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, Gem! 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 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.”

“But why?”

“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 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 for 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 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 didn't even notice leaving it behind. Looking back for it, he noticed it’d been to the side to make room for the 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' over there 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 antler’s. “But I miiiiiight 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.

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“*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 motonous 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 wasn't 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 begin with 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 if you’re *that* bored, 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.

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Finally, riding lessons!

It was another 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 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 midflight.

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. Every set of burning buildings. Every drop of spilled blood.

“Denya!”

Even the moments where Denya was having *fun* were terrible in hindsight. 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 from 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 fucking 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 of life*!

*“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. 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, 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 make 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 short comings.

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 a heavy beat of wings and gust of air, the scarlet dragon had flown off, leaving Denya alone for the first time in a very long time.

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“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 shut 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’d dose 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 dinner, 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 approaching 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 heads. 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 Gem 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 sniffling 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 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 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. *“Awwww! 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.

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“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 shorter, 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. Meh, 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 landed, right?

Chuckling, the fox suddenly raised his arms, tossing his staff into the eye. 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 accidently 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 claps 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 a very wide-eyed Versailles.

“That would never work a second time.”

Denya stuck his tongue out. “It only needs to work the one.”

“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 and 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.