

“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 their 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, we deserve 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 professors 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 mist 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, parsing their 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 mistake."

"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 behind 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 make. 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. I want to practice my 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!

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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. His mind was torn in two different places it felt, 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 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 they could help it. Still, while the deer's hand-to-hand was as impressive as their 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 very 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 Xem 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 worry 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. "Deep breath. Ok, 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 *fucking* 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 back 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 it would. “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 their 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.

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“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...

Fuck, 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 week, as practice made perfect, 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 hold back 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.

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*“Can we talk later today? The two of us, in person?”*

Denya asked during flight lessons. It probably wasn’t 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?

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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 bee line 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.

*Fuck you, Versailles, for telling me about this crush. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!*

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

*Fuck!*

"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 in 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 believe I could *be* better. You've gone 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?"* Xem asked, his deep voice now a gentle rumble, like distant thunder.

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 next.

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 then. 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, wing-less 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 pressing 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 anywhere. 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."* 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 agitated 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 enough oxygen to his brain. 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 him, taking in the fox’s natural smell. Denya had never bothered to do the same; Xem just had a natural earthy musk to him that made him smell like, well, a *dragon*. But now that he’d been so exposed to it for 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.

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"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?"