giving the side of Denya’s muzzle a playful poke. “Welcome back to the world of the living. Did you have a nice talk with your ancestors?”

“Not a clue. I don’t think my ancestors spoke Common, because I couldn’t understand a word they were saying.” Denya chuckled, shaking his head softly.

Slowly, memories began flowing back into him. Of the War Games, of shattering the artifact, of his battle with Zeak, of hanging off the green dragon before blacking out. The fox felt his smile drop. “What happened?”

Versailles’ smile faded as well. “We were hoping you could tell us. About half an hour after you left, Zin started telling me Xem was frantically calling out for help. She said she’d never heard him sound so panicked before. I was about to mount up and help, but our instructors insisted we stay behind and let them handle it, but...”

“But...?” Denya egged on, noting the deer’s crestfallen face.

“But before they even left, Xem came *crashing* through into the field, absolutely *covered* in blood.” Adrian continued, his striped face looking pale just recalling the memory. “He was absolutely frantic, carrying you in his claws. I came running to help, but he nearly bit my damn head off! I know it’s taboo to speak to another rider’s dragon, but I begged him to let you go, and promised I’d take you straight to the mender. And... yeah, here we are, two days later.”

“So you’re the reason the sun’s in my eyes.” Again, Denya’s opinion of Adrian constantly swayed between admiration and contempt. The fox chuckled at the look on the badger’s face, offering a smile. “Thank you for braving Xem’s wrath.”

Xem! Denya’s eyes widened, and he found himself trying to sit up, wincing at the pain. Immediately, he heard his friends plead for him to stay, a set of paws gently pushing down on his chest, but the fox struggled regardless. “G-Guys, please! I-I need to see Xem!”

“He’s ok! He’s recovering just fine!” Jace pleaded. “But you still need to rest. Dr. Benson took nearly a full day mending you. She said it’s a miracle you can still move your arms.”

Denya whimpered. He knew Xem was fine; the sturdy dragon could take a couple of pokes from a sword no problem. But he needed to know if Xem was *okay*. The fox had been too focused on the fight to notice, but looking back, he felt nothing but *anguish* from Xem through their connection. He wanted to run to his dragon, to be the one to comfort him for once, to tell him everything will be ok.

But maybe he wouldn’t be the most reassuring as he was now, wrapped in braces and covered in bandages. What had Xem said to him the last time this had occurred? “*You look terrible.*”

Denya frowned, but he allowed himself to be lowered back in his bed. It’s a damn shame the Mending process interrupted his connection; he wanted nothing more than to reach out to his dragon. “You’re right. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Versailles sighed. “But if you don’t mind, we’d... we’d really like to know what happened, while it’s just the four of us.”

Denya nodded, before doing just that. In any other situation, he would have loved to embellish the details, to make the fight seem like a landslide victory for him, even if it hadn’t. The fox put up as much of a fight as he could, but Zeak controlled the battle nearly the entire time. It was all he could do to fight back, to survive, until Xem saved him.

“Where is Zeak, by the way?” Denya finished, glancing around. He didn’t see another hospital bed set aside for the lion, not that he ever wanted to see him ever again.

“We... We don’t know.” Jace admitted. “No one does. Zeak had told us he was leaving to bring you back. When Xem returned panicked and covered in blood, we’d assumed you were attacked by... I don’t know, *something!* I... guess we know whose blood Xem was covered in, now.”

Denya couldn’t help but to snort at that. It seems his friends were just as bad at assumptions as he was. “So Zeak is dead?”

“Like I said, we don’t know. They’re patrolling the area where you flew off, but outside of some bloodied patches in the snow, there hasn’t been any sign of either him, or his dragon. Wild animals could have gotten to them first, or their bodies are buried in the snow. Even if Zeak survived, he can’t last long in the snow without his dragon.”

The fox sighed, looking down at himself. During the battle, he’d wanted so desperately to just *end* the lion; knowing he’d condemned his enemy to a slow and lonely death did not sit well with him. This fight only ended the way it did because he’d slacked off on his weapons training; a more skilled combatant would have swiftly defeated Zeak and brought him back for interrogation. Even if Zeak’s dragon was still hostile, well... clearly he was no match for Xem.

“Sorry.” The raccoon whined. “I didn’t mean to get so grim.”

“It’s fine.” Denya looked back, smiling sadly. “Zeak brought this on himself, I guess. I just wish I knew what he’d been thinking. It’s one thing if he planned on leaving our bodies behind and claiming we’d been attacked, like you guys thought, but Zeak said he’d be called a hero when he brought my corpse back. He called me a demon fox.”

The fox’s ears wilted as he noticed his friends exchange uncomfortable looks, with no one willing to look him in the eye. Oh no.

“Denya.” Versailles spoke slowly. “Do you remember breaking the artifact at War Games?”

“Yeah.” Denya grimaced. “And I remember the look everyone gave me, like I shat myself in public or something.”

The deer raised his brow. “Well, the good news is, your britches were relatively clean, outside of the bloodied gash on your leg. The bad...” They lowered their head again, shaking it. “When you broke the artifact, it looked like you... changed.”

“Changed?” The fox frowned. “Changed into what?”

“Into... something.” Versailles continued. “You look like you’d sprouted wings, like a dragon’s.”

The fox’s blood ran cold. He recalled seeing his reflection when he’d Linked during War Games tryouts, how he swore he saw a pair of dragon-like wings on his back. But he’d been so certain that was just his mind playing tricks on him, a side effect of manually Linking with Xem. Even now, the fox tried looking over his broken shoulders

to look for any signs of these wings. He would *know* if he suddenly sprouted an extra pair of limbs, right?!

"They're not- there's no wings on you, Denya." Versailles shook their head. "That's just... that's what it looked like at the moment."

"But it was just an illusion!" Adrian suddenly piqued up, giving the fox a friendly grin. "Headmaster said so himself. Apparently, when you shattered the artifact, it released a *lot* of stored magical energy in the air. Everyone saw the same illusion of you growing a set of dragon wings. Gods, I thought I was closest to you, and I thought I saw a dragon *tail* on you! I really wished you hadn't left when you did, Den, and not just because of...well, Zeak trying to kill you. After the Headmaster explained the situation, the crowd went *wild* and began cheering for you: The first year strong enough to *break* an artifact!" The badger beamed, giving Denya's good leg a firm squeeze. "And you wanted to be a Fighter. Hah! You're staying a Striker forever if I've got anything to say about it!"

The badger laughed, and Denya tried to join as well, but he couldn't bring himself to it. He saw the looks Versailles and Jace were giving him; the stern, lightless worry in their eyes. They didn't believe it to be an illusion for a second.

And neither did Denya.

"What are you all laughing at?" Denya turned his head towards the new voice, watching as Eperin's stunned face appeared from the doorway. "He's *awake*? You little shits were supposed to tell me! Get out of here, go make yourselves useful and bring Dr. Benson or something!"

Ah, a shame his friends couldn't stay any longer. He could really use the company. But alas, Adrian gave a grin and a thumbs up, Versailles a firm nod, and Jace a friendly wave. "See ya, Denya. We'll leave you alone with your boyfriend, now."

"Eperin's not my-!" Denya groaned, rolling his eyes. "You're lucky my arms are broken, ringtail, or I'd be strangling you!" Nevermind, his friends can leave.

It took four days before Denya was finally cleared to leave his bed. Four very long, boring, painful days, full of Mending procedures that left the fox feeling drained and sluggish. Yes, the Mending process cut back on months of recovery, and would ensure the fox's bones would return to their previous state without further complications, but the process left him constantly exhausted. Mending drew on the power that sustained his connection with his dragon, and thus only a luxury that dragon riders were allowed. But being away from Xem for so long, not hearing that growling, rumbling voice demanding he quit procrastinating and study, or to remind him to eat dinner, left him feeling hollow and empty inside. Maybe it was worth foregoing Mending and dealing with the months of recovery, just to talk to Xem a little sooner.

He wasn't alone too often in the infirmary. Jace and Versailles visited often, bringing them textbooks and other reading assignments. The three of them were Second Years now, and classwork waited on no one, not even broken foxes. Denya tried his best to study along with his friends, seeing as how he didn't exactly have much to do other than read or sleep, but the mending process had left him so drowsy, it was impossible to retain anything. On more than one occasion, the fox had fallen asleep in the middle of a study session, his textbook plopped half open against his nose.

Adrian visited as well on occasion, as did other members of the War Games team, such as Sara. Their conversations went mostly the same, about how amazed they were when Denya shattered the artifact, the shock and even fear at seeing the fox adorned with a set of wings and a spiky tail, along with the relief that it had all been an illusion. It was rough, having to follow along with this lie being perpetrated, but Denya knew his teammates were only trying to comfort him. Just seeing so many faces genuinely concerned about him, visiting him in the infirmary, was more than the fox could ever ask for. It was a far greater improvement to his first few trips there, when it had only been Eperin to look after him.

The four days came and went, and soon Denya was deemed well enough to leave. Doctor Benson insisted the fox continue to wear his slings until he was "fully" recovered. His bones may have mended and his shoulders reattached, but the damage sustained couldn't be simply mended away. It would take at least a week of physical

therapy before the fox could even raise his arms above his head, and even longer before he was in well enough shape to resume his battle classes.

The news should have terrified Denya, but the fox let out a shrug, at least as much of a shrug as he could manage. So he started his second year on the back foot. At least this time, he had a big enough support group to help work him back into shape once he'd recovered. Yes, he should be wearing his slings, and if Xem were in his head right now, the dragon would be insisting he do so as well.

But the first thing he wanted to do after leaving his bed was go to see his dragon, and everyone knows dragons hate seeing weakness in their riders.

Denya had expected to see his dragon nestled at the edge of the Sanctuary, as usual. However, he was surprised to see the ruby red drake laying directly behind the gate, almost blocking it with his body. Hopefully Xem hadn't spent too long laying there; he couldn't imagine how much he'd terrify any rider hoping to visit their dragon.

The fox stepped closer, feeling their foggy connection suddenly grow stable once again, strong enough for him to feel Xem within his head even through the Mending's muddling. The second he did, he noticed Xem's eyes shoot open, the dragon quickly rising from his perch to look down at his rider, his yellow eyes narrowed.

"Fox."

"Dragon." Denya nodded.

"Don't call me that." Xem snorted, before turning away. *"Walk with me."*

Denya followed along, sighing in relief as he stepped into Sanctuary. Like the training field during War Games, the dragons' resting place was also surrounded in a set of wards meant to keep out the chill and snow, the grass as verdant and green beneath the fox's feet as if it were summertime. Denya was quite thankful for this, as he'd rushed

over to Sanctuary the moment he was free from the infirmary, and as a result, he was still wearing his casual indoor attire. The fox would have struggled heavily to button up a coat with his damaged arms, and he didn't want to wait to ask for help. "Where are we walking to?" Denya asked, jogging to catch up to his dragon's side.

"To *Trauma-Dump Hill*, as you've deemed it." Ah, so that name did stick after all.

The fox walked beside his dragon silently, taking in the sight. It was a little surreal, walking through lush grass and feeling the warm sun grace his body for the first time in nearly a week, while seeing piles of snow as high as his waist line up around the edges of Sanctuary. It was a surreal sensation; the fox felt warm and comfortable as though it were Spring, yet the surrounding snow muffled nearly all outside noise. The silence was deafening, and all Denya could hear was the sound of Xem's mighty breaths, the slight rumble of Xem's mighty footprints.

One day, he wanted to go for a real walk, just him and Xem. And not riding on the dragon, either, just the two of them, side by side, like they are now.

Only, Denya would prefer if there was at least a *little* interaction between the two. The silence was calming, but the fox couldn't help but feel a little antsy. "Are you going to say anything, or-"

"No."

Okaaaaay. "Can I ask why?"

"*Because there are not enough words in your primitive language's lexicon to properly express the sheer and utter rage I feel towards you right now.*" Xem responded curtly, a puff of smoke shooting from his nostrils.

"What?!" Denya frowned. "What did I do-"

Xem was a blur. Before Denya could even react, the dragon was before him, head and body to the ground, and *in Denya's face*. The fox nearly choked on his own saliva, the speed and ferocity in which his dragon moved. More than that, he could smell the Sulphur from Xem's breath; never a good sign.

"You repeatedly ignored my demands that you escape from the wretched one's grasp, and even allowed yourself to be teleported onto HIS dragon, who, I might add, had every opportunity to snuff your life like a flame in an INSTANT, and likely would have had his rider not insisted on being the one to finish you. I can forgive the stunt you pulled at War Games, seeing as I was close enough to catch you, but what you've done is unforgivable. Your recklessness! CEASES! NOW!"

Xem audibly inhaled during each of those punctuated words, as if the dragon were actually speaking them outloud. And given the booming force of that voice in Denya's head, he may as well be. The fox had never seen his dragon in such a state before, or felt such anger and frustration radiating out from the giant reptile.

Put frankly, it was terrifying. Denya felt his knees buckle and sway. On any other day, after any other circumstance, he absolutely would beg for forgiveness, or even run for that matter. This was the same dragon who tore apart Zeak's dragon; it would not take much to do the same to the fox right now.

Alas, Denya had been through too much, seen and felt too much, to accept his body's natural urge to back down. He grit his teeth, clenched his fists, and stared right back into those narrowed golden eyes. "That's not fair at all! Are you saying I should have let Zeak just wail on you with his sword?"

"Yes!" Xem roared, his claws clenching the grass and tearing up the earth. *"It is my responsibility as your dragon to take the blows meant for you. We recover from injuries far quicker than your feeble bodies can."*

There was truth in that. Despite their standoff, Denya took a peek around the dragon's lowered head, gazing along the back. The stab wound was still visible, but the

flesh had scarred over and covered; the fox noticed new crimson scales starting to grow along it as well.

“That’s true.” Denya grumbled. “But you’re not *my* dragon. I’m *your* rider, or something along those lines, right?”

The fox felt no small amount of satisfaction in seeing those golden eyes widen slightly, before narrowing yet again, the black, slitted pupils focusing right back to him. *“Regardless of semantics, your actions were deplorable. Zander died on my back twenty years ago, and you nearly followed in his wake. I was forced to relive that horrid, deplorable day, because my rider chose to be selfish!”*

“Selfish?!” Was this really happening right now? Denya gritted his teeth, feeling his heartbeat rising. “I agree what happened twenty years ago was a travesty, and that no dragon should have had to go through what you did, but if you think I’m going to sit on my ass and watch Zeak hack and slash at my dragon’s back because of an event that happened while I was in diapers, you are *sorely* mistaken!”

“I am not your dragon. You are MY rider.”

“Regardless of semantics!” Gods, this really *was* happening. “I didn’t work my tail off passing my first year of war college just to watch you get torn to ribbons. If I can fight, I’m going to fucking fight.”

“Even if it means not fulfilling your role?” Xem snarled. *“You fell into your role at War Games for the striped one, yet you won’t extend to me the same courtesy.”*

“Because it’s a stupid *game*, you dumb lizard!”

“Mind your tongue, fox! Need I remind you that you almost lost your life over this ‘stupid game?’”

"I knew you'd catch me. Dammit, Xem, I even promised you I'd make you some stew!"

"I still want my stew!"

And that was it. That was the moment both fox and dragon came to a mutual understanding their passionate argument, fueled with trauma and anger, had devolved into petty squabbling.

Never, in all of his life, had Denya expected to hear a near-200 year old dragon scream "I still want my stew" in his head like some spoiled, whiny child. Fuck, Xem wasn't even young for dragon standards!

"You make me this way." Xem snorted, spewing smoke into Denya's face.

The fox coughed and shook away the gas, looking back at his dragon. Talk about childish. At least that screaming fest finally ended, and now they had a better understanding of one another. Kind of.

"Look." Denya sighed, holding out his arms. "It was never my intention to scare you, or to throw my life in peril... multiple times. I know if I'd stayed calm, we could have figured out a better plan. But seeing him stab you like that, seeing him *smile* while doing so..." The fox shook his head, clearing the tears before they could come. "Xem, what would you have done in my shoes."

"I don't wear shoes."

"Don't be a smartass, please."

Xem grunted, before looking away. Slowly, he responded. *"Anyone who lays a finger on you dies by my hand."*

"Yeah, that's exactly how I felt." Denya felt the familiar rage bubble up inside him. It wasn't just Zeak's blood he wanted on his staff. He wanted Zeak's *teeth*. "I guess what I'm trying to say is: I'm not just throwing my life away, here. But I'll happily fight anyone who threatens you. I'd *die* for you, dammit!"

"A pointless gesture." Xem grumbled. *"Anywhere you go, I follow, and that includes the afterlife."*

The fox smiled. "Then let's agree not to die quite yet. I want to at least live to see my graduation."

"And I want to be there to witness it." Xem chuffed, and Denya felt a sense of relief was over him. Finally, that tension was gone; his shoulders were starting to ache more than usual. That fight had been brutal, but the fox was relieved to see his dragon was coming out of it just fine-

"However." Xem raised his head. *"My rider has committed the grave sin of upsetting his dragon, and for that he must be punished."*

Oh, Gods dammit.

"Fine." Denya sighed. "I'll make your stew."

"The stew must wait. You've committed far more heinous acts since the War Games, and they must all be accounted for."

The fox frowned. "Xem, I don't know how to make anything else."

"Food is not how you will atone for your crimes." Xem's tone was unusually light, the dragon swaying his head from side to side. Was he... teasing Denya?

The fox furrowed his brows. Xem was clearly waiting for him to continue. "I don't... Alright, how do I make it up to you?"

"How indeed, how indeed..." Xem stood up from where he laid, turning to face away from the fox while still swaying his head. Was this supposed to be some strange draconic gesture that was being lost in translation? Seeing Xem act so playful was almost a little unsettling.

Finally, Xem casted a glance in Denya's direction. *"Tell me, fox: you have no further plans for the evening, correct?"*

"Y-Yeah, that's right." The fox muttered sheepishly. "Nothing until class tomorrow morning. Why?"

"Wonderful." Xem's head suddenly stopped swaying. *"Until then, you belong to me."*

"What-" Denya started, but Xem was *fast!* A flash of red, and Xem was in Denya's face yet again; closer than before, in fact, the dragon's warm breath washing over the fox, their snouts inches apart.

And Denya couldn't even attempt to hide the squeaky yip that escaped his mouth.

His eyes were wide, his heart *thundering* in his chest, breath caught in his throat as he gazed up at those deep, golden eyes. This wasn't the same Xem that was

infuriated with him, that looked ready to burn him into a crisp. This Xem was far, *far* more dangerous!

“H-Hey, c-c’m on, now.” Denya muttered sheepishly, back peddling. But Xem quickly closed the distance, ensuring no more than a couple *inches* separated the two, the dragon’s mouth slightly agape, almost as if he were grinning. “X-Xem... I-I thought I was already your dragon.” Goodness, was Sanctuary *always* this hot?

“*You are.*” Xem grumbled lowly, panting. “*Yet, I often must share you with others. The antlered one, the masked one, the striped one, to name examples. But I’m done sharing. You’re all mine now.*”

O-Oh, shit. Denya was not prepared for today. The fox tried looking away, but the dragon’s long neck allowed him to effortlessly move his head, ensuring that all Denya could see *was* Xem. Xem and his big perfect snout. Xem and his adorable round nostrils. Xem and his brilliant golden eyes. Xem and his wonderful sharp teeth.

Denya swallowed hard. He was not winning this one. “W-what if I run?”

“I’ll chase you down.”

“And if I hide?”

“I have your scent.”

Not. Fucking. Fair.

Xem let out a gentle rumble, followed by a chuff, as if he were chuckling. “*I told you, Fox, that you’re no match in a battle of words. It doesn’t take much to bring you to your knees.*”

"You're a monster." Denya whimpered.

"I'm your monster." Xem purred. *"And I'm never letting you out of my sight."*

And that was all it took. Denya collapsed onto Xem's muzzle, holding him as tight as he could with his battered, broken arms of his. He peppered that perfect scaly snout with kisses, up and down and all around, and would have happily covered the dragon's body in them if he could. *"Promise me."* Denya silently pleaded, not wanting to break his quick little pecks.

"I promise you." Xem rumbled, bringing a claw out to embrace the fox. *"That I will not let anything between us ever again."*

All his feelings for Xem, everything the fox thought he'd wrapped up in a box and tied a neat little bow on, flung open as he fell into the dragon's embrace. Dammit, he *loved* this dragon! He would kill for this dragon! He would *die* for this dragon!

And knowing that Xem not only returned the sentiment, but was willing to keep him close, willing to stay with him for the rest of the evening, throughout the night, and even into the morning, that was enough to squeeze a tear out of Denya.

"You wanted to run." Xem growled, nipping at Denya's ear.

"I did." The fox flicked it out of reach, but to no avail. Xem was persistent.

"You like being chased."

"Shut up."

"You like being scared of me."

"You're a big red marshmallow. I'm not scared of you."

"You should have seen how wide your cute green eyes went when I lowered myself to you. Precious foxy."

"I'm going to leave if you keep this up."

"Why? So I can chase you?"

Dammit. Xem was right, Denya couldn't win a battle of words against him. The fox sighed, resigning himself to his fate of being pulled into the dragon's chest, of feeling that warm tongue wash over his back and head, of feeling that mighty, scaly body purr and rumble. He didn't care if the school thought he was a monster. He didn't even care if he smelled like dragon breath for a week.

Denya had the greatest friends and dragon he could ever ask for. And for them, he was unbreakable.