Dragon Will 3

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 2-3](#_Toc375850053)

[Chapter 2 2-11](#_Toc375850054)

[Chapter 3 3-20](#_Toc375850055)

[Chapter 4 4-32](#_Toc375850056)

[Chapter 5 5-43](#_Toc375850057)

[Chapter 6 6-54](#_Toc375850058)

[Chapter 7 7-67](#_Toc375850059)

[Chapter 8 8-76](#_Toc375850060)

[Chapter 9 9-86](#_Toc375850061)

[Chapter 10 10-96](#_Toc375850062)

[Chapter 11 11-104](#_Toc375850063)

[Chapter 12 12-113](#_Toc375850064)

[Chapter 13 13-127](#_Toc375850065)

[Chapter 14 14-138](#_Toc375850066)

[Chapter 15 15-151](#_Toc375850067)

[Chapter 16 16-158](#_Toc375850068)

[Chapter 17 17-166](#_Toc375850069)

[Chapter 18 18-174](#_Toc375850070)

[Chapter 19 19-186](#_Toc375850071)

[Chapter 20 20-198](#_Toc375850072)

[Chapter 21 21-209](#_Toc375850073)

[Chapter 22 22-218](#_Toc375850074)

[Chapter 23 23-227](#_Toc375850075)

[Chapter 24 24-238](#_Toc375850076)

[Chapter 25 25-247](#_Toc375850077)

[Chapter 26 26-256](#_Toc375850078)

[Chapter 27 27-266](#_Toc375850079)

[Chapter 28 28-281](#_Toc375850080)

[Chapter 29 29-292](#_Toc375850081)

[Chapter 30 30-302](#_Toc375850082)

[Chapter 31 31-314](#_Toc375850083)

[Chapter 32 32-322](#_Toc375850084)

[Chapter 33 33-336](#_Toc375850085)

[Chapter 34 34-342](#_Toc375850086)

[Chapter 35 35-352](#_Toc375850087)

[Chapter 36 36-360](#_Toc375850088)

[Chapter 37 37-369](#_Toc375850089)

[Chapter 38 38-378](#_Toc375850090)

[Chapter 39 39-385](#_Toc375850091)

[Chapter 40 40-393](#_Toc375850092)

[Chapter 41 41-402](#_Toc375850093)

[Chapter 42 42-414](#_Toc375850094)

[Chapter 43 43-424](#_Toc375850095)

#

 Felix entered the room and looked around. He was shivering. He wished he could get ahold of himself a little better. Without Tsavrina, though, he felt lost. He bit his lip and forced himself to gather his courage together. He walked further in and blinked, trying to clear his eyes.

 There eight bunk beds pressed up against the walls on either side of the room. Next to each one was a chest of drawers and a chest. He walked over to one of them that remained unclaimed and picked up the name tag sitting on it. Nope. That wasn’t his name. He sat it back down and went to the next one and repeated the process – bringing the name tag up to his eyes and staring at them, trying to make heads or tails of them. He sighed. People were starting to stare. He pushed them to the side of his mind. Let them stare, he thought. It would hardly be the first time and it was definitely not going to be the last.

 Finally he found his name. He drew a deep breath and released it. Feeling calmer he dropped his bag to the side and leaned down to get under the top bunk. He hoped who ever had the top bunk that they would not mind being up there.

 There was a squeal of delight from one side of the room. “See those?” a female voice shouted.

 “Yeah? What the hell are they? They look like some sort of medicinal tanks.”

 “That’s it exactly – oh, you really are a complete moron, Dennis. Don’t you know anything? You ever heard of the Death Slayer?”

 A male voice sighed in exasperation. “Of course. Who hasn’t? That female with the special dragon powers or something, right?”

 “Yeah! Meldling, I think is the term.”

 A shiver went up Felix’s spine. He turned to the voices intensely interested now. He, too, had heard of the Death Slayer. A female woman that three years ago had taken out the Death Dragon by using her special dragon-mind powers. It was something like out of a storybook.

 “These are hers!”

 “Huh?”

 “Ugg, you moron. She has a *death scent*. That’s how she was able to meld with the Death Dragon. It only takes Riders who have a terminal illness. She has problems with breathing. These are *hers*. She needs those to breathe. She made a deal with the Generals and gets all her medicine delivered special. *She’s in our room!*”

 Felix’s breath caught in his throat. Was that true?

 “How is she in our room? She’s a second year, moron. We’re first years.”

 The girl sighed patiently. “You idiot. They have a partner system here. The second years partner with us first years. They teach us.”

 “Sweet! So that means –“

 “One of us will get chosen to be partnered with the Death Slayer!” the girl screamed excitedly.

 Felix grinned. That would be awesome. Not that he had any grand delusions of being partnered with someone as impressive as that, but… if she was in his room as a second year, suddenly Battle School didn’t sound so bad afterall.

 He turned around and got busy with his things, losing himself in trying to find where everything went and would go.

 It was about a half hour before a voice rang out across the room. “All newbies off the top bunks!”

 Female voice. He turned to the sound and blinked. It was a girl with bright red hair. She was striding in, behind her filed in fifteen more people. He didn’t need to see the green badges on their chest to know that these were upperclassmen. He licked his lips nervously and stared at them as hard as he could, trying to take them in.

 He smirked at the sight of a tiny girl in amongst the line. She couldn’t have been more than four feet. Her brown hair was tied up in a ponytail. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was taking in the whole room, surveying it. There was a set determination to her jaw.

 “Looks like everyone is here, Lydia,” the first girl called out. “Wanna get started?”

 The tiny girl uncrossed her arms and put her thumbnail to her mouth. She stared around the room again before lowering it and shrugging. “Might as well. Let’s get this started.”

 “You want to do the explaining or would you like me to?”

 She shrugged. “Go ahead, Ori,” she said grinning up at the girl. “Enjoy.”

 The girl named Ori grinned wide and clapped her hands once sharply. “Newbies! End of your beds! Come to attention!”

 Felix swallowed hard. Here we go, he thought. Gods be with him. He rushed to the end of his bed and stood up straight and tall.

 Finally everyone was at the end of their beds and the girl named Ori nodded. “Alright. Welcome to your first day of Battle School. As of today you are officially Dragon Riders. My name is Orange Lavender. You can call me Ori. My Will: Loyalty. I am your Room Lieutenant. This girl here is your Room Commander. You answer to her first.”

 The small four foot girl stepped up. Felix blinked and stared at her even harder. R-room Commander… this *shrimp* was in charge of them… He swore inwardly. He looked around at the other upperclassmen. He wondered which one of them was the Death Slayer. Had that girl that had been talking about the medicinal tanks been mistaken?

 The girl took a few steps forward. “My name is Lydia Alvincia. My Will: Tenacity. The order of rank is pretty simple. You answer first to your partners – we’ll explain them in a moment – then you answer to Ori. I’m last. If you have a problem that you don’t feel we can address, you can *attempt* to take it up with the Department Head.” She smirked. “I wish you the best of luck on that one.”

 Ori spoke up again. “Before we continue with our explanation on the working order of things around here, we first want to get to know you. We’re going –“

 “Excuse me?”

 Ori blinked and looked around at where the voice had come from. She put a fist on her hip. “Yes?”

 “W-well… I was just wondering…” Felix recognized the girl’s voice as the one who had spoken earlier about the Death Slayer. “Well… I mean… I was just wondering… which of you is the Death Slayer?”

 There was a dead silence in the room. Felix’s heart beat hard in his chest. Please answer, he begged. Still, if they hauled off and smacked that girl for her question, he could hardly blame them.

 Ori sighed and turned around to the Commander. “Well, that took all of, what, two minutes?”

 The Commander hid her face in the palm of hand. “Oh for god’s sake. And what makes you think the Death Slayer is in your room?” she growled, obviously directing the question to the newbie-girl who had spoken out.

 “W-well… I thought those tanks over in the corner were hers. I mean… she has a death scent and is sick. Those are hers, right?”

 The girl crossed her arms across her chest again. “And what difference to you does it make if the Death Slayer is in this room or not?”

 “Well… not much, I guess. I just thought… it would be pretty cool if she were.”

 Another of the upperclassmen chuckled. “Just get it over with, Lydia. Truth will out eventually anyways.”

 The small girl glared up at the boy who had spoken. “This is so ridiculous. Fine! Let’s just get over with.”

 The small girl stepped towards the middle of the room. She lowered her arms to her sides and balled her fists. A look of determination came over her face. “I am the Death Slayer,” she announced.

 Felix couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. It was stupid and he hated himself almost immediately. Especially when she turned and glared at him. She narrowed her eyes and stepped up to him. “Something funny?” she growled, looking up at him.

 That really did not help. She was just so… *small*. This small pipsqueak was both the Death Slayer and the Commander? “Yeah,” he answered. “You expect me to believe *you* are our Commander and the Death Slayer?”

 She glared up at him for several minutes before a slow smirk drew across her mouth. “You’re right. I’m kinda puny, aren’t I?”

 He grinned. “Just a *little*.”

 She smiled wide with him. “Yeah. You know what, though. There’s only two people in this whole world I will let make those kinds of jokes. One is my own partner Landon, but he’s the same size as me. The other is my boyfriend but he knows what he’s getting himself into when he says things like that.”

 She made as if to turn around when sudden she spun around on her heel, her left leg swinging out. It caught him behind the knee. He fell forward with a gasp and suddenly a fist connected hard with his face.

 He gasped at the blow, falling back, a hand on his face where the blow had connected. Tears were welling up in his eyes. Her jerked, his body tensing realizing with a start that he was suddenly staring down three inches of cold gleaming steel. The point of a knife hovered barely an inch from his eye. “Next time,” she growled, “it will be my knife, not my fist. You see, the problem with tall people is they think that makes them superior. I think it just makes them fall harder when they hit the ground. She backed up and walked away. “Continue, Ori,” she commanded sharply.

 Felix swallowed. Well… he had deserved that. *Great start, Felix!* He had just pissed off his Commander – *the Death Slayer*. Like life wasn’t going to be hard enough for him.

 “We’re going to go around the room. You’re going to tell us your names, the names of your dragons, and Wills,” Ori shouted. “If you don’t know your Will, you will have until the end of today to get back to us.”

 Felix groaned as he stood up. His left leg knee smarted almost as much as his face did. For someone so small, she certainly packed a punch. He revised his image of her. Small but deadly. Well… that was fun, too, he decided.

 He waited his turn until they finally reached him. When the girl named Ori did he opened his mouth to speak but stopped, uncertainly suddenly overcoming him. He took a deep breath and shook it off. “F-Felix. Felix Yevon. Dragon: Tsavrina. Will: Perseverance.”

 He noticed behind Ori that Lydia’s head had snapped around. She took him in, her thumbnail lifting back to her mouth. He sighed. Yeah… they would have probably debriefed her about him… Go figure. Yep. I’m Felix. That’s me. Nice to meet you. I’m the one who you just a stuck a knife blade in his face for laughing at you.

 The introductions finished, Ori stepped back to the middle of the room. “It’s pretty simple. In this place upperclassmen take care of the lowerclassmen. You guys get to be partnered with us second years, the way that we were partnered up when we were in your shoes last year. Your partners follow up with you all the way up to your senior year. A successful year depends as much on your partners as it will us or your Instructors. *We* will be doing the choosing. It should go without saying that me or Commander Lydia are the more desirable partners. That said, Lydia, would you like to go first?”

 She shrugged. “Does it really need to be said? I, Lydia Alvincia, take Felix Yevon as my partner.”

 His eyes widen –and could almost hear the snap of fifteen heads as the whipped around to look at him. His hear pounded against his chest. H-had the Death Slayer just… picked him as partner…

 A half hour later all fifteen other upperclassman had selected their partners. Lydia strode forward. “The rest of the day belongs to you and your partner. This is your chance to hammer them with questions. They will also take you on a tour. Learn well, newbies,” she snapped. “Tomorrow is when the real work begins. Dismissed!”

 Felix stumbled around to his bed and sat down hard. He buried his face in his hand. Oh dear gods… His head was spinning and he was feeling sick to his stomach. He looked up and frowned as he heard a strange sound. The sound of metal scraping across stone.

 “Need help with that, Lydia?”

 “No thanks. Tend to your partners. I’m just grabbing one for now.”

 Felix blanched as she came around to him. He frowned as he stared at her. She was leaning over a cylindrical tank applying some sort of tubing to it. He looked and found that the tubing ended in a mask. She looked up at the top bunk and threw the mask up there. “Good. Long enough.” She looked down at him, staring at him hard. “We’re going to make quite a pair,” she muttered. She took deep breath – if that’s what he could call it. It sounded shallow and she winced. “Let me start, ok.”

 He swallowed and nodded. “I’m not sure what you mean, but, ok.”

 She nodded and folded her arms across her chest. “My name is Lydia Alvincia. Let’s get this out of the way real quick. I’ve got several titles. Death Slayer, Meldling, Commander, and more importantly *Dying Girl.*”

 “Uh – I-I’m sorry…”

 She shook her head. “I have a death scent. I’m terminal. Eventually, someday, my illness is going to kill me. I’m battling it. You know something about that, I hear. Let’s make this fast since this day is supposed to be about you, not me. I’ll provide some better instructions tonight. You see this tank and mask? If I ever ask for my tank – that’s referring to this. There’s a valve here. Turn it to the right. Umm… d-do you need me to show you or anything?”

 He shook his head. “No. I saw. Enough anyways”

 She nodded. “Ok. Now, a few minutes before lights out you are going to see me use a machine. It’s glass. *Don’t* mess with it and be careful around it. If you accidentally break it it’s going to make my life really sucky.”

 “W-what’s your illness?”

 “I have a breathing problem. My lungs don’t work so well to put it mildly. You’ll learn the sounds I make when I’m in serious trouble. You might also see me coughing up stuff up. Don’t worry about it. It’s normal. Now this is important. The first hour and half of my nightly treatment I’m going to be high. The rest of the upperclassmen know this. I’m just making you aware of it as well. Ori will be taking care of me, but just in case she isn’t here or something happens – never let me leave the room. And forgive me if I say off the wall random stuff.” She licked her lips and tilted her head. “Ok. Any questions for me?”

 He shook his head. “None off hand. Sounds like you have it pretty rough.”

 “I hear you have it just as rough. I’ve already been debriefed pretty well, but, how about you tell me about it out of your own mouth. Believe me, I know how cold and callous medical files are. They just don’t provide the full picture.”

 He smirked. “No. No they don’t.” He grinned. “What do you want me to say, Commander? I’m half-blind.”

 She grinned. “I see you don’t waste any time getting all choked up about it.”

 He shrugged. “Not really. I experience some basic difficulties but I –“ he paused and smiled even larger, “I *persevere*.”

 She nodded. “Perseverance and tenacity. Sounds like a good combination to me. Alright, so, you wanna give me a basic run down of what it is you can see and what you have trouble with?”

 He shrugged. “Sure. It’s hard for me to read any sort of words. People I see as figures. Don’t ask me to make out fine details. I know that you are sm- uhh… I know the height of a person in front of me and can make out figures. I can kinda make out basic details like that Ori has red hair and you have black, but fine details are lost to me.”

 “And what’s it look like to you?”

 “The closer something is the better I see it. I can see you kinda fine right now. Mostly, though, it’s blurs. Sometimes just silhouettes. Your tank I can kinda make out. I can’t see the valve but I saw where your hand was so I’ll figure it out if I ever need to, but I really wouldn’t depend on me. I have no night vision. My eyes don’t dilate, so in shadowy rooms or dark areas I’m completely blind. Not that that bothers me. I had vision when I was a kid but then lost it completely for a few years. I only regained it back three years ago from a surgery.”

 Lydia nodded. “And now you’re on a dragon trying to become a fighter.”

 He looked down, a knot in his stomach. The normal reaction… “I-I know. You’re probably thinking I’m insane for wanting to try to be a fighter.”

 “Hardly. Actually, absolutely not. Others might feel that way, Felix, but you’re probably talking to one of the few people that completely understands. I was wheelchair bound up until three years ago. Given an expiration date that I miraculously survived. They don’t call me Death Slayer just because of my battle with that ridiculous dragon. I’m *not* going to dishonor you by saying that it’s impossible. Maybe it will be, but we’re both going to put our best effort into this. Besides, I’ve also seen your high school chart. You reached Battle Rank 1.”

 He stared up at her and grinned wide. “Yes. I *did*,” he asserted.

 She smirked. “Yeah. You are definitely my partner. I think I’m going to enjoy this. I like a good challenge.” She turned her head and coughed. Felix almost winced at the sound. His hearing was better than most people’s and every time this girl breathed he almost wanted to cringe. He had thought he had it rough. She turned back to him. “Alright. So here’s our first basic warning. People enjoy getting a rise out of you here. You have anything you are sensitive about?”

 He blinked and tilted his head. “Not that I can think of.”

 She grinned. “We’ll see about that.”

 He blanched. He didn’t like that tone of voice. People enjoyed getting a rise? He had a feeling that she enjoyed it just as much.

 “So, blindness aside, what else can you tell me about yourself?”

 He grinned. “Nothing super exciting. After you get over the blind part, I’m actually a pretty boring guy. Middle child of three. Two normal parents. Hobbies include exploring ironically enough. It’s… kinda fun to get lost when you can’t see. I’ve only had one major incident where I ran into some serious trouble.” He laughed. “Drove my parents to a little insanity.” He stood up and almost regretted as he felt like he was just now towering over this tiny girl. “Exploring takes on a whole new meaning when you can’t see.”

 “I know you have some skill on your dragon – can you fight?”

 “Like with weapons? I can manage my bow well enough. Weapons fighting is a bad weakness of mine, though. It’s too fast and I miss where the blades are. I think I could do a little better at it if I put some effort into it, but no one has bothered. I tried the classes they offered at my school but the teacher didn’t really want to give me that much attention.” He clicked his tongue. “The students knew it, too. Their favorite strategy was to board me. Once they were on my dragon, they knew they had me. I’ve done what I could to alleviate that problem with better flying but –“

 “You’d be delusional to think that you are never going to get boarded. And even worse – you may be missing your own opportunity to board.”

 He sighed. “Yes. Exactly.”

 She nodded. “Alright. Now, quick question, though I think I already know the answer to it – how in the world are you able to shoot your bow? I’ve seen your archery skills and they aren’t half bad.”

 “Tsarvina. I look through her eyes to get a better understanding of the picture in front of me. It’s not perfect but it gets me by. Once I have a clue what something *might* be I can adjust.”

 She nodded. “So you take advantage of your meld link with your dragon to get clear vision.”

 He grinned. “Exactly. Up in the air it’s a little harder for us than most but we manage. You can’t treat us like a normal dragon and Rider pair. We *both* look after each other. It can kill our speed a little bit and it’s extra work for her.”

 “But it’s obviously worked out very well. Alright, I think I’m getting a better picture – so, you ready for that tour?”

 “Lead away, Commander.”

 She nodded and started to walk away. “Remember: stop me if necessary. I’m not doing this just to hear myself talk or to take a walk around.”

#

 Lydia stared back at the boy as she continued with her explanation. Felix was about as tall as her boyfriend Hugh. He had black hair that looked like he raked his hands through. His eyes were… strange. They looked cloudy. They were pretty, though. A soft brown. He had only a little bit of scarring around the left of his left eye but nothing dramatic. If it weren’t for the cloudiness she probably would never be able to tell he was blind – or half-blind rather.

 His fate did not seem to be an impediment for him, nor a point of weakness. He had already risen above it. He had spent his high school life showing people up. No, he was definitely not like her in that regard. She did detect some shyness but she as beginning to feel that’s all it was. Still, she was going to grate into him pretty hard to make sure that his eyes were not a big deal.

 She lead him to the classrooms and explained the classes that he would be attending in the morning. “Normally you would receive your books tomorrow, but I placed yours under your bed. It seems you had some special ones delivered.”

 “Thanks,” he answered shortly.

 His books had been very interesting. She had never seen brail before though she had heard of it. A part of her was somewhat hoping that in the future he would show her how to read like that. She turned around to say something else when a loud shout echoed down the hallway.

 “Lyyyyyyyzzzzzzzzzzz!!”

 Her heart jumped into her throat and tears welled up in her eyes almost instantly. “Hugh!” she gasped.

 She pushed around Felix and ran to her boyfriend. Hugh was running down the hall after her. The two met in the middle. He bent down and picked her up. Laughing, she wrapped her arms around his neck as he spun her around. Hugh was here. He was back. He had returned to her life. Her life had returned.

 She pecked his face with a million kisses. He could only laugh as he held her up, unable to try to keep up. He sat her back down on the floor and pressed his lips to hers. Aww, she felt like she would melt. Just melt right here. Or maybe it was the world that was melting. Everything just seemed… so far away. It just no longer mattered.

 He pulled away, his thumb rubbing her cheek, his hand caressing her face gently. “Gods it’s good to see you again.”

 She smiled up at him. “We were only away for a few months.”

 “It was an eternity.” He stood up and gave her his widest smile – her smile. With his precious blue eyes sparkling. “Looking good as always, babe.” He sighed and his smile vanished. He crossed his arms. “Looks like we weren’t in the same rooms.”

 Lydia swallowed hard. No, they weren’t in the same rooms. It had hurt when she had discovered that, but a part of her was happy. Hugh had no weaknesses that a partner would need to take care of. She was convinced of that. Nothing that would require the vicious attention that she could give to someone else. She wanted to be sure she could handle that aspect of commanding. So, a part of her was sad that neither he nor Erica were in her room, but at the same time she was happy. Even happier that she could give her attention to someone like Felix. It felt like the fates themselves had aligned for this.

            “Who’s your partner?” she asked hollowly, though she knew the answer.

            A boy came around him. As tall as Hugh with black hair and green eyes. John. Her classmate in her advanced classes who had fought like hell to try to beat her points and failed dramatically. He was the Commander of his own room. He grinned as he placed a hand on Hugh’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Lydia. I’ll take care of him.”

            “Well, at least it’s not another girl. I don’t think I could have stood for that,” she said trying to force a smile.

            Hugh sniffed. “Oh, but that dirty Lance can do whatever he wants to you and I don’t have a right to say anything?”

            “You punched him. Twice as a matter of fact.”

            Hugh shrugged. “He deserved it.”

            No. No he hadn’t. Hugh had punched Landon once for taking throwing her medical charts up for the whole world to see. The experience had been a nightmare but it had helped. It had made her a better person for the experience. The second time Hugh had punched Landon out to take the guy’s place in a forced joint melding.

           He looked up and over at the boy behind her. “This your partner?” he asked with a wide grin.

            He walked over and stuck his hand out to the boy. “Name’s Hugh. I’m Lydia’s boyfriend.”

            She watched as Felix smiled and reached out and took his hand. “Felix. Lydia’s partner, I guess,” he said with a laugh.

            Hugh grinned wide and then frowned, leaning forward. Felix, for his credit, stayed still. He was probably use to this. She watched as Hugh frowned. “Yo, pal… something wrong with your eyes?”

            Felix’s smile turned into a smirk. “Look kinda weird, don’t they?”

            Hugh blinked and stepped back. “Uh – I didn’t mean to offend, pal. So sorry,” he said with a wide open smile.

            Felix sighed and shook his head. “No. I’m sorry. I just get that reaction a lot. It gets annoying. I’m… I’m half blind.”

            Hugh blinked and spun around. “Lyz?’

            “What? Yes, my partner is half blind. That’s why I took him – because I know better than anyone else the struggles that he will be facing in the future, and I think I would be more suited to taking him on to address his special needs since we both share similar struggles.”

            Hugh grinned. “Special needs people unite?”

            “You want me to attack you with my knife, Hugh Oliver?” she growled, crossing her arms over her chest.

            “That could be fun. It’s been quite a while since me and you had a row at each other.”

            She sighed. “John, get him out of here. I’ve got a newbie to take care of and Hugh’s got his own learning to do.”

            Hugh sighed. “Geez. So cold, Lyz.”

            She smiled at him, “I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind today. Love you,” she said, standing up on tip toe for a kiss.

            He grinned down at her. “Gods you’re so small and cute.” He pressed his lips to her for a brief second before pulling away.

            Gods she hated that the kiss was so brief. She turned around and headed back over to Felix. “Sorry about that.”

            He shook his head. “No. Don’t worry about it. You two make a good couple,” he said with a smile.

            She felt herself redden. “He… he’s saved my life more times than I can count. Umm, anyways, come on. Let’s continue with our tour. Let’s introduce ourselves to our dragons.”

            The boy followed behind her silently. She frowned after they were about halfway and turned to him. “You can feel free to ask questions?”

            “Absolutely.”

            They walked on in even more silence. She turned to him again. “Anything?”

            He grinned. “Does it bother you that I have no questions?”

            “I just remember my first day here and I was full of them.”

            He shrugged. “I usually just listen and gain all my information that way. Sorry, I’m not a very sociable person generally.”

            “And is there a reason for that?”

            He shrugged. “I think I unnerve them. Not that I really care. I’ve learned to be above them. Usually the things I can do are a lot better than them anyways and if they have a problem with me they weren’t worth talking to anyhow.”

            Gotcha. She almost said that. Click. That was the guy’s issue. She sighed. Sadly, it sounded so very similar to hers, though his seemed to lean towards a little more… pride. He was definitely more sure of himself while she had been nothing but awkward and… less confident. She wondered what Landon would suggest. This might be a little over her, though she was going to try to think of something first before she consulted him. Felix was *her* problem now.

            She turned to him. “Sounds like you have a bit of an ego?” she asked lightly.

            “I wouldn’t really call it ego. Defense mechanism. There’s only so much hurt you can take from others before you just give up caring anymore. Either you can be defeated by it or you can rise above it. I chose the latter.”

            She sighed. He was like her in so many ways but had dealt with his problems in a far more different matter. Yeah, she was going to do her best for him. He deserved it. Just like she had. She would pay forward what both Hugh and Landon had done for her.

 “How about you? Looks like you have the same problem,” he said lightly.

 She bit her lip before she answered, “Believe what you want.”

 They walked again in further silence. She took him to her own stable. She walked up to Tsaul’s stall. She laid her hand on the door and grinned inside. “How you doing, Tsaul?”

 “Oh, very well, thank you, Lydia. Did you bring your new partner?”

 “Yes, he’s here. Felix, meet my dragon Tsaul.”

 She watched as the boy approached the stable. She really wished she knew what it was that he saw. She watched as he blinked and rubbed his eyes for a moment before peering back inside. He grinned. “Good day to you, dragon. A-aren’t you the dragon from famous Captain Townsend?”

 Tsaul rose up and reached his head out the door. “Indeed. Aw, my beloved Adrian. He would be delighted to hear that years after his death his name is still being spoken even by youngsters.”

 She smiled as she reached up and petted him.

 “C-can I ask how you got him?” Felix asked. “I mean… no offense but it just sounds strange that you got such a famous dragon, what with your death scent and all.”

 Tsaul sniffed indignantly. “Like I would take just any Rider,” he growled. “I took the Rider that had the most amazing Will.”

[Hugh needs to stop his pranks. Lydia gets cut whenever there’s a prank played. To rechannel his energies Hugh starts to build things and repair things]

 Lydia rolled her eyes. “You took me because no one else wanted me,” she snapped with a laugh.

 The dragon snorted. “It only took me then to realize how much I wanted you as my Rider. That I just couldn’t stand the thought that you wouldn’t be a Rider. Disgraceful. How could they dare stand there and tell someone like you that you couldn’t be a Rider.”

 Lydia grinned, her heart filled with love. She reached up and hugged his head. “Isn’t he the sweetest?”

 Felix stared between the two of them. “They told you that you couldn’t be a Rider?”

 “Yeah. What about you?”

 “Well, they didn’t tell me no, but I think they thought that a dragon would never accept me. Tsavrina sure surprised the hell out of them,” he said with a wide grin. “To tell you the truth, she surprised me, too. A part of me didn’t really think a dragon would want me either. Somehow she thought I was worth it. I would absolutely die for my Tsavrina,” he said with an even wider smile.

 Lydia nodded. She patted Tsaul’s head. “Well – let’s go meet her, then.”

 Felix nodded and turned around and started heading out of the stable. Lydia followed him. His step was suddenly much faster she noticed with a grin. Yeah, she knew that excitement.

 Tsavrina’s stable was only three down from her own. Lydia grinned when they reached the dragon. There was nothing ‘dainty’ about Tsavrina – if a dragon could be described as dainty. Tsavrina was large and wide. A light blue dragon who could easily match Tsaul in terms of size.

 She glared down at Lydia and bent down to Felix so he could pet her. She sighed. Uh oh. It was going to be one of *those*. Crap.

 “Tsavrina, I want to introduce you to my partner. A second year. Her name’s –“

 The dragon hissed. “I know exactly who she is.”

 Felix blinked in surprise stepping away from her and looking back over Lydia. “Uhh? Tsavrina?”

 The dragon hissed again. “Meldling,” she growled. “Get away from me. I’ll rip you to shreds if three seconds.”

 Lydia sighed and stepped forward, staring up at the large beast. “Now let’s not get off on the wrong foot here, Tsavrina. I’m Felix’s partner. We’re going to be seeing a lot of each other. *Don’t* do this. I’m not going to do *anything*. I promise I will not go near your meld link. I assure you. Tsaul is the only one that I have any interest in.”

 “Demand another partner, Felix, because I do not want this one anywhere near you.”

 Felix stared up at the dragon. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve never acted like this to anyone before.”

 Lydia shook her head. “Don’t worry about it, Felix. I’m a Meldling. Normally I’m a dragon’s best friend, but some… they react this way.” She sighed. “We’ll just have to deal with it.”

 Tsavrina suddenly charged the door. Lydia gasped as the door was reduced to a thousand splinters. She jumped out of the way quickly from the charging dragon. She spun around with a hiss. The dragon had crashed into the wall on the far side – where she had been seconds before. The dragon turned its head, its eyes falling in her. She swore. “Tsavrina! Don’t you *dare* do this. Calm down!”

 The dragon opened her wings, spreading them wide as she roared. It shook the whole room. Powerful thoughts and emotions crashed through her brain. It made her dizzy.

 She whirled around and dashed out of the stable, running as fast as her legs could carry. The dragon was in bloodlust. It wasn’t thinking now. Behind her she could hear Felix screaming at Tsavrina.

 She heard Tsavrina behind her and she jumped to her right, rolling on the ground. She heard the loud snap of a dragon jaw. She pushed herself up off the ground looking up at the dragon. Smoke was starting to billow up out of its mouth. She jumped up again and took off, weaving between the stables.

 “Janus!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

 From out of a medical shed a human leaned out the door, blinking. The man was barely older than her with blond hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was as lean as he was tall. He was not wearing the silver dragon rider’s uniform with red stripes, but was instead dressed in overalls with a white coat. The outfit of a dragon medic.

 “Lydia? Again?”

 “A little help!” she screamed.

 The man disappeared back inside even as she went running past. A large body crashed down from the sky in front of her. She slid to a stop as hard as she could, her legs slipping out from under her. Tsavrina glared down at her. Lydia spun around, crawling back up to her feet, taking off at a run. Behind her she felt the snap of Tsavrina’s powerful jaw. Much too close. Way too close!

 “Hurry up, Janus!” she screamed.

 Her lungs were starting to burn. She was losing pace. She danced out of the way a split second before Tsavrina’s jaws almost closed on her. She pressed herself up tight to a building, trying to avoid the dragon. Licking her lips, she went running back past the dragon – squeezing in between the dragon’s body and the stable.

 “Lydia! Firing!” a shout echoed through the air. There was sharp *thwunk* sound. “Got it!”

 “I don’t think one is going to take this one down, Janus!” she screamed as she went running again. She rushed past Janus. He had a crossbow down in the dirt, pulling back on the string with all his might, a tranquilizer shot in his mouth. He was lost to her view as she ducked behind the medical shed. She ran around it, turning the last corner and gasped as Tsavrina’s jaws almost closed down on her from in front of her. She windmilled her arms trying to stop her forward motion. She hit Tsavrina’s closed snout. At the same time she heard another sharp hiss of the crossbow. Tsavrina pulled up and away, shaking her head. She gave one massive loud roar before crashing down on her side, losing consciousness.

 Lydia stood there, fighting to catch her breath. Janus ran around to her. “Lydia? Are you ok?” he asked worriedly, looking her over desperately.

 She clutched her chest. Pain flared through her lungs. She doubled over and started coughing and spitting up phlegm and mucus. Janus caught her by her shoulders and held her up as she coughed, desperately trying to relieve the pressure in her lungs.

 “Lydia?” Felix’s voice shouted. She could hear the boy’s running footsteps getting closer. “W-what happened to Tsavrina?!” he asked, panic in his voice.

 “Relax, Rider,” Janus growled. “Your dragon’s fine. She’s just sleeping.”

 “L-Lydia? Oh gods… is she alright?”

 “She’ll be fine once she calms down. Here, Lydia, I have one of your tanks in my office. Let me go grab it for you.”

 She shook her head. “N-no. D-don’t need it,” she gasped in between coughs. “A-alm-most done.”

 “W-what the heck happened?” Felix asked, panic still in his voice. “Tsavrina’s never attacked anyone before! This was not like her.”

 “Some dragons are just like that with Lydia,” Janus explained, patting her back. “What’s that make now? Three dragon attacks within the past month?” He chuckled. “I’m starting to become a good shot with this thing.”

 There more were more running footsteps come up from the distance. Lydia looked up as three other dragon medics reached them. They stopped. “Gods,” one of them said. “Heard the dragon roaring. She alright, Janus?”

 The medic smirked. “Yeah. Someone might want to go check out the damage and get it reported to maintenance.”

 The medic that had spoken before sighed and crossed his arms. “I swear, sometimes this girl just feels like an absolute curse around here.”

 Janus laughed. “I don’t want to hear you say that. How many times have you called on Lydia this month to help calm down one of the dragons. Here – take my crossbow,” he said, throwing it through the air.

 Lydia stood up and took a shuddering breath. “Sorry guys,” she murmured. She then smiled. “With new dragons coming you guys might want to keep those tranquilizers close.”

 Janus shook his head. “I wish you would just control them yourself. I know you can do it.”

 She shook her head and glared at him. “They are attacking me because they fear that I’m going to do *exactly that*. I’m not going to force them to live through their worst nightmare like that when they are already that panicked. I don’t even want to imagine what that would do to their minds.”

 “Yeah, but one of these days your luck is going to run out,” Janus said, concerned.

 She waved him off. “It’s fine. I’m quick on my feet.” She drew away and walked over to Tsabrina. She reached over and pulled out the two tranquilizer darts. She looked up at Felix who was crouched over his dragon’s head. “I’m sorry, Felix,” she muttered.

 “No. I’m sorry! I can’t even believe that she did that. T-that’s so not like her,” he said, not taking his off his dragon.

 “No. She panicked. Believe me. I don’t take it personally. She’ll be fine when she wakes up. We’ll… just have to be careful during training. I’ll come out here on a daily basis and let her get use to me.”

 “T-this has happened more than once to you?”

 She sighed. “It’s my Meldling mind thing. They can sense me reaching out to their minds. Most of them don’t mind. Most of them are absolutely delighted to have me in their heads. There’s even been a few that have tried to force a meld with me. But every once in a while I come across one that acts negatively.”

 *“Why?”*

 “Because, Felix!” she snapped. “I can take over their minds. Completely. If I wanted I could reach out right now and break Tsavrina’s mind. Make her do things she wouldn’t want to. Even worse, I could force a meld link on her. I could rip away your meld link and replace it with mine – even do a joint meld. They can’t tell me no. As long as I match their attribute and even then I could still probably force it.” She sighed and looked away. She closed her fists. “I-I… I don’t need to be touching them to link with them. Right now I could talk in your mind as if we were sharing a group link.”

 She looked down. Felix’s expression was guarded. She could not read it. He looked back down at his dragon and petted her head. Guilt twisted inside her stomach.

 “I-I’m sorry,” she repeated and walked away.

#

 Tsavrina had attacked someone. His heart twisted in pain. He didn’t really care what the reasoning was, but it still fell to the truth that Tsavrina had tried to hurt another human. And he had not been able to stop her. Had not even been on her.

 He stared down at the girl that walked in front of him, leading him back towards the school. She had *apologized*. That was the weird part of it. She should have been angry. He would. He was. It had terrified him when Tsavrina had burst through the stall door. He had been slammed into the ground by the force. When he had looked back up, Lydia and his dragon were blurs running into the bright sunlight where he could make out no definition of anything.

 *And this wasn’t the first time it happened to her?!*

 That more than one dragon medic had come running, *knowing* what was going on was almost appalling. He had never been the subject of a dragon fighting over him as a Rider, but he had heard those were terrifying enough. Tsavrina had been trying to *kill* Lydia. He had been terrified. He was shaking even now.

 Lydia was calm. Apologetic.

 Who the *hell* was this girl?

 They walked back into the school and Lydia continued with the tour, pointing out a few final last minute details. She ended with the library.

 He watched her as she fumbled slightly. “Umm… well… here’s the library but…”

 He laughed. “Yeah. Not a whole lot of good for me, I’m sure. Lydia, don’t stress it. It’s alright. I’m not all that sensitive.” His stomach growled loudly and she turned to him. He laughed. “B-but I guess I’m hungry.”

 She smirked and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s go get some food. Come on.”

 She lead him up to the mess hall and he gaped. He stopped dead as he stared around. He groaned. It was packed. Busy. Filled with hundreds of people and several tables. People shoving and coming and going. He closed his eyes. It was all a mix-matched blur of confusing colors and shapes to him. He hated crowds. He could never make sense of it all. It all just became dizzying.

 “Felix?” Lydia called from some distance away.

 “Sorry, Commander. I’m afraid I’m not so good in crowded rooms.”

 He made out the sight of her in the blur as she came up close to him. She titled her head. “Why?”

 He sighed. “Imagine a bunch of faceless blurs all pressed in together. I can’t tell distances very well to begin with so I’m never sure how close people are to me or one another.”

 “Do you need me to help you?”

 He shook his head. “No. I’ll make it. Just give me a moment.”

 “LLLYYYYYYDDDDDDIIIIIIIAAAAAAAAAA!!”

 The scream was loud and filled with multiple voices. Not just two or three or even four. But at least ten or more.

 He watched as Lydia froze. She then whirled around. “Oh my gosh!” she gasped. “Everyone!” she screamed.

 Suddenly a group of people rushed her, shoving him back out of their way, crowding around her. There was a loud rush of people talking all at once. He stumbled back and gawked, trying to make out the whole scene. Lydia was completely lost from his view. Now and again he could hear her voice, filled with emotion.

 A hand landed on his shoulder from behind. He turned around and faced himself face to face with the grinning Hugh. Lydia’s boyfriend. “Might want to watch out there, buddy,” he said with a laugh. “More’s coming. Whoops-“

 Hugh grabbed his arm and shoved him to the side as several others ran into the room, almost pushing them down. Hugh released him. “Yo! Tanis! Get your hands off my girl!” he barked, and followed it with a laugh. And then Hugh was gone, disappearing into the crowd.

 “What the heck is going on,” a voice growled from his left.

 His head spinning, Felix spun to the voice. Now he was faced with a boy roughly Lydia’s size. His arms were crossed over his chest and he was glaring at the crowd. Another guy stood beside him, just slightly smaller than Felix himself.

 “A-are all of those people –“ the second guy murmured in awe.

 “Lydia’s school friends,” the first boy groaned. He sighed. “You’ve got to be joking. And she had problems with being social *here*?”

 The second guy laughed. “Sometimes something can be right in front of your face and you just don’t realize it. Besides, I get the feeling Hugh had a lot to do with this group.”

 Felix stared between the two groups. He felt dazed. “E-excuse me?” he finally said to the two boys.

 The small one looked up at him, as if noticing him for the first time. “Yeah? Who are you?”

 Hi, I’m Felix, a very confused newbie on his first day who seems to have lost his partner in a sea of people, is absolutely ravenous, and has no idea where to go or what to do. Yeah. That sounded like a great opening introduction. Instead he said, “I’m Commander Lydia’s partner.”

 The taller boy chuckled. “I hope you have one left by the time that crowd is done devouring her like that.”

 He watched the small one reach up to his hair and start twirling a lock in between his thumb and index finger. “Name?” he asked shortly.

 “Felix Yevon.”

 “The blind boy.”

 “Glad we got that out of the way so quickly. Saved us on time. Thanks,” he responded sarcastically.

 The tall guy laughed and slammed his hand in the small one’s back. “Maybe I should work on your people skills next, Landon.” He turned to Felix and stuck out his hand. “Name’s Conner Forscythe. I’m this guy’s senior partner.”

 “Landon Daiton,” the small one said curtly as Felix shook hands with Conner. “Lydia’s senior partner.”

 Conner chuckled. “Looks like we have the whole chain here. Well, go on Landon. Go save your partner before she is crushed.”

 “Like hell I’m going into that mess.”

 Conner grinned down at him. “How about a little Commander shouting to persuade them all to start backing off.”

 Landon sighed and shook his head. “No. Let her have some fun for a while. Starting tomorrow things are going to get tight for her again. Let her have this moment.” He turned away and walked off.

 Felix sighed and buried his face in his hand. *Will some sense please return to the world!* The least they could have done was show him how to get his food. He sighed and took a seat at a nearby table and waited.

 Finally one by one angry senior partners began to gather up their lowerclassman and pulled them away from Lydia, reclaiming them and returning them to the tasks at hand.

 “See you later, babe!” Hugh shouted as John pulled him away last.

 Felix stared up at the tiny girl. He watched as she reached up and brushed at her eyes quickly. She then turned to him and stopped. “Oh! Oh my gosh. Felix! I’m sorry! I forgot.”

 Yeah. Noticed. Thanks. He looked away. “Whatever. It’s fine,” he growled. “Can you show me the dinner line now before someone *else* comes up to talk with you?”

 “S-sorry about that. I haven’t seen those people for a year,” she snapped. “They were my old classmates.”

 “How the hell does that work?”

 “Excuse me?”

 “You’re a year above them.”

 “I skipped my senior year. I was invited to come here early by General Sanders.”

 Felix started at the name. *The* General? The General of the whole damn Dragon Riding Corps? *He* had invited her to come early. He looked up at her. That this girl had shoved a knife blade in his face this morning was becoming readily understandable. The Death Slayer… a girl with a medical condition that was just a serious, if not more so, than his and had accomplished a hell of a lot more than he had.

 And this girl had chosen him as his partner. Ok, Felix. Get over yourself and your stupid hunger. Count your blessings. Someone amazing had entered his life and he would just have to deal with all that came with it.

 He stood up. “Food?” he asked.

 She nodded and waved her hand. “Yeah. Come on, this way.”

 She lead him to the line for their class: Fighter. He looked down and saw the lines for the other classes: Border Patrol, Rangers, Field Medics, and Mail Couriers. Once he reached the front of the line, he watched as Lydia gave her name, marked it off a check list, and handed her a tray. He stepped up and gave his name. They repeated the same process. He looked down at the tray. It was covered by foil and he could not see the contents. He looked over to where Lydia had disappeared and saw a drink station. Coffee. He could smell it from here. Well, there was a blessing, he thought happily.

 He followed her to a table, managing to sit down beside her. Landon and Conner were sitting on the other side. Hugh was on Lydia’s left. John was past Hugh and he could also see the fiery red hair of Ori past him. Sitting beside Landon was a girl that was miraculously *even smaller* than Landon. And beside her was two black haired girls, one with red on top, with her locks hanging past her shoulders. The other girl had short black hair and had green in her hair. He blinked as he stared between the two – oh, they were twins he realized.

 “Aw! But I wanted to sit by Lydia!” another girl’s voice shouted.

 Lydia turned and stared up at her. This girl had brown hair cut just above her shoulders. She was taller than Lydia and there was a very masculine quality about her.

 “Sorry, Erica,” she said with a smile. “Oh! Who got you as a partner?”

 Erica sat down beside Conner. “A guy named Terran.”

 “Another of my teammates. John! You got all of the best fighters.”

 “You got Ori,” John pointed out. “That more than makes up for it.”

 “Is there room for one more?” a male voice asked.

 Lydia looked around. “Sit beside Felix here, Tanis.”

 Felix reddened slightly. “Uh – I’ll move down, Lydia.”

 “Stay where you are,” Hugh growled. “Other side, Tanis,” he snapped.

 “Knock it off, Hugh,” Lydia snapped.

 The twins jumped up. “We’ll sit beside Felix!” the shouted in perfect unison.

 The small girl beside Landon gasped. “No! No we can’t split up Team Spirit!”

 “Hugh can get over his crappy jealousy,” Lydia snapped. “Tanis. Beside me.”

 The boy named Tanis sighed looking away. “I value my life, Lydie,” he murmured.

 John stood up. “Oh for gods sake.”

 “I don’t want him beside me, either!” Hugh shouted. “Damn snake.”

 “Are we still going on about that?” the boy named Tanis said, his voice cold and growling. “No. It’s fine. I’ll sit beside the other guy.

 Felix felt poorly out of place as the guy named Tanis sat beside him. He looked over at him. The boy was shorter than Hugh and not half as built, but there was still a powerful edge to him. He had deep brown eyes and bushy hair that he had tied back into a ponytail in an attempt to manage. The boy stared up at him and held out his hand. “Tanis Archer,” he introduced himself shortly. “Lydie’s friend.”

 Felix reached over and took the hand. “Felix Yevon. Her partner.”

 “I’m Tanya!” the tiny girl shouted across the table reaching out a hand. “Oh! Tanis is a Field Medic?”

 Tanis shook it. “Field Medic and Doctor. Well… still trying to manage that one somehow. Hoping to continue that field of study after I’ve graduated from here.”

 The tiny girl clapped her hand. “That’s so wonderful. C-can I ask, though, why does Master Hugh not want to sit beside you?”

 Silence. Awkward. Very awkward silence.

 It was the girl Lydia had named Erica that broke it. “Let’s change topic.”

 “Please,” Tanis growled beside him.

 It was Conner who leaned forward. “Oooh? That’s amusing. Wow. I didn’t expect to see drama between Lydia’s friends. I missed that the last time I saw you all together a year ago.” He grinned. Felix thought there was something distinctively devilish in the smile. “Hugh, you should have mentioned that you had competition for little Lydia’s heart.”

 Lydia jumped up and pointed her fork at him threateningly. Was she seriously assaulting him with a *fork*? “Let it die!” she snapped.

 “Keep your mouth shut, Con-man,” Hugh growled, anger in his voice.

 Tanya blinked, staring between them all. She sat down. “Oh. It’s like that,” she muttered. “S-sorry…”

 And Felix realized he was in the middle of this very awkward situation. He sighed and forced it to the back of his mind. He ripped open his foil and dug into his food.

 “So, it’s the partners that control the diet, here right?” Hugh asked. “Yo, John-man. Let’s talk about something sweet next time.”

 Felix stared down at his own tray which contained some sort of dried meat with lots of carrots.

 “We don’t *control* it,” John snapped. “We make suggestions and provide some insight into our partner’s lives. And would you please at least *somewhat* treat me like your Commander?”

 Hugh turned to him and blinked. “Oh? I have to do that when we are even out of the room. I thought at least for meals we could drop it.”

 “No,” four voices snapped at once. Conner, Landon, Lydia, and John.

 “You have any idea how hard we have to work for that privilege?” Landon said.

 “Yeah,” Hugh said with a wide grin. “I’ve read those crappy outdated books. Yo, we should go ahead and talk about this John. You are planning on putting me into those *advanced* classes, right? If I’m going to be Captain one day I figure starting off as a Room Commander is probably a good start.”

 “Personally I think someone has a lot of growing up to do,” John muttered lowly.

 Hugh glared at him. “Geez, what’s with the attitude.”

 “You should probably listen to him, Hugh,” Lydia said.

 Hugh turned to her, giving her a wide grin. “Life’s too fun to take it too seriously.”

 “Fun has its places, but you’re in the army now, Hugh,” Landon said. “Time to start reeling it in.”

 Hugh took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. You’re right.”

 “If we only believed it was going to be that easy,” the twins muttered across from Felix.

 Hugh glared across at them. “They let you have fun.”

 “Their randomness doesn’t cause distress for others,” Landon growled.

 Hugh clicked his tongue. “You’re just pissed because I punched you twice.”

 Landon stood up, slamming his fork on his tray. “No, Hugh!” he snapped. “It’s not just about me. One of your damn pranks came back on Lydia and she’s *still* dealing with it. There’s a time and a place and a way.”

 The girl Erica spoke but Felix could not see her from his position. “I’ve never had a problem with Hugh’s pranks.”

 “And Lydia’s just about always joined in. She enjoys them.”

 “I did and I do, but Hugh… as many fights you get into because of them… I think it’s time that you brought them to an end until you can learn to be more constructive with them.”

 There was silence. Lydia sighed. “You’re angry.”

 “No. I’m just… Look. This is our first day back together. Let’s not ruin it with a fight already, ok?”

 She sighed. “Of course not. Alright, Hugh. We won’t deal with it today.” She turned to Landon and Conner. “Looking forward to tomorrow, *third year*?” she asked with a smile.

 Landon smirked. “Hell yeah.”

 “Why? What’s tomorrow for you guys?” Tanis asked leaning forward.

 “Well for starters,” Conner said with a light laugh, “our original teams have rejoined each other. Last years are placed back with their partners. Landon loses his right to being a Room Commander *but* –“

 “We get to join seniors in more advanced training. Tomorrow it’s an all out war – Fourth years vs Third Years. The Room Commanders all get together and we lead our teams of fifteen together to try to take them out. If we win against the fourth years we get a star on our uniforms. It is also marked in our records. It looks *good* for our placement in the army when we graduate. The third years get a star – the fourth years lose one of theirs.”

 Conner nodded. “Third years, even if they lose, never lose a star, but the seniors *do*.”

 “It’s risky, though. If we do poorly throughout the year and I never get a star for my team in any of these simulation battles, I can lose my placement as Room Commander and our teams can be reshuffled. So there’s a lot of risk riding on the whole thing.”

 “And I assure you, little partner, I am *not* going to go easy on you,” Conner growled.

 Landon looked up at him. “You never do.”

 “Oh gods… that’s what I get to look forward to next year? Am I going to be alright with leading my team,” she muttered.

 “Self-doubt again?” Landon asked, frustration in his voice. “Lydia, the battles that you did at the end of the year, they were fantastic. Your strategies are always sound. You’re going to do great.”

 John clicked his tongue. “How many times did you beat me there at the end? I don’t want to hear it.”

 She sighed. “I just get so impatient,” she muttered.

 Landon chuckled. “Yes. Yes, you do.” He turned to Hugh. “I actually had to board her one day just to keep her in check. She had this beautiful strategy to have two of her teammates hassle the hell out of this one dragon. The end result was that Ori was going to shoot up out of the sky and hit it out of the sky so that one of the other dragons could grab ahold of it. It was hilarious watching it. Except that she kept worrying that Ori wasn’t going to be in place at the right moment. This damn idiot was going to fly out there instead of Ori to do it herself.”

 Lydia sighed. “This moron falls out of the sky, almost breaking his wrist just to board me and keep me in place. It annoys me. I just hate being out of the action, watching everything when I know I could easily get it done myself.”

 Hugh smiled. “Lydia the one person Corps here,” he said with a laugh. “Gotta learn to trust your team, Lyz. Just think – in a real battle you would need to give them the order to do that and maybe focus other parts of your team that’s doing even harder stuff.”

 Lydia sighed. “I still have a lot to work on,” she muttered.

 “Our weaknesses never go away. We just learn how to deal with them and rechannel them,” Landon said with a nod.

            Felix had listened to the entire conversation silently. He didn’t really much care and he couldn’t follow even half of what was being said. He felt undecidedly awkward among what was obviously a very tight knit group. He felt like an intruder. He was the one out who did not belong.

            “You’re very silent,” the boy to his right said suddenly, while the conversations around them were continuing.

            Felix turned to the boy. Tanis, it was? He shrugged. “I’ve never been much for conversation.”

            “Considering that you are a Will Rider, that’s not a very good way to start your career. I know the frustration, believe me. I’ve always been awkward in a crowd myself. Still – join in. The last thing you want to do is start your first year off on bad footing.”

            Felix smirked. “Honestly, I wouldn’t know the first thing to talk about. And the one conversation most people would want to have with me I would rather not discuss. Not that I care, but it’s the only one people ever seem to focus on.”

            Tanis nodded. “It’s only day one. Get it out of the air now so that way we can move on. I wish Lydie had learned that. Don’t repeat her mistakes.”

            Felix stared across at the group deep in conversation. “They look like they are busy. I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

            Tanis sighed. “Excuse after excuse. Lydia?” he said, speaking the girl’s name louder than the rest of the sentence.

            Lydia blinked at the interruption before she turned to Tanis, leaning forward. “Yeah, Tan?”

            Tanis leaned forward. “How about we get the awkward questions out for Felix here so he’s not constantly on the edge of his seat waiting for them and might feel a little more comfortable among us.”

            Lydia grinned and nodded. “Excellent idea. Go ahead, Felix. Floor is yours.”

            Felix blanched as he felt all eyes turn to him – he couldn’t see all of them, but he could definitely feel them. Silence. He wanted to *kill* the guy beside him. He dropped his fork and glared down at his food. “What do you want me to say? Hi, I’m Felix Yevon the half blind boy.”

            “Who spent five years completely blind,” Lydia amended.

            “Aw, yes, I completely forgot that part,” he said, smirking at her.

            Landon sighed. “Another person with a snarky attitude,” he muttered. “That’s perfect,” he growled. “Now you’ll experience exactly what I did with you, Lydia.”

            “I have *no idea* what you are referring to, Landon,” she responded innocently. “Just count your blessings that you don’t have to know the frustrations of being defined by a medical condition.”

            “After everything *you’ve* accomplished, it should almost be a badge of honor for you,” Landon said. He turned to Felix. “Though I hear that you made quite an impression, too, Rank 1.”

            Felix grinned wide. “People tended to underestimate me because they thought I couldn’t see them. I have no delusions. I’m sure once I’m up against enemies that *don’t* know I’m blind things will be much harder.”

            Landon grinned wide at him. “Don’t worry. Lydia has let us know what happens when people underestimate her. Your team might at first, but she and the rest of your upperclassmen teammates *won’t*.”

            Lydia sighed. “Speaking of the newbies – what in the world am I going to do with them and group linking? I can’t *not* link with them. I’m not going to be able to do with them what you did with my team.”

            Landon shrugged. “You’re intelligent. Use your head, Lydia. I’m not helping you on this one. You can’t rely on me for everything.”

            Felix turned to her. “What’s wrong with you linking with everyone?”

            She turned to him. “Pain,” she answered simply.

            Conner chuckled. “And that’s putting it mildly. Lydia lives in a different world than the rest of us. Experienced linkers can easily handle her, but the newbies –“

            “People in my school did not even want to link with me,” she interrupted, her voice low and soft. “I had people drop out because they did not want to deal with my pain.”

            Felix blanched. “I-is it that bad?”

            “Yes,” Landon answered.

            That was cold of the guy, he thought. Still, if he wasn’t softening the situation, that made it even more concerning. He wondered briefly if there was a way that *he* could choose to be placed in another room.

            Dammit. He immediately chided himself for such a disgusting thought. Good job, Felix. The girl has more issues than you that were thrust on her as bad as yours and you just belittle her mentally that way. He had always thought his situation was pretty tragic and people had always treated him that way. For once he was beside someone who might take the sting out of his situation a little – and could possibly understand him in a way others wouldn’t.

            Honestly, it felt a little odd to think that there was someone who might share a mutual experience into the difficulties of his life and the career path that he had chosen.

            “So, Fil!” Hugh suddenly shouted. “Mind if we ask what exactly it is that you *can* see? No rudeness of course. Just curious and so that way if I ever fight you I might know your weak spot,” he said with a laugh.”

            Felix blinked. “D-did he just call me, Fil?”

            Landon sighed. “Give it up. He calls me Lance. Choose your battles. You’ve been given your own nickname by Hugh.”

            Felix wondered privately how the heck his name could have been so warped in this guy’s mind, but… at least it was better than Lance. Poor Landon. He shrugged. “I don’t really *see* people. I can make out forms. I can see facial details barely and even then I can only make faces up to you Hugh. Any further than that and I just see that there’s *something* there, though I can barely define it as a person.”

 Hugh frowned. “So your archery skills must suck.”

 “Actually my archery is very good. I hit what I aim at – I just don’t always know what I’m aiming at,” he said with a laugh. “My archery improves significantly when I’m on my dragon.”

 “How’s that?”

 “Well for starters, there’s only one place a human is going to be on a dragon and even if it’s a blob I can still make out that it’s a dragon. But beyond that – Tsavrina. She’s my eyes. We work together. I look around when I can but if I see something strange, she is able to process it a little better than me. I mean, there are things that I still miss a lot, but I make up for them by being a fast flyer.”

 Lydia popped her fork in her mouth and munched on her food. “Which means your skills are in dodging.” It wasn’t a question but a statement.

 “Dodging and evading and getting the upperhand. My dragon is a lot swifter and she can pull off moves that others might have difficulties with. She’s also a pretty stocky dragon so she is able to easily overpower smaller dragons.” He grinned. “I love it when dragons try to get her into a Death Grip, trying to break her wings in their claws. We whirl around so fast that we catch them instead. So I wouldn’t say we *always* evade. We’re able to stand our ground a bit.”

 Lydia nodded. “Your dragon has a wider wing span that most. I saw that.” She went quiet as she chewed her food.

 Hugh was watching her intently. “God I love it when she gets that look.”

 Beside him it looked like Erica leaned forward. “Uh oh, Lydia’s thinking.”

 Landon sighed. “If she could only remain this focused when she’s up there in the skies.”

 Lydia looked up suddenly and jumped up. “I want to fly!” she shouted. “Ugg! This is so annoying!” she shouted, burying her hands on either side of her head. “I’m not going to get to fly for a whole week yet!”

 She whirled around on Felix, pointing at him. “If you and your team better shape up real quick,” she growled. “Damn newbies. This is so incredibly frustrating.” She whirled back on Landon. “How come you get to jump up into the skies and immediately start some huge war game while I’ve got to babysit.”

 Landon smirked. “How do you think I felt when I walked into your room and had to deal with you. Worse. I had to deal with *you* and your frequent insubordination.”

 She sat back down hard into her seat, glaring at her tray. “I can’t even go sparring,” she growled.

 Conner chuckled. “No. You are a Room Commander, Lydia. You have responsibilities now.”

 “This is bullshit,” she growled. “I’ve been tricked. I don’t want to be a Room Commander after all.”

 John glared at her. “You certainly fought me like hell for the points.”

 “Like I’d let you defeat me,” she said with a smirk.

 One of the twins – the one with green in her hair – leaned over and ran her hand through her hair. “Aww, our cute little over competitive Lydia. Always fighting for number one spot no matter what it’s in.”

 Lydia batted her hand away, trying to smooth her hair back down. Strands were now sticking out from her ponytail, though. “If you’re going to break down an obstacle, you gotta go all out.”

 “I was an obstacle?” John asked with a laugh.

 “No. The classes were. You were just collateral damage.”

 Several people burst out laughing at the table.

 Felix stared down at his tray, his meal completed. He looked across at her. “I’m done. Where do I go from here?”

 She looked up at him. “Go see to your dragon and make sure that she’s ok. Those tranquilizers should have worn off by now. As soon as you’re done, return to the room. Think you are ok on your own? Or do you need me to come with?”

 He shook his head. “No. I’m good. Thanks, Commander,” he said with a small bow. He picked up his tray and walked away, trying to make his way through the overly crowded room with as few incidents as possible.

#

 *“I can’t believe you attacked her.”*

 *“I will not apologize for myself! She’s dangerous. Her sort usually are. She comes near me to try to take over my mind and I will rip her to shreds.”*

 *“Stop that! What are you going to do when we start group linking with her? She’s my Commander. If this place is what I have to get through to have the life I want, then she’s the person you have to deal with to have that life with me. Look. I don’t know who she is yet, but so far everything I’ve seen is amazing. She chose* me *to be her partner. The Room Commander – the Death Slayer – chose me to be her partner. Let’s just take everything we can from her, deal with her, and surpass her. Just like every other asshole we’ve ever had to deal with.”*

 *“Li –“*

 *“Rina! You heard me. I’m your Rider and you* will *obey me. We’re partners. I shouldn’t* have *to be yelling at you to obey me.”*

Tsavrina glared at him before finally looking away. He could feel her anger. Could feel her thoughts. He was melded deeply with her mind. Far deeper than most Riders went, he knew that. He had to. Tsavrina was his eyes and he could only experience clear vision when he was that deep. It took a lot of experience and training to hold the link this deep. He was probably more experienced at the meld link than anyone else in his team.

 But it was worth it. It was an intense experience. Hovering between himself and Tsavrina. Seeing the world through her eyes. Seeing the world the way that others did but took for granted.

 He slid his hand away reluctantly, releasing the connection between him and her. The connection lost, he was once again thrown back into a world of milky vision. Even worse, it evening and the light was waning. He walked over to where he had set Tsavrina’s saddle and pulled out a small stick that was barely bigger than a pen. He pulled on the end of it and the stick fully extended. At night he was blind again. His eyes did not dilate. The world darkened for him quicker than most.

 He really did not think that he would need his walking stick, but he had regretted not having several times in the past and he really did not want to cause trouble for his Commander and embarrass himself on the first day.

 “Night, Rina,” he said softly as he stepped out.

 “Good night, Li,” Tsavrina called out softly, using the pet name she had given him.

 He tapped the stick against the ground as he walked, his left hand in his pocket. The action was rather pointless. It was not quite that dark out yet, but it was something for his hand to do and it was familiar.

 He walked in between the stables and frowned as he heard a sound. He looked up and started, his eyes widening.

 In the half light of his vision he could make out two figures. Hugh. Definitely Hugh, hunched over something – no, *someone* – small. He had the person’s back up against the wall and was kissing them deeply. The girl made a soft groan of delight and Felix instantly placed the voice: Lydia.

 Well… this was awkward. He had accidently stumbled on an intimate moment between his partner and her boyfriend. He took a step backwards, hoping to maybe duck behind one of the stables before he was noticed so as to not interrupt them.

 Hugh drew away suddenly. The sound of coughing – vicious coughing – reached Felix’s ears. Hugh laughed. “Sorry, babe. Got a little carried away, I guess.”

 It took a moment before Lydia regained control of herself – and Felix reached the edge of the stable this time. He quickly ducked behind it and out of view. Phew… he seriously did not want to be party to that awkward situation. He walked around the other side of the stable, looking back at it as he headed off towards the school, despite not even being able to see it. He smirked. They really did make a cute couple, he thought. He didn’t even have to see them to know that. He could hear it in Hugh’s voice whenever he said Lydia’s pet name.

 He hoped maybe one day he’d find a girl to love that much, too. Or maybe not. Maybe Tsavrina was the only love he needed in his life. People were usually too much of a hassle to deal with.

 Once inside the building, he closed his stick and pocketed it. The uniforms normally did not have pockets but he had ripped out the seams and adjusted them himself. It was just better if he could pocket his walking stick.

 He walked up the stairs and headed to the room with his teammates. People were already piled pretty thickly into the room. They were loud and running around talking amongst each other in excited tones. The upperclassmen all sat on their top bunks, watching them from above.

 He had barely made it to his bunk when someone grabbed his arm. “I said ‘hey’!” she shouted.

 Felix instantly recognized the girl as the one who had spoken about the Death Slayer earlier when she had noticed the tanks in the corner. He turned to her. “S-sorry, I didn’t hear you before,” he apologized.

 The girl paused. He sighed. She must have noticed his eyes. She pulled her hand away from his arm. “Umm… what the heck is –”

 “Wrong with my eyes?” He turned to her and gave her his largest most sarcastic smile. “I’m blind!” he said happily. “Half blind, actually, but who’s really focusing on the half part.”

 “Oh. Well, that answers that question.”

 “And what question was that, exactly?”

 “I was wondering why the Death Slayer had chosen *you*. I see. It’s because you’re special needs like her.”

 A bitter taste entered his mouth. He thought of popping off smart but held back. Instead he nodded. “Perceptive,” was all he said as he walked away towards his bunk. Yeah, thanks for redefining it like that. He had not been chosen as if he had some great skill or talent. He had been chosen instead because he was half blind. *Special needs?* The only one who had any special needs in the room was *you*, bitch. That brain needed some serious work.

 “Blind?” someone in the corner asked incredulously. Felix could almost see the smirk on the guy’s face though he could not see the person. “No way?”

 “Yes *way*!” Felix mocked.

 He felt people begin to enclose around him, leaning over and looking at his eyes. He hated this. Dammit! Go away!

 “And you seriously think you can be a fighter like that?” someone asked.

 “Wow. How the heck did you make it past the review board?”

 “You can’t see *anything*? Or just a little bit?”

 “Your eyes do look pretty freaky.”

 “How long have they been like that?”

 “You’re probably no good in a fight. Shouldn’t you be trying your hand at a different career?”

 “They actually gave you a dragon? I’m mildly impressed.”

 Felix sat there glaring around at the group of them. He forced himself to remain calm, though personally he wanted to burying his fist in one of their faces.

 “Hey!” a sharp voice shouted across the room.

 Everyone looked up towards the door, but Felix recognized the voice enough now to easily name the person. Lydia. He looked over at her. He couldn’t make much of her from this distance, though he could see her fists balled at her sides.

 “Ori?” she asked, walking into the room and looking over at the red haired girl.

 “They just started, Lydia,” Ori growled.

 “Was two seconds away from knocking some heads in myself,” another upperclassman growled.

 Lydia nodded. “Knocking some heads together sounds fun. Ori – you want to do the shouting?”

 Ori jumped down off her bed. “I would be delighted to, Commander.” She walked to the middle of the room. “Attention! Everyone at the end of their bunks! Stand ready!” she shouted at the top of her voice, barking out the orders.

 Felix groaned. Yeah. Put him in the spotlight. This promised to be a fun evening. Did he really actually believe that he was going to be able to make it to bed without their being an additional scene? Gods, he was more delusional than he imagined.

 Everyone gathered at the ends of their beds with the upperclass men standing off to the sides. Lydia walked across the room to a boy three beds down from him. “Nick Averies, correct?”

 “That’s me,” the boy muttered uncertainly.

 “The appropriate responses,” Lydia growled, “include ‘Yes, ma’am’, ‘No ma’am’, ‘Yes, Commander’ or ‘No, Commander.’ Understood?” she barked the last word.

 “Yes, Commander!” the boy snapped in reply.

 “According to your file you are pretty handy in a knife fight. Center of the room, now!” she snapped, pointing to alley way in between the lines of beds.

 The boy quickly stepped where Lydia had pointed. Lydia walked past him. “Knives out,” she ordered. She got a spot approximately six feet away from him. Felix watched her blurred figure as she bent down and lifted her pants leg up and unsheathed a single knife. The boy reached down and unsheathed both of his, staring uncertainly down at her.

 Lydia threw her knife up lightly into the air, flipping it and catching it by the hilt again. “I’ll repeat myself from earlier today. I am your Commander. My name is Lydia Alvincia. My dragon’s name is Tsaul, the dragon of the former Captain Townsend. My Will: Tenacity. You have probably heard of me as the Death Slayer or maybe even as the Meldling.” She glared across the room. “I have many other titles besides that. But none that I treasure and hate more than my title the Dying Girl. I have a death scent. I am terminal. Let me explain my illness. I was diagnosed when I was three years old. My lungs are deteriorated. I do not breathe the same way that you do. I cannot draw a proper breath. The fluid built up during the day that causes you to clear your throat is deadly for me. Things like strong scents, excessive heat, excessive cold can trigger an attack. I cough a lot. I spit up. The air turns against me. There’s not a single moment of my life that I do not experience pain.”

 She began fingering the knife point, lowering her eyes away from the group. “My attacks are also triggered by exercise. I spent the time that I was eight years old until I was fifteen in a wheelchair to avoid overworking myself. I have come a long way since then, but I must confess – extreme exercise, like fighting, can push me over the edge.” She raised her knife blade up at the boy across the alley. “You have until my first cough to try to cut me once,” she growled. “Let’s get started. Attack me with everything you have.”

 She stood there and the boy stood there gaping at her for a moment. “Umm… now?”

 “Did you have a more pressing engagement now? Yes, now. Attack me!” she shouted.

 The boy nodded, tensed, and then rushed her. Lydia danced to the side quickly, avoiding him. She drew her blade across the guy’s back. The boy hissed in pain. Lydia dropped down, throwing her leg out and around. She swept the boy easily off his feet. He fell forward on the ground, one of his knives sent skittering. Lydia walked up to him and placed a boot on the back of his neck, pressing down on it. “Now that you know that I’m no weakling,” she growled. “How about you come at me a little more serious this time, Nick. Fetch your knife.”

 Nick went searching for his knife. He found it and whirled around. Lydia did not wait this time. She rushed him with her single knife, closing the distance in seconds. The boy had just enough time to bring up both knifes and stop her single. The boy pushed her back, removing of the knives and attempting to catch hers in the hilt of the left one, but she had already removed her blade and was dancing backwards on light feet. Nick did not give her time to put much space between them. He leaped forward, rushing her.

 The time Lydia fell to the ground. His knives went sailing by over her head. Felix smirked. She was small – and she used it. Her knife made another cut in Nick’s leg. The fresh knew scratch began bleeding, staining the uniform with a nice red splotch.

 Nick swore. He spun around and tried to jab downwards, but Lydia had not wasted time admiring her work. She had rolled forward, actually rolling on her back. The momentum carried her to her feet. She spun around and rushed him again. The boy’s momentum was still carrying his blade downwards so he was unable to save himself as her knife cut into his upperarm.

 Instead of dancing backwards this time, though, she ran past him completely, turning when she had placed some distance between them again. Nick whirled around, furious this time. He lifted his arm and sent one of the blades flying through the air. Lydia had enough time to dance to the side before the knife hit the floor where a second ago her leg had been.

 She bent down and picked up the blade. “Are you kidding me?” she snapped. “Good job, moron,” she hissed. “You’ve just given me another knife and reduced yourself to one. Unless you know your shot is going to be accurate and actually productive, *never* release one of your knives.”

 Felix tilted his head. Something was wrong. He could hear it in her lungs. She had struggled with the sentence and she was panting heavily. A lot more heavily than she should be. There was also a strange wet gurgling sound that he could hear. He watched as she swallowed several times.

 She was weakening, he realized.

 She rushed Nick again. She held Nick’s blade loosely in her left hand – unready for the attack. She lashed out at him and Nick caught her blade on his, the hilts hitting each other. He yanked his knife and hers went sailing up into the air, wrenched out of her tiny hand. He stepped back with a grin. Lydia’s left hand raised. Nick had forgotten the blade in her left hand. She slashed downwards, opening a scratch that started from his right shoulder blade down across his chest to the left side of his stomach.

 Nick glared at her, his anger now at its peak. Roaring, he slashed out at her wildly – abandoning all rhyme or reason or tact. Lydia danced back quickly, each swing of the blade coming far too close for comfort. Then Nick screwed up. One of his swipes arced out too wide. It was just the time that she needed. Again she dropped her tiny form to the floor and buried the knife into his leg. This blow was not just a scratch. She had buried the point of the blade a little deeper. Blood immediately began pouring from the wound. Felix could not see many details but he saw could see the red blossoming wound. There was a blood but not much. The wound was not deep. Not a nick but nothing serious either.

 She jumped up and walked away, her hand over her mouth. She started coughing desperately. Nick whirled around. Felix’s breath caught. Was that asshole about to attack her with her back turned? A gasp was almost wrenched from his throat.

 But Lydia had caught the movement from the corner of her eye. Still coughing, she whirled around and caught his blade in her own. His arm snaked out and he caught her by her neck and slammed her against the bunk bed. Her tiny body was being wracked with coughs. She was completely hopeless. Nick raised his knife blade again. “I’m going to cut into that damn face of yours!” he growled.

 And then Lydia stilled. She stopped coughing. At the same time, Nick stilled too. His knife was raised high up in the air, but he had not brought it down yet. It held suspended there for a few seconds. And then the blade fell from his hand. He stumbled backwards, clutching at his chest. He was panting heavily. He started coughing hard, desperately. The coughs tore through his throat.

 Lydia dropped his second knife blade at his feet and went walking past him calmly. Felix watched as she walked past him and reached down for a trashcan. She got down on her knees and buried her head in the trashcan – and then just as suddenly as she had stopped, she began coughing again. This time with a vicious intensity. Felix looked away. Her coughs were wet and there was a whistling sound coupled with the gurgling. Every time she drew in a breath she sounded like she was fighting for it. And then he heard her cough something up. Heard something drip into the trashcan. He grew concerned but none of the upperclassmen had moved. Ori watched her sadly but did nothing to help.

 This was normal.

 That was the impression Felix got. This was normal and there was nothing that they or anyone could do for her. He looked back and he watched as she reached over to her tank. She took hold of the tubing and pulled it. The mask that she had thrown up on the bed earlier today came falling of the bed, hitting the floor. She picked it up and pressed it to her face, reaching over to the tank and making some small gesture he could not define with his sight.

 He looked back over at Nick. The boy was still having a rough go of it, but he was not coughing anything up and though his face was red, he looked to be regaining himself.

 The boy leapt to his feet finally done. “What the *hell* did you to me?” he screamed.

 No one answered. Lydia was still coughing hard, desperately gasping in whatever was coming through the mask.

 “You gave me your illness!” he roared. “How is that even possible? I thought it wasn’t catching?!”

 Lydia coughed up once again into her waste bin. She pulled the mask away and got to her feet. She was still coughing slightly, but she definitely sounded slightly better this time. She walked back over to the middle of the room. “No,” she wheezed. Her throat sounded raw. “My illness is not catching. What’s wrong Nick, did you not like that? I simply shared my pain with you. You are a Will Rider. Do you not know the difference between your own pain and the feel of another’s pain through the link in your mind? I gave you my pain.”

 The boy took a step back. “W-we aren’t on dragons…” he muttered.

 “No. No, we aren’t. I don’t need to be. As long as you share a meld link with a dragon I can enter your mind at any time through a group link, seated on dragons or not. I turn my weakness into my strength. You pushed me too far. How *dare* you attack me like that. Have you no honor? You treated me like an enemy and not a sparring partner – so I treated you like an enemy. I forced my illness on you. I fed you my pain. I have that ability.”

 She looked around the room. “I am sick. I am dying. I will never be the greatest fighter in the world. My skills rely on my own cunning and ending the attack quickly.” She pointed to Nick. “Any single one of his scratches could have been fatal. Do you doubt my abilities? Who among you in this room will have the gall to stand here and dare to tell me that because of my dying status I do not have the right or capabilities of being a Dragon Rider and a fighter?”

 No one answered.

 She walked across to one of the newbies, closing the space between them until there was barely an inch between them. She still had to look up at them, but there was a dominance in her stance that made her seem so much larger than she was. “Will you tell me? What do you think? Do you believe that I cannot be a fighter because of my illness?”

 The newbie swallowed hard and shook his head. “N-no, Commander.”

 She stepped back and walked across to another person and repeated the same thing. “How about you?” she growled. “I could die tomorrow. Do you think that because of this I should not be standing here as your Commander?” she growled.

 The second person also shook their head. “No, ma’am.”

 Lydia nodded and walked back to the front of the room. “My illness means nothing to my skill. It simply means that at the end of the day I have had to work three times harder to get where I am now than you will have to work. It means that I have to be more cunning to make up for what my weaknesses. The only thing my illness does is change my effort and determination – not my skill. While you are off having a fun time hanging out with your friends I will be out training, pushing myself past my breaking point. Does this much dedication mean that I have no right to be a fighter? What do you think Ori?”

 Ori grinned. “No, Commander. I think it means that you have more of a right to be a fighter than anyone in this room.”

 Lydia nodded. “Thank you, Ori. You’re so sweet.” She turned to Felix. He winced. “Felix Yevon. Forward,” she growled.

 Licking his lips he stepped out to the middle of the floor, stopping in front of her.

 She turned away from him once again addressing the room. “Felix Yevon is half blind. He has a disadvantage in his life that he has no control over. Does this mean that he should put his dreams away. Force them into the darkest corner of his mind where he can only pull them out and admire them as simple, silly delusions? I do not believe so. If a person has a dream they have every right to go for it. To give it their honest and best effort. What you take for granted – being given a dragon and training with your weapons – he, like me, wants it so bad that he has put in far more effort into it than any of you ever have or ever will. Will this career path be possible for him? Who knows. Maybe his effort and dedication will not be enough. However, he has as much right to make the attempt as any of the rest of you. It just means that it will be a lot harder for him. He knows that and has accepted it. *Don’t you dare dishonor that by standing here telling him otherwise!*”

 She looked around at the group, casting her eyes slowly across every face. “I am Lydia Alvincia,” she growled. “And I have taken Felix Yevon, the half blind boy, as my partner because I *know* the effort he will need. While the lot of you goof around and take your blessings for granted, we will be training and fighting. And we *will* one day surpass you.”

 Felix felt his throat swelling closed with emotion. He stared down at the tiny girl. H-he had never felt so honored in his life. Never expected to hear those words from someone else. To expect to hear the words locked in his heart spoken so plainly *by someone else*.

 Maybe he had been chosen because he was blind. Maybe he had not been chosen because of his great skill. He had been chosen because she *knew* what was in his heart and knew the lengths he was willing to go for it despite the difficulties he faced. He closed his eyes and thanked the fates. This year was promising to be greater than he had thought possible.

 And she was skilled. This pipsqueak with all her problems was a Room Commander and had just totally trashed the much bigger, stronger boy. She had put in a brilliant display. He looked down at her. He couldn’t wait to get started.

 Lydia turned and looked up at Felix and nodded. She then turned to Ori. “Let’s see how good he is. You want to give him a go. Don’t go easy on him. I want to see his full skill. See what he needs to work on.”

 Ori grinned. “Wiped yourself out pushing yourself that far, didn’t you?”

 Lydia spread her arms out wide and replied innocently. “I got pissed off. Handle this group. I’ll be watching.”

 She turned around and walked back towards the bunk bed. She threw her mask up to the top bunk and climbed up with a grunt. “Damn top bunks,” she growled. She turned around, pulling the mask on over her head.

 “Come on, Felix,” Ori said walking past him. “Knives out,” she snapped.

 Hesitation and fear instantly filled him. He took them out, licking his lips. Please don’t let him embarrass himself too bad. Please let him put in a good showing and not suffer too dramatic a defeat.

 “Ori,” Lydia barked pulling out her mask. “Walk forward slowly. Felix, tell me when she becomes too difficult to see.”

 He looked up at her and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

 He watched as Ori slowly paced backwards, one small step at a time. He watched and waited until she became a formless silhouette that was too impossible for him to make out. “There.”

 “Not too bad, then,” Lydia muttered, barely audible through her mask which muffled her words. He probably wouldn’t have heard if his hearing wasn’t a little better than most people’s. She pulled the mask away. “So if someone has ever boarded you in the past, you’ve had no problems seeing them.”

 “Yes,” he answered. “The problem comes when the start swinging the knife. I have trouble following it and the body movements. I’ve had people actually switch the blades behind their backs because they know I can’t see the weapon too well and I lose which hand it’s in.”

 She nodded and put the mask back on her face, saying nothing, giving none of her thoughts away. Felix took a deep breath and dropped into his stance. He glared across the room at Ori – or what he was sure was Ori. The girl rushed him. He danced backwards, trying to search out the knife blade. Which one was she going to attack him with? He brought his knives up quickly, just in time, catching Ori’s blade in the crossing of his. He tried to take another step back and realized he had been pushed up against the wall. Damn, he had nowhere to go!

 He kept the blade trapped in his own as he forced himself around her. She pulled out and made a swipe at him before he could get around. He rolled forward, ducking quickly. He swore as he felt a blade cut into right right shoulder.

 “That didn’t last long,” Ori muttered.

 No. No it hadn’t. His grip tightened around his blades. He felt absolutely humiliated.

 Ori looked up at Lydia. “Again?” she asked.

 “No. I saw enough.”

 He swore inwardly. He turned to her. “I-I’m not that bad!” he protested. “Let me try again and I swear I can do better.”

 “I have no doubt, Felix. I am not telling Ori to stop because I think that I have been given a good estimate of your skill or lack thereof. This exercise serves no purpose anymore. I have the answer that I wanted. To continue would do nothing but humiliate you more and make you even more frustrated.”

 “What *answer* were you looking for?” he snapped angrily.

 She leaned forward over the edge of the bed, staring down at him. “You’re afraid. You’re so afraid of screwing up that you became too panicky. You’re afraid of the weapon and your opponent. The fight had not even started and you already knew in your mind that you were going to lose. You were just trying to drag out the time and put in a good showing. You feel superior on your dragon and you show signs of an ego, but the moment that fight started you made it obvious how *inferior* you felt. The key to winning any battle is to first start off feeling that you *are* going to win. You’re right. We could continue this and maybe the next time you might win, but it still won’t take care of the problems, will it. I have my answer. I know your skill. The exercise is done. Next person, please, Ori.”

 Feeling red in the face he sheathed his blades and went to stand back at attention, anger raging through him. That damn little pipsqueak had in the space of a few minutes made it feel great and then crashed him back down, and the worst part of it – she was right. He knew it. He wanted to argue it with every part of his soul. He was *not* afraid, but… yes, yes he was. It wasn’t even the blade he was afraid of. It was the failing. And somehow, he felt that she knew that, too, though she had not said it.

#

 He was woken by two things all at once. First the sound of coughing. Choking. Next, Ori’s voice shouting, “Lights on! Everyone up! Attention! End of your beds!”

 He sat up. He could hear Lydia coughing from the top bunk above him. Could hear her spitting up. He slipped out of his bed at the same time he heard her slide out on her side. He looked over and found her with her head in the trash can. She was also rubbing her eyes pretty hard. Carrying her trash can she walked over to the middle of the room, joining Ori.

 Lights out had been an interesting experience. Lydia had set up her ‘machine’ which was really just a boiler pot with steam that somehow deliver her her medicine. Ori had jumped up into the top bunk with her and hung out with her up there for about an hour and half. Felix had tossed and turned in the blackness, hearing them talk now and again. What Lydia was saying hardly made sense. She kept muttering about dragons in her head and kept calling Ori ‘Landon’. It might have been a little funny if he didn’t feel it was so awful.

 “Alright there, Commander?” one of the upperclassmen asked.

 Lydia waved her hand. “F-fine. Just a moment,” she muttered.

 Ori nodded and turned to face the lowerclassmen, casting her eyes about. “Part of your responsibilities in this room is to clean up after yourselves!” she barked. “Anyone’s station that is found messy in the morning will receive demerit points. You will also be taught how to make your bed to regulation. Your partners will show you the proper way that we expect to see your beds made every morning.” She turned and nodded to the line of them. The group dispersed out, including Ori, going to their individual partners.

 Felix stood there waiting for Lydia. She was still busy trying to regain control of herself. He felt impossibly awkward standing there at attention, watching her as she struggled with herself. Finally she lowered her waste bin and drew in a shuddering breath. She walked over and sat the trashcan down. “S-sorry,” she muttered quietly. “Mornings are hard for me,” she mumbled, digging a fist into her eye. “I have to take sleeping pills to combat my medicine which tries to keep me awake, but it’s hard for me to keep my lungs clear when I’m sleeping.” She sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead. “And of course it’s going to be a bad tremor morning,” she mumbled.

 “Need help, Lydia?” Ori asked from across the room.

 “No,” she called out.

 She stared up at him. “This time take a moment. Just watch me and be patient.”

 She walked across to his bed and pulled off the sheets and blankets. He watched her, following her instructions as she explained how they expected the beds to be made. Now and again she would stop. Her hands would just start shaking uncontrollably and she had to pull back and pause, forcing herself to be calm again. Damn – was there anything this girl *didn’t* go through?! Just when he thought he knew all of Lydia’s problems, she had one more to reveal. Was this really the same girl that had thrashed the crap out of Nick last night with her blades. Sometimes it was almost difficult to combine the two images. Lydia the fighter and Lydia the dying girl.

 “Will you *stop* looking at me that way,” she growled suddenly whirling on him.

 He stood back and stared at her blankly. “E-excuse me?”

 “You’re pitying me,” she snapped shortly. “I can see it in your eyes. Knock it off. It’s degrading. I don’t need your pity. Just accept that I’m sick like I do. Have I *once* looked at *you* with pity.”

 He sighed, thinking of last night. “No.”

 “And don’t expect it. You’re blind. Got it. Now you want to be a fighter. I don’t give a damn how blind you may or may not be. I’m going to come at you the same as I would any other person. Treat me the same. The tremors aren’t as tragic as they seem. They are because of my medicine. I would rather have them and my medicine then not have either. They’ll be gone by the time I’m done with breakfast… sometimes, but even if they aren’t, bad days are pretty rare, and I deal with them. I could still kick Nick’s ass,” she said with a wide grin.

 Felix returned it. “I’m sure you could.”

 She reached down and ripped the blankets off.

 “Ok, now you try. While you do yours I’ll work on mine.”

 She jumped up , balancing herself on the edge of his bed. It was a little difficult to work while she was, too, but he dealt with it. Though he had a few moments where he had to fight back laughter at her constant hisses and growls that she could not reach a section she needed.

 Finally she jumped down, nodded her approval at his, and went around the room with Ori, checking everyone else’s work. Finally everyone was done.

 “Alright,” Lydia shouted. “After roll call this is your duty. Starting tomorrow you will earn a demerit every time that we rip your blankets up until you have done it correctly. Once you have been dismissed from this room your first duty is your dragon. Dragon and then breakfast. After breakfast you will report to your first class at 8am. Your partners will not join you. I don’t recommend being late. After class – lunch. You will report to the archery section today – so bring your bows. Dismissed!” she shouted.

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 She hated Hugh. Damn him. Why did he make her feel so good? He had her pressed up against the far side stall a little behind Tsaul so that anyone looking inside as they walked by would not see them. Like usual, he had her wrapped in his arms. He had pulled down the zipper to her uniform slightly and was licking his favorite spot on her neck. His right hand had traveled down to her butt, but she let him keep it there this time. Normally she would have reached around and corrected it, but this morning…

 His delight surged through her. He moved back to her mouth and forced his tongue inside. He pushed her back even harder into the wall, his hand squeezing. His passion burned through and into her, setting her on fire. Her mind was gone. She couldn’t process a single thought. All that existed was her and Hugh.

 He pulled out of her mouth before she started to cough. He rubbed her butt and smiled. “Gods, I love you, Lyz,” he breathed. He pulled his hand away and reached up, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. “I’d do anything for you, you know, right?”

 She smiled, reaching around wrapping her arms around him. “I do. Me, too. Anything, Hugh. I thank the fates every day that they placed us together.”

 He laughed. “Maybe it’s a good thing that we are in different rooms. I don’t think I would have been able to focus if you were there with me.” He sighed, his smile falling slightly. “I guess they don’t let us have weekends off here, do they?”

 She frowned and shook her head. “No, why?”

 “I’d love to take you on another date.”

 She laughed. “We need to focus, Hugh. We’re fighters now. What are you going to do when we both graduate and start receiving orders to different parts of the world?”

 He sighed. “Long for it to be over and dream of seeing you for the two months that we get off in between our terms of duty.”

 “And if they don’t sync?”

 “You’re just so full of pessimism, aren’t you?” he muttered. He reached back down and pressed his lips back to hers.

 She tried to push him away. “Hugh – I need to be going.”

 “Just a little longer,” he begged.

 “Breakfast, Hugh. And then you have classes, and you *don’t* want to be late.”

 “One more,” he begged again. He pressed his lips back to hers. His hands reached up and buried themselves into her locks of hair.

 She gave up and gave in. She reached up and wrapped her arms around him, burying them in his hair, too. When her lungs started to burn, she ignored it, trying to breathe through her nose, but it was no good. His body weight on her was just too much pressure. Gods, she hated her body with a passion.

 He pulled away and nipped at her neck, scraping her skin lightly with his teeth. His hand once again fell downwards. She swallowed, her thoughts trashed again.

 “Good morning you two,” a voice called in.

 Hugh pulled away, a curse on his lips. “Oh he is *not* doing this,” he growled. Anger immediately traveled up his body. He looked around and glared at the person standing on the other side of the stall door. Lydia leaned over to try to get a sight of the person for herself.

 Tanis was standing there with a wide, innocent grain.

 “What the *hell* are you doing?” Hugh snapped angrily.

 “Absolutely nothing,” Tanis replied innocently, his smile widening. Lydia thought, privately, that Tanis looked good when he smiled, but this particular smile looked like it was filled with a little deviousness.

 “Then go away.”

 “No.”

 Hugh frowned and glared at him and then turned back to her. “Fine. Watch then,” he said coldly. He pressed his lips back to her own, but a lot of the passion from earlier was now gone – replaced instead with anger. He was rough, not passionate.

 “So, Lydia, would you like to know who I found in Hugh’s bed one evening when I went looking for him for dinner a couple months ago?”

 Hugh froze and pulled away. His eyes wide. He whirled around away from her. “You fucking *asshole!*” he screamed. “It was nothing like that!”

 “Really? Didn’t look like it to me. She was on top of you and you really didn’t look like you were putting up that much of a protest.”

 *“It was not like that!”* Hugh shouted at the top of his lungs. *“I was helping her study when she came on to me!”* He whirled on her. “Don’t you dare listen to him, Lydia.”

 “I never know, Hugh,” Tanis pressed on. “You don’t exactly have the greatest reputation, you know. I mean, what with all the girls that you speak with on a daily basis. For example, who was the girl that you were speaking with this morning, showing her Tsauria?”

 “Are you fucking spying on me?” he shouted. “She was no one. She’s the stall next to mine!” he shouted, desperately trying to defend himself. He then stood up tall, steeling himself. “That’s it,” he shouted with finality, “I swear I’m going to punch your lights out,” he growled.

 He ran for the stall door and leaped over it, grabbing Tanis by the collar of his uniform. He raised his fist.

 “Hugh!” she shouted. “Don’t you dare!” she screamed.

 But he didn’t listen to her. His fist came down hard against Tanis’s face. The boy’s glasses went flying. Tanis stumbled back, his hand on his face where he had just been hit. He calmly pulled away from Hugh’s grasp and went off in search of them. He found them and replaced them on his face. “Does it make you feel better hitting me? Hit me as much as you want it doesn’t change a single damn thing, Hugh. For someone who tries to convince Lydia that he’s so dedicated to her, your actions certainly do not reflect your words.”

 Anger flooded through her. Both for Tanis and his cold words and for Hugh who was getting so pissed off at them. She marched to the door. “Knock it off!” she screamed. “The both of you. Grow up!”

 Tanis shrugged, opening his hands wide. “I just get tired of seeing this guy so obviously mistreating you. That’s all, Lydie. He’s nothing but a playboy prankster. The only good ideas he has is when he’s trying to figure out how to piss someone off – preferably a bunch of people at a time. Tell me, Hugh, when’s the next time one of your pranks is going to get *Lydia* hurt? How many is it going to take before you realize they are no longer funny anymore?”

 “That’s what this is about?” Hugh growled. “You’re just pissed because I got one over on you yesterday, aren’t you?”

 “No, Hugh. I don’t care that you pulled another prank on me. I care that you are now in Battle School pulling the same bullshit you have pulled since you were in middle school. I hope whatever happens, your *partner* will take care of that crappy attitude of yours. I hope your partner is smart enough to realize what a big issue it is.”

 “You talk about my crappy attitude, but you’re the one who locked me away in a closet just so you could get at *my* girl.”

 Lydia winced at the memory of that wonderful night of the school dance before she had graduated months later and come to Battle School. Tanis had invited her to go with Hugh having no plans on going – until he showed up that night in his own suit. In a fit of jealousy, Tanis had shoved Hugh into an equipment closet, locking up him.

 “Stop *claiming* Lydia like she’s some damn item that belongs to you!” Tanis shouted.

 Lydia sighed. She opened the stall door, wished Tsaul a good day, leaving it open, and walked past them – letting the two of them have their pathetic argument.

 They were *still* bickering when she sat back down with her tray and Tanis had returned with his. Tanis made it a point to sit beside her so that she was flanked on either side by the arguing boys. Hugh on her left and Tanis on her right.

 Landon joined them, followed by Conner. He raised his eyebrow up at her before sitting across from her. Hugh had just jumped up and was shouting something at Tanis. She had lost the thread of their argument a long time ago. All she knew was that Hugh was raging and Tanis was responding in his calm, cold usual way. True to his name, Tanis was an archer that knew how to hit his target with perfect accuracy.

 She rested her arms on the table and buried her hands in her hair. “I can’t handle this,” she muttered to him.

 “What the heck is going on?” Landon asked her.

 “This guy’s an asshole,” both Tanis and Hugh responded in perfect unison, pointing at each other.

 She jumped up and turned to Hugh. “I said knock it off, Hugh Oliver!”

 He glared down at her, anger in his eyes. “You’ll yell at me but you won’t yell at him?” he growled.

 “No. I won’t. Because honestly I think half of the things he says are true. But that’s not even the point. Stop letting him get under your skin so bad. Sit *down*. You are the only one who’s upset.”

 Hugh stare at her aghast. “Y-you *believe* him?”

 “Not everything but some things, like your pranks, yes.”

 Erica joined the table sitting down with a sigh. “Don’t even get me started on Hugh and pranks,” she muttered. “You have any idea what he did last night? He put tacks on the floor beside everyone’s bunk bed. John was furious with him.”

 “It was all in good fun,” Hugh protested. “Look, whatever – it’s fine. I’ll start trying to reign it in a little.”

 “A little?” Erica stared up in exasperation. “Hugh – how about a lot? One every now and again is great, but seriously…”

 “W-wait! You guys loved my pranks!”

 “Yes, Hugh,” Lydia agreed. “Some of them are funny and I enjoy them, but not when they start getting people pissed off to the point that they want to fight you. You pranked Tanis *and* pranked the whole lot of your Battle School teammates all in one day? As if yesterday wasn’t hectic enough?”

 The twins joined them, sitting down and looking at them. “Uh oh. Hugh’s in trouble for a prank?” Kylie asked.

 “No,” Hugh growled. “They are yelling at me saying that I should stop them altogether.”

 “No, Hugh. We’re not,” Lydia tried again to explain, calling together all her patience. “You don’t have to stop having fun but you just have to do it more productively. Less frequently.”

 “How the *hell* did this conversation get stuck on me and my pranks?” Hugh growled. He sat down and ripped off the foil of his breakfast. He picked up his fork and began viciously stabbing at his eggs. “Damn snake,” he growled, his eyes flicking towards Tanis for a moment.

 Tanis spread his arms wide. “Call me names all you want, Hugh, but it doesn’t change the truth of my statements. You are a prankster playboy with a violent attitude.”

 “You want me to punch you in your face again?” Hugh roared.

 “That will be just fine. Prove my point again. It was so fun the first time.”

 Lydia stood up and banged her fists into the table. “Enough! The both of you!” she screamed. “Say another word Tanis and I swear I’ll tell Tsonja to make your life a living hell for the next week,” she growled.

 “My apologies, Lydie,” Tanis said sweetly. “I just hate seeing you with someone who deserves you as little as he does.”

 Conner raised his eyebrow. “And *you* do?”

 Tanis smirked. “I know my flaws and I’m working on them. I never claimed to be perfect. I don’t care who Lydie picks in the end, but I would be remiss as a friend if I didn’t try to watch out for her and warn her before someone hurts her. Hasn’t she been through enough in her life without a crappy relationship, too?”

 “My relationship with Hugh is just fine, Tanis,” she growled.

 “Absolutely, Lydie. I’m sure it is. So, when was the last time that Hugh did anything with you other than just kissing you?”

 “I just *got here*,” Hugh growled.

 “Yes, I know, and you couldn’t wait to get your hands back on her again, could you? You’re pretty sick, Hugh. You know that?”

 Lydia jumped up at the same time that Hugh did. Reacting fast she shoved her body into Hugh’s, surprising him. He lost his footing and balance and went falling backwards off the bench. She stepped back over her seat and grabbed the back of Tanis’s collar, pulling him off of his seat. He managed to keep his footing as he was dragged over the bench. “Take a walk!” she growled. “Get the hell out of here, Tanis.”

 She turned around and grabbed his tray and shoved it hard into his stomach. Tanis took it and glared down at it. He then stared across at her. “You know what I’m saying is true,” he snapped at her. “You deserve better than that. Someone as strong and amazing as you, Lydie. You deserve someone who is just as strong and amazing. Maybe that’s not me but I don’t think for a second that it’s Hugh, either.”

 Taking his tray he whirled around and left.

 She spun back around and marched back towards Hugh who was back on his feet, wincing. “Sit!” she growled.

 He glared down at her. “And now I’m a dog?”

 “You might as well be because at this point you are hardly someone I want to even *call* my boyfriend.”

 Pain flashed through his eyes. He looked away. “To hell with you, too, Lydia,” he growled. He reached over and picked up his tray and left too.

 She sat down angrily and picked up her fork. She glared across at Landon. “Comments?” she snapped at him, daring him to say something.

 Landon stared across at her with an unreadable expression, chewing his food. “Nope. I have nothing.”

 “Liar,” she growled. “You’re *dying* to say something against my Hugh.”

 “Lydia, do not try to involve me in your argument. I couldn’t care less. Calm down. This is not the way to start your day. Your classes are going to be three times harder this morning and then you have a group of newbies that are going to need your full attention – including a blind partner. Push the drama bullshit aside.”

 She winced, looking away. He was right. Damn him, why was he always *right*?

 She drew in a deep breath, wincing. “Yeah. I still have to figure out how the hell I’m going to group link with my new team. I really didn’t need this this morning.”

 Erica scooted down and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Deep breath, Lydia. Today was just bad because Tanis hasn’t seen you for a while. He’s just looking for a way to catch up on some time.”

 She sighed. “Yes, and this was a great way to endear me to him. Damn Tanis. No, I can’t think about this right now. I have a partner and a team to think about. Personal problems to the side.” She looked up at Landon. “Actually, there was something that I wanted to ask you.”

 “Go ahead,” he said with a nod.

 She shook her head. “No. Not here. After breakfast can you meet me solo for a few minutes? I think I’m going to need some help with Felix. I’m… a little out of my league on an idea here and I wanted to be sure my idea was sound.”

 He nodded. “Of course. I’ll be happy to lend my ear to *that* problem,” he said with a smirk. “As long as it’s not boyfriend related and you’re not begging me to figure it out for you.”

 She rolled her eyes. “I’ve got this, Landon. I think I even have a few ideas about my team and my problem with connecting with them.”

 She looked down at her food and began digging in hurriedly.

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 Landon followed behind her as they stepped out into a side hall.

 “Lydia!” a voice called to the side.

 Lydia turned and found John running up to her. He stopped as his eyes rested on Landon. “Oh… I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?”

 Landon shrugged. “Just a discussion about partners, I think.”

 “Yeah,” she said with a nod. “I need Landon’s advice and help on something.”

 “Oh! No, that’s perfect. Do you mind if I join in. I need your help mostly but I might need Landon’s help, too, for my own partner.”

 A shiver went up Lydia’s body. “Hugh?”

 Landon put a hand on her shoulder. “Focus,” he growled.

 She swallowed and nodded, looking back at him.

 “Something happen?” John asked.

 Landon rolled his eyes. “Hugh and that other boy that likes her got into a heated argument today about her. What’s going on?”

 John rolled his eyes. “That asshole and his dirty pranks, actually. Lydia, I know we’ve joked in the past about them and he seems harmless with them, but –“

 She groaned burying her face in her hands. “Erica told us he put tacks on the floor,” she mumbled.

 “And a rat in one girl’s boot and then jam in mine,” he growled.

 She sighed. “H-he’s just excited that he’s here. It’s pent up energy. He’s very wired and pranks are a bit of a release for him.”

 “And fighting? When one of the guys got pissed off at him this morning, he decked him pretty hard.”

 Landon nodded. “You know what you have to do, John. The same as what us upperclassmen did to the two of you. Normally it’s just correcting weaknesses but this falls under the same category. The boy *can’t* be acting like that. Sorry, Lydia.”

 John nodded. “I know. Of course. That’s what I wanted to talk with Lydia about – and I think I’m going to need your help, too. W-we can do that right? Get others to help? I mean – I figured we could after what you did to Lydia. There’s no way that you did that by yourself.”

 Landon shook his head. “No. That wasn’t just me. Yes. If we need to, we can ask any of the upperclassmen to assist. That’s what I did. I even asked other people from the other class types to assist. Lydia’s was a special case. It rarely needs to go to that extensive of a scale.”

 John shook his head. “It still amazes me that you did all of that work in a couple of days.”

 Landon shrugged. “It’s amazing what can be accomplished when you have a group of people assisting you.”

 “One of these days you are going to give me the full list of people,” Lydia growled.

 “No. I’m not. You would just attack them. I know you too well. Now, let’s hear it. What have the two of you got in mind for your partners? Lydia, you first.”

 She took a deep breath. “My partner has an ego problem.”

 Landon immediately laughed. “No wonder you feel you’re out of your league.”

 She glared at him but continued on. “He’s *fine* with his illness. He’s the exact opposite of me in that way. Where I entered a depression with my illness, he just shrugged off people’s comments with his. It still gives him the same issues. He’s absolutely socially inept. He doesn’t even have an interest talking to people while I did – I just didn’t feel secure about it. That part is easily fixable. I think that will cure itself with time. He still has a natural curiosity about people, so that’s in his favor. Except when he’s fighting. It completely turns against him. All of that ego was suddenly *gone* as soon as I pulled him up for fighting.”

 John stared down at her. “The exact opposite of you. You were quiet and withdrawn until we got those blades in your hand.” He grinned wide. “I remember the first night you went up against Al. You had not even wanted to show your blades at your ankle. Then you stepped out there and thrashed him with a smirk on your face.”

 She nodded. “Felix’s ego… he hates to fail. I get that impression. And unfortunately he’s failed a few too many times with fighting. He *expects* to fail. I think honestly if I told him he never had to use a single knife ever again in his life he would be delighted.”

 “So, what’s in your head?” Landon asked.

 She nodded. “I think, like whatever John has in mind, I’m going to need other participants for him. My partner has a superiority complex. I don’t want to touch that. I think I can use that. I think he *needs* that. And the best way to get a rise out of someone with a superiority complex –“

 “Humiliate them.”

[will have people come up and constantly fight him. Dragging him out and slicing into him.]

 She nodded. “Exactly.” A wave of relief washed over her. That’s what she had felt and she was glad that Landon was on the same page as her. “I’m going to need other people’s help and the rest I can handle on my own with Ori. Humiliate him and build him up at the same time. Rekindle his fighting spirit not just on his dragon but also for his knife skills.”

 “Alright. Let’s hear your idea in full then. What do you want me to pass along for others to do?”

 She nodded and began explaining in detail.

#

 Felix rubbed his eyes. He stood in front of the sink with a small glass in front of him. He poured a medicinal solution from a bottle into the glass. He leaned over, pressing the glass around his eye and tipped back. He opened his eye and allowed the solution to soak his eye. He leaned forward again and removed it. He dumped the solution down the sink and filled the glass again and repeated the same action with his other eye.

 Both eyes done, he blinked several times and grabbed a cloth and lightly dabbed at the corners of his eyes to soak up the extra moisture. He picked up his things and hurried out of the restroom returning the items to his room. Lunch was almost over. The class had been fascinating… Even though he had his own books written in braille, the teacher had given him another set so that way Felix would have access to the necessary illustrations. The teacher had even given him extra handouts of the the things that were displayed on the board. There were full color charts that the teacher referenced, but Felix, in his seat, was not able to see them. Someone had redrawn smaller versions of them. The teacher had chuckled telling him to thank Lydia for the illustrations.

 Was there no end to the surprises with this girl? She had skillfully redrawn everything for him and already several of his teammates had asked to look at them for their own reference.

 He walked out of his room and headed downstairs. He frowned. There was a crowd at the bottom of the stairs. He paused in his step. Something wasn’t right. The crowd was quiet. He walked past one of them and noticed the yellow badge that she wore on her uniform. A third year, he thought. He stepped down the last step and headed towards the door.

 “Felix!” someone shouted.

 He did not recognize the voice. He turned around, tilting his head, trying to make heads or tails of the figures around him. Someone grabbed him by his neck suddenly and pulled him forward into the center of the crowd. He grappled with the hand trying to pull it off but they were strong.

 His heart began hammering in his chest. What the hell was going on?!

 He was brought in front of a large boy with thick arms and a thicker body. The guy reminded Felix of an ape. A cross between an ape and a human. He looked around. There was a thick crowd growing, more people added to it every second and him and the boy were at the epicenter of the whole thing.

 A wave of dread swept over him. He knew the signs of a fight and this had all the earmarks. He turned to the other boy. “Can I help you?” he asked low, his body tensing.

 The other boy smirked. He reached down and drew out his knives. “Heard you weren’t all that much good in a knife fight.”

 Felix winced. He looked away, his throat tightening. “What the hell is it to you?” he snarled.

 “Oh nothing much. I just thought I’d try my hand at you. Let’s see how bad I can thrash a little blind boy,” he chuckled.

 “Are you frequently in the habit of picking on those that are clearly at a significant disadvantage?” he snapped, throwing as much imperium as he could into the words. This guy was so beneath him! This was absolutely disgusting.

 “Not really, but I thought for you I’d make a special case. You think you belong here at this school? A fighter?! What bullshit nonsense and I’m going to prove it to you and everyone here.”

 Anger coursed through Felix. Where the hell was Lydia when he needed her, he thought. She’d thrash this boy in two seconds flat.

 “Well?” the boy growled. “You going to get your knives out or not?” he snapped.

 Felix swallowed. “Not. I would not disgrace myself like that by fighting you.”

 The boy shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

 Felix gasped as the boy rushed him. He was quick. Shockingly. Like a charging bull, he thought. He dodged out of the way quickly, running to the side. The boy chased him. Felix swore. The last thing he wanted was to turn this into a humiliating game of chase as he ran for his life away from this guy. He slowed his pace down, allowing the distance between them to close. Waiting for the right moment, he dropped down and spun around at the same time. The boy’s knives went sailing overhead while Felix’s fist jabbed upward and buried itself in the boy’s stomach.

 The guy winced and stumbled backwards coughing slightly. Felix winced, waving his hand painfully. That had been like hitting a brick wall, he thought – and did about as much damage to himself and the boy. He was shocked the boy had even felt it in the slightest.

 The guy stood up laughing. “Is that all you got, blind boy?” he growled. “I think you better get out those knives of yours.”

 Felix swore. He reached into his pants legs and pulled them out quickly. This was not going to end well, he thought miserably. He looked around at the faceless crowd and immediately felt himself redden both in anger and embarrassment. He was going to get thrashed in front of this large crowd and not a single person was going to step forward to stop it.

 *Where the hell was Lydia when he needed her?*

 He paused at that thought as he stood up. When had he come to suddenly depend on her? In the space of a few hours after last night… speaking up for him like that. And how degrading was that? That he needed to actually *depend* on someone.

 Dammit!

 The other boy rushed him. Felix struggled once again to look for the knife blades. He caught the glint of light off of one. He reached up just in time to catch it in the hilt of his right blade. He reacted quickly trying to lash out with his other blade at the guy’s stomach, but the guy expected the move. He caught the blade in the hilt of his own knife and twisted. The guy was so much stronger than him. The blade was wrenched out of Felix’s hand and sent sailing through the air. With nothing to block it, the boy jerked his hand and the point of his knife slashed across Felix’s chest.

 Felix stumbled back, wincing in pain, grabbing at the scratch. It was just a scratch fortunately. The guy had held back. The guy rushed him again and Felix panicked. He caught a knife blade in the hilt of his remaining knife again, but the same process repeated itself. The boy carved into his body once again. “W-what the hell are you doing?!’ Felix screamed desperately. “You cut me! Fight’s over!”

 An evil grin spread slowly across the boy’s face. “This fight’s over when I say it’s over,” he growled.

 Felix felt his heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

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 Felix felt Lydia’s eyes on him. It was a simple flick , a moment to take him in, as she stepped up towards the front of the class. He must look a mess, he thought. He had been cut in several places and he had not had time to change his uniform which was stained with blood in several places and cut. He had managed to somehow plow through the crowd and out the door after having been carved into several more times. He could still hear the peals of laughter in his ears. Could still feel all those eyes on him. Lydia’s did not help. He felt absolutely humiliated.

 “*What great words of wisdom would have to offer for this situation, oh great leader?*” he snapped in his mind. Just like him? She knew what he would be going through? What bullshit. She could handle herself in a fight. He couldn’t. She was still capable of being a fighter in every sense of the word. Once he was off of his dragon he was *nothing*. Just a blind boy. He bet if him and that bully were up in the air the situation would be completely reversed. *He* would be the cutting into him with Tsavrina.

 His grip tightened on the bow in his hand. He couldn’t wait for the class to get started. He was better at his bow. It was still incredibly difficult, but he needed the build up after his humiliation.

 Lydia began talking and pairing them up. She began going through instructions on what targets to aim for when they were in certain formations – and then the fun began. “Aim! Shoot! Remember, make your shots count. Today is not about speed. Show me your accuracy.”

 Felix lifted his bow. He narrowed his eyes pulling back on the string. It was difficult seeing the target at this distance, but it was not impossible. It was a circle. He did not need to see the individual rings to know where the middle was. The middle was all he needed to be concerned with. He pulled back on his bow and released his arrow. He reached down for his quiver, pulling out another arrow and sliding into place in one quick easy movement that had come from hours of practice and practice and more practice.

 “Felix!” Lydia’s voice snapped. “Third ring shot.”

 He froze and turned to her. “E-excuse me?”

 “I said. Third. Ring. Shot,” she answered, emphasizing each word individually.

 He winced and looked back at the target. “I don’t understand. I can easily pull off a bulls eye shot,” he argued.

 “So you can kill your opponent, but maybe we need to shoot him out of the sky but keep the Rider alive for interrogation,” she suggested. “We need him *wounded* not dead.”

 He swallowed, his anger rising. Hadn’t he already suffered enough humiliation for one day? “I can’t see the rings,” he muttered.

 “It’s easy,” she snapped. “The third ring is approximately two inches in. You can see the edge of the circle, correct?”

 He raised his arrow considering her words. He aimed adjusting his shot and considering the position and where two inches might be. He could see the red and white colors of the target but the longer he stared at it the more the colors blurred together. He could barely make sense of it. He pushed that to the side. He studied the edge of the target and estimated where two inches might be. When he was sure, he released his arrow.

 “No bad,” Lydia said approvingly. Just slightly off the mark by a breadth too far to the right. “Cease fire!” she shouted to the rest of the class. “Go up and take a look at you shot, Felix. Learn from it.”

 He nodded to her and walked up to examine it. The closer he strode to it the more it came into focus. It was still an impossible mesh of colors – red and white was an impossible mix for him to define, but up close he could make it out. His arrow was on the exact line in between the third and second rings. Just a hair further to the left and it would have been perfect.

 “It’s like you said,” she explained. “Even on the back of a dragon it’s pretty obvious where a Rider is going to be. Don’t focus on trying to define sights – go for distances. How many inches from a dragon’s body behind their neck do you think you should aim? That’s the idea I want you to have in your mind when we get up into the air. I’ll create a chart for you with space distances for each of the rings tonight and you can memorize them. Tomorrow we’ll give this exercise a new try and see if we can’t get you to hit every single ring on command. It’s great that you can hit a perfect bulls eye. Let’s see if we can enhance your brilliant shooting ability to hit *anything*.”

 He nodded. “Thanks, Commander.”

 A thrill of excitement surged through him. No one had ever bothered with this before. All the teachers had been fine with him hitting a bulls eye. It had been enough and he had never bothered with anything else, but getting up into the skies it wasn’t so easy, even if he did rely slightly on Tsavrina’s sight. It would be nice in its own way to not have to depend so much on Tsavrina. To regain what was supposed to be his natural position as the Rider so that Tsavrina could focus on her position as the *dragon*.

 The afternoon progressed similarly. Shot after shot hit his targets. Now again Lydia would call out different rings with different distances – and he would shoot at them with varying degrees of accuracy.

 It was heading towards the end of the day when Lydia gave the command for Ori to round every back up. She muttered some quick instructions that were too inaudible for even his ears to hear.

 “Alright!” Ori shouted into the air. “Newbies form a circle, face inward,” she commanded.

 All sixteen of them obeyed the command. Felix noticed some curious looks passed among the second years. Whatever was going on was not normal, he thought, as he placed his bow beside him with his quiver. Minutes later Lydia stepped into the circle and looked around at the group of them.

 She took a deep breath – well, as deep as she could take, he amended in his mind. He could also hear a slight whistle sound in her lungs. He wondered, briefly, how much pain she was feeling at the moment. Whatever pain she was feeling she didn’t show it on her face.

 “So, let’s put aside the fact, for a moment, that I am your Commander. We are Will Riders. Our breed is the only dragon race in the world that can share a group link. In addition to reaching into our dragon’s minds to take pain, we are able to take the pain of each other. We are able to take pain, feel their emotion, and pass orders easily amongst each other. There is a closeness that we are able to share in that other dragon armies do not experience. And we make the most of this fact. Our meld link is what makes us the most powerful army in the world.

 “The first thing that we are taught, that you have been taught, and should know instinctively by now – is that we take pain. We share it and divide it. If there is something wrong with one of our teammates that could impede their abilities to fight, we draw it out. Your skills with this are subpar. You have been taught rudimentary basics in your classes at school. This year your abilities will be enhanced. However, *today* you are newbies. Starting a week from now we will be on our dragons and you will instinctively group link with our team – those around you, the upperclassmen… and me. You will reach in instinctively for my pain to take it – and you will find it. You will experience my illness just as you saw Nick do yesterday when I forced it on him.”

 All eyes turned to Nick who blanched, a sick look on his face.

 “He will no doubt tell you that the pain I feel is no joke. It is not just the pain, either. The pain is the easy part. What you will feel in your lungs and being unable to breath is the hard part. Going through school I had teammates drop out because they could not deal with me. People who were just as skilled as you. It is *not* your pain. It is manageable. I have an entire team now that has learned how to manage it. Once you have built up the skill it is ignorable as with all the rest of the pain that will be forced onto you in the future.

 “Last year my group had to be thrust into the experience one at a time over the course of a month. We cannot do that with you. Next week I will *need* to link with you. Therefore the same technique cannot be used. Instead, I will be doing something else entirely. I am a Meldling. You know this. I am able to enter your minds through a group link with or without dragons. I am going to be using this power to assist me here and now with you.”

 She licked her lips and closed her eyes. She stood there for a moment, clearly thinking things through one last time. “What I am going to be doing is feeding my pain to you slowly over the course of these next few days. We will start today. I will create a group link with you now and give you a bare margin of my pain. It will last with you. You will go about your activities as you normally would. This time tomorrow, I will feed more of my pain to you and the process will repeat until finally you all share in my complete and total pain and will be used to it by the time we mount our dragons for the first training session.

 “The key to remember,” she continued, “is that this is *not* your pain. Learn how to push it to the side. Learn how to deal with it. This is a necessity. There is no telling in the future *who* your team may be. Consider for a moment General Cassings himself. He experiences pain as real as mine. I experienced it my own self for a while. Would you turn down the chance to be on his team if invited simply because you could not handle his pain?”

 She looked around and several people shook their heads. She nodded. “I thought not. If you have any very real reservations about what I am going to do, please voice them now. I will hear them out and consider them. You will not be punished.”

 Everyone remained quiet, even Nick who was still standing there with an ugly expression on his face. “So we may all concede to this?” she asked. Several nods. She smiled at them with approval. “Good. You all may make wonderful Will Riders yet. So, shall we get started. Now, you’ll have to patient with me. I’ve never held a group link for this long and to do what I’m going to do. This is a new experience. If something falters for a moment don’t panic or get concerned and I will do what I can to block your thoughts from each other so that there’s no invasion of privacy, but if something slips through I do apologize.”

 A girl smirked beside Felix. He looked over and realized it was the same girl from yesterday that he had over talking about Lydia. “This is actually kinda exciting. I mean, not the pain part, but to experience the group link like this.”

 Lydia smiled at her. “I’m glad that you are thrilled about this in your own way, Allie. Maybe that will be enough to push you through. Just keep it in your minds: this is not your pain.”

 He watched as Lydia closed her eyes and went silent and still for a moment. Barely a minute had passed when people around him began to make small sounds of surprise. Nick even grunted. Felix waited but felt nothing until one by one, all fifteen of his teammates had a disgusted expression on his face. He looked across at Lydia who opened her eyes frowning. She shook her head. “Felix… your dragon closed her mind off to me. She’s going to be difficult. We’re going to have to talk to her directly. This moment aside, I can’t have her closing herself off to me once we get up to the skies. I can force myself into her mind but I would rather not do that her if I can at all help it. That’s exactly the sort of experience she is dreading. So once class is dismissed I’ll come with you when you do your chores.”

 Felix winced and inwardly cursed Tsavrina. Because of his dragon he was now singled out – as if he needed any more of that!

 He looked around. The girl named Allie had her hand up to her chest, her hand balled around the fabric. “T-this isn’t even all of it?” she muttered.

 “Not even a third,” Lydia said.

 “It’s not even about pain,” another boy muttered. “It just feels… so hard to draw in a breath. And this is how you *live*, Commander?”

 She shrugged. “Today’s a good day, too. I’m glad. I hope you do not have to experience a bad day. I know when I take my medicine I’m probably not going to be able to hold the link. I might not reconnect it until after my normal morning routine. That’s usually worse than normal. No need to make you experience *that*. That’s not what this is about. I just need to speed your education along with the meld link. So just consider this a bit of a crash course. If any of you experience any difficulties, simply speak it out loud in your mind. Your link is always with you, even if you can’t feel it. Simply reach into that same place. It will be there and I will be able to hear you there. Alright – class dismissed!”

 Felix watched as everyone picked up their bows and quivers and began walking off the field towards their stables. He stood there and sighed. “I’m left out again,” he muttered softly.

 Lydia sighed. “Let’s go see what we can do about that,” she muttered.

 Felix did not wait for her. He spun around on his heel and stomped off towards his stable. Anger was coursing through him. Like he didn’t have enough difficulties in his life without his one true partner making things even worse by blocking out his one ticket to possibly making things work for him!

 He entered the stable and marched towards the stall. “Rina!” he growled. “You damn dragon!”

 He threw open the stall door and marched in. He strode up to the dragon who was backed up against the wall looking for all the world like an abused animal waiting to be chastised and beaten again.

 “You have a lot of bloody nerve!” he shouted at her.

 “I *will not* tolerate that woman in my mind, Li!” the dragon roared.

 “She’s part of our team! What are you going to do when we get up in the skies with her.”

 “I’m not *doing it!*” the dragon roared even louder, shaking the walls of the whole building.

 “You *will* do it. This is the best shot that we have to achieving what we both want. Or maybe what I need is another dragon,” he said. The last sentence he spoke in a low voice, very slowly, emphasizing the last two words.

 Tsavrina crumpled, laying down in the dirt at the back of the stall, her head hung low. “You wouldn’t…?” the dragon whined.

 The sadness that accompanied the words tore at his own heart. He wanted nothing more than to run up to her and hug her and apologize, but he wouldn’t. No. He needed to do this. To stand firm and unrelenting. He was not going to let *anything* beat him, not until he had given it all that he had.

 “Felix,” Lydia’s voice called. “Don’t brow beat her like that. That is not how I want to handle this.”

 He turned and watched Lydia as she walked across the stable and unlatched all of the stalls one by one. She nodded a few apologies to other Riders who were in there, asking them if she could borrow their dragons a moment. Most almost seemed to recognize Lydia on sight and smiled, nodding their approval.

 One by one the dragons began to come over to his stall and laid themselves out in the middle of the aisle. It was… an alarming sight. All of those dragons together in a huddle. Even more disconcerting, Tsaul entered the stable a while later and laid at the head of the group, wishing everyone, including Felix, a good evening.

 Lydia walked over and petting her dragon lovingly. She sat down on the ground, cradled up against him. The dragons pulled closer to her. She reached her hand up and patted a few of them. “Tsavrina,” she called gently. “Come out here, love.”

 “I don’t want to,” the dragon growled.

 One of the dragons looked over and stared into the stall. “Oh do please!” it begged. “No reason for this nonsense. Lydia is a good person. Come out here. We will vouch for her.”

 Felix swallowed stepping out of the way, unsure of where to go. There was a small crowd of Riders amassing around with smiles on their faces, chuckling. One of them laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Watch this, kid,” he spoke. “Lydia’s at it again. Have you ever seen anything as incredible as this?”

 Felix swallowed. He could hardly make out much of anything. Just a pack of dragon-shaped blurs with a Lydia-shaped one sitting among them. Still… what he did see and comprehend was amazing.

 Tsaul snorted. “No reason for this defiance, young pup. Come out here. Talk with us. Talk with my Rider. I can understand your trepidation, but I assure you, my Rider is honorable. A few months ago she was forced to meld with a horrific dragon. Lydia fought that dragon tooth and nail. Come out here. Connect with my Rider’s mind and see her for yourself all her memories. I will share them.”

 “There is no reason to fear this Meldling,” another dragon said. “She respects us. Come out here. We will answer all the questions you have and share whatever knowledge you wish to know about this small Rider.”

 “Please, Tsavrina? If not for me, then for your Rider, Felix?” Lydia called in.

 Felix blinked as Lydia looked over at him and waved him over closer to her. The man behind him gave him a gentle push. “Go on, boy,” he laughed. “If you’re afraid, how do you think your dragon is going to handle this.”

 Felix stared across at him. He wasn’t afraid! … Not really. Ok, maybe a little, he thought miserably as he entered the crowd of dragons, struggling to find a safe place to put his foot as he stepped around and through. He swallowed as he approached Lydia who patted the ground beside her. He sat down at the spot. “C-come on, Tsavrina,” he said quietly, calling over to his dragon.

 Slowly… step by step Tsavrina walked out of her stall and approached the gathering of dragons. She hung her head low, her tail not much higher. She lay down at the outskirts of the group.

 Lydia turned to Felix. “May I touch her, please?” she asked him.

 He blinked and nodded. “O-of course.”

 She nodded and stood up and crawled over the backs of two dragons to get to Tsavrina. She held her hand out, inviting Tsavrina to touch her. “Come on, Tsavrina. Connect with me for a moment. Look at my memories. If you see something that you do not like we do not have to do this, but I think you would hurt your Rider very badly. There’s so much that I want to do to help him and you. Both me and Tsaul want to see you two do great things. I think you can. I think you are a brilliant pair and I can’t *wait* to fly with the two of you. I bet you’re going to give me and Tsaul a hard time,” she said with a laugh.

 Felix felt Tsaul sniff behind him. “Please,” he growled. “A pup as young as her. She still has a few many years to gain on me, but I know potential when I see it. This dragon reminds me of my mate Myrillia.”

 Lydia stared over at him and laughed. “She does, doesn’t she!”

 “M-Myrillia?” Felix asked uncertainly. “What dragon is that? The name sounds vaguely familiar.”

 “Will’s dragon, of course,” Tsaul answered as if that were the most obvious answer in the world.

 Lydia smiled. “General William Sanders. His dragon is Myrillia. Tsaul’s mate.”

 A shiver of excitement swept through Felix. He leaned forward. “My Rina reminds you of that dragon?” he gasped.

 Tsaul snorted indignantly. “As if I would have reason to lie about my mate.”

 Tsavrina raised her head. “What’s a General?” she asked.

 Tsaul shook his head. “The heck if I know, but the humans seem to find him a very important person. I don’t understand. He’s always been Will to me. A respectable Rider. Nothing like my Adrian, of course, and definitely does not hold a candle to my Lydia. Lots of humans know his name, though. Your Rider could be like that someday. I can tell these things. I have been with enough humans. Perseverance is a good quality. I much prefer Tenacity, of course.”

 Tsavrina snorted. “Overrated. A tenacious person just exerts too much pessimism into a situation and works far too hard. Perseverance is by far better. They don’t try impossible tasks, but the ones that they do take they excel in and are not easily defeated.”

 “Yes but obstacles are what make strong Riders, and a tenacious person tries more of them.”

 “But while persevering person does not take so many of them, the ones they take they excel in. The energy is put to more practical places.”

 Another random dragon snorted. “I don’t know what the two of you are arguing about. Defiance is by far the better Will.”

 Another shook its head. “Hardly! Intelligence!”

 Tsaul chuckled. “Cunning is a good secondary trait. Yes, both my Adrian and Lydia have that in spades. Felix’s secondary trait is Duty followed by Wit. Not quite as good but –“

 “Not quite as good!” Tsavrina growled. “And your human’s Cunning and Diligence is what you think excels? What ignorance,” she snapped. “What a horrid combination. A diligent tenacious human. What a redundant combination. As if she didn’t try to force herself through enough obstacles already she applies even more force. Cunning at least saves her and gives her fighting chance to at least apply some intelligence at it.”

 “I think they are both horrible combinations,” another dragon muttered.

 Tsaul turned and glared at it. “Like you would know. Valiance? A horrible disaster. Always the first to jump into the fray. Too high of a mortality rate.”

 “Tsaul!” Lydia gasped. “That was rude! Apologize.”

 “I will *not*,” he growled. “As if these young pups have seen battle yet. As if they would know.”

 The other dragon stood up and growled. “Yes, please. Indulge us with the story how your Tenacious, cunning, Rider Adrian *survived*.”

 Tsaul started to growl low. Felix felt his heart beginning to hammer inside his chest.

 “Enough! All of you!” Lydia shouted. “Tsaul be still. You dishonor yourself.” She turned back to Tsavrina. “Perseverance, duty, and wit? Sounds like a winning combination to me. However, if you hold him back, how can he excel? I want him to succeed. He’s my partner now. Tsavrina, I want both of you to succeed. I want to succeed, too. I want to be able to command others, to be able to teach them, and mold them into more great people. I think I can do a great a great job for your Felix. I’m probably the best chance that he’s got. I will give you a dragon’s oath that I will not enter your mind *ever* without your permission unless it has to do with the safety of your Rider. I don’t even like doing it, but while I have this gift, if there’s some good that I can do with it, I’m going to make the best of that opportunity. I need to be able to connect with you now and in the future to help Felix and so that Felix can help me. Please. What can I do to gain your confidence?”

 Felix watched as Tsavrina turned to Lydia and glared at her. Lydia immediately held her and up again in a gesture to let the dragon know that she wanted to pet it. Tsavrina lowered her head and allowed Lydia to reach up and pet her. “You will take a dragon’s oath?” Tsavrina growled.

 “I will.”

 “Understanding, human, that if you break it, not only will I attempt to kill you but so will other dragons?”

 Felix felt Tsaul start to growl behind him. “Lydia…”

 She looked across at Tsaul and shook her head. “I will do it, Tsaul. I, Lydia Alvincia, take a dragon’s oath, that I will not force myself into Tsavrina’s mind without her permission *unless* it has to do with the safety of her Rider Felix Yevon.”

 Felix watched his dragon tilt her head. She regarded this for a moment before nodding finally. “Very well,” his dragon growled. “I, Tsavrina, accept Lydia Alvincia’s dragon oath.”

 Lydia grinned and jumped up to her feet. “Alright. Settled. Now, I need to get into your Rider’s mind. I have an illness and I need to feed him my pain slowly so he can adjust. Do you mind terribly, Tsavrina?”

 “Do whatever you need human,” the dragon growled. “If Felix accepts I will, too, but the moment he has a problem I *will* close my mind to you.”

 “Accepted,” Lydia said with a nod.

 She climbed over the dragons and walked up to Yevon. She held out her hand and he took it. She helped to pull him up. She looked around at the other dragons. “Thank you everyone!” she called out. “You are all so sweet. It was an honor as always.” As she spoke she went up to each of the dragons and patted them on their heads even as several Riders walked up and reclaimed them.

 Felix turned to Tsaul. “That was incredible,” he said. “Is there anything Lydia *can’t* do? I’m starting to feel a little jealous here.”

 Tsaul chuckled. “I tell all Riders that obstacles are what make strong willed Riders, and Lydia has experienced more than her fair share. Because of it she now shines so bright. Do not feel *jealous*. That’s just a discredit. You would not want to go through what she has or is. You have your own obstacles that will make you into the sort of Rider you need to become. Work through them and you will doubtlessly shine just as bright as my Lydia one day.”

 Felix nodded and stared across at Lydia. “I will. I *will* one day be just as good if not better than her.”

 The dragon laughed. “Good luck with that one boy. If you are setting a goal, that is not a bad one. Don’t let her hear you say that, though. Lydia does not see herself the way we see her. You will just make her feel uncomfortable.”

 Felix walked across to the small girl. She turned and looked up at him and nodded. “Alright, now for the fun part. You ready to take on a piece of my pain?”

 “Yes, ma’am,” he answered with a nod.

 She nodded and turned around walking away. Felix gasped as a pressure suddenly appeared on his chest. He swallowed and winced. He reached up and rubbed at the spot. It wasn’t painful but it was terribly uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and struggled with the link that he could feel in the back of his mind. He tried to force it to the side and remind himself that this was not *his* pain.

 He turned back to Tsavrina’s stall and groaned. He was going to have to do his chores like this, he thought miserably. Maybe this had not been such a fantastic idea afterall. He heard Tsaul behind him get to his feet and walk out after his Rider. He looked over and watched the pair. This was just a piece of her pain? … Yeah, this was not something he felt he wanted to be jealous about. If this was what she experience then it was no wonder she shone so bright.

 He reached over and picked up the pitchfork that he had leaned against the wall and got started, struggling with the link and the cleanup. And then he thought miserably… Lydia was experiencing even more than this and was cleaning up her own stall. How the *hell* did she manage it? No wonder her Will was Tenacity. She would need to be tenacious just to do this simple task!

 And he would persevere.

#

 Lydia walked out of the mess hall. She looked across at Al and could see the crowd beginning to gather. She blinked. “You’re going to have another go at him?” she asked her Room Lieutenant. “You cut him up pretty bad before practice.”

 Al smirked. “Best to not let up on the first few days. Humiliate the heck out of him right before bed so it stays on his mind for the rest of the night. Did he say anything to you?”

 She shook her head. “Not a word. Ugg, you guys are horrible,” she muttered. “I wasn’t thinking you’d do anything at least until tomorrow. That’s when Landon started mine.”

 Al chuckled. “Get it started early, and in Landon’s case he had all that copying to do. Yours took some time to prepare. I still think him ordering those flowers were a nice touch.”

 She winced as she recalled the funeral arrangement of lilies that Landon had once purchased and sat on her dresser. She sighed. “I hate doing this,” she muttered.

 “But look at how much it helped you. Helped me, too. My experience still hurts like hell in my mind but we got through it. You better get up there. I think John is waiting for you. I saw Landon and Conner head up that way themselves. Plus I don’t want you to be around when Felix gets out here.”

 She sighed and nodded. “I… I really don’t like what John has planned,” she muttered miserably. “Hugh… he’s so precious to me.”

 “That’s *why* it needs to be you, Lydia. You think if they tried any other sort of punishment it would get through to that guy?”

 She swallowed. “I don’t want to hurt him,” she said softly.

 “He certainly has not shed a single tear over that experience you had in your sophomore year when those boys attacked you because of his pranks. Lan’s still working on you with that one, isn’t he? You still freak out pretty bad when someone comes at you from behind.”

 She buried her face in her hand. “Y-yeah…”

 “Get up there,” he ordered.

 She closed her eyes. A tear slipped out. She chided herself as she reached up and wiped it away. She tore through her mind trying to figure out something – *anything –* that was a better suggestion or strategy.

 She could think of nothing.

 Landon had not been able to think of anything better.

 John’s idea was ridiculously, unavoidably, sound.

 She turned to the stairs and began the upwards climb to her floor, dreading every single step that brought her up closer to the barracks – brought her closer to Hugh.

 Steel, Lydia. Become steel. That’s what you will need to be to get through this night. That’s what Hugh is going to need to see.

 She had no sooner reached the last step when she looked down the hall way. Landon and Conner were standing there with another bulky looking third year beside Conner. Landon was leaning up against a wall but he immediately stepped forward as soon as his eyes fell on her. “Ready, Lydia?”

 She looked across at John who was standing there, too. “C-can’t we wait for tomorrow? M-maybe this is unnecessary. Hugh’s just… he was just excited yesterday.”

 John glared at her. “Lydia. He got into a fight this afternoon with two of the upperclassmen. Just for the sheer hell of it. I think he just wanted to see if he could take them on. In class he’s obedient to a fault. He listens to my instructions and what’s more he’s willing to learn even more. The *moment* I ended the class it was like a switch flicked inside of him. He got this wide smile, walked over to them and picked the fight. I watched every second of it. I think Hugh’s a fantastic person and a friend, but he *can’t* be acting like this. Maybe he can manage to endear himself in some way to his team which is important, but it’s also important that anyone else he comes up to will also accept him. We don’t get to choose our teams. What if in the future he picks a fight with someone and then he gets put on the same team as the guy? Do you think that’s going to be a great fighting combination?”

 She sighed and hung her head. “No. But – you should see him when we went out to town. Everyone knew him and loved him.”

 “Because he didn’t go out of his way to piss them off like he’s doing us. He gets a kick out of it and he tries to draw people into it. Which is great – except for his victims. The mouse in the boot was fine, maybe a little funny. The jam in mine was *not*. And I can’t think of a single person who appreciated the tacks. Even Erica got mad at him for that one. I don’t want to curb his fun attitude but if he can’t do it in a responsible manner it’s better that he doesn’t do it at all.”

 Lydia sighed and nodded. “I know and I would be lying if I didn’t say that I feel the same way, but… isn’t this a bit extreme?”

 “Then tell me in your heart, Lydia, do you feel that Hugh would stop if you just asked him to? If you say yes and truly believe that – we won’t do this. You think I want to do this to you?”

 She closed her eyes. No. She knew it would not be that easy for Hugh. He was rebellious. He had told her his horror stories as a youth. An orphan whose last name was probably not even correct because someone couldn’t have been bothered with it. An orphan who could not approve of any family – broke their things and rebelled. An orphan that would run away, and choose to break into stores and trashcans in search of food. Just because he did not want to accept any one. His ‘crappy attitude’ as he called it himself. Deep down… Hugh probably knew that his attitude still needed a lot of work.

 And maybe this would be trigger he needed.

 But the fall out? What then? How bad would things get before they got better? She wanted to be there for him but that was not the role she was being given. No. That was not a role she could choose to have. She was probably the only thing in the world that might convince Hugh to change.

 She swallowed and shook her head. “No. It has to be me,” she spoke miserably. “But… what if… I mean… I love him so much.”

 “You can refuse, Lydia,” Landon spoke softly. “You can refuse and maybe we’ll get lucky and his attitude *might* turn. Or maybe this time next year he will be asked to leave.”

 She drew in a sharp breath. “T-they wouldn’t do that! He’s too good to not be here!”

 “It’s three demerits for fights, Lydia!” Landon shouted. “Is that what you want to happen? For John to whittle away at those points until Hugh is kicked out? Your choice, Lydia. Are you just going to play the part of the supporting girlfriend or are you actually going to play the part of a *Commander*? One of your troops is acting up, Lydia. What are you going to do?”

 She drew in a deep breath. Girlfriend or Commander. What part was more important? What part would Hugh want her to choose? She remembered one night that Landon had asked her a question similar to this. If she had to do to Hugh what Landon had done to her would she do it? Her answer had been clear that night.

 She nodded. “Let’s do this.”

 John nodded. “I’ll enter first. Let me get everyone at attention and call him forward. Lydia, wait until Hugh’s been secured before you walk in.”

 Conner cracked his knuckles. “This is not going to be easy. That guy is strong.”

 Landon groaned. “You’ve no idea. You’ve not been the one on the other side of those fists, and I don’t think either time he has put his full strength into those blows.”

 The third upperclassman stared across at them and grinned. He was a thick guy with a chest like a barrel. “He going to be a toughy, huh? Think we should call in someone else?”

 Landon shook his head. “No. Just get him to his knees and his arms around his back. I’ll secure his wrists and his ankles. After that he shouldn’t present much of a problem.”

 “Make sure those ropes are tight,” Conner said to him. “I really do not want to have Hugh escaping on us. I don’t think he will hold back this time if he takes a swing at us. Lydia’s already told us he’s capable of one hit knock outs. I’d rather not wake up in the hospital ward tomorrow if I can help it. And for the love of gods do not forget to remove his knives.”

 John shook his head. “I’ll do that. I’ll ask him for his knives when I call him to attention. Lydia – stay out of sight!” he barked. “If Hugh sees you he will definitely know something’s up. The only thing we are going to have going for us is the element of surprise and him thinking that this is not as serious as it’s going to be.”

 She nodded miserably, not trusting herself to speak. She couldn’t stand this conversation. Being an accomplice to assaulting her boyfriend.

 All four of the guys looked at each other and nodded. John lead them through the hall heading towards the barracks where his team stayed in. She stopped slightly down the hallway, choosing a spot where she could hear but could not see or be seen. John looked back at her and nodded his approval. “I’ll call you when we’re ready for you.”

 Landon, Conner, and the other boy stopped outside the door, too, staying out of sight. Landon was playing with two lengths of rope in his hands.

 John walked inside. “Everyone at attention!” he growled, his voice reaching all the way out here. Lydia felt her stomach twist into knots. “At the end of your beds! Now!”

 There was scuffling inside and the chatter had ceased.

 “Hugh Oliver, front and center,” John growled.

 Lydia pressed her back to the wall and slid down it. She wanted to cover her ears and vanish. She did not want to be here!

 “Knives,” John’s voice echoed out into the hall.

 In her mind she could see Hugh with a wide grin, leaning over and pulling up his pants legs and pulling out his beloved blades.

 “Hand them over,” John said.

 A frown. There would be a frown of curiosity now. Hugh was intuitive – even more so than her. With that order he was beginning to suspect something, but he would comply. John was his Commander. Hugh would not argue against that, no matter how many alarm bells might be going off in his head.

 Seconds later John walked out the door way. He threw the knives to the side and nodded at the three upperclassmen. Conner and the other upperclassman rushed in, followed by Landon.

 “Hey!” Hugh shouted, alarm in his voice. Lydia could hear a brief scuffle – but that would be all it would be. Hugh would be surprised but not completely suspicious. No fear. He might try to fight a little but he would not put any real strength into it, curiosity probably winning over. Curiosity and trust – because why would these people want to hurt him. He hadn’t exactly *done* anything. And these were his schoolmates, and he would recognize Conner and Landon. Even being tied up by them he would still hold a margin of trust.

 Tears slipped out of her eyes. She wiped them away and got to her feet. Steel, Lydia. Do not betray the experience with tears. It was all or nothing. She had agreed to do this so she would be committed. Fully and completely. Anything else would just be a disgusting betrayal to all parties involved.

 She stood up and waited.

 Minutes passed until finally John stepped out into the hallway and nodded. “Lydia.”

 She drew in a deep breath and walked forward. There was a knife in John’s hand now. His own knife. It gleamed viciously.

 She walked into the room, brushing past John through the doorway. She looked down at Hugh on the floor. Landon had done a good job tying him up, she thought. His wrists were tightly bound behind his back in two loops and then into one. There would be no way for Hugh to slip out of that. He was also on his knees and his ankles had been secured in a similar manner. Conner had his arm under Hugh’s left arm, while the other upperclassman had Hugh’s right, both of them struggling to hold him in place as Hugh fidgeted.

 Hugh looked up at her as she walked into the room.

 Now there was fear on his face. Something was wrong. Something was really wrong. That’s what would be going through his mind right now. He was tied up with two upperclassmen hold him back and his Lydia had just walked into the room.

 “Lyz?” he asked, his voice tight. He looked between Conner and the other boy. “What the hell is going on?” he growled.

 Lydia kept walking further into the room. Her eyes met Erica’s for a moment. Erica gave her a questioning look. She closed her eyes not wanting to see Erica. She walked until she was a about a foot away from Hugh and then turned.

 John who had been walking behind her also stopped and turned around to Hugh. She watched as John’s hand tightened on the knife blade in his hand. He took a deep breath. “Hugh Oliver, we have a serious matter to discuss with you. I want to ask you why you decided to attack Nancy and Thomas after class today?”

 Hugh frowned. “Attacked? I wouldn’t call it that. It was just a little sport. I was just having some fun is all.”

 John looked across to two upperclassmen that Lydia did not recognize. “Fun? Is that what the two of you would call it.”

 The girl shook her head, glaring down at Hugh. She had a nice knife cut across her face. “Hardly,” she growled. “He went up to us and challenged us. We barely had enough time to try to react and calm him down before he took a swing at us. I don’t know who was having ‘fun’ but it certainly was not me.”

 John again turned back around to Hugh. “I’m asking you again, Hugh. Why did you feel it necessary to attack two of your *teammembers*?”

 Hugh shrugged. “Alright, maybe it was a little stupid. I didn’t mean any harm in it.”

 “Answer my question!” John shouted.

 Anger flashed through Hugh’s eyes. He looked up at John. “I just felt like it! No real reason!” he shouted back. “I just wanted to see how strong they were. They’re my upperclassmen. I was curious to see how good they were.”

 “And did you get your answer?”

 Hugh smirked. “Yeah. They were pretty weak. I mean, they had some good moves, but seriously that was the best they could do?”

 “And now that you have your answer, what do you plan to do?”

 Hugh shrugged. “Nothing, I guess.”

 “You attacked two of your teammates, you sit there now and insult them, and there was no real point to it from the beginning?”

 “Yeah, I suppose so. What of it?”

 “What of it?” John asked incredulously. “I’ll tell you what of it. You are a Will Rider, Hugh,” he growled. “We are the only dragon race in the world that can group link. As a Will Rider we take advantage of that fact. Our bonds are strong. We take each other’s pain. We are in each other’s minds. We are able to pass orders quickly amongst each other. Our meld link is what makes us the most powerful army in the world.”

 A sharp feeling swept through Lydia. She had said those very words herself barely two hours ago to her own team.

 “Now that you have attacked two of your teammates,” John growled, continuing on, “what do you think that has done to your relationship with each other?”

 Hugh shrugged. “I have no idea. I don’t think they should make all that big a deal about it. Look, I just wanted to see how good my team was.”

 John nodded. “Oh, so do I. Would you like to know what I have learned in the two days that you have been here since last night and today? I know that you, Hugh, are a strong fighter. You are extraordinarily skilled in knife fighting – the best in the whole room. Your archery skills are crap, though. I know that Erica is just as equally skilled. Not so much in knife fighting, but she is not afraid to drop her knives and use her intellect. She will never be half as strong as you, but I bet if I pit the two of you against each other, she would probably win. I also know that you are thinker. What weaknesses you do have, you like to accommodate for them. You know your archery skills are subpar, but you still held your own, and you made up for it by supporting your other teammates today. You are already growing a close bond with Tally and Carol who you recognize as being the strongest shots in the team just as I have. I have seen all of that Hugh, and not for a second did I need to fight you. Nor did I need you to fight Erica, and you certainly did not shoot along with Tally or Carol today. I could have easily told you how a fight between you, Nancy, and Thomas would have gone. The worst part is, Hugh, I think you knew before the fight began exactly what was going to happen. You did what you did, I feel, to humiliate people that were above you, and to attempt to draw in a little humor from the team members that are your own age. You knew how good you are, you wanted to show it off to everyone else.”

 Hugh smirked. “I *told you* I was just looking for a little fun.”

 “And hurting people that you are supposed to be forming a bond with does that?”

 Hugh’s eyes narrowed. He looked across to Lydia and then back at Landon behind him. “I hear that hurting people is a great sport around here. Isn’t that what *you* did to my girlfriend last year?”

 “No, Hugh,” John snapped, returning Hugh’s attention back to him. “We do not enjoying hurting people. We do not hurt people here. We search out their weaknesses and we show them how to rise above them. We are here to teach. What Landon put Lydia through is none of your business, and I’m sure if you asked a single one of them, they would tell you that they are far closer than anyone in his whole school. That’s what *I’m* going to attempt to do to you, Hugh. To teach you that your attitude is *wrong*. There is nothing wrong with being overly spirited and want to have a great time. Later in the month after you have formed a tight bond with your group, if you decided to play a prank, don’t you think it would have been better received? Would have gotten a bigger laugh?”

 “Now we’re talking about my pranks?”

 “I’m talking about *all* of you Hugh. Your attitude! There is not a doubt in my mind that you are a fantastic person. Last year we got a chance to spend time with you. Lydia cares for you. I trust Lydia with my life and if she tells me that I can do the same for you I trust that. Especially when I know what a great judge of character Lydia is. If you pulled pranks and picked fights in an intelligent manner to have fun and to actually *learn* something as you claimed I would not have a single problem with you. But I don’t for a second think that that’s what you were going after. You were being malicious. Rebellious. You spent a whole day following my orders which I think secretly pissed you off. You view me as inferior but you have enough intelligence in that head of yours to know that you should not talk back or argue and that there is a lot to be learnt by me. Your pranks this morning was to show off in front of everyone the sort of sense of power you feel that you have over them. To be perfectly honest, I think you have a major ego problem coupled with your rebellious personality. I also think you realize that in yourself and are trying to correct it.”

 Hugh had listened to the whole thing, the anger in his eyes slowly giving away to embarrassment and guilt. He looked away, biting his lip. “So what does tying me up have to do with fixing my attitude do you think?” he growled.

 “Because I think there is only one way in this whole world to teach you. You love your friends. You value them. You don’t listen to them, though. You don’t even listen to Lydia. Otherwise I would tell them to talk to you and that would fix this whole situation. So instead I’m going to teach you through consequence. I am going to put it in the plainest most obvious terms that I can think. Your actions hurt the people around you. It hurts your bonds and it hurts your friends.”

 John turned to her. Lydia swallowed and stepped forward. She was shaking. She forced herself to be calm. To say nothing. Don’t look at Hugh.

 John came around, angling her so that Hugh was to her left. So that Hugh could see the knife in his right hand. He grabbed Lydia’s chin with his thumb and index finger.

 “H-hey…” Hugh gasped. “W-wait! What the *fuck* are you doing?!” he roared.

 “There’s a consequence, Hugh. Your attitude pushes people away. It *hurts* your friendships. Lydia is pretty dear to you. You couldn’t stand for a second that Landon was doing something to her last year that you could not stop. So, why the hell, do you do things that hurt *her*? You think she wants to be standing here right now hearing that her boyfriend has an attitude problem? That he challenges and beats up his teammates? She spent all of last year being forced to connect with hers. You makes friends so easily, Hugh. Why do you do things that damages those bonds? You could be the greatest Will Rider in this whole room. But with your attitude the way that it is, that’s never going to happen. Your group link is going to suffer. Your superiority complex makes me reluctant to even attempt to put you in a position of any sort of power. You can’t see that, though, can you? So I’m going to make is that way you *can* see.”

 John turned her head so that she wasn’t looking at him but was now looking at Hugh. There was terror in Hugh’s eyes. He did not like the knife in John’s hand and definitely did not like the way that she was allowing John to handle her.

 “It’s simple,” John continued. “Every single day that you play a prank or beat up one of your teammates, I will take my knife blade to Lydia’s face. A real solid representation for you to know the damage you are doing to your loved ones.”

 *“Don’t you fucking dare!”* Hugh roared. He tried to jump to his feet. He probably could have, even with them tied up. But Conner and the upperclassman were ready. They tensed their bodies and held him back. She could see the effort even that much took. Hugh was strong. “Get the hell away from my girlfriend, you asshole!” he screamed.

 “No, Hugh. You *are* going to learn this lesson.”

 John turned her face back to him and raised the blade to her face. Placed the point of the knife blade against her left cheek.

 “Lyz!” Hugh screamed. “What the hell are you doing?!” Hugh screamed. “Are you seriously allowing this? You’re seriously going to let him *cut you?!*”

 She closed her eyes. She could feel the pain in Hugh’s words. Her eternal guardian. Hugh couldn’t stand to even think for a second she was outside running in the cold. This… this was killing him inside. She knew it. She could feel it. He couldn’t stop it. His Lyz was about to be hurt and he couldn’t stop it. She was about to be hurt because of him. And he couldn’t stop it.

 And she wasn’t fighting it.

 John dragged the blade slowly across her face. Drawing out every second of it for Hugh. It wasn’t that bad. John knew how to handle his blade and it was sharp. She barely felt it as it dragged across her cheek. It wasn’t even deep. She had received deeper wounds from her scratching her own face with her nails by accident. She could feel blood trickle down her cheek.

 “That,” John said, stepping back, glaring at Hugh, “was for the pranks this morning. This is for the fight this afternoon.”

 Swallowing, Lydia reached up and pulled her zipper down slightly. Gave John access to her neck. He pulled her collar down from the left side of her neck. Hugh’s mark was there from this morning, she knew it. In his favorite spot.

 Hugh was quiet.

 John placed the knife blade up against the mark and cut, slicing into Hugh’s favorite spot. She winced. This spot was already tender, and though there was no force to the blade and the cut wasn’t deep, it hurt. She tried to force the pain aside. Did not want Hugh to see her in pain. This was hard enough for him without thinking that John was causing her real harm.

 She swallowed as John pulled the blade away. She turned to Hugh and wished immediately that she had not.

 She had expected anger. Sadness even. What she saw was nothing. Hugh’s expression was guarded. Calm. He was calm. He had steeled himself. His eyes raised for a moment to hers and for just a bare second she thought she saw hate, but it was so quick that she could not make it out.

 “Can I be released now?” he growled. “I’ve got it. I got your message.”

 “Have you?” John growled. “We’ll see. Attack any one of us and it will be Lydia that suffers.”

 “Do whatever you think is necessary,” Hugh growled, a trace of anger slipping out.

 John looked across at Conner and nodded. Lydia could see Conner exchange worried glances with the other two. They stepped back, their bodies tensed – prepared. Swallowing hard, Landon came up behind Hugh and severed his bonds with his own knife.

 The ropes fell off of Hugh. He got to his feet slowly, his eyes on her the entire time. Then he turned away and walked out of the room.

 Not a single word or defiant action.

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 Lydia sat her breakfast tray down beside Erica, looking around.

 “You’re not going to find him,” Erica said. “He… he didn’t return back last night. He wasn’t there for roll call either. I looked in Tsauria’s stable, but Tsauria said he wasn’t there, either, and she wouldn’t tell me where he was.”

 She stared down at her tray. She wasn’t hungry. She didn’t even feel like eating. “I hurt him…” she muttered.

 “Yes. Yes, you did. That was brutal, Lydia. I didn’t even like watching that. Like I needed that on top of the shit my own partner is giving *me* already. This place… it’s messed up. I didn’t approve of it in the twins’ letters and my feelings have not changed.”

 “It works, though,” she muttered. “I survived mine and it’s over. I’m better for it. Take a look at Sam. She’ll be more than willing to talk about her experience. She absolutely adores her partner now and she’s so much stronger.”

 “Sometimes the ends do not justify the means,” Erica growled. “But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let this break me. I’ll endure their bullshit. I’m better than that. And what about you? What are you doing to your partner?”

 “We don’t talk about it.”

 “No, of course not. I pray that when I become a second year I will have retained my own sense of identity so that way when I get my own partner I can help them in a far more beneficial way.”

 Erica stood up and walked away. Lydia wished she could just die. If her illness acted up right then and there, she wasn’t sure she would do anything to stop it. She wished it would. She wished her heart would stop beating. It hurt. It hurt like hell.

 Minutes later Tanis sat down beside her on her left side. “Morning, Lydie.”

 She did not respond. He was the last person at the moment that she really wanted to see.

 “Lydie?” When she did not respond again he sighed. “Look – I’m sorry about yesterday. You’re right. I was way out of line. You and Hugh are happy together and… I just get pissed off, but that’s no reason to ruin your happiness and I should be better than that. Hugh just has a way of… pissing me off really bad.”

 She wanted to throw up. Happy together… Yeah… They had been until what she did last night… Please gods let him forgive me.

 A sob escaped her, ripping through her entire body.

 “Lydie?” Tanis’s voice asked, more concerned this time. “H-hey! Why are you crying? Lydia?”

 She couldn’t see him. She had brought her hands up in front of her face to cover up her tears. She felt Tanis’s hands on her turning her around to face him, trying to pull her hands away. “Lydia? Talk to me. What’s going on? Hey! What the heck happened to your face? Who the hell did that?” His voice had dropped into a low dangerous growl.

 She shook her head. “J-john,” she answered, forcing herself back together. She swallowed and calmed herself mentally, drawing back her tears.

 “John? Hugh’s partner? Why did he cut your face, Lydie?”

 “Hugh,” she murmured.

 “Lydia, I’m not following. John cut your face because of Hugh?”

 She swallowed and told him the full story, not leaving out a single detail – bringing everything up to where Erica and stood up and walked off.

 Tanis turned away. “Lydia… gods…”

 “Oh, Tanis, you should have seen his face. It… it was just blank. He wasn’t mad or sad or anything. There was no emotion. I’ve never seen-“

 “Hugh without emotion? I have. Just once. The night of the dance when I locked him up. I expected him to pummel me within an inch of my life but… he did nothing. It was like… I was no longer worth the effort. I was less than dirt to him.”

 “Oh gods… what have I done…”

 “What you had to,” he snapped. “Lydia, what you did was probably the only thing that he would respond to. He’s been pulling this same shit since middle school and probably longer than that. I dunno. The guy doesn’t exactly share his full life experiences with everyone. I met him when he was my roommate. He’s always been the same. Either you absolutely love Hugh or you hate him. There’s never an in between. You made a decision. You know he wants this more than anything in his whole life. Admiring Captain Townsend, I think, has been the only thing that has ever kept him on the right path. Until you, it was the only thing he gave a damn about sometimes. Hugh’s always been a wild spirit. Which sucks like hell. The guy has the strongest morals of anyone I know, he’s got an incredible love for life, and he’s probably the smartest guy in the world, and probably the greatest friend you can have. Except he just can never stay focused. He can never stay *serious*. Which wouldn’t be a problem –“

 “Except that it drives others away,” she finished.

 “The boy with a million friends and two million enemies,” Tanis said.

 “He trusted me and I hurt him.”

 “To help him. Lydia… I hope if you ever saw a problem with me you would do the same thing. It might hurt like hell but I would be a better person. That, to me, is the value of true friendship.”

 “Even if it ends it?”

 “Friends gets angry with each other. It passes. As pissed off as Hugh has been with me, he has still never driven me away. Relax. You are way overthinking this.”

 She swallowed. “Oh gods… I hope so.”

 “You made your decision last night, Lydie. It’s a dishonor to what you did to regret it now.”

 She nodded, drawing in a deep breath. “Yeah. You’re right.”

 Tanis grinned. “I usually am.” He reached up and touched the knife blade wound tenderly, fingering her cheek softly. “I’m going to get you something for that. I hope it doesn’t scar,” he muttered. “I’ll be right back.” She watched Tanis jump out of his seat and leave the mess hall.

 She sighed and looked down at her food. Hugh was probably starving… wherever he was. Maybe she would pick up his tray and leave it with Tsauria.

 Minutes later Tanis had returned. He sat down in his seat and pulled out a tube of cream from his white coat. He pushed his tray to the side and straddled the bench. “Turn around here,” he commanded gently.

 She pushed her tray to the side and turned around, also straddling her seat. He worked, applying the cream gently to her cheek. He pulled out a bandage and carefully pressed it to her cheek, taping it up.

 As he worked, Landon sat down across the table, Tanya at his side. Tanya clicked her tongue. “You shouldn’t be taking supplies from the cupboards, Tanis,” she admonished in her cute tiny voice.

 Tanis shrugged. “There’s no harm.”

 “You’re not a field medic yet. You should have her go to the doctor for that.”

 Tanis’s eyes flicked across to her. “I spent the last three years at my school working out of the medical ward, and worked part time last year at an actual clinic. I have full medical file viewing privileges and full access to the medicine cabinets. I assure you, I can apply *cream* to my friend’s face,” he snapped coldly.

 Landon glared at him. “I don’t care how you talk to Hugh’s girlfriend, but you won’t talk to mine like that,” he snarled. “For someone with so much medical experience, your communication skills are seriously lacking.”

 Tanis turned back to her, a disgusted sneer on his face. “I did it again,” he muttered. “Damn myself.” I took a deep breath. “You’re right. Let me try that again. I am sorry, Miss –“

 “Tanya,” the little girl snapped.

 “I am sorry, Miss Tanya, for talking to you like that. You’re right, Landon. My skills in that department are lacking. I’m working on them.”

 “Try a little harder.”

 Tanis opened his mouth to say something but stopped. He closed his eyes and drew in a patient breath. Lydia smiled despite herself. He reopened his eyes and took in her smile. His eyes narrowed. “It’s not funny,” he snapped.

 “No. No, it’s not, but I thought it was cute that you’re trying at all.” She turned to Landon. “He is trying hard. Believe me, he used to be worse than this. He cares. His words just come spilling out before he catches himself.”

 “I hope my partner can come up with a good way to fix that,” he muttered. He turned and started to recap and clean up.

 Landon smirked. “You’re not going to let him do the other one, Lydia?”

 She blanched and glared across at him. Asshole! Jerk!

 Tanis looked back at her. “W-wait, you guys cut her *twice*?” His lips pursed. “If these scar – “ he started to growl, but he did not finished the sentence. “Where at?” he demanded.

 She flushed bright red. “M-my neck…” she mumbled. She would kill Landon! In his sleep! She would hunt him down in his new room and slaughter him!

 A light blush appeared on Tanis’s own cheeks. He looked away, making a show of uncapping the medicine again. “U-u-unzip,” he muttered below his breath, the command coming out in a stuttered mess. “S-so I can get at it.”

 Conner sat his tray down even has Lydia was reaching up and pulling her zipper down just enough to reveal her neck. He stared between the two of them. “Now this looks entertaining,” he said with an evil smirk.

 Tanya sighed. “Conner you are an absolute bad influence on my Landon,” she muttered, reaching over and pecking Landon’s cheek. “You shouldn’t torture people like this,” she said.

 Landon grinned. “I don’t really think Tanis is minding all that much.”

 Lydia felt her cheeks redden even further. Tanis turned to her, his hands shaking, and his own cheeks even redder. She held her collar down revealing the scratch – and Hugh’s marks. Tanis blinked and his eyes lifted up to hers. “I take it back. I think this one was a little unnecessarily cruel for Hugh. Tell me that wasn’t your idea.”

 “Mine actually,” Landon said with a smirk. “I thought Hugh would like that one in particular. If anything was going to get the message across, I thought that one would have had the best chance.”

 Tanis sighed and shook his head. “I think you pushed it too far,” he muttered.

 He reached out and applied the medicine. He got out more gauze and tape, gently applying them. The red increased a little deeper in his cheeks while he worked, which did nothing to help the awkwardness that *she* felt. When he was done, he jerked back around in his seat, bringing his leg back around over the chair. “W-was that all?” he mumbled.

 “I bet you wish it wasn’t,” Landon said.

 Conner chuckled. Tanya sighed. She reached over and pecked Landon’s cheek again. “Leave it alone, honey,” she muttered.

 Landon opened his arms out wide in an innocent gesture. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, darling.”

 Lydia turned towards her, swinging her own leg over. She mouthed, “you are *so* dead,” at him.

 He grinned evilly at her, returning to his meal.

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 Lydia sighed. She hoped she would not be late for class, but she just couldn’t leave it alone. In her hands she carried Hugh’s tray of food. Her heart felt impossibly heavy again. She wasn’t even sure what she would *say* to him if she did see him. She had made her choice. She wasn’t going to apologize. She had no idea what she was going to say to him. But… she wanted to talk nonetheless.

 She went up to Tsauria’s stall. The dragon growled as soon as it saw her. “Good morning to you, too,” she muttered.

 “And what the heck could you possibly want?” the dragon growled inside her mind.

 She sighed and stared down at the tray. “I-I just wanted to make sure Hugh got some food,” she mumbled. “Tsauria… where is he?”

 “You are the last person in this whole world he wants to see at the moment.”

 She sighed and closed her eyes. “He’s in here, isn’t he?” She did not see him, but she knew Hugh. There was nowhere else he would go. Nowhere else he could go.

 “No,” the dragon growled, speaking the word slowly, emphasizing it.

 Liar. She knew Hugh too well to believe the dragon for even a moment.

 “Fine,” she growled. “Here. Just make sure he gets this and make sure he gets to class.”

 She opened the stall door and walked over to set the tray down on a small stool just inside. She turned around and stopped. Hugh was up against the corner to the far side of her. He was staring across at Tsauria. In his hands he was playing with a knife, twirling it, playing with the point. There were dark circles under his eyes but he looked… emotionless.

 She took a deep breath. “Hugh –“

 *“Leave!”* Tsauria roared loudly, shaking the whole room.

 “No I’m not!” she shouted at the dragon, her anger flaring. She turned back to Hugh. “Hugh! I want to talk!”

 “So talk.”

 It was two simple words. No emotion.

 “About last night, Hugh. I just want you to understand –“

 “Oh. I understand. Don’t worry.”

 “No, Hugh. I don’t think that you do.”

 “No. Really, Lydia. I got it. No pranks or fights. No more attitude.”

 She swallowed. The feeling of fear was not going away. Hugh was being way too compliant and he was still refusing to look at her. “Hugh –“

 “I won’t. Not anymore. I wouldn’t want to ever do anything to hurt you. You know that, right, Lydia? I would never do anything to hurt you.”

 Lydia swallowed. “I didn’t do it to *hurt* you, Hugh. I was trying to *teach* you.”

 “You’re a fantastic teacher, Lydia. You’re going to make a great Commander someday. Maybe a General. Yeah. You could replace General Sanders one day. I hear they have to make a lot of tough decisions, too. Sometimes people get hurt, but at the end of the day lives were saved. That’s what matters, right? The end result.”

 *“Hugh!”*

 He turned and looked up at her. “I should ask Tsaul if Adrian ever did stuff like this. Is that what it means to be a leader? I’m not sure I have the stomach for it afterall.”

 “Will you just listen to me.”

 “You know why I do stuff like that, Lydia? John thought it was an ego problem. Maybe in part it is. I couldn’t stand it, though. Thomas and Nancy were picking on their partners. You know, Lyz, the pranks part I get. Yeah, I don’t always have a lot of rhyme or reasons to my pranks. I really am just trying to have some fun. I guess I didn’t realize it was that much of an issue. No one before I got here ever complained. I walked off pissed off at Tanis’s words yesterday but I was seriously rethinking things. I was. I actually thought ‘oh, ok. Damn, guess I did go too far.’ I thought – if Lydia was saying it then I should listen. I have never *once* in my whole life picked a fight with someone innocent, though. I will take any challenge set before me, but I don’t just randomly swing at someone. Thomas and Nancy were being brutal to their partners. It pissed me off. I talked with their partners – my teammates. I beat them up to show them that those two morons *don’t* have any power over anyone. They are just like the rest of us.”

 He brought his legs up and hugged them. “You seriously thought I just picked a fight for no reason? No, not that I even care about that. If I had been admonished that would have been one thing. That I had my friendships used against me… not just my friendship but my *love* used against me. You know, it felt like that one day all over again. That day that those boys carried you off to the quarantine stable to cut your hair. You still suffer from that scare. You know how badly that hurts me? To think that my pranks caused you to be hurt?

 “Tanis brought it up yesterday. I actually was thinking yesterday – yeah, Tanis was right, as usual. That’s why I thought, absolutely, I would start reigning it in. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was going to start trying. I was going to start passing my ideas to you for your approval. I thought that way it could not only help you to regulate me but I thought it would be fun for the both of us to be back together like that.

 “Then I watched you enter that room… John put his dirty hand on you and raised that knife blade. *You did nothing*. You *allowed* it. I had punched Landon for hurting you. I fucking threw myself in front of a dragon to save you last year. My heart has stopped so many times for you. But you were standing there allowing them to use you to hurt me. I had gotten into a fight because the upperclassmen were being cruel and there you were… doing the same thing *to me*.”

 “Hugh – we’re trying to teach you!”

 “And it was a fantastic lesson, Lydia. You’re going to do well for your partner, if he survives his lesson. It was a fantastic sound strategic decision. I can’t fault it. You used yourself to teach me a lesson.”

 He stood up and slowly walked across to her. He touched her uninjured cheek gently, lovingly. “I promise. I will not do anything to hurt you. No more fights and no more pranks. I couldn’t live with myself if I thought for a second that you were being hurt. But… Lydia -”

 He reached into her collar. Her heart suddenly raced as she tried to figure out what he was doing – and then his hand found the chain she wore constantly around her throat. He pulled it out and stared at the dragon necklace. He had given it to her. His first present. Received when she had thought to have been dead.

 “You can go crawl into Tanis’s bed,” he said, his voice low with the first traces of raw anger. “I think the two of you were made for each other. You don’t care what you say or how you say it as long as you get your point across. I think the two of you will make a brilliant couple.”

 She gasped as Hugh suddenly jerked the chain down with all his might. The chain cut viciously into the back of her neck for a moment before it finally snapped. Hugh walked across with it and threw the food tray off the stool. She reached back to her neck and rubbed at the cut. It was bleeding. “H-Hugh? Hugh, what are you doing?” she asked, her voice on the edge of panic as she watched him.

 He placed the necklace calmly on the stool and raised his knife, the hilt pointed downwards.

 “Hugh!” she screamed. “What the hell are you doing?”

 She rushed over to try to stop his arm. She grappled with it. The knife fell from his grasp as he released it. He took her by her shoulders and pushed her roughly backwards through the stall. She didn’t stand a chance against him. He was far too strong for her. He shoved her roughly into the wall with all his might. She gasped as pain flared through her body. He had not held back. He reached up with his hand and slapped her hard across her face. “Get the fuck away from me,” he snarled.

 She collapsed down the wall, coughing, her hand pressed to her stinging cheek. The room spun for a moment and she had to push back a wall of darkness trying to eat at her mind. “H-Hugh,” she gasped. “P-Please, don’t!” she begged as she tried to pull herself together.

 “Don’t *what*, Lydia?” he growled as he retrieved his knife off the ground. “I just thought you would need ‘a real solid representation for you to know the damage you are doing to your loved ones,’” he growled, throwing John’s words back at her.

 He raised the knife blade up in the air, the hilt downwards again, and brought it down with all his might against the delicate necklace. She gasped in horror and in pain as the necklace shattered into several tiny irreparable pieces. Her heart felt like it broke with it.

 “Get away from me, Lydia,” he snarled, throwing his knife down on the ground. “Looking at you disgusts me. I hope Tanis enjoys you. Tell him, count to twenty. That’s how long it takes to kiss you before you start coughing.”

 She sat there, tears pouring out of her eyes. “H-Hugh.”

 He stomped over and grabbed her roughly by the arm, yanking her roughly to her feet. He pulled her out of the stall and threw her down the hallway. “Get away from me!” he screamed, anger thick in his voice now. “You’re no longer mine. I don’t care if you die. I don’t give a damn about you anymore. You threw that away when you used yourself against me. I’ve never had someone treat me so low in my whole life. Stay away from me. Come near me ever again and I’ll smack you even harder next time,” he growled. “Go on! You’re going to be late for your precious classes. You have a lot to teach to those newbies. Show them! Show them how to be an uncaring Commander. You’ll make General Sanders real proud. Your asshole father, too. I can’t believe I ever thought you were above all of that. You really are selfish. You tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen. You take whatever you want and leave the rest behind. As long as you are tearing down an obstacle who cares about the rest. As long as you are on your dragon, nothing else matters.”

 “That’s not true!” she screamed, turning around in the dirt to face him. “I love you, Hugh.”

 “The fuck you do,” he growled, whirling around and disappearing back into Tsauria’s stall. “If you loved me you would never have done that yesterday. You don’t use love as a weapon!” he screamed from inside. “I’m done with you.”

 She jumped back up to her feet and rushed back to the stall. “Hugh, you don’t mean that,” she shouted, her heart hammering hard against her chest.

 Hugh whirled around as she reached him and this time grabbed her by her neck. His hand tightened around it. She tried to gasp in pain but her airway was cut off. Panic surged through her. She reached up trying to grapple with his hand. He was choking her! *Hugh* was choking her! He picked her up by her neck and her left arm, lifting her barely an inch off the ground. He carried her around the corner and slammed her hard into the wall. “I said stay the hell away from me, Lydia,” he growled. His blue eyes were filled with rage. Rage and betrayal.

 He released her and she collapsed to the ground coughing hard. She struggled to pull in air. She cut the group link with her team – they didn’t need to feel this! She got her knees under her and pulled in air desperately, spitting up several times.

 “Lydia –“ Hugh growled behind her when she started to regain control of herself.

 She turned around. Hugh had his tray in his hands. He ripped off the foil and threw it, contents forward at her. Food was dumped all over her. She groaned at the insult, a sob escaping her lips.

 “You *love* throwing things at people. I thought I’d give it a try myself for once. That’s the second thing you ever threw at me. A food tray. Pleasant, wasn’t it?” he growled, whirling around and disappearing back inside. “Maybe if you give a damn you’ll search through your memory and remember *why* you threw a food tray at me.”

 She remembered. With vivid clarity. It had been the first time Hugh had ever showed that he cared. Had ever expressed concern for her. The first time he had wanted to protect her. And in a fit of anger she had thrown it at him – wanting nothing to do with him, trying to drive him away. It hurt. It was a painful reminder to the effort that he had gone through for her.

 She lay there, sobbing and crying before she managed to crawl up to her feet and run away – before Hugh could think of something else nasty to do to her.

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 He didn’t need to see her to know that something was wrong. Her voice sounded hollow. He swore. He really needed her, too, right now. Felix was sliced up pretty bad. That bully had hit him once again the previous night before dinner. Lydia had come in late after lights out last night, took her medicine with Ori’s help, and went straight to sleep once her high was over so he had not been able to get her help then.

 And after lunch he had been attacked once again. *This couldn’t keep happening!* But as she was right now, she was barely pushing through the archery orders. Something had gone seriously wrong. He had felt it along with everyone else in class. Suddenly her condition had flared and she had cut the link. It had not been returned until sometime during lunch.

 He was watching the upperclassmen – those that he could see. They all kept giving her distressed and worried looks. She just… did not seem to care and many of her orders hardly made sense. Ori had to step in several times to correct something she was saying.

 *This* was why he hated depending on people. At some point down the line, they always turned their back. They put in as much effort as they wished to before losing interest with him.

 Not that was this situation, but it hurt all the same. He was in trouble and he didn’t know how to solve it and the one person who might be able to was going through her own issues.

 He hoped that maybe at the end of class he might speak with her, but the class ended and she immediately walked off the field. The only change – an increase to the pressure on everyone’s chest. Without even saying anything she had fed them more of her pain. That was a little callous, he thought.

 He swore and slammed his bow into the ground. His teammates only gave him passing curious glances as they walked by. She had not a single thing they had talked about the night before – no distance training. No charts. She hadn’t even bothered with him today.

 Pissed off, he stomped towards the stables – towards Tsavrina. The only consistent thing in his life. Gods he couldn’t wait to get on her. To get back up into the skies where things made sense. Where it no longer that he was blind.

 He sighed after he was done working and slid down her side, nestling up against her body. “Li?” she asked. “Aren’t you going to go in and get your own food?”

 “I’m not hungry,” he lied. Truth was – he didn’t want to go back to the school and risk being humiliated again. To risk running back into that older guy and the crowd that normally accompanied him.

 “You should still go in. You have homework.”

 He sighed. He did. A ton of it and it would take him a little longer than everyone else to work through it.

 “Persevere, Li,” the dragon spoke softly in his mind. “That Meldling was truly interested in helping you. Don’t give up. See what happens tomorrow. Everyone has their rough days. Remember, it’s not just about you, my beloved Rider.”

 *That* didn’t help. His own dragon was reprimanding him. “Thanks, Rina. You really know how to make a guy feel better.”

 He got up to his feet and walked out of the stable heading into the school building, dreading every step that took him closer.

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 Tanis ran out the door to the school building and winced as he collided with someone. Both him and the other person went falling to the ground hard. Tanis winced as he sat up. “Gods, I’m sorry!” he gasped, apologizing quickly. He got to his feet and reached out for the other person.

 The other boy grabbed the hand and allowed himself to be pulled up. Tanis blinked instantly recognizing the guy. “Felix?”

 “Oh umm… I’m sorry your name escapes me at the moment.”

 Tanis shook his head. “Tanis,” he said quickly. “Sorry for running into you – but I gotta go.”

 Felix frowned. “What’s going on?”

 “Nothing you need to worry about,” he growled. “Except I might just kill someone before the night’s out.”

 “Is Lydia ok?”

 Tanis clicked his tongue. “She’ll be fine. I hope. Sorry –“ he apologized once more before taking off again, leaving the other boy behind.

 He took off at high speed across the fields heading for Hugh’s stable. He reached it and ran inside. He pulled off his white lab coat and threw it to the side as he ran and then reached up for his glasses and also discarded those, throwing them off carelessly – it was a halfway safer fate than what he knew was coming.

 He reached the stall and peered inside. “Hugh!” he shouted.

 Hugh was up against Tsauria’s side. He looked up and his eyes instantly narrowed. “Get the hell away from me, Tanis,” he growled.

 Tanis wrenched open the stall door and ran in. He didn’t stop. He raised his fist and poured all of his energy and the energy of his run into the swing. The blow caught Hugh completely off guard across the face.

 As quick as lightning Hugh was up on his feet. He grabbed Tanis by the throat and the left arm and slammed him to the ground, throwing out his own punch. Tanis rolled just in time and the blow hit the ground. Tanis kicked out with both legs, catching Hugh in the stomach and throwing him off. He jumped up and caught Hugh around the stomach, pulling him back to the ground – but this time he was on top. He crawled up to Hugh’s face and swung down again, connecting another blow. Hugh grabbed him around the chest and pulled him down under him. Hugh swung out at him twice with each fist. The first blow connected across Tanis’s left cheek while the second hit his nose.

 The fight continued like that for several minutes. Both of them rolling around in the dirt, taking punches and trying to get an upperhand over the other.

 They were both starting to weak – coming close to exhaustion. Tanis knew he wasn’t going to be able to last much longer. He took another swing at Hugh, the two of them on their feet. It missed and Hugh slammed him up against the wall. “She loves you!” Tanis roared angrily. “You have any idea what you’ve done to her?!”

 “She should have thought about that last night!” Hugh snarled, burying his feet deep into Tanis’s stomach. He danced back, shaking his fist in pain.

 Tanis collapsed trying to pull in air, completely winded. “She did you arrogant asshole!” he snarled. “You think she really wanted to do that to you? Do you think she enjoyed it? *She let them take a knife to her just for you, Hugh!”*

 “She let them use her against me. You want to know what it was like being tied up watching that – to know that they had set about that. That it was *planned*? I would never do something like that to her! To have my own *love* for her used against me?”

 “It’s the only thing that would get through to you!”

 “You’re right. I got the message. Loud and clear,” he growled. “There’s consequences for every action. Now she can enjoy the taste of her own medicine. Do you even know what that was like? How *betrayed* I felt? No, I bet you don’t. No one’s ever loved you. You’ve never cared about anyone enough to let them that far into you.”

 “How betrayed you felt?” Tanis asked incredulously. “She did that so you would become a better person. So you could achieve your dream. You think she made her choice easily? You think she didn’t realize how hurt you would be? You think she didn’t bang her head trying to find a better solution? And you had the *gall* to call *her* selfish,” he snarled. “Is that the full testament of your *love*, Hugh? At the first sign that something is not going your way you cast her aside like that? I thought you said you wanted to learn from *her*? Did you say that last year when we were all here together? *Well she tried to teach you something and you threw it back in her face!*” he screamed

 *“She didn’t teach me anything except how to hurt me!”* he screamed back. “If I don’t bend to her will she will use herself against me? Love isn’t a weapon. I would never have done something so disgusting to her.”

 *“She sacrificed herself on a knife point the way you almost did on the teeth of a dragon!”* Tanis screamed.

 “I was trying to kill myself because I couldn’t bear the thought of living without her. I had no idea that it would have snapped her out of it.”

 “But knowing that now would you have changed your mind?! Now you are truly alone, Hugh. You’ve thrown her away. What now? How did the situation change? It’s only fine if you throw her away. You can live without her if *you’re* the one discarding her?”

 “I didn’t throw her away,” Hugh snarled. “She did that herself last night when she stood there letting them hurt her. I can’t even *think* of her right now without my stomach turning, thinking of that horrible scene.”

 “You’re a piece of shit, Hugh,” Tanis growled. “Lydia is inside balling her eyes out and you’re in here too busy thinking about yourself. She came out here today and you *choked her?!* You smashed her necklace, choked and hit her, and threw food on her. I had no idea what sort of disgusting person you were deep down. Heh, and to think – you got pissed at me because I locked you away in a closet?”

 “She’s all yours, Tanis,” Hugh growled. “I would think you would be rejoicing. You finally have your chance to take her.”

 *“It’s not my happiness I care about!”* he screamed. “You selfish asshole. It’s Lydia’s happiness I care about.”

 “Don’t worry. She still has Tsaul. Her dragon always comes first in her life. She won’t be unhappy for long. Just get her back on her dragon. That’s the only thing she’s ever given a damn about. The only thing she’s ever bothered to work for.”

 “Because she shouldn’t have to work on love!” Tanis shouted. “You knew her obsessions before you asked her to be your girlfriend. You don’t ask a person to change because you add yourself into their life. I never would do that. Isn’t that why you fell in love with her? Because she was willing to work for what she wanted? To defy all the obstacles? I don’t know about you but I feel in love with Lydia because of her steadfast determination. She wanted to do things and she made them happen. I would *never* ask her to change that for me.”

 “But it’s alright for her to tell *me* to change.”

 “Because your behavior is out of control. It’s hurting you, Hugh, and you don’t even realize it. That’s what she was trying to teach you. Trying to show you. Your behavior pushes people away.”

 “I have *tons* of friends.”

 “And just as many enemies. How many school brawls have you ever been in in your life, Hugh? I bet you can’t answer that because it’s far too many to count. *I* hated you the first few months I knew you. I couldn’t stand you. The only reason you know are so good at fighting compared to other people, Hugh, is because you’ve been in that many more fights than them.”

 “So she should have talked to me. You both did yesterday. I was listening!”

 “You were arguing,” he growled. “Like Lydia. We could never reach her. We could never break her away from her secrets. She would listen for a moment but go back to her same ways. How many arguments did you use to have with her about it? It wasn’t until she came here and someone did something extreme to her that she learned. She was trying to give you that same experience. Look at how strong she has become. *She wants that for you, too!*”

 “I’m done talking,” Hugh growled. “There are some things you do to a person and some things that you do not. She crossed that mark.”

 Tanis drew in a deep breath. “I knew you didn’t deserve her. I prayed that I was wrong. I had no idea when I was insulting you yesterday how soon you would prove my words.”

 “Get out of here, Tanis. Go enjoy your new girlfriend. She’s all yours. You won.”

 “You’re such an asshole, Hugh. What do you care, though. I bet this time tomorrow you’ll just have some new girl pressed down into the hay. At least this way you no longer have to worry about hurting her, huh? I bet it absolutely infuriated you not be able to kiss Lydia the way you wanted to. Now you can go back to your nice uncomplicated relationships.”

 He stood up and marched out towards the stall door. He slammed it shut behind him.

 “Hey, Tanis.”

 Tanis thought for a moment about just walking about. To ignore him. But he was too pissed off and looking to try to get in another jibe. “What?” he asked spinning around.

 “Tell Lydia this is another first that she gets to enjoy. Ask her how’d her first ever break up go for her?”

 Tanis hissed as he breathed air in deep, his mind searching for something cruel to say.

 “You know that, right, Tanis?”

 “I know *what*?” he growled.

 “Me and you… we’re the only ones she’s ever kissed.”

 Tanis waited expecting Hugh to follow up with something cruel. “And?” he growled.

 “T-Take care of her. Make the memories count,” Hugh muttered softly.

 “I *will*,” Tanis growled. “Whether it’s me or someone else. Lydia is going to be happy!”

 He whirled around and stomped off.

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 Landon watched as Tanis sat down across from him, laying his white lab coat on the table in front of him along with his glasses. He was beat up bad. His lip was split open and there was a blood trail going down from his nose. His left eye was also swelling. His hair had half fallen out of its pony tail and was hanging down in his face untethered. He sighed. “You should go to the bathroom and get yourself cleaned up.”

 “I will in a minute once I get calmed down.”

 He had never thought he would have ever heard any other emotion in the guy’s voice other than cold restraint. Even now, for a normal person he sounded only mildly angry. These two facts put together told Landon: this guy was seriously pissed.

 “I take it the ‘talk’ didn’t go well.”

 Tanis released a string of swear words calling Hugh every name in the book. It was… colorful. He didn’t even know half of those words existed. Beside him, Conner titled his head, like a student listening attentively to a new lesson. He would nod now and again.

 “E-excuse me…” a voice spoke softly behind him, interrupting the three of them.

 Landon turned around and winced at the sight of Felix behind him. “Good evening, Felix. Something we can help you with?”

 “W-well… I seem to have lost my partner,” he mumbled.

 Landon sighed. “You see that crowd of girls down there?” he asked pointing. “She’s in the middle of that.”

 Felix looked across to the table. Every single girl in the whole school had gathered around the table and the small four foot girl crying in the middle of it all. At least Lydia was not alone in her grief, he thought miserably. There didn’t seem to be anything that could bring a group of women together faster than a broken heart. He had lost his own Tanya somewhere in the mix. He wasn’t about to go searching for her, either.

 “I-is everything alright…” Felix breathed.

 Landon sighed, taking another sip of his coffee. “It will be. Eventually. Boyfriend problems.”

 Felix’s head whipped around. “Huh?”

 Tanis slammed his fist into the table. “That asshole broke up with her,” he growled. “She did something to try to help him. It hurt him a little too deeply but instead of trying to work it out, he just threw her away.”

 Felix tilted his head, frowning. “Seriously? I really thought they were a cute couple. Oh gods…” he breathed. “I’m having problems and my partner is having personal issues…” he snapped. “No!” He ran his hands through his hair aggravated. “I shouldn’t think of it like that. Dammit! I’m no good with this.”

 Landon sighed. “She’ll be fine tomorrow, Felix. I’ll make sure of it,” he promised. Anger flooded through him. The kid had a right to be angry. Lydia was going to need to learn how to separate her person life away from her duties. “She gets today and that’s it,” he snapped. “She’s lucky I’m tolerating this much.”

 Tanis whirled on him saying something completely incomprehensible. Beside him Conner burst out laughing. Which only pissed Tanis off even more. “Something funny?” he growled.

 Conner waved his hand. “Not at all. I’m just enjoying seeing this unrestrained side of you. I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone slip up and try to throw three curse words into the same word.”

 Landon turned to him. “The disgusting part of your Will is starting to show, Conner.”

 Conner gave him a wide grin. “I’m struggling to reign it in, but I can’t help it.”

 “W-what is your Will?” Felix asked.

 “Yes,” Tanis growled. “I want to know this, too. I think Lydia told Hugh but he never told the rest of us, but he suddenly started calling you ‘Con-man’.”

 Conner winced and looked way. “I don’t like to mention it.”

 Landon sighed. “You’re sitting among a boy with an anger management problem, another who’s usually calm and cold, and then blind boy behind us that has an ego problem.”

 “Oh, that’s cute,” Felix growled. “How long did it take for you to come up with that one?” he snapped. “Hope you didn’t strain your imagination. That can be a dangerous thing, I hear.”

 Conner sighed and shrugged. “And yet my cunning partner has a point. My Will is Deceit.”

 Felix burst out laughing behind them. “That’s great. I didn’t even think something like that could be a Will.”

 Conner shrugged. “I like deceiving people. Manipulating them. Getting done what I want. I hate that people instantly take a dislike to me for it. If it helps, my secondary Will is justice.”

 Felix came around and sat beside him. He leaned forward and took a closer look at Tanis who glared back at him. Felix blinked. “Damn, I thought I was good at losing fights.”

 “I didn’t lose,” Tanis shouted at the boy.

 “It doesn’t look like you won, either.”

 Landon shook his head. “Actually, you look good considering who you went up against. He was pulling his punches.”

 Tanis released another string of curses and insults. Landon did not bother trying to follow it. “He’s just playing the part of the injured victim!” he shouted, finally coming around to something comprehensible.

 Landon shrugged. “He’ll do that. It feels like that to him. He’ll come around eventually.”

 “I still can’t believe he *choked her*.”

 Landon stared across at Lydia. “I choked Lydia on my first day with her. It was a carless act of anger. She was so far gone after the experience that she had to get her tank immediately. No. Hugh knew what he was doing. I think he just wanted to make a point. To get across how furious and done he was with her. He attacked her weak point the way that she did to him.”

 Tanis sighed. “And he busted her necklace. She cherished that thing. He gave that to her when she was being taken to the hospital. He gave her his Lily for Lydia and gave that necklace to her father hoping the guy would give it to her. I don’t think there was anything more cruel he could have done.”

 Landon stared down into his coffee. Had they pushed it too far? Hugh had not seemed the sort to fly off the handle this badly. “The guy has his own lesson to learn the same way we all did when we got here. Dealing with a weakness is never easy. Hugh has to learn to curb his attitude. Taking swings at people is not acceptable behavior, no matter what the reason.”

 “Lydia said he was trying to defend the lowerclassmen,” Tanis muttered.

 “Nancy and Thomas are strong people. They are going to do well with their partners. Hugh interfered in something he had no business interfering in. Like when he punched me over Lydia. It’s even less than acceptable. He took a situation and didn’t reflect on the whole picture. Narrow sightedness is not something that can be afforded in someone who’s wanting to command the way that Hugh is wanting.”

 Tanis sighed. “That’s the kind of person Hugh is, though. A friend’s in trouble – he jumps in. Lydia being in trouble, unable to help, and that she was doing it against him… I think you just attacked him on a multitude of fronts there.”

 “And he’ll get over it eventually,” Landon nodded. “She will, too. If this is all it took to break them up, how strong was their relationship really? I told Lydia before that she could either choose to be the doting girlfriend or be a strong leader and do what needs done. She made her choice then and it was the same choice she made last night. And like I told her back then: it’s the choice I would hope *my* girlfriend would make for me.”

 Tanis nodded. “It’s what I would want Lydia to do for me. She told me it before, too. That I could be short and coldhearted. I want to change. I’m working on it. If she or anyone else can think of a good way to speed up the process I’m willing to go through it.”

 Landon smirked. “Talk to your partner. I’m sure he would love to hear all about it.”

 Tanis sighed. “She.”

 Landon’s eyebrow raised. “She?”

 “My partner’s female.”

 “What’s her name? Maybe Tanya knows her.”

 “Constance.” He swallowed. “It had to be a girl…” he muttered.

 Felix grinned at him. “And that’s a problem, how? My partner is a female and I think she can kick everyone’s ass at this table.”

 Tanis turned and glared at him. “Apart from tomboyish Erica, the eccentric twins, and socially awkward Lydia, the only girls I’ve ever been around I have instantly offended and been slapped by them.”

 Conner burst out laughing. “Somehow that doesn’t come as a surprise. I think this is perfect for you, then. Sounds like a weakness to me. What better way to deal with it.”

 Felix shrugged. “If it makes you feel better – I have no girl experience, either.”

 “You don’t seem afraid to talk to them – or anyone.”

 Felix smirked. “When you’re blind, you kinda have no clue who you’re talking to until the conversation has already started. And what makes them so special anyways?”

 Tanis threaded his fingers through his hair as he leaned forward on the table. “They’re sensitive. They cry. A guy gets angry and punches me but I can still go back up and talk to them. A girl gets angry, cries, slaps me, and won’t have anything to do with me ever afterwards.”

 Landon burst out laughing despite himself. “How the heck did you deal with Lydia?”

 He frowned and considered. “I think Lydia was too busy focused on Hugh to worry about my nasty comments. That and… Lydia doesn’t exactly cry. Not like a normal girl. Whenever Lydia cries you know it’s something serious.” Landon watched as the boy’s grin grew wide. “And the moment I told her I wanted to help with setting up a training routine with her wheelchair, she couldn’t wait to jump at the chance. I think that’s my favorite memory of her. That wide smile she gave me when I suggested swimming. Everyone was tearing down the idea but she was actually *excited* about it.” He busted out laughing. “You think she looked sick and frail when she joined here? You shoulda seen her before at the beginning when she was in her wheelchair. Erica had her in an old swimsuit. The thing looked awful on her. You have no idea how difficult it was for me to keep my tongue and not say something to her. I still don’t know how I managed it.”

 Landon wasn’t sure how he was keeping *his* tongue. This boy had it bad for Lydia. No wonder he was doing nothing but tearing down Hugh the day before. And for the guy’s credit he was sitting in front of them, bloodied and bruised, having done what he could to patch things up between the girl he was in love with and the guy she was in love with – that was not him.

 Landon shrugged finally. “Just treat your partner the way that you do Lydia. Things will sorta fall into place after that. You might knock heads a little but I think once your partner figures you out, she’ll be less… vindictive, I suppose.”

 Conner grinned. “Do you know why she chose you? Did she give a reason? Or was it just a random thing?”

 Tanis stared at Conner. “She said she wanted to try her hand at someone whose Will is Stubbornness.”

 “What’s hers?” Felix asked.

 “Would you believe Patience?”

 Landon and Conner both burst out laughing at the same time.

 “Oh that’s rich,” Felix said with equal amusement.

 “I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” he growled. “I keep avoiding her. The whole first day all she did was pull me around and *watch* me. When I asked her what the hell she was doing she just told me she was wondering how long it took for a stubborn person to run out of patience and become *not* stubborn. I feel like the wench is toying with me. We didn’t speak the whole morning through and then when I went to class she called out ‘Still waiting, Tanis!’”

 “What is she waiting for?” Conner asked with a wide grin.

 “The hell if I know. I keep going back through our conversations to try to figure it out, and there wasn’t a whole lot of them to begin with.”

 Felix smirked. “Have you considered that maybe *that’s* what she’s waiting for? You’re avoiding her and not talking to her, aren’t you?”

 Conner chuckled. “When Lydia’s feeling better you should tell her your troubles. I think she would seriously enjoy hearing this story.”

 Tanis turned around to stare at the group of girls that were still crowded around Lydia pretty thickly. “I hope that’s soon,” he muttered.

#

 Lydia rubbed her eyes, trying to force away the last effects of her usual sleeping pill. With a an oomph, she hit the floor from the top bunk. She flicked on the lights.

 “Lights on!” she shouted to everyone.

 Ori shot up in bed blinking wildly, looking around. She stared down at Lydia with a questioning expression, but Lydia pretended that she did not see it.

 “Lights on!” she repeated at the top of her voice. “Everyone at attention! Now! Let’s go newbies,” she shouted.

 Ori jumped down, rubbing her eyes. She looked down at her. “Uh – did you need to cough or anything?” she murmured.

 Lydia shook her head. “Already did. I woke up a little early this morning.”

 Ori stared down at her friend with a critical expression but turned and shrugged. Lydia grinned inwardly. She had confused her. Everyone would be expecting the same. Her still in tears. Well, she wasn’t going to do it!

 If that’s the sort of person Hugh Oliver had turned out to be – she was as done with him as he was with her. Her heart still stung like hell but the best thing for grief was work. And she was going to work. Guys sucked. How many girls had repeated that same line to her last night. It had been therapeutic, actually. She had spent the whole evening listing all of Hugh’s bad traits and tearing him down, and now she felt even better for it. Hugh had been a pretty sucky boyfriend afterall. Ok… ignoring that he had stood up to a maniac dragon pleading for his death because he thought he had lost her, and then the time he had slaughtered ten men with her to try to escape from the Death Rider, and that he had always dropped whatever he was doing to make sure she was ok…

 But she wouldn’t focus on that! *He* had felt betrayed? How betrayed did she feel when he had dumped a tray of food on her and choked her? Just because he did not want to listen to her at the first true test between them as fighters. *She* was a Room Commander. It was her duty to instruct newbies. If he had not wanted to listen that was his problem. She had worked far too hard for this opportunity and she was not going to throw away all her dreams and efforts because some *guy* could not get over his ego.

 She had duties and responsibilities and she was not going to fail in them because of *Hugh Oliver*. Hugh had promised he would never be an obstacle and she was certainly not going to turn him into one now. He was *not* something she was going to be forced to have to surpass.

 She was *not* going to play the role of the sobbing love-sick brunette in one of Hugh’s favorite love stories. Nor was she going to consign herself to the role of the heartbroken princess crushed by the loss of her prince in one of her favorite fairy tales.

 “Ori, roll call, please!” she commanded once everyone had appeared at the end of their bunks. She stared across at Felix. She clicked her tongue. Al had really worked him since yesterday. She was going to have to tell the guy to start pulling back now. Damn her. Damn Hugh. She had wanted to start their one on one sessions yesterday. She felt like she had lost valuable time and all for what – to cry over *Hugh*?

 She doubted he was crying over her. Tanis was right. He probably had some new girl outside already pressed up against the wall having his way with her. Probably some girl that was far easier than her… and prettier… and was not so flat chested…

 “Alright – beds! And I’m going to warn you, I’m going to be going over with them a stern eye today. You cut corners and I’m going to notice,” she growled. “I’m not holding your guys’ hands today.

 She walked over to her own bed and worked on making it, struggling still with the height. Why was the world made with only tall people in mind, she thought angrily. Like this wasn’t difficult enough for her.

 She jumped down and began to go around inspecting everyone’s beds. She started with Nick. She was in the mood to hand out demerits and she could sense that guy’s laziness and mile away. She went around the room like this, criticizing and commenting, ripping off sheets now and again with a joyful glee. She had never power tripped before and she did not really approve of doing it often, but for this one morning…

 She heard a soft chuckle at the door that caught her attention. She looked over and found Landon leaning up against the frame, his arm propped up above his head. She turned to Ori and told her to continue and walked over to her partner.

 “Yes?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

 “I see you’re in high spirits this morning?”

 “You expected otherwise?” she challenged, glaring up at him.

 He gave her a wide grin. “Yes. Yes, actually, I did. I apologize, Lydia. I kind of expected to come in here and have to rip you out of your own bed.”

 She shook her head. “I’ve had my moment. I shed my tears. I’m done.” She clicked her tongue. “Gods, I’m dreading the extra work I’m going to have to put in to make up for yesterday.”

 Landon nodded his approval. “Good girl. Well then, I’ll return to my own business. Just one more thing – Felix was looking for you last night. I think he’s reaching his breaking point. Focus or you might lose your opportunity.”

 She nodded and cast a quick look back at Felix who was struggling with his bed still. She slipped out into the hallway, pushing past Landon. “Tell Al to back off for a few days. Start spreading out the fights. I’m going to start today. I want to try to build up his skill and confidence before we put him to the test again.”

 Landon nodded. “I’m impressed, Lydia. You’re keeping your head.” He laid his hand on top of her head. “You’re going to make a great commander.”

 She smirked and nodded. She turned around and started to walk away but then turned back around. “Hey, Landon.”

 He turned and frowned. “Yes?”

 “Downstairs. The station for hair trims… when’s it open?”

 Landon put a hand on his hip. “As soon as breakfast starts.”

 She nodded. “Thanks.” And she ran back into the room.

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 She reached up and ran her hand through the back of her hair for the several hundredth time. Short. Ridiculously short. A boy’s cut, actually that hung a little low on her neck. It felt.. . weird. But she felt better for it, too. How many times had her hair gotten into her way while she was working. Especially when fighting?

 She stepped into the mess hall, her books in her arms. She had been given the opportunity to make up for the previous day’s assignments – after a lot of begging on her part – and she was going to need to throw all her effort into it. She was going to need to work through lunch. She would still need to eat something, though. Especially to get ready for all the fighting she planned to do with Felix.

 She sat her books down and looked up to turn around. She froze. Hugh was two tables down from her and he was staring at her – his eyes wide with his fork midway to his mouth.

 A shudder of malicious delight swept through her body. This was better than she had pictured it. Hugh *loved* her long hair. And now it was gone. She gave him her most brilliant smile and flicked him off before spinning around on the spot and marching to the line.

 *That* made the day *so* worth getting up for.

 She was practically skipping when she returned to her table. Hugh was still there but she looked away from him. She pushed him from her mind as she spread her work around her and got busy. She had lost herself completely in between eating her food (shrimp, gross!) and studying when she looked up next. Hugh was gone. She blinked and realized that she was looking in between two people. She pulled her eyes away from where Hugh had been sitting and looked up and smiled at Landon and Conner. “S-sorry. Hope you weren’t sitting there long,” she apologized.

 “About five minutes,” Conner said with a shrug.

 “Holy crap, Lydia,” Landon gasped as he took in her hair. “When you asked me this morning, I had no idea you were going to go that extreme.”

 She shrugged. “It was in my way. Has been for some time. It was just an obstruction so I got rid of it.”

 Tanis spoke beside her – how long had *he* been there, “And the fact that Hugh loved your long hair had absolutely *nothing* to do with your decision.”

 She gave him an innocent smile. “Never even crossed my mind,” she lied sweetly.

 She blinked and looked past Tanis. There was a girl about his height sitting beside him. Her hair was as black as Tanis’s but she had brilliant shining brown eyes that almost looked *red*. Her hair bounced around her head in half moon curls that it looked like the girl struggled in vain to straighten as best she could. She was wearing a white coat over her silver and red striped uniform.

 She grinned. “Tanis. It seems you have picked up a friend?”

 Tanis turned three shades red. “I-I wouldn’t call her a friend. She’s my partner.” He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Lydia, this is Constance. Constance, this is Lydia.”

 “The Death Slayer,” Constance exclaimed, standing up and reaching over Tanis to shake Lydia’s hand. “I know exactly who she is. This is a treat! I had no idea my stubborn little partner was familiar with you.”

 Oh no, Lydia thought, grinning inwardly, meeting *her* was the true treat. She swallowed hard, fighting back her laughter. “T-tanis didn’t mention his partner was a girl,” she finally spoke.

 The girl sighed and spread her arms out wide. “Don’t lie. Tanis didn’t mention me at all. He’s been evading me since the first day. It’s fun, actually. I had no idea that choosing someone whose Will is Stubbornness would prove to be so entertaining.”

 Tanis looked up and glared at the girl. “Do you have to talk about me like I’m not here?” he snapped.

 “Why not? It’s not like you’re doing a whole lot of speaking. You might as well *not* be here.”

 Lydia swallowed. It was getting harder. She was reaching her breaking point. “A-and your Will?” she asked finally when she trusted herself a little more.

 “Oh? Me? Patience.” She grinned wide. “I’m Patient Constance. I’m patiently constant and constantly patient,” she said with a laugh.

 Lydia couldn’t control it anymore. It was too much. She busted out laughing. She realized that Landon and Conner had both joined in with her.

 Tanis slammed his fork on the table. “It’s not funny!” he shouted.

 Constance blinked. “Am I missing something? I seem to be the subject of a joke that I don’t get.”

 Lydia waved her hand through the air struggling to regain control of herself. “No, no, no. Not you. Well, it *is* you but you’d have to know Tanis a little better. He’s completely totally and hopelessly awkward with girls.”

 Tanis glared at her. “Thanks for sharing that, Lydie,” he hissed. “Just throw that right out there. Don’t hold back.”

 She grinned back at him. “Oh, I’m not. Anything your partner wants to know.”

 Constance grinned. “While you provided a valuable bit of insight, I must decline, Miss Lydia. I think half of the challenge of taking care of my new partner is going to be to get him to talk to me on his own. It’s fun waiting him out. I’m going to have a lot of fun taking care of him. Whoever heard of a medic who doesn’t talk with their patients.”

 “Be careful,” Conner suggested. “The problem with Tanis isn’t always getting him to talk.”

 Landon nodded. “It’s what comes out of his mouth next that can be an even bigger issue.”

 She grinned at him. “Multi-layered, huh?”

 He jumped out of his seat. “I am not that bad,” he hissed. “Like the three of you are so fantastic,” he growled. “Mr. Deceit over here, anger management problem, and –“ he stopped short and swore.

 “I like that he stopped just before it came to insulting you,” Landon remarked.

 Tanis swallowed and sat back down. “I’m working on it,” he growled.

 Constance leaned over. “It seems like it. So! Tanis’s introduction, no great surprise, was horrifically awful. The only name I’ve been offered is his girlfriend’s.”

 “Oh gods, no…” Tanis breathed, burying his face in both of his hands.

 Lydia felt herself redden fifty shades. Conner was the only one who laughed. Landon just winced. “Uh… Constance, let’s avoid the relationship thing. Lydia is currently going through a break up and…” he sighed, “let’s just leave it at that.”

 Constance blinked. “Oh! I’m so sorry. Just that I assumed,” she mumbled. “I-I mean… Lydia’s the only person Tanis has really talked about.”

 “Drop it!!” Tanis shouted through his hands.

 Constance winced. “Dropping it!” she announced. “Now that I’ve made everyone incredibly awkward… your names, please?”

 Landon nodded drawing in a deep breath. “Landon, Lydia’s senior partner.”

 Conner nodded. “Conner, Landon’s partner.”

 “And the only one with any relations to Tanis is Lydia, then, I’m assuming?”

 Conner and Landon nodded. “If you come around for dinner,” Landon explained, “you’ll meet more people that are friends with Tanis.”

 Constance nodded. “I’ll do that. Oh and for the record – feel free to call me Cici. I prefer my nickname over my full name.”

 Lydia turned back to her homework, working on it with a new rushed fervor, realizing she had just lost some valuable time.

 “So, wait, all three of you are Room Commanders?” she heard Constance ask after a while.

 “Did we do something to give ourselves away?” Conner chuckled.

 “Nah. Just that Room Commanders in the Fighting division have a certain attitude. That’s great to see. I could never do that. I’ve never been the bossy sort. It’s nerve wracking enough having a partner.”

 “That’s great,” Tanis muttered. “I get the subpar partner with confidence issues.”

 “Oh, don’t you start doubting me yet, Tanis. I don’t care if I need to get all of your little friends involved. I’m going to figure out all your problems and take care of them. I’ve seen your medical privileges and seen some of the stuff you’re into – especially that mini library of books you brought with you.”

 “Y-you went through my things?!” Tanis shouted.

 “Naturally. I needed to get *some* info on you. It was pretty boring for a guy’s drawer. I have two brothers at home. I was expecting to see at least *one* naughty magazine or something.”

 Lydia pulled out of her notebook to stare at Tanis’s face. She grinned at the bright red on his cheeks. She kept quiet and turned back to her work.

 “I-I would never! W-what kind of guy do you think I am?”

 She sighed. “The boring sort apparently. I was hoping to find a little bit of dirt on you. And no more hints from the rest of you lot,” she snapped. “I’m going to figure you out bit by bit, Tanis.

 Tanis sighed and went back to his food. Lydia lost herself again in her homework. Minutes later she felt Landon’s hand tap her shoulder. “Better get out there to your team, Miss Commander.”

 She sighed and stared desperately at her work. She wasn’t even close to being done. Stupid Hugh… this was all his fault. Reluctantly she rushed through picking it all up. Maybe she would put Felix through a few solo exercises and get her books out then and get some more work done. “Why is there never enough hours in the day,” she grumbled.

 She stood up and nodded to Constance. “It was lovely meeting you,” she said.

 “Likewise!” the girl said with a wave of her hand in the air.

 Tanis stared after her for a while as she started to head away. “Lydie?” he called out finally just as she was about to rush off. She turned to him and waited. “I… I like your haircut. It’s different, but… I think this look suits you better.”

 She grinned widely at him. “Thanks, Tanis.”

 She ran out into the hall and stopped for a moment, her steps faltering. She reached back and felt again at her missing locks. A small sob racked her body. Hugh would hate it. She felt the tears well up in her eyes.

 No! She was not doing that!

 She steeled herself back together, brushing at her eyes furiously, and threw her mind back into gear. *Forward, Lydia! Think: Dragon! Hugh was the one who had thrown you away and you’re not going to spend even another minute thinking about him.* That’s what she told herself as she rushed away and out the doors.

#

 She walked out to the field and looked around at the newbies. They were all staring at her curiously. She shrugged off the stares and turned to the upperclassmen. “How’s things going with your partners?” she asked. There were nods all around.

 “Nothing that we can’t handle,” one of them even chuckled.

 Lydia nodded. “I’m giving you guys the option today. You can continue to push your team through the archery exercises – some of them do need them – or you can pull your partners aside for some one on one time. I need to get Felix on his own. I’m going to be putting him through some knife training and then his own private archery lessons.”

 There were nods and some of them took a moment to pause and consider their options. Lydia turned to Ori. “How’s your partner?”

 Ori turned to look back at the girl named Allie. “She’s doing good. Over excitable. She likes to rush her shots, but you’ve seen that. I think I’m going to keep her on archery.”

 “You mind taking lead, then?”

 Ori nodded. “Sounds good.”

 She turned to the rest of them. “So it’s up to you. If you need any assistance don’t be afraid to reach out to me.”

 “Good luck on Felix,” one of them said with a wide grin.

 She nodded and turned around and headed towards the team. “Felix Yevon!” she called out as she neared. “Follow me,” she ordered without looking across at him.

 She walked away for a short distance from the rest of the team and the archery unit. She dropped her books and began shuffling through her papers.

 “Hey, C-commander?”

 “Yes, Felix?” she asked absently.

 “S-sorry to hear about your boyfriend.”

 A sharp pain stabbed at her heart. She swallowed and shook her head. “No. Thank you, but no. Let’s keep away from that topic. That’s neither here nor there. We have more important stuff to focus on.”

 “Y-yes, ma’am,” he said softly, guilt now in his voice.

 She stood up and handed him the papers she had searched for. “Can you see these?” she asked. “I tried to make them as dark as possible. I didn’t know if that would help.”

 Felix took them in his hand and stared down at them. “It does, but it’s sunlight out right now so that’s going to work against me a bit.”

 She blinked and looked up at the sky. It was actually a somewhat overcast day. One of those early spring days with just the hint of spring rain in the air. “Even this much light is too much for you?”

 “Not that it’s too much, but it sorta blurs out the colors. At least it’s not a sunny day. Those are the worst for me.”

 “So bright sunny days and darkness. Gods, no wonder you have trouble when you’re boarded up in the skies like that.”

 “Yeah,” he said miserably.

 She reached up and nibbled at her thumbnail. “Have you ever tried tinted glasses?”

 There was a pause. “A-actually I never considered that to be perfectly honest. I wonder how good those would work,” he mumbled.

 She nodded. “I’ll see if my friend can hook you up with a pair. I might need to special order them for you from a catalog. But for now, let’s work as best we can. That stuff is for your archery. I’ve provided the distances for you. Tonight I want you to memorize them. We’ll start working on them one on one a bit more. Just listing the distances isn’t going to do you a whole lot of good until we can get your eyes to measure out the distances, of course. I want to work on your knife work today.”

 Felix actually breathed a sigh of relief. She waited. She wondered if he would mention the bullying or if he was going to clam up. Nothing. He provided no follow up. That was alright in its own way. That meant he wanted to take care of it himself. That was good, but at the same time she wanted him to feel confident enough with her to talk about situations like this. She knew *this* problem. She had created itself herself, of course, but what if there were a problem he was going through that she was unaware of. She could not work on things if he would not let her know about them. She clicked her tongue. She wondered if yesterday when he had searched her out if he might have confided then in his frustration. No, she was too busy wasting tears about Hugh. Damn her. Damn Hugh.

 “Pull out your knives, Felix. I want to see them real quick.”

 Felix bent down and pulled the blades out. She had noticed before, but she wanted to be sure. He passed them over to her and she confirmed what she had thought. Felix’s knives were short. They were not the typical blades that even the schools handed out.

 “Who gave you these knives?” she asked.

 “Oh, these were just some that I picked up at home.”

 “Didn’t your school give you any?”

 “No. They didn’t even want to give me weapons. They thought it was a little too risky.”

 “S-so wait, what did they have you do when you were boarded in Class Five? What did you use then?”

 “Nothing. Lydia, the moment I was boarded the fight was basically over. Even if I *did* have knives they wouldn’t have done me a whole lot of good. They let me try out a spear once that I could throw at a target, but I hit wrong against something and it snapped in two. I never got a chance to use it against someone boarding me. My plans of attack always revolved around me doing everything I could to *not* get boarded.”

 She clicked her tongue. “Now I’m just getting pissed. You went to just a simple public school, didn’t you?”

 Felix smirked. “And what school did you come from?”

 She drew in a deep breath. “A private boarding school.”

 “Oh gods, don’t tell me you’re one of those fancy rich kids.”

 She allowed a small smile. “Felix. I’m an Alvincia.”

 “Sorry, is that supposed to mean something?”

 “The uniform you’re wearing? My great-great-great-grandfather created it. I think there’s a few more greats in there or maybe too many, but you get the idea. My father is even in the process of trying to redesign it, but things keep getting pushed back with it. Your dragon saddle, probably a product of Alvincia. We deal with horse products and horse breeding mostly, but it’s easy to translate a lot of that into dragon gear.”

 “Oh crap, you really *are* a rich kid.”

 “The richest.” She sighed and threw the knives away. “This not going to work. No wonder you are having such a hard time. Stay here. I’m going to see what I can find in the equipment shed. Also – what weapon would you prefer to train with? Do you want to concentrate on your bow or do you want to try spears or another weapon?”

 “W-wait, you’re going to train me like that?”

 “I have no idea how good it will turn out but I can see what I can do. I do spears myself. Spears, though my principal weapon is my bow. If you want a different weapon we could manage even if I had to get someone else in here to help us with it.”

 He grinned wide. “You handle spears? I’m actually somewhat impressed that you can lift those.”

 She glared up at him. “People that underestimate me are always easy to impress,” she growled.

 Felix held up his hands defensively laughing. “F-fair enough. Sorry, Commander. Umm – yeah, I could try spears. I have no preference considering two minutes ago I didn’t even think it was a possibility.”

 She nodded. “I’ll be right back then. Stay here and see if you can at least study the charts. Give yourself something to do.”

 “You want me to come with?”

 “It’s dark in the shed. I think you would just be more in the way than an actual help. I’ll be right back.”

 She spun around and took off towards the shed. She entered and began searching around for the gear that she needed. She first considered the knives. There was nothing spectacular on the shelf. Just standard issue. She pulled them out and looked at them. She was hoping she could find a set with a little longer reach. She found a set. The reach wasn’t anything significantly more, but maybe it would be just enough to give Felix a bit of an edge over his enemy. She wondered what sort of gear he had on his dragon. She would have to check those knives, too. She wanted him to have a dagger at the very least.

 She turned to the spears and stopped dead. She had not realized she was not the only one inside. There was someone else standing at the spears. He didn’t seem to have noticed someone else was inside either as he considered the items.

 Of course, it was Hugh.

 She bit her lip. Felix was waiting, but Hugh was taking his time. She wouldn’t be able to just stand outside and out-wait him. She swallowed. *This was stupid!* She was not going to make her partner wait because of this asshole!

 She walked over and picked up the three closest spears – just simple ones. Enough for Felix to try to train with and attempt to learn. From the corner of her eye, she saw Hugh look up at her and then heard the sound of a his as she pulled in air through his teeth. She ignored him. Concentrated on her task. Steeled herself.

 She grabbed three spears and started to turn around. Her heart was pounding. Damn it! She was *over him*!

 “There’s a crack in that one,” his voice spoke softly. “I taught you to always *check* the shafts before you just pick them up randomly.”

 “I don’t need your help, thanks,” she growled. “The crack one is better for now for my purposes. It will hold and it’s no crying shame if it *does* break.”

 Why the *hell* was he talking to her? Damn him. Damn him for torturing her like this.

 She turned around and headed for the door.

 “You look like a boy with that ridiculous haircut,” he growled.

 “I’m glad you approve,” she snapped. “Why don’t you find a comb before you hand out comments to someone else’s hair style.”

 She ran out the door, grabbing up some tape, before he could say anything else.

 Her heart was pounding in her chest as she ran back across the field. She had to swallow several times and force her throat open. She was *not* going to spend another second crying over him. Not doing it! Dammit, why had he been in the shed?

 She dumped the equipment off beside Felix. “The knives are good. The spears I chose some that are a little beaten until we can be sure that you can handle them. I’m going to reinforce them a bit but if they shatter don’t get all worried. When I’m more sure if this is going to work or not, I’ll get you something a bit more permanent,” she explained.

 He walked over to her and picked up the knifes with their own ankle sheathes. “Wow, these are longer than my others.”

 “Yes. They are a little longer than mine. I think you’ll want the extra length. I wish I could have found some a little longer, but then again considering these are ankle blades, it might be the best I can hope for. I’m actually somewhat considering fitting you for a dagger instead. Not typical Fighter gear, they belong to Rangers, but for you it might be a good consideration to have both. What sort of gear do you have for your dragon?”

 “Back shield.”

 She waited, but he didn’t answer with anything else. She sighed. “Oh gods, please tell me that’s not all you have.”

 “Lydia, they didn’t even want to give me ankle blades.”

 “B-but it’s your own dragon gear. Didn’t you buy them yourself?”

 “It must be great to be all Miss Rich over there, but for the rest of us, the world doesn’t just rain money.”

 She sighed and buried her face in her hand. “My boyfriend bought me my set, Felix. He had to work parttime to pay it off but he managed it.”

 “Goody for your boyfriend. Lydia – what parttime job do you think *I* could work? I’m from the city.”

 “Do you have problems cleaning out your dragon’s stall?” she growled.

 “No.”

 “So did you not consider being hired as a stable boy? Don’t give me the blind boy sob story excuse.”

 As she talked she picked up one of the spears and began wrapping the tape around it, doing what she could to reinforce it.

 “Are you seriously mad at me for not having got a parttime job and worked for dragon gear?” he asked incredulously.

 “No! I’m mad because you just tried to use your damn illness as an excuse. You made it into your own damn obstacle. ‘I am blind, therefore I can’t.’ That is *not* going to pass with me. That is the whole source of your problems.”

 “I’m here aren’t I?” he snapped.

 “That’s great, Felix,” she snapped, looking up from her task. “That’s one issue you decided to not let your condition hold you back from, but it extends to every other aspect of your life, too. You have an ego – why does it stop at certain places but not others?”

 “And what about you, Miss Wheelchair?” he growled.

 “No, Felix. I still got up and *did* things. I used to try to train my own horses and I can’t count how many times I pissed off my parents pushing myself. I won’t lie. After I entered another coma I did enter a three year depression where I did not move. There just… didn’t seem a point. I let that sort of thinking consume me. Believe me, you don’t want to get to that point – ever. But I got up. I got walking. *Now* look at me. I’m telling you *right now*. Do not let your condition hold you back from doing *anything*.” She sighed. “Gods, what am I going to do about your gear… I’ll have to see if there’s something I can hunt down for you.”

 She finished the last spear and swung it through the air, giving it a twirl. Felix burst out laughing. She sighed and glared at him. “What now?”

 “Nothing. I was just wondering how you would manage to pull off that type of move without tipping over.”

 She glared at him and threw the spear down. “I was going to go easy on you – but now you’ve just pissed me off. Knives out, Felix. You can worry about adjusting the ankle sheathes later.”

 She watched as his body immediately tensed as he pulled the blades out uncertainly. The same flash of fear entered his cloudy eyes.

 “If you tell yourself you’ve lost already then you *have* already lost,” she told him. “Half of fighting is attitude. Even if you have never handled a blade once in your life you should come at someone with the attitude that you have done it a million and one times and you *know* you’re going to win.”

 “Easy for you to say when you can see the other blade.”

 “Another error. You don’t watch the blades, Felix. You watch the person’s body. You watch what muscles they are tensing – what arm they are about to use. You learn and practice so you can detect the signs of a feint. You’re so afraid about what you *can’t* see, that you are missing the things that you can see. You told me up close you can see me pretty clearly, right?”

 “You’re still a hopeless blur, but yeah, I suppose.”

 She raised her arm suddenly to strike out at him. He gasped and danced back quickly.

 “So you could see that? What gave you the first hint that I was going about to slash you?”

 “Your arm lifted.”

 “My arm lifted – but you weren’t focused on my blade, right?”

 “No. I didn’t see it.”

 “But you still saw my body movement and knew ‘oh, she’s about slash me, so I better back up’ right? That’s what you have to do with the rest of fighting. Of course you can’t follow the blade. People try to feint all the time. We have two blades – we can slash out a person with either one. Only a moron tries to do both at the same time. It’s all about misdirection and trying to think one step ahead. Because o fyour disability, you’re going to have to be twice as smart – instead of one step ahead, you’re going to have to be thinking two steps ahead. You keep playing defense, Felix, but what you should be playing is offense. Don’t give them a chance to attack you and you won’t have to worry about losing.”

 “You make it sound ridiculously easy.”

 “Of course it’s not easy. It’s hours upon hours of practice. You’re going to fail a lot before you finally succeed. Now, get into your stance. I’m going to go through a series of a few attacks and teach you how to handle those. It will be slow. We’ll work up into an actual heavier fight. We won’t do it until you feel confident, though, ok?”

 She watched as Felix took a deep breath and licked his lips. He dropped down into his stance. The fear was gone. Good.

 “Alright!” he barked. “Come at me, Commander!”

 This was going to be fun.

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 Felix winced as Lydia bandaged his face. He wished she would be a little more gentle.

            “She likes hitting that spot, doesn’t she?” Conner remarked. “How many times did you get a cut there, Landon?”

            Landon stared across at them over his tray, taking a mouthful of food. “Too many times to count. I think she gets a thrill out of the fact that normally it’s not a spot she can reach.”

            “Oh gods… Lydia, your hair is so short,” Erica said as she sat down at the dinner table.

            “And you’ve no idea how much I’ve fallen in love with it,” she answered simply. Actually, truth be told, she didn’t really have a preference that she could detect yet. It was nice that she didn’t have it in her face all the time, but… she was still not ‘attached’ to it. It was still a gesture of vindictiveness.

            “We should so put green highlights in it!” the twins shouted as they approached, Tanya in the lead. “It would look just like mine, then,” Samantha said with a laugh.

            “So, tell us, Lydia? How’d Felix do?” Landon asked.

            Felix swallowed, also on the edge of his seat as he waited to hear what Lydia had to say.

[get Lydia and him on firstname basis]

            She shrugged. “Once we got him the right equipment, he did pretty good. Not bad. Completely novice. I mean, I can tell that he took some classes but his skills are in horrific shape. Not a lost cause, though. He’s never going to be ‘spectacular’ but hopefully we can get him to at least be able to save his neck so if he does fail and get boarded it’s not a total game over.” She glared across at Conner. “No attacking him with your battleax for a while. Oh! That reminds me. I need some old equipment if you guys have any. Felix has nothing for his dragon except his shield. I found some spears and that’s what he’s going to try first, but I was hoping for some knives – preferably daggers.”

            Landon raised his eyebrow at her. “Thinking of compensating with a longer reach?”

            “Exactly. Anything to give him an extra edge. I almost want to fit him with a dagger instead of just our normal ankle sheathes. Stealth is not going to do him a whole lot of good. It’s just not an advantage he’s going to be able to have.”

            Landon nodded. “I can safely say I agree with all your thinking, Lydia. I don’t have any daggers myself –“

            “We do!” the twins shouted. “I’ll be happy to provide one for you, Felix” Kylie said.

 Felix looked across at them and nodded. “Thanks. Ah, Commander? If you’re done, I have to go get to my homework and start memorize that stuff you made for me.”

 Lydia nodded, cleaning up the items around her. “Yeah. I need to start back on my own work.”

 John took Felix’s seat as the boy got up and left. He sat down and looked across at Lydia, blinking. “W-what happened to your hair?”

 She sighed. “I cut it,” she answered. “Isn’t that obvious?”

 “Oh… it’s obvious alright.”

 She sighed and rolled her eyes. She reached down under her seat and pulled up her homework books, spreading everything out around her. “I’ll let you copy off my next homework assignment if you let me look at yours?”

 “As appealing as that offer almost sounds – no.”

 Lydia clicked her tongue and shrugged. “It was worth a try.”

 “You seem… shockingly past yesterday and Hugh?”

 She winced and glared at him. “That topic is *so* not open for discussion,” she growled.

 He shook his head and turned to his tray. “I just don’t get girls. Look, Lydia… I mean… I kinda want to apologize, though. I feel… somewhat responsible.”

 She swallowed hard and bit her lip. “What part of not open for discussion did you not get? You did *nothing* wrong. If that’s all it took…” she swallowed hard and knuckled her forehead. “Whatever! I don’t give a damn! I have homework that I have to do. Please just… just leave me alone for right now.”

 John sighed and nodded. “At least it wasn’t in vain. I’ve never seen Hugh so serious today in my life. Still friendly but… down to earth. He didn’t even try to be rebellious or insubordinate or anything which is what I thought he might do.”

 She forced herself to drown out the sound of John’s voice. Forced herself to focus on what was in front of her. Yeah… she didn’t need Hugh Oliver in her life. She was fine without him. And she would prove that to him and to anyone else staring.

 Hugh Oliver meant absolutely nothing to her.

#

 The clang of metal on metal rang through the late spring air. Beside him, Lydia was breathing heavily with her mask on her face.

 “Come on, Felix!” Landon’s voice snapped. “Stop playing defense!”

 Lydia’s coughing tore through the mask. Tanis hated the sound her lungs were making. He wondered right now how much pain she was in. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She was grinning through the mask. She had her back up against the shade tree with her left leg up and her hand resting on the knee with her right hand gripping her knife. She was watching Landon and Felix fighting in the late fading sun with a certain delight. He clicked his tongue. The only thing she was feeling right now was longing for wanting to be out there fighting more with them. Why did he even bother to worry about her?

 There was a soft clang and a sharp tink. He heard Landon swear. He looked up in time to see Landon’s blade go flying off into the air.

 Felix stood with both of his knives in Landon’s face. First his right one and then his left one over top the other behind just an inch. “Who said I was playing defense?” he said with a wide grin.

 Lydia sat forward clapping excitedly, laughing. “G-good job, F-Felix!” she shouted, stammering in between her pants.

 Felix turned to her and bowed dramatically. Tanis nodded in approval. He had not the first clue about combat but he had to admit – it was hard to even tell that the guy was blind with the way that he fought. Now and again he would make the odd mistake – a telltale give away that something was not right, but he would adjust quickly.

 In a month and half’s time, Lydia had made him into a halfway respectable fighter.

 Landon grinned inspite of himself, a hand on his hip. “Not bad. Of course, don’t get too full of yourself. I was only using one knife.”

 Felix looked back at him and tilted his head. “Why are you really all that much better with both blades?”

 Lydia sighed. “He’s better than me, Felix. Let’s just put it that way,” she shouted through her mask.

 Landon stared over at her. “I’m not better than you – you just try to take me out too fast and get too hasty. “You get too worried about your lungs and you make mistakes. How you feeling?”

 She sighed and shook her head. “It’s a bad day and it didn’t help with me working as hard as I did with Felix.”

 “After the pain that I felt when we were on the dragons today I’m shocked you tried to do this,” Felix said, walking across to her and taking a seat beneath the shade tree. “Is it always this hot this early? I’m not used to the south. Gods it feels like it’s Summer already.”

 Tanis smirked. “Pity there’s no lake here, huh, Lydie?” he said looking up at her.

 She turned and grinned. “That use to be fun. Gods I hardly ever left that lake.” She sighed. “It would be nice to work on my lungs again, try to continue to build them up some more. Maybe I should start jogging again,” she muttered. Then she pouted. “But I have so much homework!”

 Felix leaned forward and looked at her notebook. “I feel partly responsible what with you drawing out all my additional notes. You really don’t have to try to force that into your day, Commander.”

 She glared across at him. “Yes. Yes I do. Don’t lie. I know without it you couldn’t even begin to try to sit there in those classes, and your grades are lacking as it is.”

 Felix sighed and leaned up against the tree. “Guess I broke the chain, huh?”

 Landon came across and sat down, his lost knife retrieved. He lifted up his pants leg and replaced it in his ankle sheathes. “The chain?”

 “Yeah. Of Room Commanders. Conner, you, and Commander here.”

 Tanis frowned and leaned forward. “Do you have a problem saying her name? It’s been a month and a half. You *can* call her Lydia.”

 Felix flushed and turned away. “I… I dunno… calling her by her name just doesn’t sound right on my tongue.”

 Landon smirked. “And why’s that? You have no problem calling me by my name?”

 “W-well… I dunno… I think…” he sighed. “I just look up to her too much to consider her ‘friend’. She’s my Commander. Saying her name just sounds too personal.”

 Lydia leaned forward, pulling her mask away from her face. “You don’t consider me a friend?” she asked, hurt in her voice.

 “Y-yes I do! J-just… I like your Commander role. You do what’s necessary to train me. You aren’t afraid to slice me up if I make a serious mistake.”

 “And I don’t?” Landon asked.

 Felix shrugged. “I dunno. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but that’s how I feel.” He smirked. “I think she’s better than you Landon, in all honesty.”

 Tanis watched as Lydia’s eyes widened and a faint blush appeared on her cheeks. He looked over at Landon who nodded. “That’s alright. I do, too. And there are days that it absolutely pisses me off.”

 Lydia looked down at the ground. “Y-you guys are seriously overestimating me,” she muttered softly, her cheeks even redder than before.

 No. No, they’re not. He wanted to say that. He wanted to say it more than anything, but… his words weren’t the same that they were saying. He couldn’t say his. Not out loud. He swallowed and fought with himself, trying to refocus back on his work.

 He heard Lydia sigh and turn around, grabbing her own books. “I better get to studying. Thanks for your help, Landon.”

 Landon turned to Felix and raised his eyebrow. “Actually, I was in the mood for a little more?”

 Felix grinned, getting back to his feet. “I’m game.”

 Lydia nodded in approval as she opened her books. “Me too,” she muttered miserably. “Damn lungs.”

 Tanis swallowed. He wished he could figure out the cure for her. There were times he almost thought of abandoning the idea of being a Field Medic just so he could concentrate on medicines… but that was whimsical thinking. He knew deep down there was no cure for Lydia. There was no miracle for her stronger than the medicine that had already been provided for her. There was no cure, just something to ease the symptoms and slow the progression.

 “Hey, there!” a female voice shouted, joining them. “Aww, look at my cute little dutiful partner.”

 A shiver went up his body at the sound of the Cici’s voice. He immediately felt himself tense and cursed himself. He swallowed and forced himself to be still. He felt her sit beside him, her left arm touching his right. He shifted over automatically, trying to put space between them.

 “Hey, Lydia,” she greeted, leaning over, staring past him. “Looks like you’re having a rough time of it today.”

 Lydia turned and nodded. “You’ve no idea. How about you?”

 Cici grinned wide and rubbed a hand through his hair, mussing it up. “Doing great now that I’ve found my partner.”

 “And just who the hell invited you?” he growled angrily, slapping her hand away. “You’re annoying! Go away!” he shouted.

 She tilted her head, placing a finger beside her mouth as if considering his words. She then turned back to him and gave him a wide grin. “No.”

 He swallowed, his anger flaring through him. He turned back around and forced himself to be calm. Anger does nothing, Tanis. It clouds thoughts. Push it away.

 She leaned over. “Oh by the way,” she said seriously. “Don’t be late for dinner. I’ve got something special planned for you.”

 He frowned and looked up at her curiously. “E-excuse me?”

 She leaned back around. “You’ll see,” she said evasively. “It’s a good thing I’m so patient. Most of the other partners have already helped their partners out. I feel like I’m just getting started with you.” She looked down at the books in his lap. “Want me to quiz you?” she asked.

 “No,” he growled.

 “Oh,” she said simply turning around.

 He tried to force himself to concentrate again, but it was useless. His thoughts were completely dashed. He had Lydie on his left and on his right his petulant partner who was pouting and pulling up grass blades absently.

 He sighed finally and handed her the book. “Fine!” he snapped.

 The girl looked up with wide eyes. She blinked a few times in astonishment before reaching out and taking the book. “R-really?” she gasped.

 “I have a test tomorrow,” he explained in a rush. Honestly… he felt a pang of guilt for the way he always treated her.

 A slow smile spread across her face. It was filled with absolute delight. That just made him feel absolutely awkward. W-what was there to be so excited about?

 She flipped through the pages of the chapter that he was on. “What would you like to go over?” she asked.

 “The medicines and their effects,” he answered simply.

 Nodding she began to read off different names and he racked his brain to try to remember what each of them did. As he answered, his eyes wandered over to Lydia. He watched her as she concentrated so hard on the book in front of her. He couldn’t help but be reminded of the earlier days when they were in school. The first time she had shown a true interest in her studies – because she was about to take the Dragon Training aptitude test. He had seen it. She had hated every second of it, but he had seen her intelligence. She was woefully behind in her schoolwork but that had been because she had just never been *taught*. She had picked up everything quickly. It had been a delight to teach her. And now… she was in one of the more advanced classes struggling through content most never bothered with. True it was still dragon tactics, but he had looked at the books himself and had felt woefully unskilled. To see her answering such difficult questions, now and again nibbling on the end of her eraser, made him feel proud.

 He was glad deep down that Landon had seen what he had seen.

 Lydia’s eyes blinked and her head twitched slightly. That focused glaze in her eyes was starting to disappear. He looked away quickly, refocusing his full attention on Cici’s questions – answering them quicker than he had been before.

 “I better get up. I’m going to get dinner a little early so I can sit in Tsaul’s stall later where it’s quiet and do more studying,” she muttered, gathering her things, and pulling off her mask. “You guys coming?”

[Tanis meets Lydia later on in the stall?]

 Landon laid Felix out flat on his back with a sharp roundhouse kick. He grinned wide as he stood over the boy. “Yeah. I think I’ve had my fun.”

 Felix glared up at him. “Leaving when it’s your win,” he growled. “How low are you?”

 Landon danced back. “Want to have one more go at me, then?” he said with a wide grin. “I would never want to be accused of being unfair.”

 “You’re on!” Felix shouted, jumping to his feet.

 Suddenly a tiny four foot streak rushed past Felix. Landon had just enough time to throw up his knife blades to blow the blow. He danced back quickly as the second knife blade came at his stomach, just a hair’s breadth from slicing him open. But the small attacker did not relent. Her leg snaked out, catching him behind the knee and jerking forward. Landon fell forward, and the knife blade that he had just dodged, sliced into his left cheek.

 Grinning wide, Lydia danced backwards. “Never let your guard down,” she said with a laugh in her voice.

 Landon glared up at her, holding a hand to his sliced cheek. “You’re right. You better start watching your back, Alvincia,” he growled.

 “I’ll be looking forward to it,” she said with a smirk. Spinning around merrily she ran over to her school books, sheathing her blade.

 She looked so happy. This was the Lydia that he liked best. The happy normal teenager, enjoying a life that was almost denied to her.

 He watched after her as she left with her three teammates.

 “Why don’t you follow?” a voice asked behind him.

 “Hrrm?” he asked distractedly.

 “I’m just wondering what’s holding you back? You can get up and follow. She would love to have you among them, joking around.”

 He shrugged absently. “I… I wouldn’t know how to joke around like that.”

 “I don’t think she would care. You could say anything and I think Lydia would be delighted just to have you joining in.”

 He swallowed and looked down. “Who says I wanted to join in?”

 “That look of longing on your face.”

 He winced and looked around at Constance. He looked down. “Well, you’re mistaken!” he snapped.

 Constance rolled her eyes and stood up. She grabbed his arm and pulled him up. “I’m not. Come on you.”

 “I need to study,” he growled.

 “No. No you don’t. You can do this in your sleep.” She shoved his book in his chest. “You weren’t even paying attention to me and you were answering off the top of your head. Ugg! You’re impossible. Stop being so afraid of *yourself*. You have a right to be happy, too, Tanis. Come on. I’m not going to sit by anymore and watch you just *watch*. You’ve done it. You’ve cracked my own patience.”

 She grabbed him roughly by his arm and pulled him along. He tried desperately to pull himself away but her grip was too strong. She looked over her shoulder at him and glared. “I told you. I have two brothers at home,” she growled. “I’m no mouse.”

 When they reached the door way, she stepped around behind him and shoved him forward from behind and inside. He gasped as he ran into Lydia from behind. She squeaked and fell forward, both of them losing their footing and tumbling hard to the ground.

 He sat up and immediately tensed. Lydia was below him on the floor, her back to him. Both of his hands were propping him up on the cold stone floor, straddling her body. There was barely an inch of space in between them. She turned around staring up at him. “T-Tanis?”

 Oh gods… she was so close. His heart was hammering against his chest. T-they were close enough to kiss. That was his next thought and that killed whatever thoughts he had left. Lydia’s lips so close to his. He swallowed. The memory of the one time he had ever dared to steal a kiss seared through his brain. He wanted that now. Back then his body had reacted on its own. He had pressed his lips to hers almost before realizing what he was doing. What would it be like now, to press down and to kiss her of his own volition? Would she return it? Would she push him away?

 That’s what he wanted more than anything in this world. To kiss her and wrap his arms around her. The way he had watched Hugh do so often. How the hell could Hugh have just throw away someone as wonderful as her? It had been a month and a half. Hugh had not even tried to talk with her - went out of his way to not be seen near her.

 Hugh was a fucking moron.

 He bit his lip and pushed himself off of her. He reached out and helped her back to her feet. “S-sorry, Lydie. Are you ok?”

 She gave him a wide grin. “Yeah. What happened?”

 He turned around and glared at his curly haired partner who had her arms folded across her chest looking very pleased with herself. “Nothing,” he lied. “I tripped.”

 Felix was staring from one to the other. Landon had a smirk on his face, a hand on his hip and his other hand in his bangs, twirling a random piece of hair.

 Feeling himself redden, he whirled around and started to stomp off.

 “Tanis?” Lydia called. “What’s wrong? You look angry.”

 Suddenly a hand had him by the back of his color. He froze and turned around looking into the brown-red eyes of Constance. “Oh, he’s not mad, Lydia. Actually, he was wondering if he could get your tray for you? Since you’re not feeling well right now.”

 He felt himself redden. He was going to kill her! He was going to murder Constance. Feed her to Tsonja, that’s what he was going to do.

 Lydia blinked staring between the two of them. She grinned wide. “T-that would be sweet. Sure. Thank you, Tanis.”

 Tanis swallowed. Doing something like that… That was something Hugh would think of doing. He should have thought of it. He nodded at her, not trusting himself to speak. He reached back and pulled himself free from Constance’s grasp and marched into the mess hall with the girl right behind him.

 “If you want to get a girl,” she muttered in his ear, “you have to think of all the little small things.”

 “What the hell do you know?” he growled.

 She gave him a wide grin. “Because I’m a girl, stupid. Now get in line and get Lydia’s tray. I’ll get ours.”

 “Who said I wanted your help?” he shouted at her.

 “You didn’t. That’s the problem, but I’m going to help you anyways. Now – line!” she said, snapping her fingers and pointing to the Fighter’s Division line.

 Tanis felt incredibly awkward standing in the line of another division. His white coat stuck out like a sore thumb. He fought to ignore it. What did he give a damn anyways what other people thought? He… He was doing this for Lydia.

 He turned and stared back at Lydia who was sitting down at her normal table. All of her study materials were spread out in front of her. He realized Landon and Felix were both behind him in the line. Landon had a smirk on his face. He glared at him. “What?” he snapped.

 Landon shook his head. “Absolutely nothing. Just that I have a new found respect for your partner.”

 “Then why don’t you take her,” he growled. “I can’t stand her.”

 “I have my own partner, thanks. You know, you told us back at the beginning that you had hoped you would get a partner who would help you. I think you got your wish, Tanis. Learn well. I think she’s going to do very well by you.”

 Tanis whirled around angrily. This was *not* what he had had in mind! His partner was a girl – and not just any girl, but an absolute flake. And now she was forcing her advice into the situation with him and Lydia. Like he was going to need any more confusion.

 He got Lydia’s tray and walked back with it. Constance had already joined Lydia at the table. She patted the seat between her and Lydia, indicating she wanted Tanis to sit there. He fought the urge to go on the other side of Lydia. He had a feeling it wouldn’t work anyways. Constance would just switch seats.

 “Here, Lydie,” he said, sitting the tray down in front of her.

 Lydia nodded, barely looking up from her books. “Thanks, Tanis,” she mumbled distractedly.

 He sat down and took his own tray from Constance, a small pain of disappointment in him. He had hoped Lydia would give him more acknowledgement than that. Oh well. He would rather her concentrate on her studies anyways. Landon and Felix sat down on the other side. They were early today so there weren’t many people in the room yet.

 He opened the foil on his lunch and began eating. Landon and Felix were talking amongst each other about some fighting techniques.

 Constance leaned over to him. “Why don’t you talk to her?” she asked softly

 “She’s studying,” he said, his voice just as low.

 “I’ve seen that girl work in the past. Talking with friends is hardly a distraction from her studies.”

 He shrugged. “I have nothing to talk with her about.”

 She sighed and rolled her eyes. “What are your shared interests?”

 “Huh?”

 “Well you have to be interested in some of the same things as her. Isn’t that why you like her?”

 He stared at Lydia. He wasn’t even sure. He liked Lydia because of her amazing stubborn spirit. She never let anyone tell her no and she was not afraid to fight for everything that she wanted in her life. She had been incredibly interested in the training regimes that he had made for her. There was also his incredibly stubborn Tsonja who absolutely melted whenever Lydia came near her to talk to her. Was there anything else? He hadn’t really analyzed it before.

 He clicked his tongue. This had probably been so easy for Hugh.

 Beside him Constance sighed. “Hopeless,” she muttered. “You’re a field medic aren’t you?” she asked with a snap.

 “So *what?*”

 “So what? She’s a Dragon Tamer. Isn’t that what they call her? Aren’t you learning how to help dragons as well as humans out on the field?”

 He blinked. “Oh. I suppose. I never focus on that part of my studies.”

 “Which you should. I notice your grades seriously lack in that department. You have the human portion down but you need to learn to focus more on the dragons, too. Why don’t you ask Lydia for some tips on calming down dragons?”

 “I have no idea what I should even ask.”

 Constance sighed and rubbed her temples on either side of her head. “You like her don’t you?”

 He felt himself redden in the face. “I’m not even going to answer that,” he hissed.

 “Don’t you *want* to talk to her?”

 He swallowed and stared at Lydia and then looked back at Constance. “I’m afraid of insulting her like I always do with people,” he confessed.

 Constance smirked. “You’ve known her for how many years? If she hasn’t run away completely insulted by now she’s not going to. I’ve heard some of your brief conversations in the past. Lydia will be fine. She’ll let you know when she’s said the wrong thing, and that’s why I’m here, too. I’ll help.”

 He looked down at his tray. “I don’t want your help,” he snapped.

 “You’re getting it any ways. Make the most of it, hon’. Now – talk to her.”

 “Why do you *care*?”

 “Because I do. You’re my partner and this is your weakness. People. Talking to the girl you like and trying to get with her is the best way that I can think of to help you.”

 He flushed. “G-get with her?”

 “Don’t you want to date her?”

 “She’s Hugh’s.” He blinked and a shudder went up his body. He looked back at Lydia. No. No, she wasn’t. Hugh had thrown her away. Cruelly. He looked back at Constance. “S-she was… I mean…”

 “A month and a half. I think that puts her break up in pretty safe territory where she should be able to feel like she can move on. She’s absolutely one hundred percent available, Tanis.”

 “S-she probably doesn’t even like me like that,” he muttered sourly. She had once even told him that. That she was absolutely in love with Hugh, that maybe there was no room for him, not a chance that she might be able to change her heart. But… she had also said that didn’t mind him pursuing her. That she wasn’t sure. She had spoken it plainly that night.

 He tried not to think of that night very often. The night after the dance party during the last of her junior year. Between Hugh and learning that she had been leaving… and then the embarrassing moment that he had seen her naked… For fear of feeling like Hugh he kept that memory stored in the deepest recesses of his mind, though he would be lying if he said he did not pull it out now and again… Lydia in her beautiful dress dancing with him that night and then walking in on her as she was fighting to pull the dress back on to show her dragon. She had pulled it off in order to climb over the stable doors which had been locked for the night. He had not meant to see her naked and she had beaten him pretty bad for it. But a part of him thought that… maybe it had been a little bit worth it. Was he sick for thinking that way?

 “That’s why you talk with her,” Constance said, pulling him out of his thoughts. “You talk with her to get to know her more and to show her what a sweet person you are.”

 He shook his head. “I’m not, though. I can’t say anything but hurtful things.”

 “You have your moments. I’ve seen them. And I think she has, too. Now, go on. Talk. I don’t care about what – but you’re not leaving this mess hall today if you don’t speak to her at least a little.”

 He sighed and rolled his eyes. “L-Lydia?”

 “Hmm?” she asked, not pulling out of her study-trance.

 He leaned over and smiled. She was currently drawing out a complex grid and creating an illustration. “Does your Instructor let you answer the questions with drawings?”

 She looked up and smiled. “They tried to fight it for a while,” she said with a laugh. “But finally the teacher began to accept it. I can’t answer like this on tests, but my answers in drawings are a lot more succinct than my words. I still have to explain the illustration briefly and the teacher demands now that everything be done in grid. Thank gods. It saves on a lot of effort. I’m even getting better at my drawings.” She grinned and held it up.

 Gods it was impressive. It was an illustration of a team of five dragon set up in a formation to attack two other dragons below. Each of the dragons were incredibly detailed. “Lydia I think you missed your calling as an artist.”

 She shrugged. “And miss out being a Dragon Rider? No thank you,” she said with a wide grin. “I use to not even put all that much thought into my drawings. Not until I got here. I mean, I use to doodle in my notebooks, but when I started taking the classes here, I just couldn’t convey in words what I was trying to get across to the teacher.” She glared down at the paper. “And *then* when he began to understand his answers became ‘oh that’s more advanced than we need to get into, Miss Alvincia,’” she growled, mocking a teacher’s stern voice. “I don’t care how advanced it is!” she shouted. “I had a question it should have been answered!” She stared angrily down at her books. “I hate teachers,” she growled.

 Landon smirked. “That was my first clue that Lydia was in the wrong class. Her teammates learned one day that she had been making illustrations and trying to ask the teacher questions – and then throwing them away. They were furious with her and then the truth sorta outted itself that Lydia was struggling – in a far different way than they were. It was an impressive sight, though. Walking into the mess hall and her entire team was surrounding her, bugging her for questions, but of course Lydia goes into trance mode.”

 “Trance mode?” Lydia repeated with a smirk. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

 “Yes. You go into trance mode and it’s almost impossible to pull you out from it. I would *hate* to have been your teammate knowing you had the answer and you were too far gone to provide it. And even when you *did* you never gave the complete answer. Only subtle hints. As much as you hate teachers, I think you would make a good one yourself if this Fighting thing doesn’t work out for you.”

 “Agreed,” Felix said with a nod.

 Lydia turned to him and grinned. “And just think, Tanis. Three years ago you were trying to patiently hold your tongue while you were walking me through basic math problems.”

 “I told you back then that I thought you were intelligent. Your parents and tutors did you a disservice.”

 She shrugged. “It wasn’t always them. I turned the tutors away more times than anything. The only time I liked them was when they were discussing literature – but then they would always pull out the most boring books or books that I had already read.”

 Tanis nodded. “I enjoyed my tutors. They weren’t afraid to pull out more advanced materials for me. Then my parents decided to enroll me in a private boarding school for middle school. I was furious. Especially when I realized that I had already studied much of what they were just starting to get into it. It was… insulting.”

 “Why’d they do it?” she asked.

 He sighed. “The social experience,” he muttered.

 Landon laughed. “That worked like a charm.”

 Tanis grunted. “Well, I won’t lie. It helped in another way. I wouldn’t have thought of becoming a Dragon Rider. I mean, my three older brothers wanted that, but I had honestly not put all that much thought into it, but seeing the kids donning on their uniforms excitedly and showing off their dragons… yeah, I wanted that. To go into a battlefield and to try to help people. Maybe I am socially hopeless but I still want to help. Then I got Hugh as my roommate when I moved to high school.” He winced. He had not wanted to bring up that name, but it didn’t seem to faze Lydia thankfully.

 She grinned. “And he forced you into the lunchroom crowd.”

 “Yep. I think I was member number five. The twins were there already… who else… well, anyways I guess it doesn’t matter.”

 Felix stared between the two of them. “Richies,” he muttered. “Private tutors? Boarding schools? I know Lydia’s an Alvincia, but what about your family, Tanis?”

 “The Archers!” Lydia shouted happily. Tanis blushed immediately. It still amazed him that Lydia knew his family. “Railroads and trains. Have you ever seen a train, Felix?”

 Felix nodded. “I’m from the city, remember? Use to scare the hell out of my parents. I would get super close up to the tracks even when I was blind. They were always horrified something was going to happen to me. Like I couldn’t feel a train barreling down the tracks.”

 “Did you ever get to see the logo on front of most of the trains?”

 She opened her notebook and began to instantly etch it out. A figure of a man, knelt down, with an bow drawn back, his arrow pointed upwards at a 75 degree angle. She held the illustration up.

 Landon blinked. “Oh. I know that.” He turned to Tanis and pointed. “Yours?”

 “That’s our family shield, yes. The estate belongs to Lee, though. I’m the youngest of four. I, thankfully, dodged that little family headache.”

 Felix grinned and stared at Lydia. “But not you. You’re the oldest, aren’t you?”

 Lydia grinned. “I’m a female. I have a three year old baby brother now. The estate goes to CJ. I’m completely in the clear.” She winced. “Actually as of last December when I turned 18.” She sighed and held her hands open wide. “I’m on my own now. Of course my father still sends me a monthly check, but that’s all I get. Just a shy away from being disinherited. Especially since he does *not* approve my career choice. Pretty much, I am currently no better off than you guys.”

 Tanis shook his head. “That’s harsh. Nah, my family didn’t go that far. I’m still part of the business. They keep trying to get me to take some interest ‘just in case’ they say. I… humor them. Lee and Marcus do what they can to try to step in and intervene for me on my behalf. I think Marcus opened up a train station in my name and claims to my parents that I’m the one running it. He sends me monthly reports on it and I do what I can to follow up and at least make sure I have the numbers in my head just in case my parents ask any questions.”

 Landon shook his head. “Poor sob stories. The both of you.”

 Lydia glared across at him. “It is! At least the military is taking care of my medicine. You have any idea how much that stuff costs. My dad sent me a bill once just to underline his point. Oh my gods… I had no idea…” She sighed and looked down. “I’ll confess. I have no idea of the value of money and I have this sick feeling that I’m going to be released from here in a few years and it’s going to hit me hard.”

 Landon chuckled. “Good thing it’s usually the guy that takes care of that part. You better hurry up and get married Lydia,” he said laughing.

 She winced. “Cute Landon,” she growled. “Thanks for that. Ugg…” she leaned forward, laying on top of her books. “I spent my whole life waiting to die and suddenly I’m living and being forced to think of problems I *never* considered. I know that’s a seriously depressing thought but that’s how I feel.” She smirked and looked at Landon. “You know… I once had a boy playmate that my father hired – long story, don’t ask – but I forced him to go through a wedding ceremony with me because I thought I wanted to experience that before I died. My mom was so angry. I had borrowed her wedding dress.” She sat up and shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’m ruining the mood here with my depressing story.”

 Landon shook his head. “No, not at all. Considering how closed up you were last year it’s amazing to hear you sharing this sort of thing with us now, Lydia. I’m glad. You’re having this problem is a good thing. It means you’ve finally stopped thinking of yourself as a dying girl.”

 “It’s not forgotten and I can’t ignore it but…” she grinned. “Maybe I will be able to experience all of that.”

 Felix chuckled. “And kids, too?”

 Tanis choked. He wanted to reach over and throttle Felix. He stared across at Lydia his heart pounding.

 Landon glared across at Felix. “You damn moron,” he hissed.

 Lydia shook her head. “No. I mean. I haven’t even considered that or gone to a doctor to even talk about that.” She grinned wide, giving a brave smile. “That’s way off in the future. But… yeah, I have no delusions, really.” She sighed and shrugged. “I’ll take the blessings that were given to me and be thankful for that. Besides, there’s plenty of orphans in the world if I want it that badly,” she said with a light laugh. It sounded forced.

 Felix looked away, guilt in his eyes. He looked like he was inwardly chastising himself. Landon stared down at his food tray, not wanting to deal with Lydia’s forced smile. Tanis swallowed. “Y-you’re right, though. It’s a little too soon to bring up that question. You first have a few other steps to go through. Besides, you’re going to be a fighter. That should be a thought a long ways into the future.”

 Lydia stared at him and smiled wide. “You’re right! Kids would definitely just get in the way and I’m not working this hard for nothing,” she said with a laugh – a genuine one this time.

 Gods, how did she *do* that? Find a way to smile through everything? Hugh loved her look of determination when she faced a new obstacle. Personally, he thought Lydia looked best when she managed to smile even at her lowest point. Where did that strength come from?

 He wished he could get closer to her to find the answer.

#

 Lydia had eaten and disappeared with her homework. Felix and Landon had stayed a little longer before Felix finally went upstairs himself to go complete homework. Now it was Conner and Landon. Conner with his food tray and Landon sipping a cup of coffee.

 Tanis had his own homework spread wide around him, Constance sitting beside him helping him now and again when she wasn’t randomly talking with Conner or someone else. He had made several attempts to excuse himself but Constance had insisted that he stayed for his ‘surprise’. He sighed. He really wished this girl would just leave him the heck alone.

 And then she jumped up out of her seat and ran over to another table. Tanis felt instant relief. He started packing up his things hoping he could make his grand escape.

 And then Conner began laughing hysterically. “Oh Gods, no. I love this girl. This is great.”

 Tanis looked up at them. Landon’s eyes were wide eyed in shock. The flicked for a moment to Tanis and then he grinned. “Yeah. Your partner is going to do well by you.”

 Tanis whirled around to see what they were looking at. He froze. There was a whole crowd of females – all Field Medics, including Landon’s girlfriend Tanya – seated at the table behind him. Not only just his female teammates, either, but upperclassmen, too. Constance was running among them, organizing them.

 Tanis swore and jumped up, forgetting his books and making a mad dash for the door.

 “Stop him!” Constance’s voice shouted.

 “I got this,” Conner said with a laugh.

 Tanis had almost made it to the door when he was seized by the back of his collar. “What the hell am I?” he shouted. “A cat?”

            “As skittish as you, sometimes I wonder,” Conner said with a laugh.

            “Let go of me! I’m not doing it!” He struggled to wrench himself away, but Conner grabbed him around the stomach and heaved upwards, lifting him off his feet.

            Tanis struggled desperately, shouting, and making an embarrassing scene of himself before Conner ungracefully sat him in the middle of the girls in between Constance and Tanya – and stood behind him.

            There had to be at least thirty girls all around him. He groaned and leaned forward, burying his face in his arms on the table. He wanted to die. Just for the earth to open up and swallow him whole. “Why are you doing this to me,” he mumbled around his arms.

            Constance patted him on his back gently. “Because I think you’re a wonderful person, Tanis, and you have problems with communicating – we’re going to get that fixed for you. But your biggest weakness is talking to girls. Let’s just kill two birds with one stone as they say. Come on, up, up, up! I’ve already told everyone about your harsh words so you don’t have to worry about hurting anyone’s feelings,” she said the last two words with a dare in her voice.

            He looked up at her from the corner of his eyes, just tilting his head slightly. She was glaring around at everyone.

            Beside him Tanya spoke. “Come on, Tanis,” she squeaked in her low, but determined voice. “Talk with us. It’s easy. We’ll talk about anything that you want.”

            He drew up, feeling absolutely miserable and completely uncomfortable. He looked around and felt himself redden as thirty pairs of female eyes stared at him. Many of them with crooked grins and sly smiles.

            “I don’t *want* to talk,” he snapped. “I have homework that I have to do.”

            “Liar. You finished it about fifteen minutes ago,” Constance said, calling him out on it. “And don’t worry about Tsonja, I already had someone take care of her, too. You are not weaseling your way out of this.”

            He blanched and glared up at her. “Y-you sent someone else to take care of my dragon?” he demanded. “Wait! That’s dangerous! Tsonja’s –“

            “As stubborn as you. I know. I’ve talked with her quite frequently.”

            “You talked with my dragon?!” he asked incredulously, feeling completely horror stricken. Was there no ends to this woman and her meddling. She… She was as bad as Hugh!

            “Yes. Quite as bad an attitude as you.”

            “L-Lydia is the only one who can talk with her! You’re lucky you weren’t hurt.”

            “Oh be still – she wasn’t that bad.”

            “She locked me away for three days in a cave! Yes. Yes, she is that bad.”

            Several of the girls laughed. “Ok, now I’ve got to hear this story,” the one in front of him said, leaning forward.

            He turned bright red. Lydia was the only one he had ever told the story to. He took a deep breath and began to explain how back in middle school Tsonja had been so unruly that they had thought maybe it would be better to give him another dragon. The moment that he had attempted to meld with another, however, Tsonja had attacked the dragon and kidnapped him, locking him in a cave for three days without food and only a small puddle of water.

            All of the girls busted out laughing at him which did not help his feeling of awkwardness.

            “That’s fantastic! I mean, I’m sure not at the time,” one of the girls said, rubbing her eyes which had watered because of how hard she was laughing, “but that’s hilarious.”

            “I guess you really didn’t have a choice but to keep her after that,” another exclaimed.

            He shook his head. “I-I wouldn’t want to give her up for the world.”

            “I hear that! My dragon is my eternal partner!” one of them shouted.

            “So how has your relationship been with her since then?”

            There were too many girls. He had long since given up trying to keep up with who was talking about who he had talked with already. He was starting to feel a little dizzy. “S-she’s stubborn and she likes to give me a hard time. She only minds for Lydia.”

            Tanya grinned. “The Dragon Tamer.”

            He nodded. “I don’t mind it. It’s frustrating sometimes, but when I need her, she’s there. It’s a little fun kind of combatting each other.” He swallowed. “A-are we done now?”

            Constance shook her head. “Not even by a long shot! You’re doing great. We’re not stopping now. Things are just startings.”

            Tanis groaned, slumping his shoulders.

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            “I don’t know why you’re so uncomfortable,” Landon said with a wide grin when Tanis finally returned to gather his things. “You were in the middle of every guy’s dream over there.”

            Tanis glared at him. “I guess I’m just not *every guy*,” he snapped. He sighed, reaching up and adjusting his ponytail.

            Conner stared up at him, for once his face devoid of a smile. “You know, Tanis, if you allow your life to be ruled by fear, there’s a lot you’re going to miss. Like Lydia. You missed her once with Hugh. You might stand to lose her again.”

            Tanis froze and looked up at him. “Y-you think so?”

            Landon sighed. “You think you and Hugh are the only guys who have noticed Lydia? She’s the Death Slayer, a fighter, and an intelligent Room Commander with a lot of leadership in her. Not to mention that everything she seems to do she does it with a wild flair. You would be an idiot to think that other guys aren’t looking at Lydia. They just know that she’s still going through heartache. They aren’t going to wait much longer. If Lydia doesn’t know that you are interested in her – if you don’t have the courage to let her know and try for her again – you could wind up with the same heartache that you had before.”

            “I-I don’t even know if Lydia is remotely interested in me,” he said, shaking his head.

            “So ask?” Conner suggested. “The worst she can say is no. Then you don’t have to continue pouting over her. You suffer a broken heart for a while but you can finally move on. If yes, you get a girlfriend you’ve been pining over for the last few years.”

            Tanis glared at him. “You make it sound so easy.”

            He shrugged. “It is. It’s one simple question, Tanis.”

            He shook his head. “If anyone knows the value of words, I promise it is me, and some words are not always easy to say.”

            He gathered up the last of his things and left the mess hall. He started into the direction of his barracks but paused at the door that lead outside. Landon’s words kept bouncing around in his skull. There were other guys looking at Lydia? That thought froze his heart. He wondered who they were. Maybe she would be better off with them? He knew he was completely hopeless. Could he even make her happy?

            Was he really ok with that thought? Would he be ok seeing Lydia with another guy?

            If she was happy…

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 Lydia rubbed her eyes, adjusting the lantern on the stool for better light. The days were starting to get longer, but it was still getting dark too early. She was almost finished and she did not want to pack up to join a noisy room until she had completed it.

 Now and again Tsaul would interrupt her to provide her some extra insight into a problem. She grinned. Tsaul was her secret weapon. His expertise helped add to her knowledge. He couldn’t provide actual strategic advice – a dragon just didn’t understand strategy – but his experiences did help a little bit.

 “It’s not very safe to have a lantern in a stable,” a voice snapped coldly.

 Lydia shrugged recognizing Tanis’s voice without even looking up. “Well until they provide electricity out here, I’m stuck doing what I can. I promise, I know how to handle a lantern near hay.”

 She finished the last problem that she was on and stretched yawning. “What are you doing out here anyways?” she asked finally.

 Tanis looked away. “Do you have a problem with me coming out here?”

 Tsaul chuckled behind Lydia. “The boy’s in rare form tonight.”

 Lydia grinned. “What’s go you so pissed off?” she asked.

 “I just spent the last hour of my life with Constance,” he explained.

 Lydia laughed. “Ooh, yes, that’s simply awful. How dare Cici spend time with her partner.”

 He sighed and looked back at her. “With Constance and about thirty other girls including Tanya.”

 Lydia felt her eyes widen in shock at that news. A slow smile spread across her face as she envisioned that scene. “And I *missed* that?”

 “I like that you’re so sympathetic with me,” she growled.

 Tsaul titled his head. “Is there something wrong with being among that many humans?”

 Lydia grinned. “It is when they are all one gender and you have a social anxiety disorder,” she said with a laugh.

 Tanis blanched. “I don’t have a social anxiety disorder.”

 “You’re right. Just an asshole disorder,” she said with a laugh.

 A hurt look passed across Tanis’s face. He whirled around and started to march away.

 Lydia blinked in surprise at his receding figure. She jumped up, rushing after him, sweeping through the stall door without closing it. She grabbed his hand. “Tanis? Hey, I’m sorry. Wow, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

 He stopped the moment her hand touched his, but did not turn around, keeping his back deliberately turned to her. “Lydia… do you really think that?”

 “Think what?”

 “I’m a terrible person, aren’t I? I can’t talk to anyone without being rude or insulting them.”

 She tightened her hold on his hand. “No. No, I don’t think that. Tanis – you’ve helped me so much. You’ve been there with me as long as –“ she flinched at the name she was about to speak. “You’ve been with me for as long as I can remember,” she said, amending her sentence. “I seriously doubt that I have made it as far as I have without your help. I don’t think you’re a jerk, Tanis. You need some work, but every once in a while I see a glimpse of the sweet person inside. You should listen to Constance. She’s trying to help bring that side of you out more.”

 He turned to her and she took a step back. There were tears in his eyes. Very real tears. “Lydia… I’m annoying, aren’t I? You probably can’t stand being near me.”

 She sighed. “No, Tanis. You’re not annoying. And I like having you around. I wish you would open up more, though.” She grinned. “The only time I can ever get you to open up is when you start talking about your medicines and studies. It would be nice if you talked to me more about things like your brothers and what else you are studying. How about your combat lessons? I know Field Medics are taught *some* rudimentary battle skills. You would need to if you were ever attacked while trying to help someone. I know you know your way around a bow since you’re the one who taught me. Hehe, it might even be fun to shoot against you. See how far I’ve come.” She then grinned widely. “Or we could always continue those dancing lessons that we started that night at the party.”

 Tanis swallowed, choking back his tears. “I just… feel so helpless with situations like this. You just come up with so many good suggestions and I can’t help but wonder why I could never come up with a single one. My mind just goes blank.”

 She smiled. “So let Constance teach you. That’s what she’s trying to do. She’ll help. She’s going to be a great partner for you.”

 Tanis bit his lip and stared down at their hands that were still connected. “I-I’d rather learn from you,” he muttered.

 She felt herself redden slightly at that. “W-well of course I’m going to help, too. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

 Tanis stayed quiet for a while and then he said, “Lydia?”

 “What is it, Tanis?” she asked. She was beginning to worry about him. Something seemed to absolutely be eating him up inside.

 He stayed quiet for another moment then finally swallowed. “L-Lydie… I-I know that… I mean, I realize that a part of you is still hurting a lot.”

 She sighed, pulling her hand away from his. “Please don’t bring that up right now, Tanis,” she muttered. “Me and Hugh are over. I’ve realized that and I’m trying to move on.”

 He nodded. “I-I know. You’re amazing. How you push yourself, I don’t know. I think Hugh’s an absolute idiot. An asshole. I don’t know how he could do what he did. I… I would never treat you like that.”

 She sighed and shrugged. “I hurt him, too. I own some of that blame and I’m not going to excuse myself for that.”

 “You did nothing wrong,” he growled low. “He threw away a wonderful person. I bet he doesn’t even give a damn, either. Lydia…” He drew in a deep breath and looked up into her eyes. “Lydia, I would never treat you like that. I love you. I love you, Lydia. If you were my girlfriend I would do everything I could to make you happy.”

 Her heart started racing in her chest. She felt herself turn a deep red. “T-Tanis…” she mumbled, her throat constricting.

 He reached down and took up both of her hands in his. “Lydia, please be my girlfriend. I know I’m not Hugh. I don’t even want to try to be him. I-I want to try to make you happy in my own way. I’m absolutely clumsy and I react harshly a lot of the time, but I love you, and I would like that opportunity to see if I could get it right. I want to try to make you as happy as you were with him. I believe I could get it right. Please, Lydia. I’m… I’m so in love with you. The last three years have been miserable for me. I-if it doesn’t work out then we can break up, but I want to try.”

 His words froze her heart. It scared her. She had been waiting for this moment. She knew it was going to come eventually. She had just hoped… it would be a little later. She… she wasn’t sure she was ready yet. A part of her – some ridiculously vain, stupid, and hopeful part of her – still held out the hope that Hugh would return to her.

 But he didn’t even look at her. He didn’t even speak with her. The few times they had come close to each other he had sneered at her and spun around and went the other direction.

 It was over. It was over and there was a guy in front of her right now asking for her – begging for her – to give him a chance. And she liked Tanis. There was no denying that. Like, not love, but… could it grow into that? If she finally realized that Hugh was no longer there, would Tanis eventually come to replace him?

 And what better way to move on than to start dating someone else. Hugh had only been her first. Her only. Maybe it was unfair for her to just make a decision about her life only on one. Maybe, in truth, Hugh wasn’t really all that great. Maybe, in truth, Hugh had been awful. But she wouldn’t know that because she only only ever been with him. There were many faults with Hugh. She could spend hours listing them.

 There’s a guy right now, in front of you, Lydia, with your hands in his, begging you to give him a chance. Begging for you to try loving him, to give him that chance to prove himself. Tanis was here in front of her. Not Hugh. Hugh had smashed her necklace, thrown her, choked her, and dumped a food tray on her. She knew Tanis would never do that. Tanis was a gentleman. The sort her father would approve of.

 Maybe that’s all Hugh had been. A rogue that had entered her life and shown her how to live. Now she knew how to live and now it was time to move on.

 She swallowed and looked up at Tanis, stared into his eyes which were tear filled and begging.

 *Lydia – tell me that you like me.*

 Hugh’s words from three years ago echoed in her mind.

 She swallowed driving the memory away from her mind. Her heart felt like it was being ripped in half. Her lungs felt tight. She realized she was on the verge of panic. She closed her eyes and took a calming breath.

 *I hate you, Hugh.*

 She opened her eyes and nodded. “A-alright, Tanis. I-I don’t want you to misunderstand. I’m still hurting a lot. It’s almost unfair for you to take me like this. But… I think, I want to give it a try, too. I like you, too, Tanis. Yeah.” She grinned and actually surprised herself to feel that it was genuine. Yeah. Yeah, she was going to be Tanis’s girlfriend. Tanis was her boyfriend.

 A wide excited smile spread across Tanis’s face. Delight. Sheer and absolute delight. His excitement was absolutely intoxicating and it dragged her into it. She felt… giddy. He clasped her hands tightly. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped and instead returned to smiling. He pulled her hands even closer to his, bobbing them up and down excitedly. He opened his mouth again but again nothing came out. He pulled away with only one hand on hers and acted as if he were about to start out from the stable exit, pulling her along behind him, but stopped and turned back to her grabbing both of her hands back into his.

 Oh gods… She laughed inwardly. She had driven Tanis to speechlessness. Tanis, for the first time in his life didn’t have anything to say. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t even know what to do.

 She laughed and seized his hands and pulled him back as he almost spun back around again. “Tanis!” she said in between her laughter. “Calm down!”

 He stopped and knuckled his forehead. “I-I… I’m Lydia’s boyfriend!” he gasped. “I’m Lydia’s boyfriend. I’m Lydia’s boyfriend! Oh gods… I’m Lydia’s boyfriend.” Each time he repeated the sentence it was said with a new version of vibrant emotion. First a statement of fact, then an exclamation of shock, and then a stunned realization.

 Oh gods… he was cute. Tanis really was cute. She wondered if this was the side of Tanis that only his brothers ever got to see. She laughed trying desperately to reign him in.

 Then he stopped suddenly and turned to her seriously. It took her by surprise. Like a switch had been flicked there was suddenly no delight there. “I’m your boyfriend,” he stated.

 She blinked, a wary grin on her face. “Y-yes. And I’m Tanis’s girlfriend,” she said giving him a full smile.

 A smile spread across his lips – slow… almost daring. He looked away, swallowed, and then turned back to her. “I… Lydia… Umm…”

 She frowned. “Tanis? Is something wrong?”

 He drew in a deep breath as if he were steeling himself for something, gathering all his courage. He licked his lips. “L-Lydia, can I have your permission as your boyfriend to kiss you?”

 She blinked and stared up at him in surprise. His question was absolutely serious. He was staring deep into her eyes waiting with deliberate intention for her answer.

 Hugh never asked for her permission. He had never. In fact that was the first thing he had done when he had confessed to her. He had never asked for anything. He had always taken. Always pushed himself further, trying to see how far she would allow him to go this time compared to another time.

 She had not been prepared for this question. She felt herself redden. It… it made her feel like… it made her feel like a lady being courted by a gentleman. She blinked and shook her head. “Y-you’ve kissed me before Tanis? Why are you asking for permission now?”

 He winced and turned fifty different shades of red. “I… I had no right to have kissed you back then. I apologized for it. I had no right to have touched you like that.”

 She blinked and smiled. Yeah. She did remember. He had apologized. “Tanis, I’m your girlfriend now. You don’t have to ask my permission.”

 He stared down at her, his cheeks still red. “I don’t?”

 “No.”

 “I just… I would never want to touch you without your permission, Lydia.”

 Oh gods… he was so different. He was so wildly different from Hugh she couldn’t even hardly compare them. It felt so much nicer in its own way. It was nice to have a guy ask her permission before he kissed her.

 Her smile widened. “Tanis. As my boyfriend you have my permission to kiss me whenever you like. You don’t need to ask.”

 He swallowed. “B-but what if you don’t want me to? And then I do?”

 She laughed. “Tanis if you ever kiss me and I don’t want you to, I’ll let you know, ok?”

 He swallowed and nodded. “A-and… and can I hug you?”

 Oh gods… he was cute. He was seriously cute. “Tanis. Don’t you think that it goes without saying that if I give you permission to kiss me you can definitely hug me, too?”

 “I… I dunno, does it? Hugging seems worse to me,” he muttered scratching his ear. “Do I have it backwards?”

 “J-just a little. Oh gods, Tanis! You’re so overcomplicating this,” she said, laughing at him. “I promise, if you do something that I don’t want you to, you’ll be the first to hear about it.”

 “I don’t want to offend you.”

 “Tanis!” she snapped, starting to feel exasperated and slightly annoyed.

 He winced and blushed. “Now I’m just screwing it up,” he muttered. “O-ok…”

 His body tensed and he turned back to her. She watched him as he licked his lips again and then leaned forward, bending down. She closed her eyes as his lips touched hers. Softly. His arms wrapped around her, his right hand raising her her neck, grazing the edge of her hair, and his left hand in the middle of her back.

 It was so gentle. So soft.

 She felt him shaking. He was so scared – so insecure. So afraid that she was not going to enjoy this. She remembered that these were the same impressions that she had gotten the first time he had kissed her. He had been more daring back then, though. He had been reacting without thinking. Now he was thinking and it was making him even more nervous.

 She sighed inwardly. She threw her arms around his neck and closed the distance between their bodies. She pulled down a little on his neck, drawing him even deeper down into her lips. He balked in surprise at first, almost pulling away, but she didn’t let him go anywhere. She pressed her lips even tighter and pulled him even closer to her body. He remained tensed for a while before he finally relaxed his body and grew comfortable with it – grew bolder. He tightened his arms around her body. He brought his hand away from her neck and got her face. He caressed her cheek with his thumb before gently pressing his hand there, forcing her head to tilt. She felt her heart begin to beat in her chest as he took over the kiss, becoming more desperate with it – finally releasing himself and enjoying it, taking his time with it.

 Her lungs started to burn. She swore.

 *I hope Tanis enjoys you. Tell him, count to twenty. That’s how long it takes to kiss you before you start coughing.*

 She broke away, gasping for air and coughing. Tanis frowned at her and then his eyes widened. “Uh – Lydie, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “D-did I do that wrong?”

 “N-no,” she gasped, struggling with her coughing. She shook her head desperately. Dammit… just when he was starting to feel comfortable with it. “No. Not even Hugh could kiss me all that long,” she muttered. “T-that’s why he gave me a lot of marks,” she said the last part softly, almost reluctantly, not sure if she should bring up that part.

 Tanis reached up and scratched his head. “Oh. That was the reason?” He swallowed and looked away. “I-I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

 “No. No, you were doing great. I was enjoying it.”

 He looked back at her and smiled. “Were you?”

 “Do it again?”

 Tanis grinned down at her excitedly. “A-absolutely, but, this time, don’t wait to start coughing before you pull away. I’d rather you take a quick breath and then we can continue.”

 She grinned up at him. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

 He reached down and pulled her back into his arms, back into his body, and kissed her again – more passionately this time. He was becoming more confident, more sure – less afraid.

 Gods it felt so great to be kissing him.

 If she could only get rid of the sick feeling in the back of her mind that felt like she was cheating on Hugh.

#

 The girl beneath him was enjoying this. She moaned in desperation as she reached her arms around his neck and pulled him even deeper inside her mouth. A thrill went through his body. There we go, he thought. This was right.

 He closed his eyes and tried to lose himself in what he was doing, his tongue enjoying the sensation of being in this girl’s mouth. It gave him such an incredible charge.

 Keep it up, Hugh.

 He pressed himself down even harder into the girl’s body and released his thoughts. Gave in to the pleasure. Forgot himself.

 *Fifteen… sixteen… seventeen…*

 He swore. He was counting again. He tried to push the numbers aside. Tried to forget them. Empty his mind.

 The girl moaned again and that helped to destroy his thoughts.

 Then she pushed him away. He swore. No! He pulled away and looked down at her. She was wearing a devilish grin on her face. She reached up and grabbed his zipper and began to pull it down. She then reached into his uniform and felt the skin of his chest.

 He closed his eyes, trying to enjoy the sensation of the girl’s hands on his body.

 No, this wasn’t right.

 He grabbed her arm and pulled it out, smiling wide. He kissed her fingertips, licked them, and then leaned back down on her, tried to go back to kissing her. She let him back into her mouth. He tried to find his rhythm again – tried to find that happy thrill he had had just a moment ago…

 Except now it eluded him.

 Now when she moaned disgust went up his body.

 He swore. Every single time!

 He could enjoy himself for minutes at a time and then either he would think of something or the stupid female would do something. Either way the end result was the same.

 He lost his passion for the moment and felt only disgust at the female beneath him.

 He pulled away and sighed. She gave him a confused and puzzled look. “Hugh?”

 He sat back, leaning up against the wall. “Leave,” he commanded shortly.

 The girl gave him a blank look. “Excuse me?”

 “Leave. I’m done with you.”

 The girl sat up with a look of fury. “D-done? We didn’t even get started.”

 “Then stay. I don’t give a damn.”

 He got up, zipped up his uniform and left the stall, ignoring her shouted protests and heated insults. Why the hell had he picked her up in the first place? Looking back at her now, there was absolutely nothing cute about her.

 What was *wrong* with himself?

 Now was he just going to try to pick up every random girl he could find? He felt disgusted at himself. He didn’t even know that girl’s name. He had just been… desperate. There really was something seriously wrong with him. No matter what girl he had tried to be with since his break up something just… wasn’t working. He would get his normal charge out of it before it would suddenly just… disappear. To be replaced quickly by disgust. Disgust at the girl who was the wrong one and disgust at himself for placing his hands on the wrong one.

 None of them were Lyz.

 Talking to them was no better and he had long since given up on that. Boring, mindless, stupid, vapid females. Even those that were fighters with him.

 And even worse, he never knew how they were going to react to his pickups. Either they would respond or… they were on ‘Team Lyz’ as he had begun to call them. Team Lyz girls would viciously insult him, berate him, and shout at him. And those were the nicer ones. One girl had actually thrown her food tray at him and demanded to know if that’s how he liked it.

 And it didn’t matter what Division he tried for. Team Lyz was everywhere. A random Field Medic – nope. A Ranger – shut down. Even a Border Patrol. How the heck did *that* happen? As far as he knew Lyz didn’t associate with any Border Patrollers.

 Not that his life in other areas was much better. John was cold to him. Callous. Distant. Erica danced between the two of them but definitely spent a marked more amount of time with Lyz. The twins no longer even looked at him. The upperclassmen were all cold and hardly wanted to deal with him. They did only as much as they had to.

 *What the hell?!* He was the one who had been victimized. Betrayed. Forced to watch as Lydia struck him where it hurt. Used herself and his love for her against him.

 And then Lyz and Tanis. Somehow Tanis had become the favorite topic among the girls. A… cute little pet, is the impression Hugh got. They viewed him as the ‘awkward boy with the sharp tongue’ that they enjoyed sitting with because it was so cute to watch him squirm. His hand held by Lyz, his girlfriend, and his partner on his other side.

 On one hand it delighted him. Some deep part of him was happy for his friend and his new found success with the other gender. And then there was the part that he could not shake – the part that included him and Lyz in the same sentence.

 They both deserved each other, he thought angrily.

 But then the thought of Lyz held in Tanis’s arms would invade his thoughts. Tanis’s lips pressing into Lyz’s…

 He was the one who had broken up with Lyz. He was the one who felt betrayed. Why did he care whose bed that bitch climbed into?

 He stalked off towards the Dragon Medics cabin. He needed a release. *Something* to do to get his mind off things. “Yo, Jan!” he shouted, leaning into the door. “You in here?”

 Janus looked up from his desk. The man smiled at the sight of Hugh. “Good morning. You’re here early. Don’t you have breakfast or something before your classes?”

 Hugh shrugged. “Not much point in going. I’m way more advanced than those morons in the class.” He sighed. “And yet despite that John is still unsure if he wants me in the advance classes or not.”

 Janus chuckled. “They only put people in that class that they think have leadership abilities.”

 Hugh gave him a wounded expression. “You don’t think I have that ability?”

 Janus shook his head. “I’m not the one you need to impress, Hugh. There’s something you’re not doing to show off that ability.”

 “I think it’s just cause my partner is on Team Lyz,” he growled.

 “I doubt it, Hugh, but it could be related. I know John and he does not strike me as the vindictive sort.” Janus set his pen down and stretched. “I suppose you are wanting something to keep your hands busy as usual?”

 “You got anything?”

 Janus stood up and walked across the tiny room to another chart. It was amazing to Hugh how close he had come to the young Dragon Medic in the space of the past month. The guy had an easy going air about him and *listened*. He did not mind lending an ear to Hugh’s problems. In exchange Hugh had begun to follow the guy around and started doing odd jobs – things that maintenance just didn’t always have time to get around to or asked the Medics to handle in shared duties. Hugh had fumbled a lot at first. He was hopeless with hammer and nails, but he had learned. Janus was appreciative. There was always *something* that needed done. It was amazing the effort it took to keep the place running smoothly.

 It turned out to be a nice trade off. Hugh got a friend, Janus got a helper, and Hugh had found a way to keep his hands and mind busy. Instead of being destructive and pranking people, he was fixing things. His extra energy got drained and he actually got a warm feeling when he stepped back and admired his work. Most of it was clumsy looking, but he was getting better with every task. And Janus was a good teacher. What the guy didn’t like, he would calmly take it apart again and explain to Hugh how to do it better.

 Janus sighed as he looked through the papers. “Well, I’m not sure how much you’ll like this task. This is from the maintenance clipboard. They are backed up and asked if we would help with this small one. The hinges in Stable 26. They needed to be checked and tightened on the stall doors, and oiled.”

 Hugh winced. “Tsaul’s stable,” he muttered.

 “I’ll take that as a no then,” Janus muttered.

 “N-no. I’ll do it. I’m not going to avoid things purposely,” he said with a sigh. “It’s getting really old.

 Janus nodded. He reached down and picked up a can of oil. He handed it to Hugh along with a hammer and the bucket of nails. “Follow me,” he said, stepping out of shed.

 Hugh followed him obediently. He ran a hand through his hair as he did. “I really… I really wish I could figure out how to get my life back on track,” he muttered. “I’m the one who broke up with her, but I think I’m the one doing the most hurting.” He clicked his tongue. “B-but maybe that’s an indication of how little she cared for me. She’s had no trouble moving on.”

 Janus stared over his shoulder at Hugh. “People handle things in different ways. Lydia has never struck me as the type to moan and whine when something happens to her. In fact, quite the opposite. When something pushes her, she pushes back even harder.”

 Hugh could agree, though he didn’t say so out loud. That was his Lyz. That brilliant look of defiance that would appear on her face when something didn’t go her way. The moment that she balled her fists at her side and steeled herself. He swallowed. He was beginning to wonder… had he made a mistake?

 But he would never have done what she had against him.

 As desperately as he always was to protect her. She had not tried to come to his defense. She had stood there… He had nightmares that were kinder.

 He blinked as they walked past one of the stables. “Isn’t that one of her tanks?” he muttered.

 Janus looked behind his shoulder at him and then stared across at where he was looking. He chuckled. “Yeah. She’s been leaving them in certain places around here.”

 “Why? Is she alright?” he asked worried and then cursed himself. What did he *care*?

 Janus chuckled. “Oh, she’s doing great. Actually –“

 “Felix! This isn’t a race! Come back here! Erica, stop it!”

 The words had no sooner reached their ears when something plowed head on into him, colliding and slamming into his body with heavy force. He was knocked off his feet. Him and the thing that had collided with him fell on the ground. Something landed roughly on top of him.

 “Ouch, damn…” someone gasped on top of him.

 Hugh winced in pain and looked up. Lydia’s partner Felix was on top of him. The guy winced and slowly slid off of him as he managed to try to regain himself. Janus’s hand appeared around Felix’s arm and helped up him. “Upsy daisy,” Janus said with a laugh.

 Hugh sat up on the ground and looked as a crowd rushed up to join Felix. He looked and found Erica already standing there. “Are you alright?” she asked him, reaching down offering him her hand.

 “Y-yeah,” he said with a wince as he reached out and took it, allowing his friend to pull him back up to his feet.

 “Idiots,” a voice growled. “Great job, Felix. You just rammed someone.”

 “S-sorry,” Felix apologized.

 Hugh looked over and instantly recognized the faces in the group. The one that had spoken was Landon. His tiny girlfriend was beside him. There was also Tanis, huffing and puffing, the twins, and Tanis’s partner.

 He looked past them and winced as he watched Lydia, carefully pacing herself, jogging up to join them, a small look of pain twisting her lips. “What happened?” she asked, huffing when she joined them.

 “These morons,” Landon growled, indicating Erica and Feli, “decided to make this into a race. Half-blind Felix wasn’t paying attention and careened into Hugh.”

 Lydia blinked as she stared up at Hugh. He swallowed. Gods she looked good. He looked away, disgusted with himself. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms. How sick was he?

 “No great loss,” she responded coldly. “Did you hurt yourself, Felix?”

 “Nah. I’m good.”

 She nodded. “Can we please take this more seriously? It’s called *jogging* for a reason.”

 Erica chuckled at the reprimand, folding her arms behind her head. “Aww, come on. Just a little friendly competition early in the morning.”

 “You’ll hurt yourselves and you won’t produce the desired results,” Tanya added her own reprimand, pressing her fingertips together. “Remember, this is called ‘endurance training’. Light and slow. Besides, don’t you think it’s sad to leave Lydia behind.”

 Tanis looked over at her. “Need your tank?”

 Lydia blinked and looked over at the tank that Hugh had noticed minutes later. She tilted her head as if considering it. “No. I’m good. I should be able to reach the next one.”

 “Don’t push yourself, Lydie” Tanis warned.

 She rolled her eyes. “I’m good, Tan. Come on before I get calmed down. Plus I want to finish this jog before breakfast ends. Hey, Janus,” she said with a large smile, nodding at the Dragon Medic.

 Janus grinned at her. “Looks like you’re doing good, Lydia.”

 She reached up and touched the space she always did for her lungs. “I think so. I really wish there was lake or something to go swimming in. But this will have to do. Anyways, I guess I’ll see you later,” she said with a wave, and ran past him, falling back into her light job.

 Everyone nodded at Janus, ignoring Hugh except for Erica, before following after Lydia, Tanis joining her at her side.

 Janus grinned at Hugh. “As I was saying, she’s doing great. Tanis has her on a new training regime. They have placed her tanks at specific intervals along the track. They are her check points. She tries to see how far she can go in between needing them. They come out here and jog every morning and then again at night. I think there’s a few other things Tanis has her doing, but I have no idea. They aren’t done here. I only know this much because she asked to leave the tanks alone at these check points.”

 Hugh nodded. He felt himself on the verge of tears now. She had barely even bothered to look at him. She was looking great. She was looking happy even. She always did enjoy Tanis helping her to work out. He gripped his fists tightly. “T-the stable,” he murmured, trying to get Janus back on subject.

 Janus nodded, turning around and walking towards the stable. He stopped at the first stall door and began to explain to Hugh what to do with the hinges and what to look for. It helped. Hugh lost himself in the explanation.

 Gods. Lydia really had ruined him.

 He set about the task, Janus watching him for a while and nodding his approval and making sure that Hugh had a solid grasp on the concept – and then left. Janus gone, Hugh allowed a few tears to slip out of his eyes. He… missed her. Seeing her like that, wearing his favorite expression as she struggled against her illness had not helped.

 He reached Tsaul’s stall and looked in, giving the dragon a wide grin. “Yo, Tsaul!” he shouted cheerfully.

 The dragon lifted his head and looked at Hugh. “Hugh!” the dragon called cheerfully. “How are you, boy? It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”

 Hugh nodded. “I’m doing good,” he answered simply. “How about you? H…How’s Lydia?”

 The dragon chuckled. “Stronger than ever. It’s been two weeks since that other boy asked to become her mate. I don’t think I’ve seen her smiling so much.”

 Hugh winced. Well… he had asked. “How’s her training going?”

 The dragon sniffed. “That question is almost an insult. She’s doing greater than even my Adrian. You should see her out there training the young team members. She has a natural instinct for their abilities. Now that she’s gained some confidence, she doesn’t mind sitting back and simply observing.” The dragon chuckled. “Even funnier, she likes to let them take over once in a while and she’ll act like she’s flying away. They never know who she’s watching as they work. She has caught a few of them doing more daring maneuvers than when she’s around, or in the case of one girl, has noticed that the girl will become less confident when she’s not got orders being given to her. She’s working on them with that.”

 “Miss the fighting scene?”

 “Heh, if you think we haven’t seen any action, you are gravely mistaken. In the evenings she enjoys taking us out on a flight and combating Conner, Landon, or both. Or she’s even taken Tanis out and has tried to enhance his basic combat skills. Though there are some evenings where things are reversed and Tanis will talk her ear off about different medicines and how to field dress wounds and the like.”

[adrian’s backstory, fear of friends being in harm’s way. friends being attacked, so made his friends stronger so if he weren’t there they could defend themselves]

 Hugh nodded. “Sounds like Tanis and her are getting along real well.” Saying this, he took a seat on the ground and started working on the stall door hinges.

 “She misses you, you know.”

 Pain shot through Hugh’s heart. “What does she need me for? She has Tanis now.”

 “You’re still an important friend to her.”

 “Yeah, well, there’s some things you don’t do to people,” he growled. “I don’t know if you can even begin to understand, but how would you like it if Myrillia suddenly did something to hurt herself to try teach you a lesson?”

 The dragon chuckled. “Dragons don’t work that way, though it would be interesting. However, I still understand more than you think, Hugh.”

 “Yeah, so what’s your verdict? Am I the victim here or the low-life boyfriend in your eyes?”

 “An idiot kid who hasn’t learned how to swallow his pride yet and learn the lesson that was given to him.”

 “Great, now I’m being berated by a dragon,” he growled. “Did you do this for Lydia? How about Adrian?”

 “I fully approved of what happened to both of my Riders. It was hard but they got through it. Actually, Hugh boy, I think Adrian’s story might help you.”

 A shiver went up Hugh’s body. Captain Adrian Townsend was his childhood hero – no, still was. Even now that he was gone, Hugh strove to try to equal the man that he envision Townsend to be. “All ears, Tsaul.”

 The dragon chuckled. “I thought you might be. You’re an uncomplicated human. I like that. You want to know what Adrian’s weakness was, Hugh boy? Being unable to protect his friends. Seeing his friends get hurt.”

 “Everyone feels that.”

 “But for Adrian it was more personal. Even worse than normal. He would go out of his way during training to try to shield his friends. He became insubordinate in many situations. When they came to this school it only got worse with the extra risks that were picked up. Annoyed the heck out of Will and Cassings. It was beginning to impact their own training.”

 “W-what did they do?”

 “The upperclassmen began attacking Adrian the way that they did for you. They would tie him up – there was always a group of them just for him, my Adrian was strong and he would fight – but they would tie him up and then bring out one of his friends. Anyone, several at a time, it didn’t matter. They would then proceed to beat them up right there in front of him.”

 Hugh froze. “Oh gods…”

 “Not all of his friends were willing participants either.”

 “That’s… that’s cold! There’s no way something like that is right!” he shouted angrily.

 “It happened anyways. Hugh, do you have any idea how many times in his life Adrian and his friends were boarded and captured during our lives? I’ve been forced to the ground far more times than I care to like to remember. He was tied up and his friends were abused in a similar fashion. The worst part: they were the enemy. They did not care. So, don’t sit there and tell me how cold and cruel it was for his friends to address the situation. If he had walked out onto the field with that weakness, I don’t even want to imagine what that would have done to his sanity.”

 “W-what did Townsend do? I mean, how do you grow stronger for something like that? It’s never going to be right.”

 “It did become right. Adrian learned. He learned that he could not always defend his friends. He had to swallow that lesson. He could not be their protector. Instead, Adrian became their teacher.”

 Hugh frowned. “What do you mean?”

 “He would train them. He trained his friends to be just as strong and good in combat as him. So that way when they were placed in that situation, they were able to fight off their attackers on their own. He taught them to do what he would not be able to. I think that’s what probably made his partner realize that Adrian was not just some dumb kid out there – that he had the potential to be a leader. Even though Adrian’s grades were sometimes below par, his partner signed up him up for the classes. Adrian saw the bigger picture. He wasn’t afraid to do what needed to be done to increase the effectiveness of his team. He could flounder a little with strategy, but he quickly got the hang of it.”

 Hugh lowered the hammer, swallowing. “They did something that cruel to him…”

 “But he became better for it. His friends became better for it.” He chuckled. “The world probably became better for it. If we had not been out there in Dragon Pass what might have been the outcome of some the situations were got ourselves into, I wonder. He survived. He endured. He even thanked his partner.”

 Hugh closed his eyes. “I just… I just feel that what she did was unnaturally cruel. Because of my silly pranks and a fight?”

            “If Lydia had not been concerned, do you think she would have truly agreed to hurting you like that? Why do you not have faith in her? You have an ego and your pranks have a way of angering people, in addition to the fights you get yourself into. Do you really think that is the sort of personality that not only a Will Rider but a *leader* should have?”

            The dragon reached his head out and looked down at the stall door. He chuckled. “And now it looks like you are putting your energy to more constructive uses. At least the end result was achieved, even if it meant in the end that you now no longer have contact with her. At least her effort was not in vain.”

            Hugh stared at the work and swallowed. Adrian had endured. He had held no ill will. He had become better. In retrospect, he himself had treated Lydia horribly. He had crushed her trying to force her to feel what he had. She *had* helped him. Doing these small tasks for Janus was vastly more preferable than trying to figure out how to get one over on someone. Instead of swinging his fists, he was here swinging a hammer.

            What had *she* felt when she had stood there that day in that room, on their second day of being reunited, knowing she was hurting him.

            And now she belonged to Tanis because he had not been able to acknowledge *her* feelings. Had not trusted her that she wouldn’t have deliberately hurt him for no reason. Adrian had risen above his situation and improved not only his life but the life of his friends. He… he had alienated himself.

            His throat felt tight. “Oh Gods, Tsaul… Did I… Did I mess up? Did I… make a mistake?”

            “Yes. Yes, you did. Like Lydia last year when she almost gave up. She could not see beyond her ownself until a friend reached out to her. Landon had been struggling to teach her and watch out for her, but she could not see that. She was able to recover. I am not so sure your recovery will be as easy.”

            He shook his head. “I-I don’t deserve her. I hurt her. Dammit. I said I never would but I did. She had tried to help – I just did it to be destructive.” He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the wood of the door. “I deserve exactly what I’ve got now. I have a broken heart and I get to see my best friend with my girlfriend. Gods… I can’t even look at another girl. I’ve tried, you know, but every girl I talk to just pales in comparison. Damn myself! You should have seen the cold look that she gave me today. And I deserve it.”

            He shook his head and went back to work.

            “You should talk to her,” Tsaul recommended.

            “If she spat in my face I would deserve it.”

            The dragon chuckled. “Swallowing your pride is the first step to your own recovery. Even if she throws it back in your face, at least you made the attempt. That is the sign of someone who should lead. Even a dragon realizes that much.”

            Hugh sighed and nodded. “I’ll work on it. How the heck do I work on John, though. I… I want to be a leader. I know I’ll never be as good as Lydia but I really wanted the opportunity.”

            The dragon snorted. “You humans – you have mouths and vocal cord to communicate – much easier than the telepathy that dragons have to use, but you seem to have a problem *using them*. Go talk to that human. Apologize to him as well.”

            Hugh sighed and looked up at him. “You know, Tsaul, there are times I think that you would make a better human than you would a dragon,” he said with a wide grin.

            The dragon snorted. “The very idea. I am quite content being a perfectly wise and intelligent dragon, as a opposed to a complex human with far too many issues they create for their own selves. Keep things simple is what I say.”

            Feeling a little better, if not secretly more heavy hearted, he continued working through the stable. “I shoulda went to class,” he muttered. “What am I doing? Damn you, Hugh. I need to stop clowning around. Look at Lyz applying herself.” He sighed. “I want to be a leader? Gods, I’m such a joke. No wonder John hasn’t signed me up for those classes.” He stood up with a grunt and looked around. “Alright, Hugh. Time to stop moping around and time to start refocusing.” He smiled sadly. “Think: dragon. Right, Lyz?”

            He picked up the items and started heading for the door.

            “Hugh!” Tsaul shouted in his mind, the thought ripping through with intensity. “Hugh, Myrillia is here.”

            Hugh frowned. “Myrillia? Your mate? Why is –“ he froze, a cold chill going up his body. “General Sanders… Oh Gods. Lydia.” He whirled around to stare at the dragon who had his head hanging out the stall door. “Tsaul, can you talk to her? What’s going on?”

            Tsaul shook his head. “No. She is not responding. She was given strict orders to not talk with me. The most she would say is that they are here for Lydia.”

 “Of course they are,” he growled. “Why the hell else would they be here?”

 He spun around and took off, setting the hammer and can of nails to the side. He took off down the field and looked up into the skies, looking for the Tsauria-sized blood red dragon. He heart stopped in his chest as he found three dragons flying through the air, behind them a few feet was an entourage of fifteen other dragons.

 He looked out across the fields and could see classes descending down from the air. From out of the building people were starting to file out, noticing the dragons as well. It was lunch time, Hugh realized.

 Hugh swallowed, running up towards the dragons, but still keeping a respectful distance. Myrillia landed gracefully, General Sanders sitting proudly on top of her. He unbuckled himself and slid off the dragon. Beside him landed two other dragons. General Cassings and General Bell slid off their dragons.

 Hugh swallowed, anger flooding through. He couldn’t do it. He tried to remind himself of the ranks of these people, but… no. Every time they arrived it meant bad news for his Lyz. He drew in a deep breath and stomped towards them a little closer, placing himself within viewing .

 General Sanders looked out across the fields and noticed him immediately. He smiled. “Mr. Oliver,” he greeted with a nod. “Finally in silvers, I see.”

 Anger raged through him. He fought to cap it. He gritted his teeth. “You’re here for Lydia?” he growled.

 General Cassings turned to him with an eyebrow raised. “Already with the attitude?” he said with a sigh. “I see the school hasn’t done its job fully yet.”

 The words stung Hugh. He shook it off, though. “Every time you show up it means bad news for Lydia. Placing her into some dangerous situation! You’re not going to do it this time.”

 General Sanders’s eyes narrowed. “Be careful, boy. Remember that uniform that you’re wearing,” he said, his voice level. “Miss Alvincia signed her contract with us. This conversation is between us and her. Now get back into that school before you do something that you are going to regret.”

 No. Stay away from her! You don’t have the right. He wanted to scream that and more. He fought to keep his tongue. “You don’t *own* her. You have no right to continue placing her in harm’s way. I’m not going to stand for it this time!”

 “Hugh!”

 He tensed at the sound of Lydia’s voice behind him. He turned around to see her pushing through the crowd. “What are you *doing*?” she screamed. She marched up to him and glared up at him with her fists balled tightly. “How dare you speak for me like that,” she growled, glaring up at him with anger in her eyes. “You have no say over what I do or do not do. Now fall back and stop embarrassing yourself.”

 He choked. He opened his mouth to say something against her but stopped. He swallowed, staring into her eyes which were filled with anger and the light of defiance. “They’re just going to place you back in harm’s way again,” he said finally.

 “What do you care?” she snapped. “I know my place and am fully aware of my position. Now, *fall back*,” she hissed.

 He stared down at her. His heart hammered against his chest. There was no love for him in her eyes anymore. Just raw anger. He was nothing more than an unruly solider in her eyes right now. And that hurt even more. He spun around, stomping off. “Fine,” he growled. “You never listened to me before, why should you start now?”

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 Lydia swallowed. Her heart was beating in her chest as she watched Hugh walking off the field. He… he had actually been picking a fight with the Generals over *her*? She felt absolutely confused. It made her heart ache. Hard.

 No. She was with Tanis now. She was happy with Tanis.

 She pushed those thoughts aside and turned back to the Generals, bowing deeply. “P-please forgive him,” she begged.

 General Sanders glared down at her before nodding. “His attitude will get worked out. Battle school has a way of doing that.” He looked back at his men and shrugged. “You’ll be receiving a summons tonight, Miss Alvincia, but since you are here anyways, we’ll go ahead and tell you. Report tomorrow at the arena, eight am sharp. You can leave Tsaul behind. Bring your Room Commander.”

 “I am the Room Commander,” she said, a little harsher than she had intended.

 His eyebrow raised staring down at her. “Are you?” He smirked. “Good job, Miss Alvincia. I remember what Adrian had to go through for that honor. Very well. Report tomorrow, just yourself.”

 “Yes, sir,” she responded with a bow.

 He nodded. “Dismissed.”

 She swallowed hard as she stood back up and walked away. Fear spread through her body. She felt like she wanted to throw up. She forced her stomach to settle. This was what she had agreed to. This was the cost for her dream. She would meet it.

 Whatever obstacle they placed before her, she would smash it down. She was no longer weak and she *knew* what she was capable of.

#

 She lay on the field, staring up at the stars. Tanis lay beside her, his right arm beneath her neck and his left arm draped across her stomach, pulling her close to him. His cheek rested on the top of her head. She loved this. There was something special and endearing in the way that Tanis treated her. He loved holding her. He was content with just that.

 Personally she missed Hugh’s passionate kissing, but the way that Tanis treated her made her feel special. Made her feel like she was something he was afraid of breaking if he held her too hard. She was something precious.

 Now and again he would softly kiss her forehead or his left hand would caress her cheek or move a stray lock of hair. He was silent, but it was a comfortable silence. A silence that conveyed more than words.

 “Lydie?” he spoke softly, almost surprising her.

 “Yes, Tanis?”

 “Don’t go tomorrow.”

 A shudder passed through her body. She turned in his arms to face him. His breath tickled her nose. “I don’t have a choice, Tanis.”

 “Of course you do. What Hugh said out there today – he was right. They *don’t* own you. Just tell them you no longer want any part of them.”

 “Tanis, they are our superiors,” she snapped. “They are the people giving our orders. Theoretically they didn’t even have to offer to accommodate my medicine. As long as I wear this uniform, I *do* belong to them.”

 “Then don’t wear that uniform.”

 “And give up being a Dragon Rider?!” she gasped.

 “There’s more to life than being a Rider, Lydie,” he said softly. “You could become a Dragon Medic. Like Janus. You would be good at it.”

 “But I wouldn’t be happy.”

 “You would be alive. Nothing nasty would happen to you – maybe a random dragon attack, but…”

 “We don’t even know *why* they are summoning me.”

 “They have two strikes against them already, Lydie. Isn’t that what we’ve said the last two times. The first time you almost got captured. The second time, you had that awful dragon force itself into your mind – almost destroyed you. What’s it going to be this time, Lydie?” He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her body. “They won’t stop until they’ve killed you.”

 Cradled in his arms like this, she could hear his heartbeat. It was pounding so hard. Tears filled her eyes. “Tanis, *nobody* is going to tell me what I can and cannot do. I will not run from these people. I will not give up on my dreams for them. You think it’s going to be any different when I get out on the field as a fighter?”

 “That’s different. You’ll be fighting. That’s an expected, assumed risk that you took.”

 “So is this, Tanis. Oh, please. Do we have to fight about this? I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

 She watched him almost open his mouth, but he sighed, and closed it. “Alright,” he muttered.

 They laid like that for several minutes, Tanis staring deep into her eyes. “Lydie?” he asked, suddenly again.

 She sighed and closed her eyes. “Yes, Tanis?”

 “C-can I kiss you?”

 She opened her eyes and smirked. “I thought we got you over this, Tanis. You don’t need to ask if you can kiss me.”

 “I-I wasn’t sure you were in the mood right now.”

 She smiled wide. “I’m always in the mood.”

 He nodded and slid his face closer, pressing his lips up gently against hers. It was his normal gentle, soft kiss. Hugh had never kissed this gently, but somehow it gave her the same effect – if not even more powerful. How did that work? Why was this more than enough when with Hugh it never seemed enough?

 Tanis pulled away, licking his lips, a wide, satisfied grin on his face. “I love you, Lydie,” he said, his arm sliding up her body to grab her her hand that was pressed up to his chest. He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingertips.

 She smiled. “You, too, Tanis. I love you.”

 He released her hand and wrapped his arm over her arm, pulling her closer with a gentle pressure on her back. He kissed her forehead again. She leaned into his chest, enjoying his warmth.

 “Lydie?”

 She smiled inwardly. Why was this guy so cute sometimes? “Yes, Tanis?” she asked again. How many times did that make this particular exchange?

 She felt him tense. Heard him draw in a deep breath.

 Suddenly he rolled her slightly, dragging her closer to him. She gasped as suddenly he was on top of her, his left leg in between hers. Both of his hands were propping him up on the ground on either side of her head. She blinked in surprise looking up at him.

 This was new.

 This was exciting.

 He lowered his body gently down on hers and met her lips. There was nothing soft and gentle in this kiss. It was passionate.

 He pulled up after several moments. He grinned down at her. “I don’t want something to happen to you without having kissed you like that at least once,” he said simply, reaching up and caressing her cheek.

 That did it. Her thoughts were gone. Destroyed. That was definitely *not* enough. *He* might be content with that, but *she* certainly was not.

 She reached up with her arms, and wrapped them around his head and pulled down. He resisted at first in surprise but finally relented. He made to press his lips back down on hers but she flinched with a toss of her head. He frowned, pulling back slightly. “Lydie?” he asked.

 She took it. She reached up and pressed her lips to his and slipped her tongue inside of his mouth. He gasped and tried to jerk back, alarm suddenly spreading through his body, but her arms were wrapped too tightly around his neck. He sat back so that she now dangled from his neck, on her knees in his lap, her tongue still in his mouth.

 She worked the way that Hugh had taught her. The way that he had done with her so many times. Tanis remained stiff as a board, his mind in shock. Finally he relented, his body easing. He wrapped his arms around her body, pulling her closer. He tried clumsily to match what she was doing. He was totally inept. That excited her even more.

 Was this what Hugh had felt when he had first kissed her like this? A devilish joy?

 She felt a shudder pass through his body that escaped as a moan of delighted passion. He closed his eyes. She pulled out for just a moment, grabbing a quick breath, her lungs starting to burn. There was just a brief flash of disappointment in his eyes when he opened them. She smirked. “Oh, I’m not done,” she growled seductively, pulling herself back up into his mouth.

 He accepted her joyously this time. He leaned her back, pushing her back down to the ground. A giggle escaped her. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, supporting her upper torso with his own strength. She could feel the muscles in his arms. He could never be compared to Hugh, but there was definitely power there. There was nothing weak about Tanis other than his poor communication skills.

 She pulled her arms away from around his neck and went for his zipper. He tensed once again and tried to pull away. That was so frustrating! Where did he think he was going?

 He grabbed her hands. “Lydie? What are you –“

 “Will you just cooperate for a moment,” she snapped.

 She jerked his zipper down, revealing his torso. She reached in and wrapped her arms around him and forced him back down to her, pulling him back to her mouth.

 Tanis was tensed. He didn’t know how to react to her hands around his bare skin. She wondered after several minutes if maybe she had gone too far too fast with him. He just wouldn’t ease. He refused to be comfortable. It made him even more clumsy inside her mouth.

 She pulled out of his uniform, releasing him, letting him pull out of her mouth. His cheeks were bright red. “Are you ok?” she demanded, a little harsher than she meant to.

 He winced. “I-I… ummm… L-Lydie… umm….” He knuckled his forehead, obviously trying to pull his thoughts together. “I’m… I’m just not use to this. I’ve never had a girl’s hands touch me before. It’s… gods, it’s awkward.”

 She sighed, forcing herself to be patient. “You’re not enjoying it?”

 He swallowed and shook his head. “T-that’s not the problem. I am. I am enjoying it. It’s just…” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “O-ok. I’m… I’m good, I think.”

 She smirked. “How about you make it easier and take your arms out of the sleeves? It’s also a little safer that way.”

 He frowned in confusion. “S-safer?”

 She laughed. “The zipper. When your arms are in it, the zipper can tend to travel a little too far down when I reach in and am not paying attention.”

 She got a charge out of how red his cheeks became, staring down at the zipper. She watched as he swallowed and gathered his courage together, pulling his arms out.

 “Tanis, we’ve been swimming together. I’ve seen this much of you before.”

 “T-that’s different!” he gasped.

 “How?” she asked with a laugh.

 “It… it just is,” he muttered. “I wasn’t laying on top of you kissing you, for one thing.”

 She shook her head. “Gods, you really are cute.”

 “Don’t apply the word cute to a guy,” he snapped.

 “Well start acting cooler and I might use a different adjective.”

 He stared down at her dejectedly. “Can you at least use the word handsome? I’d like to hear that one just once.”

 She grinned. “No one’s every called you handsome before?”

 “Lydia, the only girls I’ve ever been around for an extended period of time are Erica, the twins, and you. I don’t see them calling me handsome anytime soon.”

 She laughed. “No. I guess not.”

 She laid back down, giving him a wide grin. “Tanis, you’re very handsome.”

 He bent forward again, placing his hands on either side of her, hovering over her. “Now it doesn’t feel genuine since I had to tell you to say it.”

 She laughed, looking up at him. “Tanis, you’re wonderful looking. And right now, looking up at you like this, hovering over me, all I can think of is how much I desperately want to wrap my arms around you and have you kiss me. Kissing you makes me lose my mind.”

 “Does it?” he asked a little surprised.

 “Yes. I’m looking forward to enjoying this. So, please – will you shut up for the next ten minutes and relax?”

 He grinned. “Me too. I’m… I’m looking forward to this.” He slid his leg back in between hers and lowered his body down on her. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

 She groaned seductively, reaching up and wrapping her arms around him. “No. Stop worrying.”

 This time his body was completely at ease. He licked his lips and reentered her mouth. This time he was the one driving the kiss. He was clumsy and hopelessly inept, just like her first time, but this time he was the one initiating it instead of being the hapless victim. Gods he felt good. This was wonderful. Nothing should feel this wonderful.

 She reached up and tried to bury her hands in his hair but was stopped by his ponytail. She reached around and pulled out the hair tie. His thick hair fell down around his face, tickled hers. She reached up and intertwined her fingers in the locks. She then pulled out of his hair and traveled her hands down past his neck and then down his back. Taking her time, doing it slowly.

 He moaned in delight, a shudder sweeping through his body. He reacted with a jerk, pushing his leg even further up her legs. His left hand cradled the back of her neck, but his right hand began traveling, lightly brushing her body softly until he finally settled into her hip.

 How long they stayed like that she lost track of time. Now and again she would pull out only for a gasp of air before pulling him right back down into her.

 When he pulled away she almost wished she would die. She was not done!

 “Lydie?”

 “Yes, Tanis?” she asked with the bitter aftertaste of disappointment in her mouth.

 “C-can I… umm… c-can I mark you?”

 She blinked at him for a moment, not understanding him. But finally realization dawned on her. “Y-you want to mark my neck?”

 “I do,” he said matter-of-factly.

 She grinned and reached up to her zipper. He grabbed her hands, stopping her. “No. I want to do that,” he said, his voice insistent.

 She swallowed, worried for a moment as he reached up and pulled the zipper down, slowly. He stopped it just shy of her chest. He pulled it back, exposing her neck and her collarbone. He bent down and pressed his lips to the exposed portion of her skin that she never let anyone see. He pulled back up for a moment, licking his lips. “S-sorry if I’m clueless for a moment,” he said, his voice thick.

 The sound of his voice sent shivers up her body. He lowered himself back down and pressed his lips against the same spot again and then trailed his lips slowly downward, reaching up to pull the zipper a little lower. His lips burned her skin, setting her on fire wherever they touched.

 “T-Tanis?” she groaned, worried about how low he was going with her zipper.

 “I know,” his voice responded, his breath tickling too low for her to be comfortable. “Gods, this is almost too tempting,” he muttered, his fingers playing with the zipper tag.

 “Tanis, don’t you dare,” she growled.

 He chuckled. His face rose back upwards. “You’re mean, Lydie.”

 “What happened to you feeling awkward?” she asked with a laugh.

 He nestled his face in her neck. “I guess I got over it,” he answered.

 She started to respond when suddenly she felt his teeth graze her skin. And then a soft lick. Her body shuddered and her words were cut off. Oh gods… Hugh’s favorite spot. Tanis licked it again, growing more certain. His body pressed down even harder into her. His hands grabbed both of hers and lifted them up above her head, his fingers intertwining with hers. She lost herself in the familiar feel of a tongue on her neck and the gentle sucking of Tanis’s mouth.

#

 She walked out onto the stage. Like last year, there was a desk on the stage where the three Generals sat, papers spread out over the table top. General Sanders was sprawled back in his chair. General Bell, the only woman in the room, was responding sharply to something one of the hovering men at her right side had said. General Cassings had a smirk on his face as he stared over at Bell.

 She was not scared. Her heart wasn’t even pounding. Had she become that use to this scene? That use to these people that they no longer bothered her? Had she become that confident that maybe it just did not matter.

 Without waiting for them to notice her her at the door, she strode up to the table and bowed deeply. General Bell’s voice cut off midsentence as she turned to her. She waved the man away with a quick flick of her hand.

 Lydia had not seen the woman since that day so long ago when she had taken on the Death Rider. The woman stared at her, taking her in now, her eyes roving up and down.

 “Greetings, Miss Alvincia,” she said, her voice sharp and loud in the echo of the stage. “My goodness. You were right. She does look much healthier.” She leaned forward to Cassings. “Are we sure this is going to work? Perhaps we should abandon that part of the plan?”

 Cassings shook his head. “No. If you were to see her still for the first time you still get a clear impression of her being weak and frail.”

 Lydia’s lips pursed. “It’s a common mistake,” she snapped and then looked away chiding herself. “S-sorry,” she apologized.

 General Sanders chuckled. “Still as spirited as ever, Miss Alvincia.”

 She drew in a deep breath. “My partner has tried to curb it. He’s had… marginal success.”

 Sanders sat up in his seat and leaned forward. “Have a seat, Miss Alvincia.”

 She obeyed, taking the seat in the middle in front of Sanders. She looked down at the papers on the table and frowned. “My medical files?” she asked, recognizing them immediately. She looked up at him with a frown. “I-is there something you’re concerned about with my illness?”

 The General shook his head. “Not in the terms that you are worried about, Miss Alvincia. Tell me, though, how are you coping with your illness?”

 She shrugged. “Coping.” She looked up at him, tearing her eyes away from the files spread out. “It’s summer again so I’ve started up a new training regime to try to build up my lungs again.”

 Cassings leaned forward. “How are your teammates dealing with the pain?”

 She smiled. “They’ve learned how to control the link. It… it was a little worrisome with the newbies that I was put in charge of. My Meldling abilities came in handy. I was able to feed it to them slowly over a period of a week. Sort of forced them to deal with it on a day to day basis to build up their group linking ability and learn how to adjust. It has not been a problem once that they have reported to me.”

 “Still using your machine and tanks on a frequent basis?” Sanders asked.

 “I could not get through my day without them, unfortunately. On low activity days I can manage to avoid using my tank, but with a half-blind partner that I chose to take on there’s very few of those. I spend most of my days training him how to fight.”

 Cassings chuckled. “I read that you took a half blind fighter in your file and I almost about died. Paying it forward, Miss Alvincia?”

 “It’s nothing to do with paying it forward. I just know the frustrations of being defined by an illness and looked down because of it and told ‘you can’t’. I would not say that to my partner and I’m not afraid to push him the way that he needs. I… I believe I’m doing a good job, though there are times I am not so sure.”

 General Bell chuckled into her hand. “The bane of every leader – that small nagging voice that forces you to question your every move. I wish I could tell you how to silence it, but from the sound of your words now, I have no doubt that you *are* doing a good job, and I’ve not even seen your work. You’ve grown up quite a lot since the last time we spoke, Miss Alvincia. I completely understand why Tsaul took you as his partner if this is the potential he saw all along. And to think those committee members three years ago tried to have the audacity of refusing you. I almost wish they could see you now. Your instructors have all given you glowing reviews, especially your fighting abilities.”

 “Thank you, ma’am,” she said, allowing a small smile. A thrill of pride swept through her at the thought of her difficult teachers speaking highly of her.

 “So, how about we start talking business,” Cassings said, cutting into the conversation. “Miss Alvincia, news of your exploits between the Death Rider and that horrid Crystal Dragon have not gone unnoticed in the world.”

 Lydia blinked in astonishment. “T-the world?”

 Sanders nodded. “Meldlings are a pretty prized commodity in other parts of the world as it is. To hear of a Will Rider doing some of things that you have done has impressed. None more, of course, than that of your exploits with the Death Rider.”

 “I didn’t really do anything spectacular,” she muttered.

 “You melded with a Death Dragon. Meldlings are rare and even rarer is for them to have a death scent and the ability to meld with a Death Dragon. Trust me when I say you are the topic of conversation in other parts of the world.”

 “S-so… is that a bad thing?” she asked.

 Sanders leaned back and shook his head. “Not necessarily, except that you have made the neighboring kingdoms interested in you. Meldlings, it seems, are treated with a great deal of respect in other locations. We just recently learned that there is actually a Meldling school that Westerners and the Southerners send their Meldlings to. It’s part of an alliance agreement between them. Our borders are completely sealed of – especially now that we have access to the Crystal Dragon’s territory – but the Southerners are not nearly so dedicated with their borders as we are. They allow people through depending on how charitable they are feeling that particular day. As a result the Westerners enjoy certain privileges that we do not afford them. Part of making this work they have an alliance. The moment that a Meldling shows up in their lands, they send them to this school to be taught amongst their peers.”

 Lydia blinked and leaned forward slightly interested. “T-they are more Meldlings? H-how many?”

 Sanders grinned. “Including you, five. All four of theirs goes to this school.”

 “W-what are they taught and for how long?”

 “Consider it a mini summer session of training for your abilities. They go there to learn their meldling abilities and then are sent back at the end of the training back to their parts of the world. Sometimes at the end of the training the children are not only offered positions in their armies, but the other kingdom is allowed to make an offer to the Meldling to come over to them instead. It should go without saying that they are heavily reviewed during the course of the whole thing.”

 Lydia blinked. “You aren’t wanting me to go there?”

 “We do indeed. Not because we care one way or the other, but because of relations. Nor is this our personal decision, Miss Alvincia,” General Sanders said. “This is orders from the President of our Democracy.”

 A shiver went down Lydia’s body. “W-wait, the President.” Lydia felt her blood drain from her body. “Oh gods. I-I’m *that* noticed?”

 Cassings chuckled. “You think you could do what you accomplished and *not* be noticed, Miss Alvincia?”

 She felt dizzy and shook her head. “S-so, I’m going to this school. For how long?”

 “For two months simply to keep up relations.”

 “But… my studies and my partner…” She sighed and shook her head. “I’m going to be thrown behind again.” She looked back down at the table and frowned. “Wait, what does that have to do with my illness?”

 General Bell sighed. “Naturally, we are concerned for you, Miss Alvincia. We are concerned that the two kingdoms may want to attempt to take an interest in you. There’s a variety of scenarios that could go very poorly. You are a Meldling that’s on a Will Rider. We are concerned that the other Kingdoms will not be so appreciative of this and will attempt to make a fuss about you and that your fate will wind up in the hands of bickering officials who will strike some deal without any concern for you in the interim of the whole process. What’s the happiness of one soldier versus another possible alliance or some other trade off.”

 A shiver went up her body. “How strong is that possibility?”

 “Strong,” General Bell said with a nod. “You would be an edge over the Westerners at the most, at the least, a commodity over the Southerners. We want to try to discourage that, obviously.”

 Cassings leaned forward. “They know you are sick. They know that you are on the back of our Dragon Tsaul. They know nothing else. Miss Alvincia, we think you should play up your illness – not that there’s much to play up, of course – but to make yourself appear too weak and too undesirable for them to want to bother with.”

 She looked down at herself. “T-that’s why you made reference to be still looking weak and frail?”

 Cassings nodded. “Miss Alvincia, how do you feel about returning to your old wheelchair?”

 Lydia winced. “Y-you want me to act like I was three years ago when I started training to get out of my wheelchair?” She frowned. “I-I dunno. My legs aren’t half that shriveled anymore. You don’t think I look too healthy for that?”

 Cassings shook his head. “You look healthier, Miss Alvincia, but let’s face it – I think you could probably still fit through the bars of that cage that the Death Rider had you in. You can still pass yourself off as working out a little – the way that you use to – but clearly still much too sick to be all that worthwhile. Play up that you’re dying.”

 Lydia bit her lip, closing her eyes and thinking the scenario through. “It could work. There’s nothing to play up with my illness other than to complain about it more loudly.” She smirked. “That I can do. I’ve had a lifetime of experience being a bit snobbish in that regard. The only part that I think things fall apart is my glass machine. I lose my sanity for that hour.”

 Cassings nodded. “Do you think your body could handle being without your medicine for that two month stretch?”

 Lydia gasped and stared at him with wide eyes. “I… W-wait, that’s almost too dangerous. I mean, that medicine is the only thing that keeps me from possibly having another coma attack. Even with it I’m still constantly in fear.”

 “We have looked through your medical files, Miss Alvincia,” General Bell said. “Your doctors have reported multiple times that your lungs are in a much healthier state than they were when you were eight years old. Two months. You would have constant access to your tank and you would be in your wheelchair. It would even be to your benefit to refuse to do certain tasks. To voice your concerns that you could die. It would only help to enhance your worthlessness. You don’t have a choice. You are going for two months. How good you make yourself look while you are there is entirely up to you. We have provided you the warning. The medics that you are going to will be made fully aware of your situation and your medicines will be accommodated for, including those that you need in the rare event of one of your major attacks.”

 Lydia sighed. “Two months…” she mumbled. “If I take it easy and try to not be all that impressive… yeah, I could manage it. Not without a great deal of fear. But, don’t you think they would find it odd that I’m a fighter.”

 “Again, they know nothing about you,” Bell explained. “We have a viable cover story for you. You will be going claiming that you are going to be a Mail Courier. You will be given the pins for that as well.”

 Lydia nodded. “The only thing I have to do is to become a good liar about certain aspects of my life.” She shrugged. “With as awful as my lungs will start to sound from not having my new medication the story is going to be pretty easy to sell in all honesty. There’s just one more problem.”

 Sanders nodded. “Yes, please, Miss Alvincia. We have tried to think of every other problem here. You have another one?”

 She shrugged. “My wheelchair. My father –“

 “Had it specially made. Already taken care of. We had a new one constructed for you from the old design.”

 “Oh,” she was impressed and looked down at her files. “I did not know you had access to that information, too.”

 Sanders chuckled. “Anything else that you can think of, Miss Alvincia?”

 She concentrated. Going over everything in her mind. Tracing everything through carefully. Picking it apart. Thinking of scenario after scenario. The way that she did when she was creating a new dragon strategy to try out in the new skies. “Should I discard my ankle sheaths? I do not see where they would upset the scenario since they are basic equipment. But I would not be able to bring Tsaul’s equipment. I might need a little basic training for Mail Courier just to give my story a bit more of a believable edge.”

 “Yes to everything. We have a Courier with us and he will give you some basic instructions,” Cassings said.

 Lydia nodded. “I can think of nothing else. Other than how scary this whole thing is going to be.”

 Sanders nodded. “The people there are only teachers. You will not come to any harm while you are there. It is simply trying to pass yourself off as weak and worthless – someone who managed a brief miracle because you were on a war dragon. Further, this could be a decent opportunity for you to learn something more of your abilities. Perhaps if you had gone to this school you would not have the difficulties you had last year.”

 She winced and sighed. “They are probably going to force me to meld with other dragons,” she muttered. She looked away. “Tsaul’s going to get hurt again.”

 Bell nodded, a sad expression on her face. “He will just have to get over it. Even he understands that orders are orders.”

 She nodded. “When do we leave?”

 “The school starts in two weeks,” Sanders explained. “We were going to give you a week to prepare. We want to make sure we send you in prepared for your story. Give you time to readjust to being back in a wheelchair and to act like a dying sick girl once again, and not someone who is a Room Commander.”

 Lydia nodded numbly. “I’ll also need to be find a way to accommodate for my wheelchair on Tsaul.”

 “We have the strap for that,” Cassings said. “There are many Riders who are wheelchair bound. I myself have one and I will show you how to use it.”

 She looked across at him and frowned. “You use a wheelchair?”

 He chuckled. “There are some days the pain of my brace is unbearable and the thought of walking too excruciating. We all have our bad days.”

 It was hard to reconcile the two images. One of the strong General sitting before her that was an excellent fighter, and one of a man with a leg brace for a deteriorated leg that would be forced to endure a wheelchair. She nodded at him, feeling an ounce more of respect for him. She wondered how he viewed his wheelchair. As humiliating as she viewed it? Or had he risen above that and just consigned himself to the idea that some things were just not worth viewing as obstacles.

 “That also gives me time to make accommodations for my team.” She nodded. “Alright. I guess it’s settled then.” She slumped forward. “Like I have a choice in all of this,” she mumbled miserably.

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 “Thrown into another crappy situation,” Landon growled. “Might as well tie a big damn ribbon around your neck and say ‘here you go’ to those Westerners. Safe my ass!”

 Lydia sighed. “Landon. You aren’t helping.” She groaned, feeling eyes on her. She was sitting at the edge of a table sitting in her wheelchair. She felt her face redden. She tried desperately to shake of the stares. She sighed as she leaned forward and tried to eat. The table was too high from this seat, though. A valuable inch of difference. She had forgotten the difficulties she had faced wheelchair bound. She needed these reminders. The Generals’ suggestions that she spend time in it again for the next few days was good. She was going to need to readjust and return to this old lifestyle.

 Tanis stared down at her. “It’s almost disgusting seeing you in that thing again.”

 Conner nodded. “It is disgusting to see her in it. This is how you met her?”

 Erica smiled softly. “Yeah. I had to help her through the lunch line at school.” She sighed and shook her head. “You just look too healthy for this,” she muttered.

 Lydia nodded. “I’m going to stop taking my sleeping pills and my medicine tonight. That will at least add back my sleepiness and a little haggardness to my appearance.”

 Landon nodded. “It will work. I remember the first time that I met you. Telling me that you were wheelchair bound was no great shock. If you don’t know you, it’s an easy story to sell. Actually, the idea that you could have ever looked even sicker is hard to imagine.”

 Lydia sighed and stared across at Felix. “Landon, since you’re not going to have me around, would you mind trying to continue Felix’s training in my stead – do you think you could fit that in?”

 Landon smirked. “Don’t worry, Lydia, he’s going to be well taken care of. You’ve done a great job with him. The rest is stuff he needs to learn on his own now anyways.”

 “What about my Room. Who’s going to be Commander?”

 “Do you doubt Ori? Lydia, you’ve done a great job by your team. There’s nothing the Instructors can’t see for themselves now and adjust.” Landon grinned. “Ever the worrier. Just concentrate on your own skin right now. Stop thinking of yourself as a fighter or you’re never going to sell this crappy story. Do everything you can think of to make yourself look less than appealing.”

 Tanis nodded. “No stubborn attitude or defiance. The look you get on your face is a dead giveaway that you are not as weak as you look. Also if you pull out your knives, be clumsy. You’re not supposed to know how to use them.”

 She sighed. “Am I going to be able to do this?” she groaned.

 “Yes,” Tanis snapped. “Yes, you can. You have to. I-I would die to think of something happening to you, Lydia. Please. Do the best that you can.”

 She smiled and nodded, tears filling her eyes. “This is so messed up.” She gave up trying to eat and shook her head. “I… I’m going to go talk with Tsaul. I can’t stand the stares for even another second.”

 Tanis stood up. “You want me to come with you?”

 She shook her head. “No. D-do you mind if I’m alone for a moment.”

 He sat down slowly, a pained expression on his face. “Of course. Lydie – I’ll be waiting out at our normal spot,” he said.

 She grinned and nodded. “I’ll be there. Just give me some time, ok?”

 She wheeled herself around and out of the room, trying her best to dodge through the crowds. Somehow she managed to make it out and wheeled herself out towards Tsaul’s stall. She reached out to unlock it.

 “I can’t stand the sight of you in that thing,” a voice growled.

 Lydia started, whirling around in her seat. Hugh was leaned up against the wall adjacent from her stall. She froze and tensed. “What do you care?” she snapped, turning back around.

 “Because I *do* care,” he snapped. He walked across to her and grabbed her arm. He yanked her up violently and shoved the wheelchair backwards and out from behind her. “This whole thing is disgusting!” he raged.

 She glared up at him. “Release me,” she growled. “You lost your rights to voice your opinions.”

 Pain flashed through his eyes. “I might not be your boyfriend anymore, but I still care for you, Lydia,” he said, bending down to her height. “This is disgusting. You have a right to refuse.”

 “Hugh, this isn’t the Generals’ decision.

[hugh apologies, tries to kiss her but she denies him. He says he deserves it. Knows that he can’t fix everything with an apology but he hopes to one day make amends]

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 Tsaul growled as they neared the place. “I don’t like this. Not one bit.”

 “Look, Tsaul,” she said exasperated. “If I thought for even a moment there was a way around this I would do it. You’re going to have to endure like me. *Please*. We survived the Crystal Dragon last year, we will endure this.”

 “I will *not* meld with anyone else.”

 “And I won’t let them,” she agreed. “You know you are my one and only. Let’s just… do the best we can.” She sighed. “Damn my lungs hurt,” she complained.

 She slipped off Tsaul as they landed. Her eyes looked around taking in the area. Unsurprisingly, there were dragons everywhere. She had had to tell them to silence several times. The building was small. Barely the size of a small church. A small lake ran through the area not that far away. She looked around. The area was very silent. It did not have the hustle and bustle that she came to expect of schools or even a dragon outpost. The dragons were free to roam.

 She reached up and unhooked the wheelchair, taking in a deep breath. “Show time,” she muttered.

 She unfolded the chair. Cassings came around and helped her slide her tank out and get it placed on the wheelchair. She could do it herself but obviously this was part of the show. “Be careful,” he breathed. “Always act like someone’s watching you because for all you know, they could be.”

 She nodded and sat down. Acting out her illness was going to be the easy part. Her lungs were burning with a painful vengeance. It was almost difficult to believe that she had spent a good majority of life with this sort of pain. It was amazing how much she had begun to take her new medicine and its effects for granted.

 She licked her lips and reached over pulling on her mask. Just before she slid it in place she looked up at him. “There’s going to be plenty of these?”

 He nodded. “We’ll have a shipment brought in everyday like when you were at school. Feel free to use them as frequently as you need – even if you don’t.”

 She smirked. “Oh believe me, there’s not going to be many of those ‘don’t’ moments.”

 She looked up as the door to the building opened. “Here we go,” Cassings muttered, standing up straight and limping over to join General Sanders.

 She rolled after him, but stopped as a sudden thought entered her mind.

 *“Oh! Another girl! Oh! I’m not the only girl anymore! This is exciting. Teddy, see, it’s another girl Meldling.”*

Lydia blinked and looked around trying to pin point the voice. The voice was young – and when her eyes found the girl she could see why. There was a tiny child sitting on the back of a dragon. She couldn’t have been more than seven. A teddy bear was wrapped tight in her arms.

[three boys: two westerners: Eldrich, Sean. one southerner: Dennis, and Kelly]

            The girl was tiny with straight blond hair and two dazzling blue eyes that were full of life and excitement. The dragon she was sitting on was a gigantic blue dragon with an elongated body and six legs. Lydia did not recognize its type off hand, though in all honesty she had only ever seen a Will Dragon and a Battle Dragon.

            As she stared at her, the small girl slid off the dragon, landing in the grass barefoot. Lydia frowned and noticed for the first time the girl was dressed in a simple brown canvas dress.

            *“Dennis! Sean! She’s heeeerreee! It’s a girl! Dennis, it’s another girl!”*

The girl went running through the group of officials, almost knocking into General Sanders, as she rushed into the school. Sanders blinked in astonishment, watching the child disappear inside. He shook off his astonishment and shook hands with the officials that were dressed in vastly different uniforms. [uniform descriptions for both westerners and southerners]

            The group of them passed some conversations before one of the Westerners stared down at her. “This is your Meldling?” he asked. “Not much to look at, is she? I heard she was sick, but with her reputation… Anyways, she can go ahead and go inside. The rooms are off to the right, the girl’s is the left most room. She can join the others in the main room.”

            Lydia nodded. General Cassings reached up and took her bags down off of Tsaul and lead her inside. There were two rooms. She peered into both rooms before she rolled her way into the left bedroom. There were five simple beds set up. On one of them had a bunch of stuffed animals with clothes sprawled out everywhere all over the floor.

            Cassings eyed the mess. “A child,” he muttered. “How young are all of them.”

            She turned to look up at him. “You don’t know anything about the others?”

            He shook his head. “Not a thing other than two are Southerners and two are Westerners. Looks like they have your tanks set up over here in the corner. You’ll be alright with them over there or do you want me to pull them over?”

            She shook her head. “No. I remember how to handle my tanks even in my wheelchair.” She grinned. “Any help I need I can demand.”

            He gave her an approving nod. “Alright.” He set her bags on top of the bed. “Good luck, Miss Alvincia. If things look like they are taking a bad turn – I’m not really supposed to say this but… get out. Just jump on Tsaul. We’ll take care of the fall out, but please don’t push it to that point. Just… stay safe.”

            She drew in a deep breath – wincing at the action. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’ll deal with this. Who knows. I might learn something useful. I’m assuming I’ll be debriefed at the end.”

            He nodded with a smirk. “You’re going to make a fine soldier, Miss Alvincia,” he said, placing a soft hand on her shoulder. He then turned and walked out the room.

            And Lydia was alone.

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            She rolled out to the main room and blinked in confusion. The little girl was sitting on the floor crying hysterically. Her teddy bear laid on the floor, ripped open, with its fluff spilling out. Nearby two boys, both sixteen or so, were taking swings at each other, fighting heavily, one of them dressed in a white dress uniform and the other in the browns. Sitting in one of the desks, scratching into the wood with a knife point, was another boy dressed in a brown uniform. He looked closer to eighteen and looked absolutely bored with the whole situation.

            “Asshole!” the white uniformed boy screamed. “Why the hell did you do that?”

            The other boy skipped backwards, a crooked grin on his face. “She’s got like fifty more. I’m tired of seeing those damn things. Every single year I have to deal with her whining and her stupid toys. I’m sick of it.”

            Lydia reached up and started coughing as her lungs flared. All activity suddenly stopped as they turned to stare at her. Even the tiny little girl stopped. She wiped away her tears and stood up. She gave Lydia a wide grin. “See. I told you she was in a wheelchair.”

            All three boys stared at her with wide astonished expressions. She wanted to glare back at them but she fought the urge. Meek and innocent, Lydia. That’s what you needed to be. Act weak. She gave them a soft polite smile. “G-good day,” she greeted softly.

            The Westerner that had been fighting burst out laughing. “Oh my gods. She really is a dying girl. No wonder she was able to meld with a Death Dragon.”

            The boy in white turned and glared at him. “You disgust me. That’s something funny? It’s really that funny to you?”

            Lydia sighed inwardly. This was going to be a lot harder than she imagined. It was taking everything inside of her not to jump out of her wheelchair and pummel the kid. She’d show him the power of a dying girl.

            The boy walked away from the other and came across to her and bowed. “My name is Dennis.”

            “I’m Kelly!” the little girl shouted excitedly, punching the air with her fist.

            “Sean,” the boy in the desk said lazily with a flick of his hand as if he did not want to be bothered.

            “Eldrich,” the boy behind Dennis said, still smirking.

            She nodded. Not a single one of them offered their last names. “Lydia,” she said sweetly.

            “Lydia?” Eldrich said with a smirk. “What kind of a pathetic name is that?”

            “Stop picking a fight,” Dennis growled. “What do you expect her to do? Jump out of her wheelchair and start wailing on you?”

            It might work, she thought inwardly.

            Eldrich glared at him before walking past deliberately stepping on the teddy bear and giving it a twist with his heel. Kelly stared at him, tears starting to rise back into her eyes. He took a seat beside Sean, propping his leg up in his chair. He reached into his pants leg and pulled out a knife. “So,” he snapped. “You’re a *Will* Rider? What a waste. Disgusting waste.”

            “Battle Riders?” she asked the two boys.

            “Duh!” Eldrich said, rolling his eyes.

            “I’m a Youth Rider!” Kelly shouted jumping to her feet and running over to Lydia. “Did you see my dragon? Isn’t he beautiful?”

            Lydia frowned. “A Youth Rider? Youth Dragon? What attribute is that?”

            Eldrich rolled his eyes. “Gods you’re dumb. *Youth*. It only connects with people that are younger than twenty five. The younger the Rider, the better. It’s a dragon normally in the northern countries but they got one for her.”

            “And I *love* him. Your dragon looks cool, too! He looks much older. He looks all scarred up. Do you have any other dragons? I only have one right now. When I get older and can control my melding a little better I’ll be able to do much much MUCH more.”

            She smiled down at the girl and shook her head. “No. I only like my dragon. Just my one.”

            The girl stepped back, astonished by this answer. “Just one?”

            “I’m getting sick of this girl’s idiocy,” Eldrich growled. “You’re a meldling and not only have you restricted yourself to a Will Dragon but it’s your *only*?”

            She shrugged. “I worked hard for my one dragon. I did not know until later that I was a Meldling. They didn’t even want to give him to me since I was going to die in a year.”

            Mix honesty with the lie as General Bell had explained. It’s easy to tell the truth. Believable. Just watch how much was revealed. They had been over it with her extensively.

            The little girl’s eyes widened. “Y-you’re going to die in a year?”

            Lydia smiled. “Well… I was supposed to, but I managed to survive. It’s… unknown right now.”

            Dennis blanched. “I-I apologize, Lydia. That’s harsh.”

            Kelly sniffed. “That’s so sad. I like you, too. You’re a nice person. I can tell.”

            Eldrich’s hand hit the desk hard. “Why the heck are you even *here* then? Just die and stop wasting our time.”

            She could think of a lot of unpleasant things to do to this boy to correct his foul attitude. Instead she shrugged. “Why don’t you die and stop wasting our time?” she quipped. “Seems to me you’re the only one not worth living in this room. Of course, I’ve only been in here for five seconds. My opinion for the rest of you is still open.”

            It was not sweet. It wasn’t innocent, but she would be damned if she continued to endure his taunts without defending herself in *some* way.

            Dennis smirked. Eldrich gave her a dirty look. He opened his mouth to say something when Sean turned to him and shouted something at him in another language. Eldrich gave him a dirty look and responded with something in the same language.

            Dennis rolled his eyes. “Speak so everyone can understand you,” he snapped. “Gods I hate having to come here every year. I can’t wait until my eighteenth birthday next year so I can graduate from this stupid class and get away from you.”

            Sean turned and stared at him, shrugging. “My last class,” he said with a large grin. “Can’t wait to be out of here either.”

            This was wonderful. Not a single one of these people wanted to be here. She reached up and rubbed her forehead. “What are we here for?” she muttered.

            Kelly grinned. “We’re here to learn how to be Meldlings! And and my family they get looooots of money and we gets food and we gets lots of dolls. I’m going to get lots of clothes, too. Mommy wants me to wear shoes but I don’t likes them.”

            Lydia blinked and looked around at them. “T-they pay you to be here?”

            Eldrich clicked his tongue. “Wow. How sucky must your country be? Yeah. We’re Meldlings. They send our parents money to place us in this program. They teach us how to be use our skills and set us up with all the dragons we want and teach us how to be proper Riders. Our lives are set. Isn’t that how it is for you?”

            She shook her head. “We hardly know what a Meldling *is*. I guess they just stopped bothering with us in my country and they forgot over time. Or something. I dunno. They are pretty clueless with me. It didn’t even help that my own dragon tried to hide it from me since he got jealous.”

            Dennis smirked, walking over and taking a seat. “You should complain. That’s what I would do. That’s money they should be sending to you and your family.”

            She shrugged. “Money’s not really a concern in my house. Personally I’d rather not be here and just be back riding my dragon.”

            “Welcome to the club,” Sean muttered.

            “Well *I* like coming here,” Kelly said, sticking her tongue out. “Even if El is mean to me.” She stared at Dennis. “I get to see Dennis. I like Dennis, he’s fun.”

            Dennis smiled warmly at her. He stared back at Lydia. “Take a desk and just buckle down with the rest of us and just endure this.”

            She rolled her wheelchair over to one of the desks, glaring at the chair behind it. She reached over and tried to fight with it before giving up. “Kelly? You mind helping me move this chair out of the way?”

            Kelly grinned wide, her smile going from ear to ear. She rushed over excited to be of assistance. “I’ll take care of you, Lydia. Anything you need, just ask.”

            “What are you?” Eldrich growled. “A maid? She shoulda moved it her ownself. Start learning some self sufficiency.”

            Lydia really wanted to throw her knife blade at this kid. She ignored it and rolled behind the desk. She reached over and petted Kelly’s head. “Wanna sit in my lap?” she asked.

            If the girl had been a puppy she could imagine the girl’s tail wagging. She turned around and made a small jump at the same time Lydia pulled her up into her lap.  The girl looked behind at her and the two of them shared a bright smile. Grinning, the girl shuffled a little in Lydia’s lap getting comfortable. Eldrich gave them a disgusted sneer before leaning back. Dennis on the other hand was smiling brightly at the two of them.

            A jolt swept up Lydia’s body. In her mind she felt someone – Kelly, definitely Kelly – reaching to touch her mind. Reaching out to group link!

            “Kelly!” she shouted. “No. Wait!”

            It was too late. Kelly’s link connected. The girl set forward, gagging and clutching at her chest. She started coughing violently, slipping off her lap. Lydia cut her links – all of them in her panic.

            Dennis jumped up. “Kelly? What the heck happened?”

            Lydia leaned forward, touching the girl’s back. “She connected with me,” she snapped in a hurry. “She’s feeling my pain.”

            Dennis rushed over to her and rubbed her back. His head jerked up and stared at her. “Pain? You’re in pain?”

            “My lungs are deteriorated. I can’t breathe properly. Yes, there’s a lot of pain involved.”

            “S-she sounds like she’s choking,” he gasped. He leaned over. “Kelly. Kelly, it’s not yours. Push it from your mind, Kelly.”

            Guilt wracked Lydia. She stared down at the girl helplessly, chewing on her lip. There was nothing they could do. Kelly just had to work through it. It seemed to take an eternity. Finally Kelly began to pull in proper breaths, drawing them in deeper. Her coughing became less desperate. She sat there, her tiny body shuddering, rocking back and forth.

            The girl looked back at her with tears in her eyes. She hiccupped before standing up and running out of the room. Lydia turned and glared at the three boys. “Do *not ever* group link with me,” she hissed. “Do not group link and *especially* do not meld.”

            Eldrich smirked. “I know how to handle my link,” he growled.

            Lydia shrugged. “Fine. I’ve given you my warning. Give it a try, but don’t expect me to grow too concerned. You are more than welcomed to try. Personally, I think I might enjoy watching you in pain.”

            Glaring at him, she jerked her wheels backwards, maneuvering out from behind the desk.

            “Where are you going?” Dennis asked.

            “To check on Kelly, of course.” On her way, she reached down and picked up the damaged teddy bear.

            She rolled her way back down the hall towards the bedroom. Inside the room she found Kelly, buried under her mountain of stuffed animals. She could be heard snuffling under the mountain of fluff. Lydia reached into her bag and pulled out some thread and a needle. It was silver thread – for the rips and tears in her uniform – but it should blend well enough. She stuffed the fluff back into the teddy bear and began sewing it back up. When she was done she lifted it and analyzed it. Nothing perfect, but it should do.

            “Kelly?”

            “W-what?” the little girl sobbed.

            “Look who I’ve got for you? Teddy wants to say hi.”

            The girl surged out of the mountain of stuffies, all of them flying everywhere. She stared at Lydia with a tear stricken face – which was replaced with absolute delight at the sight of her mended Teddy Bear. She snatched it from Lydia’s hands and hugged it tightly.

            “I’m sorry, Kelly. I should have warned you. I’m in a lot of pain. You shouldn’t ever try to connect with me. I’m so so sorry that you had to feel that.”

            Kelly sniffled. “I’m sorry, too. I should have asked. Lydia… you’re really nice. Thank you for my Teddy. Teddy says thank you, too.”

            Lydia tapped her lap again. “You want to sit on my lap?”

            Kelly grinned wide and jumped up into her lap with a flourish, hugging her teddy bear tightly. Lydia wheeled the two of them back towards the room.

#

 Lydia blinked in amazement staring at everyone. The teacher of the small classroom was talking in a soft drone, his words running together, as if he had been through this a hundred times and really couldn’t care less what he was saying. It was somewhat interesting, too. A history of Meldlings and their accomplishments. Lydia would have loved to actually delve into it. She had even made a few notes on her paper – but that’s when she realized she was the only one who had paper and pencil out at all.

 Kelly, who had returned to her seat when the teacher walked in, was playing with her teddy bear, making him dance around. Dennis had another book out that was definitely not educational in any regards – she instantly recognized the title. Eldrich was sawing away with his knife point on his desk. Sean had a loop of string in his hands and was folding it around his thumbs and fingers in intricate patterns, holding it up occasionally to inspect his work – she recognized some of the things that he was creating, such as a tea cup. At one point he even wrapped it around his fingers in some complex knots and then pulled one end and had the whole thing fall apart slowly.

 She felt decidedly awkward, honestly, being the only one paying attention to anything. What the heck was going on?

 A few hours of this and the teacher suddenly stopped midsentence, looking at the time. And then he walked out. Kelly stood up punching the air with her tiny fist. “Lunch time!” she shouted. She flew out of her seat and ran out the door with her hands held out straight from her body, acting as if she were flying through the air, zigzagging hopelessly.

 Sean and Eldrich walked out behind her, speaking in their own tongue with each other. She frowned and followed after Dennis. “W-what’s all of this about?” she asked.

 He turned and frowned at her. “What’s all what about?”

 “I mean… the teacher doesn’t even seem like he wants to teach and you guys aren’t paying attention. What’s going on?”

 Dennis shrugged. “I’ve been coming here since I was Kelly’s age. The content never changes. It’s the same thing every year. It’s really boring.”

 “A-are we tested?”

 He smirked. “Why? What are they going to do if we make a bad grade? Fail us? I dunno how things work in your country, Lydia, but here we are somewhat forced to become Riders. They couldn’t care less about us – they just want us up in the skies connecting everyone or hiding or whatever they want us to do at the time. We are guaranteed Riders and high class spots. This is just bullshit stuff. Later on next month people will show up and start looking at us with some interest. That’s when we have to start showing off a bit. If we put up a good show, they will offer us higher positions and higher pay for not just us but our families, too. If they are our country they try to convince us to stay, if their the other country, they try to convince us to come over to them. It’s not until you’re eighteen that you have to make the decision, though. It’s kinda funny how they fight over us. All of my dragons have been gifts from them.”

 He turned around and walked out the door.

 Now Lydia was pissed. *I’m here for this?! I have studies at home. Advanced flying tactics. Fighting techniques. A partner to train. A team relying on me. Not to mention a* boyfriend!

 She grabbed the bar of her wheels, her knuckles going white. She sat there for a moment, swallowing back her anger. Finally back in control she wheeled herself forward and out the door. She turned the corner and went down the hall.

 She froze as she entered a new room. It was a long hall of a room with a large table that could seat about thirty or so people. To the side of the room was another table. And it was *filled* with food. Completely overladen with a spread that could easily rival that of Visitor’s Day back at the school when everyone’s families and friends came to visit.Kelly had a plate in her hand and was dancing wildly in front of the table, analyzing and selecting things here and there at random. Eldrich and Sean had already piled their plates high and were walking to the table – there were two plates in both of their hands. All stacked high. Dennis was licking his lips as he selected his own food, piling things up in a similar manner.

 She rolled up to the table and looked at the food. There were sweets and pastries. Meats of every sort. And buttered biscuits and toast with every flavor of jam in the world sitting out. The drinks were cold milk, coffee, and some fizzy drink that Kelly had chosen.

 She stared around at the boys sitting at the table. Sean and Eldrich sat together. Dennis sat as far down away from them as possible. Kelly sat a few seats down away from him.

 She glared at the buffet. No. She might go all out for that one glorious day a year during Visitor’s Day, but her military training had disciplined her sternly about the foods she should eat. Nutrition and a heavy training regimen. Not that she could ever eat all that much to begin with. She piled her plate with some of her less-hated vegetables and even selected some of the leaner meats. She rolled over to the table with her plate balanced in her lap and sat it down before rolling back for her drink, selecting milk. She propped it in between her legs and rolled back towards the end of the table – the only spot she could ever sit in her wheelchair.

 Eldrich stared down at her. “That’s *all* you’re going to eat?”

 “Got a problem with that?” she asked, trying to keep her voice level as she picked up her fork and knife and began cutting into some of the meats.

 He stood up in his seat, leaning over the table. “There’s a huge banquet over there and you chose vegetables?”

 She looked up at him, her eyebrow rising. “First off, I don’t eat much. So what I do eat needs to count. Second of all, that diet is absolutely disgusting. You’re soldiers – what sort of food is that to be eating? You should be ashamed of yourselves. What are you going to do when you are out in the field eating nothing but porridge and hard biscuits? What are you going to do if the enemy cuts your supply chains? There’s no nutrition value in the foods that you have chosen. What are you going to do when you start training on that? That food will make you absolutely sick.”

 Eldrich blinked. “Training? Who mentioned anything about *training*?”

 Lydia stopped midway in the process of reaching a bit of food to her mouth. She sat it down. “You *do* train, right? Run laps? Exercise? At least weapons training?”

 Eldrich grinned pulling out his knife. “Weapons I can do. We’re Meldlings you idiot. They don’t make us do that sort of thing.”

 She stared at the blade and back up at him. “I bet you’re pathetically slow.”

 He glared at her, anger flashing through his eyes. “At least I *can* fight,” he growled. “Damn wheelchair bitch.”

 Lydia wanted nothing more in the whole world to fight this guy. “I can throw,” she said simply. It was the only fighting that the Generals had decided that she would claim to know how to do. Afterall, she *had* shot arrows at soldiers.

 The boy smirked. “Like hell you can.” He pulled his knife blade out of the wood. He stood up and aimed at a spot along a far wall. It took him quite a while to aim, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth. Only one eye opened. He threw. The blade sunk into a ham on the table across the way. He smirked at her.

 “Oh, good job,” she sneered. “Bet you can’t do that again.”

 The boy glared at her. He pulled the other blade out of his pants leg and stood up again, taking aim. He had barely started to aim when Lydia’s blade connected with his, knocking it out of his hand, sending the blades skittering across the room.

 He gasped and everyone’s head shot towards her. She raised her eyebrow. “And that was done sitting. Go back to training, little boy. You have a lot to learn. You keep both eyes open and your shot must be much faster. You have a lot more hours to spend with that blade if you think to even *hope* of having a chance to survive. What would you do if you were boarded? A guy has a spear in his hand. You think he’s going to wait patiently while you take aim to kill him? A shot like that should have been instinctive for you. I’m only going to be a Mail Courier. I’m not even a Fighter and I just killed you.” Maybe this lie would have its uses afterall, she thought. Gods people *were* easy to impress when they didn’t expect much from you. “A dying girl in a wheelchair just killed you, Eldrich.”

 Eldrich glared cold death in her direction. Dennis burst out laughing, slapping the table. Sean leaned over and said something to Eldrich in their native tongue.

 “What about *you*, Sean?” Lydia said, munching around a mouthful of food. “This is your last year, right? Are you ready to get out there into the battlefield? Think you’re ready? Eating that crap without bothering to train? Tell you what, why don’t you go talk to my dragon. Tsaul will tell you *everything* you want to know about the battlefield.”

 “We’re Meldlings,” Sean snapped. “You’re an idiot if you think I could ever be boarded. All I have to do is force myself into the mind of the other dragon.”

 She nodded. “That will work against one dragon. Surely. But have you ever been up against a Will Rider? *We* do not fly by ourselves. You can feel free to force yourself into the mind of one dragon *maybe* two, but what about the third or the fourth? During training Fighters are placed in rooms of sixteen people their own ages, in addition to sixteen upperclassmen. That’s thirty two people. Thirty two people they spend every single second of their day with. They get *very* attached to one another. And that carries to the battlefield with others. You attack one you attack all of them. Tell me, *Meldling*, can you force your mind into thirty dragons at a time in a split second?” She clicked her tongue. “No wonder why my people found Meldlings so worthless if this is the attitude they have. No wonder they know so little about you. You wouldn’t last a single battle.” She smirked. “My people wouldn’t waste a single second on you trying to get you to defect to them. To be bought out with money and dragons? Do any of them even care about your *skill*? How disgusting. I’ll have *no part* of any of this.”

 Sean shot up in his seat, livid. “You think you’re so smart,” he growled. “Sitting there in your wheelchair casting judgment. You know nothing about me.”

 She stared up at him. “I don’t care about your sob backstory. I have one that could rival yours any day of the week. I care about skill, and looking at you I know more than enough. You are an undisciplined brat. You have no muscle tone whatsoever and you dare to pile your plate up with that crap. *You* a soldier? What a joke. This whole thing is a joke. Day one and I already can’t wait to get back into my barracks at home.”

 She finished off the last of her food as she talked. She left her plate where it sat and began wheeling herself out of the room, Sean and Eldrich glaring hatred at her. She turned to Dennis. “When do we have to show back up in that classroom?”

 Dennis shrugged. “In a few minutes. Doesn’t really matter. The guy starts with or without us. He doesn’t care.”

 She rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she growled, spinning around and wheeling herself out of the place, picking her knife blade up as she went.

 In retrospect she had probably handled that very poorly. That had *not* made her seem weak or mild at all. But she just couldn’t stand them for even another second. This was disgusting. Maybe it was a good thing she had shown up wheelchair bound, afterall. If she started showing off she had no doubt she would be more than a desirable commodity. She was going to have to be much, much more careful in the future.

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 Lydia buried her head in the trashcan. She gave herself over to the intense pressure and the sickest morning she had had in a long time. Her coughs ripped through her throat and tears streamed down her cheeks. Now and again she would desperately try to press her mask to her face, striving to get the medicine into her lungs. She felt awful.

 She felt even worse looking up at the teary eyed Kelly and the panicked Dennis standing there baffled. She had woken Kelly up with her vicious coughing and she had run screaming to get Dennis.

 She groaned inwardly. She should have warned them. How had she not thought of doing that? Had she become so comfortable with her team that it just never seemed an issue now? Well – this was a really bad episode, too, though.

 Dennis turned and disappeared. She continued to cough desperately into her can. She wished it would end. She missed her medicine. Oh gods… did she truly have to go through this pain again? For what? For these spoiled kids? The kids people wanted to fight and fly on dragons but were the farthest thing from soldiers she could ever imagine.

 Minutes later, the teacher rushed into the room with Dennis behind him. Oh… now this was *really* embarrassing. The guy leaned down, asking her if she was ok and if they needed to get her to the doctor’s. She shook her head. The man sat down on the bed with her and petted her back. She felt like she was nine years old again. She wanted to rage. She was a Room Commander. *Get the hell away from her!* She did not need to be pitied or babied.

 Now Eldrich and Sean were stumbling in, rubbing their eyes. Sean frowned, staring at the scene. He turned to Dennis and said something she couldn’t hear. Dennis shook his head.

 Finally – at long last – her episode began to wane. She lost track of how many times she threw up into her trash can. Each round more vicious than the last. Her lungs were struggling desperately to dispel what was trapped in them. Slowly it became easier. Her lungs were able to draw in air. Her heart was starting to settle down. The teacher got up and left and then returned minutes later with a glass of water.

 Lydia took it from him, her episode now past. She reached over into her drawer and pulled out her pill bottle full of her heart medication. She opened it and took out her pill. She popped it into her mouth and drained the glass of water.

 “You alright?” the teacher asked.

 She nodded weakly. “Y-yes,” she spoke, her voice harsh. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to have them disturb you. T-this is normal.”

 The teacher blanched, scratching his head. “Normal?”

 “Sadly, yes. Mornings are always hard.”

 Now the boys were slowly coming into the room. Dennis stared down at her hard. “This is your *normal* morning?” he gasped.

 “Yes.” She swallowed and explained her condition to them in more detail. Explained that in her sleep, mucus and phlegm got trapped in her lungs. Mornings were always difficult.

 By the time she was done, Kelly had crawled into her lap. She looked up at her. “Lydia coughed a lot tonight, though. She woke me up several times.”

 She winced and sighed, combing her fingers through Kelly’s hair. “I’m sorry. Was it that bad?”

 “Really bad,” Kelly nodded. “Then you just sat up this morning and started coughing even worse. It was super scary. I thought you were dying.”

 “I’m sorry, Kelly.”

 She hugged the little girl softly in her arms. She really, desperately, wished she could go back home.

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 Lydia rubbed her eyes, drowsing off in the afternoon sun. She looked up and spotted Dennis shooting a bow off at a target pit that had been constructed. Kelly was sitting astride her Youth Dragon – Dai’eakon. The teacher had called an early day having finished the lesson early today. This didn’t particularly bother Lydia. She had lost complete interest in the whole thing. She felt too disgusted to even want to bother.

 Eldrich and Sean stepped out of the building, their own bows in their hand, talking with each other in their own language again. Without acknowledging Dennis, they joined him and raised their bows to shoot at their own targets. She sat there and watched them. Dennis was decent. Not too bad. If in her team she would decide that he could pass muster. Eldrich and Sean were horrid. She groaned as she watched them.

 *“Hee, Lydia’s making a face at you guys,”* Kelly’s voice broke through their minds.

 Lydia winced and glared across at the girl. The boys all turned around giving her a dirty look. She felt herself redden and shook her head, trying to wave it off.

 Sean pursed his lips. “You certainly had a lot to say about our knife skills yesterday,” he growled. “Now you want to say something about our shooting?”

 Lydia groaned. She wasn’t going to be able to shake this one off after all. She sighed and rolled forward. “Your stance is all wrong for one thing. The next thing is how you are pulling back the bow. And, again, Eldrich, you *have* to stop closing your one eye.”

 “What would you know about this, wheelchair-girl,” Eldrich growled.

 Lydia rolled her eyes and sighed. She slid forward in her wheelchair seat and groaned as she stood up. Her legs were pretty cramped and the effort was hard on her lungs.

 Eldrich’s eyes went wide. “W-wait, your legs work? What the hell is the wheelchair for?” he gasped.

 She rolled her eyes again. “There’s nothing wrong with my legs, Eldrich,” she snapped. “It’s the act of walking. It’s like running five laps to me. It’s too much for my lungs. Now, turn around and draw back.”

 Giving her a wary stare he turned around and did so. He took his stance and pulled back on his bow.

 “Use your shoulder muscles, not your arm muscles. Also, your stance is too wide. Bring your legs a little closer together. Open your eye,” she barked.

 Little by little, he corrected himself and obeyed her instructions as she made one correction after another. At one point she reached around him to correct his arms and he flinched at her touch. “What the heck is that about?” she demanded.

 “Don’t just reach around someone and touch them when they’ve not given you permission,” he growled. “I don’t know how your culture is, but ours likes to maintain a certain distance.”

 “You can get over it and learn from me, or I can go back to my wheelchair and you can keep firing off one ridiculous shot after another.”

 He dropped his arms and turned to glare at her. “I don’t even know why I’m listening. What could you possibly know?”

 She sighed. “Fine. Bow please.”

 “You aren’t touching mine,” he growled.

 “Here, use my Lydia,” Dennis said. She looked over at him and nodded. She reached out and took it. She walked past Eldrich to take Dennis’s spot. She stared down at the quiver that was laying on the ground haphazardly. She rolled her eyes. “Damn children,” she growled.

 She reached down and propped the quiver correctly, throwing back the leather flap. She winced at the sight of the arrows stuffed inside, some with points up. She stared across at him giving him an incredulous look. “Really?” she demanded.

 “What?” Dennis asked defensively.

 She sighed and turned the quiver over. “Place them feathers up,” she commanded. “Look at the horrid state of the fletching now. I’m shocked you were shooting as well as you were now. You do realize that those feathers are what keeps the arrow balanced?”

 He stared at her with a stunned expression before he bent down and started replacing the arrows back properly into the quiver. She nodded and leaned it back in place. “It’s meant to sit up like this. That’s what it was designed for. This way you can quickly reach down into the back and seamlessly draw out one arrow after another. It should be an instinctive action. It should take barely seconds to nock your bow.

 Drawing in a deep breath, she spread her legs slightly. She reached into the back and pulled out an arrow, sliding into place with one quick smooth movement. She brought the bow up to her chin, sighted the target and released. Without waiting to see where the arrow hit, her hand was already moving back to the quiver. She quickly pulled out another arrow, nocked it, sighted, and released. She did this, aiming for the bulls eye for each of the three targets.

 “Third ring,” she mumbled, working her way through the targets again. “Outermost ring,” she spoke again working back through. And finally, “Bullseye, target one, tight grouping.” She loosed the remaining arrows in the quiver, sending them flying with a flourish. The arrows drove into the first target grouping tightly around the first arrow that had been a bullseye.”

 Kelly clapped behind her. “Oooh. Lydia’s good.”

 Lydia shrugged, shaking her head and pulling out of her reverie, realizing there was a silly grin on her face. “It’s called hours of practice,” she responded simply. She handed the bow back to Dennis. “Your bow is still pretty stiff. Either you got a new one recently or someone has hardly practiced as much as you should be. Should I tell you which one I suspect is the truth?”

 Dennis winced as he took them from her. “You don’t miss much, do you?”

 She smirked. “I try not to.”

 She turned around to find Sean glaring at her. “And you’re just a mail courier?”

 Lydia swore inwardly. No, but I’m a horrible liar. Damn, I’m supposed to be laying low. What the hell am I doing?!

 Outwardly she shrugged. “I would have liked to have been a fighter, I’ll confess, but some dreams are just denied,” she answered.

 Kelly clapped her hands. “That’s why Lydia has a war dragon, huh?”

 She turned and smiled down at the child and nodded. “Tsaul knew what he was choosing when he melded with me.” And that was truth. She walked across the field and gathered up the arrows. Coughs ripped through her throat as did so. It had been so long since she felt this pain that it was a little rougher for her than she remembered it being. At least that was good in its own way. It kept her weak and she was clearly having difficulties doing that.

 She returned and dropped the arrows back into Dennis’s quiver. She then turned to Eldrich. “So – do you want me to teach you now or do you want to keep fighting me?”

 Eldrich stared at her for a moment before turning away and taking his stance again – the stance that she had just shown him. “Still too far out,” she corrected. “What did I say about that eye?”

 He made the corrections, this time without fighting her. He took aim and released his arrow. It wasn’t a perfect bulls eye. It sat right on the line between the two rings. Still, it was far better than the shooting he had been doing earlier. “Feel better?” she asked.

 The boy stared down at the shot nodding his approval. “Still not a bullseye,” he muttered.

 “Nope. You’re still hundreds of hours of practice from that.

[goes to westerner town – not suppose to. Stands outside of weapons shop looking in. guy comes out thinking she’s a young boy, has surprise when she starts talking and realizes she’s a much older girl. Meets guy again at a later date and then one day at the lake. The two slowly get together. Lydia thinks she may be falling in love with him and that complicates if she wants to go back or not. The guy is not a rider but never wastes a moment of pity on her. She hates that she’s lying to him. One day spent with him Lydia gets splashed with mud (or something) and he takes her to his place to get cleaned up. He makes dinner for her and they have an intimate moment. Does she fall in love with him? Should this complicate the story? What happens when she returns? Maybe just complicates her returning at all. Does he tell her he would follow her? Maybe he just gives her a few good opinions about her situation with Hugh. Maybe he gets caught as well in the kidnap attempt? Maybe he tries to save her during kidnapping? I think he should just be a pen pal friend when she returns. A small smile with his words in her mind when she deals with the guys in her life including Hugh.]

            He whirled on her, gaping. “Hundreds?”

            “Hundreds. You think I got as good as I did just overnight? I would spend three hours of my day out at my training yard practicing. Two hours with my bow and an hour with my knife. Occasionally I would switch and do two hours with my knife and one hour with my bow. I started doing that about three years ago.”

            “Diligent, aren’t you?” Sean said, with a click of his tongue.

            She smiled. “That’s my third Will attribute.”

            All three of them frowned not understanding. She sighed. “Oh. Sorry. Will Rider thing, I guess. They meld with our Wills. My main Will is Tenacity, while my secondary is Cunning, and my third is Diligence. Not everyone always has three but it’s what our dragons look for. Asking each other for our Wills is the best way to get a quick bead on each other. For instance, my boyfriend is Stubborn.” She grinned. “Pretty obvious what his personality is off of that.”

            Kelly danced around. “What’s my Will? What’s mine? Do I have one?”

            She grinned down at the girl. “I dunno. You might be too young. We would have to ask Tsaul.”

            Kelly grinned and ran off in the direction of Tsaul. Eldrich turned back around and raised his bow. “I wonder what mine would be,” he muttered.

            She walked back over to her wheelchair and sat down, coughing into her hand. Honestly, she was a little curious, too.

            *“You would laugh, Lydia,*” Tsaul sent his sudden thought. *“It’s quite entertaining, actually.”*

            *“You’ve always had a weird sense of what is and isn’t entertaining.”* She sighed. *“What is it?”*

*“Eldrich is tenacity.”*

*“Oh, you’re joking!”* she snapped.

            *“Told you that you would enjoy it,”* he said, chuckling in her mind. *“Sean has no distinguishable Will. Nothing a dragon like me could detect or want to meld with. Dennis is Peace, with a secondary in Virtue. Perfect for his Peace dragon.”*

*“Wouldn’t that just make it a Will dragon as well?”*

*“You could say the same for a Battle Dragon, but it’s a little more than just Will. It’s a frame of mind and a personality. A spirit. There are subtle nuances. Even including his morality code. I’m afraid I can provide no more specifics than that as I am not a Peace Dragon, naturally.”*

She sighed and took a deep breath. “Tsaul says you’re tenacity,” she told Eldrich, answering his question.

            He blinked and spun around. “Oh gods. Not like *you*.” Then he smirked. “I could take your dragon away from you then if I wanted.”

            She glared at him. “Go near my dragon and I’ll have every dragon in this area try to kill you.”

            “That could be fun. Meldling vs Meldling. I wonder which of us would win.”

            She rolled her eyes. “Not interested,” she answered with a wave of her hand.

            “You’re a Meldling and you hardly act like one,” he growled.

            She shrugged. “I don’t mind the dragon friend part, or talking through links, or being able to group link different dragons, but I do not like the parts that include forcing dragons to do things that they do not want to do or forcing my mind into them, or forcing a meld link. That to me is just revolting. Nor am I interested in betraying my beloved dragon and merging with another. To me, linking should remain a sacred thing.”

            Dennis looked back at her and nodded his approval. “I completely agree. I don’t even like talking in other humans’ minds without their consent.”

            She sighed. “My partner attacked me because it freaked him out so much when I did that. I learned pretty quick it’s just nicer to *not* do it.”

            Sean smirked. “A Will Rider and he had problems with you talking in his mind?” he asked, taking another shot.

            “We weren’t on our dragons. To him, he only gives consent when he’s on his dragon. He expects it. But he always expects that there is a disconnect when he leaps off,” she answered. “Keep both your eyes open,” she snapped at Eldrich as he aimed yet another shot.

            Dennis nodded. “I could see why he would feel that’s a problem. By the way, while we are on the subject: do you mind, Lydia, if I do talk in your mind, and possibly try a group link with you? We are going to have to do it eventually anyways as the class wears on.”

            She winced. “The talking part I’m fine with, but… just be prepared when you try to reach out to me. I know the newbies at my school have a hard time with me, but those that are skilled with the group link can handle it alright.”

            Dennis took a shot and shrugged. “I’ve had to deal with quite a bit of pain through my Peace Dragon. I think I can handle it.”

            She frowned. “You take pain?”

            “It’s a Peace Dragon, Lydia. That’s what we do. We provide peace and comfort. My dragon reaches out and takes the pain and emotional discomfort of others. They are called Healer Dragons as well. I take my dragon out to hospitals and connect with a handful of patients. Or I can be out as a Field Medic or even as a fighter I can remove the pain from my unit.”

            She blinked and smirked. “Will Riders do that.”

            “It’s a little bit different, though. *I* don’t feel as much pain. My dragon is specialized in that particular linking and taking that sort of pain. I feel only a marginal part. I’m still pretty confident, though, that I could handle your pain.”

            “So what are you going to be? A fighter?”

            He shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. Fighting is fun, I suppose, but I’m not sure that I could actually kill another person. I don’t like the whole battle scene in all honesty. I’m just not sure how I would react in a real battle.” He turned to her with a frown on his face. “Haven’t you seen action before? During your Death Slayer thing.”

            “She killed ten of our men,” Sean growled.

            “I killed five, my boyfriend at the time killed the others,” she confirmed. “I was forced out there because they needed Tsaul. I got captured and the Death Rider realized I was a Meldling. Well, I guess it’s six if you consider that I killed the Death Rider himself.”

            “And earned that sick nickname on top of it.” His voice was dark and low.

            She drew in a patient breath. “And would you have reacted differently if it were *my* people that had captured you and tried to take you in?”

            “No. But you wouldn’t be very happy with me, either, right? Don’t try to suede my feelings on this, Lydia. You killed some of my countrymen, therefore I have a right to be disgusted with you. Be glad. Most of my people would just openly hate you.”

            She nodded. “I suppose that’s fair enough.”

            Dennis turned to her. “What was it like? Having killed someone?”

            She flinched and looked down. “Horrifying. Sickening. There is no satisfaction in what I did, but I did what I had to to protect myself and the people that I was fighting for. I would do it again.”

            Eldrich snickered. “Heart of a fighter. Too bad your dying – though considering you’re on the other side, maybe that’s a good thing for us.”

            Lydia grinned wide. “You’re right. Cause if I ever went up against you, you would be dead in two seconds.”

            “Overly confident in yourself, aren’t you?” he growled. He lowered his bow. “You wanna take this up into the skies?”

            A thrill of excitement swept up her body. She shouldn’t… she really *really* shouldn’t… but… She swallowed and nodded, a large grin spreading across her face. She could play it easily. Just… just a *little* fun. “Let’s do it.”

#

            She wheeled over to Tsaul and looked across at Eldrich as he climbed up onto his own tiny Battle Dragon. She reached up and pulled herself up and started crawling up her stirrups and into the saddle. Tsaul turned his head to stare back at her. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

            She clicked her tongue. “I’m going to go stir crazy if I don’t have some fun,” she hissed. “I’m on you. You’re doing most of the work, and they know that I’ve got some skill in flying since I took the Death Rider out. I don’t think I would be showing off *too* much.”

            The dragon snorted. “If you ask me, you’ve already done more than your fair share of that. The bow, Lydia? And then instructing them?”

            She gave him a hard look. “I couldn’t stand seeing them shoot so poorly like that. It just grated. You know it had nothing to do with my own pride.”

            The dragon chuckled. “No. You couldn’t resist teaching. Adrian was no better. Just be careful, Lydia. You are supposed to be playing up your illness. Or you could risk being ripped away from your friends and loved ones. Maybe even me.”

            Lydia swallowed hard. “Ok, fine. I’ll make sure we lose. Nothing spiffy or flashy. Still. Let’s just try to have a little fun.”

 The dragon chuckled. “Fun and restraint? Those words don’t match, Lydia. Especially in your mind.”

 Lydia grinned and slipped her mask over her face. “We all have our faults,” she mumbled.

 She reached down and strapped herself in at the same time she gave him the order to lift off. Tsaul leaped up into the air with a single powerful jump. The air rushed past them. Lydia lost herself in the feel of Tsaul corkscrewing as you shot up into the air as fast as an arrow. With a mighty flourish he opened his great wings and leveled out in the air.

 Lydia licked her lips.

 *“Let me show you how a Meldling is supposed to fly,”* Eldrich growled in her mind.

 Lydia felt the thought sent out through the minds of the dragons. It wasn’t control – just a light touch. A bit of encouragement. An idea planted in the minds of the dragons. Lydia blinked and tilted her head. That was a new one. They could do that?

 She didn’t have much time to think about it. Ten dragons leapt up into the air, flying past them with great flaps of their wings. A shiver went up Lydia’s spine.

 *“Er, well, this is going to be interesting,”* Tsaul spoke in her mind.

 Lydia leaned forward licking her lips. *“Very interesting,”* she agreed, excitement pounding through her veins.

 She watched as the ten dragons dispersed, going off in several different directions. She sent out her thought, trying to mimic what Eldrich had done, but failed. There was not even a single thought to cut away from them as she had done so often in the past. These dragons were acting completely out of their own free will.

 She was surrounded. She sent her mind out, searching for Eldrich, but could not feel him. He had closed himself off completely. She gave Tsaul the order to pick up their speed. She might not be able to influence these dragons, unless she wanted to do something more dire than she was willing to do, but she could feel their minds – feel the actions they were wanting to take.

 *“It’s a good thing that dragons know absolutely nothing about tactics. Otherwise I would be so screwed right now. Dragons really are kinda useless without their Riders. Also since they have no Riders we’ll be able to play a little rougher with them. Heat up your fire, Tsaul.”*

Tsaul chuckled in her mind. She could feel his excitement. Could feel his heart beating faster in anticipation. He was getting close to bloodrage. She reached in and took some of the excitement, drawing it out and clearing the dragon’s mind.

 The first attacks came from above. Three dragons, rushed them, diving down hard. Lydia closed Tsaul’s wings and corkscrewed him downwards through the air, and twisting his body to the left. He went spinning off in that direction even as he fell, safely dodging the dragons’ claws – except for one.

 Lydia had been prepared for one being smarter than the rest, though. At just the right moment, she stopped twirling Tsaul’s body, remaining upside down. Her dragon’s claws captured the diving dragon’s soft underbelly and raked into it. The dragon roared in pain. Tsaul had cut deep – deeper than he would have had they been at school. Blood fell in tiny droplets through the air. With his own mighty roar, screaming at the dragon his warning to back off, Tsaul released the dragon. The injured dragon opened its wings and went soaring away. Its pain seared through her mind.

 She didn’t have much time to reflect on their single victory, though. They were now level with the dragons that had soared off downwards. These were four. Tsaul arced his body and tried to regain some height and speed.

 *“Sudden stop, Tsaul!”* she commanded.

 Tsaul opened his large wings and curled his body inward on himself. The effect was instantaneous. The dragons went soaring past them, one to the right, two to the left, and then one below – Tsaul had managed to gain just enough height.

 *“Catch it!”* she commanded.

 Tsaul uncurled his body and flapped his wings once, throwing all of his strength into it, and then pressing his wings to his body, shooting through the air like an arrow. Tsaul’s claws caught the dragon in the back, just a few feet from its tail. Tsaul sunk his claws deep into the dragon and lashed out with his mighty jaws, tearing a huge chunk of flesh out of the dragon’s back. She swore. He was losing his battle with his sanity and his bloodrage. He was going for kills. She reached in deeper and tried to take more away from him. Clearing his thoughts.

 *“Tsaul, you’re getting into this a little too much,”* she growled at him.

 Tsaul broke away and watched as the dragon soared down towards the ground. “Apologies. Seems I’m getting as bad as you at controlling myself. It’s been such a long, long time that I’ve been able to release myself this much in battle,” he growled.

 *“Watch out, buddy. The others are starting to come back around. Let’s gain a little more altitude and speed.”*

She looked up and searched the skies. There didn’t seem to be anything nearby – a farce, she knew. There were more dragons out there. She just couldn’t see them. And where was Eldrich. He wouldn’t be able to control himself much longer. Waiting did not seem his style.

 Tsaul rose into the air, pushing through the air with his mighty wings. She kept him straight, searching the skies desperately for any sign of the other dragons. She spun around in her saddle as he straightened. Damn, where was he?

 She looked back down and realized the other dragons had not followed, either. Yeah. He was nearby planning something. What would she do in this situation? Where would she be?

 A shudder went through her body. He was on a Battle Dragon. They had the ability to camouflage themselves. The only give away would be the Rider. Yeah – she would be above, making her dragon blend in with the blue of the sky.

 *“Slow down,”* she commanded Tsaul.

 She searched above them. Staring up into the clouds and the blue sky. It was hard to see. The clouds were still above them a good distance. She resisted the urge to tell him to fly higher. No, she would wait space between them if he tried anything.

 She blinked. For just a moment, a blue spot appeared over the white fluff of a cloud. She licked her lips. *“That’s him,”* she snarled.

 Now that she had him pegged…

 She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with her medicine. *“Dive Tsaul. Hard dive. Let’s flush him out. Be ready for my signal. Let’s see if he takes the bait. Stupid kid.”*

Tsaul dove hard through the air, going almost completely vertical. Lydia braced herself for the pain she knew that was coming. At this steep of a dive her air was going to be taken away from her.

 *“Feed me some of your pain, Lydia,”* Tsaul commanded. *“Don’t allow your judgment to be clouded.”*

 Normally she would argue, but he was right. She swallowed her pride as a Rider and began letting him into that part of her. Allowed him to reach and take the pressure – shared it with her. When her air was taken from her her lungs filled with a hot pressure. A violent demand for air.

 She ignored it. She spun around in her saddle and stared behind her, searching desperately for a sign of the sky-blue beast. Come on. He had to be following. He wouldn’t be able to resist. He was too impetuous. Too untrained. He would see her gesture as a sign of retreat – trying to escape him before he reached out to try to perform a Death Grip on Tsaul, catching her dragon’s wings in his dragon’s claws. Tsaul had his wings forced tight to his body, making it appear as if he were desperate.

 And then she saw them. Her eyes found the beast and his rider. They were hard on them. A satisfied thrill swept through her body.

 She waited. The tiny Battle Dragon was able to cut through the air faster than even her lightning fast Tsaul. She licked her lips. Waiting. Judging the distance. Timing it. Patient for the perfect moment.

 *“Now, Tsaul!”*

 The dragon opened his wings and arced his back, flapping once to offset the decrease in speed as they suddenly wrenched out of the hard dive. The dragon flipped his body around in a loop. Lydia watched as the world went upside down, held only in place by the straps on her uniform. Tsaul’s claws reached out and caught the tiny Battle Dragon, pulling it out of the air.

 Tsual corrected himself in the air, still holding onto the dragon tightly. The small dragon was like a bat, flapping around desperately in Tsaul’s claws, trying to wrench itself free. Tsaul freed a claw and reached around to catch one of the flapping wings. There was a sickening crack as Tsaul applied just the tiniest pressure.

 *“Can I release him?”* Tsaul growled in pleasure.

 Lydia laughed. *“No. Don’t you dare. Land. The battle’s ours. Let’s be dignified about this and* not *kill him.”*

The dragon sighed, almost mournfully. *“I long for the days back on the battlefield.”*

 *“We’ll be there soon enough again, my friend. Oh! … Damn.”*

The dragon sent a concerned thought. *“Something wrong, my Rider?”*

 *“Tsaul! We weren’t supposed to win!”* she whined.

 Tsaul burst out laughing, the sound reverberating through her skull combined with the emotion of absolute delight. *“Neither of us held back today, it seems. So much for that. We’re both rather incorrigible, I’d say.”*

 *“It’s not our fault! It was too easy. Damn kid! He sent ten dragons after us and he still did not defeat us… Well, ok… I suppose we could have let those other dragons have us… But you didn’t even have to use your dragon fire. What sort of battle was that?”* she whined. She sighed and laid up against his back, burying her face in her arm. *“Why is restraint so hard for me. This is your fault! I’m holding you personally responsible, Tsaul.”*

Tsaul laughed all the way back down to the earth, landing with a flourish of his wings – dropping the Battle Dragon inelegantly into the dirt.

 She pulled her mask off of face and undid her buckles. She slid off of Tsaul and immediately fell hard into the earth. Pain tore through her lungs and she winced – remembering suddenly that Tsaul had been taking some of her pain. She doubled over immediately, coughing desperately and cursing herself. Tsaul lowered his head toward her, staring down at her with great concern. She lay there on her knees, coughing up desperately into the earth and spitting up several times.

 She looked up and became aware of Dennis and Sean standing there watching her with concern in their eyes. She pointed upwards towards Tsaul. *“Mask!”* she begged, reaching out to their minds.

 Dennis rushed forward, jumping up into Tsaul’s stirrups and searching for the mask up there. “I-it doesn’t reach,” he said as he tried to drop down.

 “The tubing detaches,” Tsaul explained, looking behind at him. “Disconnect the other side and it will reach down. Turn the valve on the tank at the front. There will be a strange scent in the mask. That’s how you’ll know when it’s on.”

 A moment or two later Dennis jumped down. “Oh gods, that stuff smells disgusting,” he said, handing her the mask.

 She took it gratefully and pressed it hard to her face. She looked around as she coughed and found Sean conversing with Eldrich – who had tears in his eyes. Eldrich suddenly shouted something in his native tongue and ran towards the school.

 Dennis smirked. *“Good job, Lydia. You just killed that brat’s pride. That he lost he could have dealt with. That he lost to a girl who’s so obviously in distress right now and having a hard time of it is a little bit too much for him. You didn’t even call any other dragons to you.”*

 *“I didn’t even know I could do that,”* she confessed to him, still coughing desperately and trying to regain control over herself. *“Call out to other dragons like that.”*

He looked down at her and frowned. *“Seriously? Wow. That’s a pretty basic technique.”*

 *“I wonder how much else I don’t know how to do,*” she wondered.

 *“Well, that’s what these classes are supposed to be for. Give it until next week and things might become more interesting for you.”*

 She regained control of herself and got to her feet. She walked over to the tiny Battle Dragon and looked at it. It was in pain, dragging its right wing – which was difficult for it. Battle Dragons only had two legs and then its wings were its front legs. It could now not only fly but could barely walk. She clicked her tongue. “The least he could have done was stuck around to take care of his dragon.” She turned to Dennis. “There were two other dragons we injured. Where’d they go?”

 Dennis pointed off a little farther away. “Over there.”

 “Are there dragon medics?”

 “The teacher will call them out here later once we report the injuries.”

 She pursed her lips, anger filling her. “They’re in pain now.”

 Dennis shrugged. “Nothing to be done about it. I’ll bring Quiana around and she can take their pain.”

 “Is there a medic cabin or any place with supplies?”

 He nodded and pointed in another direction. “Over that way. I don’t have a clue about any of the stuff, though.”

 “You’re a Dragon Tamer!” she snapped at him. “On a Peace Dragon no less. I thought you said you wanted to be a Field Medic.”

 “I don’t know what I want to be, yet. And what does being a Dragon Tamer have to do with this?”

 “Don’t you work with your dragon medics to take care of dragons? Mine call for me all the time to try to calm down a sick or injured dragon.”

 Dennis blinked vapidly at her and shook his head. “No. I’ve never even thought of that. They only see Meldlings as instruments of war, really.”

 “But don’t you at least learn how to take care of your dragon’s basic needs?”

 “That’s why we have dragon medics. If my dragon is injured, I’m expected to just jump onto another one.”

 A disgusting taste filled her mouth. “That’s vile. Is that how you use your *partners*? I wouldn’t even treat a horse like that, much less a dragon.”

 She went marching off to the direction of the medic shed that Dennis had pointed out to her. Anger boiled through her. Inside, she found the place well stocked. Well that was good at least. She grabbed a coat off the back of a chair and donned it, filling the pockets with all the things she knew she would need. Truthfully she knew her skills were low, but watching Janus and other dragon medics had taught her a thing or two. Plus she had helped Tanis several times with his studying which included dragon care. She picked up a basket and filled it with more supplies. She wished Tanis were here right now to help her.

 An excited thrill went up her body as she remembered the last time they were together. Her neck still bore his marks which were fading all too rapidly. Yeah, she would kill to be back in his arms. There was something more exciting about him than Hugh. Though, she would be lying if she did not admit to daydreaming about Hugh now and again. A part of her wondered what might happen if they *did* patch things up. What would she do then? She was with Tanis. Could she choose Hugh again? Even at the cost of Tanis’s feelings? Did she want to get back together with Hugh.

 And *why* with so many miles between them was she standing in a medical shed thinking about them all of a sudden?!

 She gathered the supplies and whirled around on her heels, pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind and concentrating on the tasks at hand.

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 Kelly stood up on tiptoe watching as she instructed Lydia instruct her and Dennis on how to do basic dragon care. The tiny girl was very attentive, Lydia thought. She hoped the child would keep that as she grew up.

 Eldrich stomped out as she was starting to work on resetting his Battle Dragon’s wing. He glared at her, staring from between her to the wing in her hand. “What the *hell* are you doing?” he demanded.

 “Lydia’s helping the dragon!” Kelly shouted happily. “She’s showing us how to reset a dragon’s broken wing. S-she can calm dragons. She makes all their panic and scardness go all away.”

 Dennis smirked. “She doesn’t know how to call out to dragons to aid her, but she knows how to reach out to them to calm them down. It’s kinda funny. She’s like my mom snapping at me a toddler to be still and take its medicine.”

 “My dragon will rip you alive if you try to reset that bone,” Eldrich warned her. “The last time a medic came near him, the medic almost lost his finger.”

 Lydia smiled and petted the small Battle Dragon’s head. “Ticaan wouldn’t do something like that, would you?” she cooed at it.

 The dragon held up his good wing, showing off something in its claw. “Lydia gives shiny,” it hissed. In his claw it was holding a simple hair ornament she had been wearing in her hair to hold back her bangs. “Is pretty shinies. Human knows I likes shinies. Rider should gives more shinies.”

 “And if Ticaan sits and is a good boy, I’ll give him another shiny,” she promised. “This is going to hurt a lot Ticaan. I’ll take as much of your pain as I can, ok, but you have to sit and bear it. No snapping, ok?”

 The dragon stared mournfully at her. “Ticaan behaves. It wants more shiny, but would not hurt nice humans.

 “Since you’re out here, Eldrich, how about you come over here so you can learn how to do this, too,” she suggested, almost making it into a command.

 “I get tired of your damn orders,” he growled stomping up to her. “Who the hell do you think you are? A Commander or something? I don’t even agree to this. I want a professional *medic* to look at my dragon.”

 “And when will he be here?”

 “Probably in about five hours.”

 “So, you want your dragon to sit here in five hours *in pain* instead of learning how to do this yourself.”

 “Do you even know what the hell you’re doing?”

 “I’ve assisted in resetting more wing bones than I care to remember. This isn’t even that major of a break. I’ve had to help the medics reset some wings bones that were nothing but shattered wrecks with the wing torn because some dragon couldn’t control itself during training. This is easy.”

 “This is *pointless*,” he growled. “A medic would be better to heal it.”

 She sighed patiently and stared up at him. “Pop quiz, Eldrich. You’re in battle. Your dragon was just victimized by a Death Grip. You’ve managed to get to the ground. The battle is still raging all around you. The medics are miles away. What do you do?”

 Eldrich winced and blinked looking across at Ticaan.

 “Think about it. He’s a Battle Dragon. Even in this state, would you force Ticaan to walk all those miles away? Do you think he could make it? What if you could reset the bone yourself? Even a clumsy attempt? Just something enough so that you can make the long journey back to *real* help?”

 “I could run to go get a medic.”

 “Great idea. Leave your dragon all by itself. Scared and alone with a battle raging all around. What do you think will happen if a foot soldier finds it? More importantly, do you think *you* could survive a trip across the enemy lines without your dragon to protect you? Do you think a medic will *want* to go over enemy lines just to save your one single dragon when it probably has ten dragons to mend all around him.”

 “I’m a Meldling,” he growled. “They *have* to obey me.”

 “No. No they don’t. They will point you to another dragon and tell you to ride that one.”

 Eldrich winced and looked down at the ground. He swallowed hard. “Damn you,” he growled. “I’m getting sick of you really fast.”

 “Swallow your pride,” she shouted at him. “Your partner is hurting and in trouble! Ticaan is your partner, right? Or is he just some dumb beast in your mind that you force to do your bidding? If you’re pissed off at me for always being right – then stop acting like a petulant child and start thinking like a soldier. The moment they gave you a dragon this was something you should have been taught. You think regular soldiers are treated any different?”

 He bit his lip, tears rising to his eyes again. “Do you really think,” he growled low, “that they are going to let me anywhere near the action *anyways*? No. I’m too valuable. I’m put onto a dragon and told to sit back and to reach out around me in my normal five mile radius connecting everyone. Maybe I might get lucky and take over a little. Maybe encourage other dragons in some way. I’m not really going to be a solider, Lydia. Stop comparing me to that.”

 His words stunned her and she stared at him with wide eyes. “D-do what?”

 “It’s a farce. They let me pretend I’m going to be a soldier, but they don’t give a damn. Why do you think Sean could care less. They don’t care about us doing shit like this,” he said pointing at the dragon’s wing, “because all they care about is me joining everyone’s minds, closing channels, and sending out other random dragons to battle. Maybe wrench away a meld link at a crucial moment so that a Rider loses control of their dragon.”

 She looked across at Dennis who shrugged. “Probably the same reason they placed me on a Peace Dragon. They would rather that I reach out to take people’s pain and give me something to do in addition to just connecting everyone’s minds. Yeah, I doubt they would put me in the heat of action, either.”

 “T-that’s cruel! You don’t get any say?”

 “Gods you’re really ignorant,” Eldrich growled. “I almost envy you. They would allow you to be a Mail Courier? To barely have any participation in a battle? They would never even allow one of us to have a dragon like Tsaul. A war dragon? I could only dream.”

 “So… they don’t even care about how effective you are in battle?”

 “They wouldn’t even give a damn about your illness, Lydia,” he snapped.

 A shudder went through her body. She whirled around and looked at her wheelchair. She ran a hand through her hair. “Oh gods,” she muttered.

 “All they care about is how fast you can enter a dragon’s mind, connect them, and do Meldling things. Why do you think we stopped giving a damn about this place? It’s just an excuse for them to test our skills and to try to proposition us. They will make a thousand and one promises.”

 Dennis sighed and nodded. “We don’t even chance going out to the neighboring towns anymore. Three years ago I had three Westerners try to kidnap me when I went out there. I just barely escaped.”

 Eldrich nodded. “It would be the same for me if I went to one of the Southern towns. This is neutral territory. We’re protected here.”

 Lydia bit her lip and stared down at the dragon wing in her hand. Her mind was working through this information. She swore inwardly. Her stupid farce was never going to work anyways. The moment they had learned that she was a Meldling her fate had been sealed. Even more so that they had agreed to let her come out this far. “Even with me dying…” she muttered.

 “You kidding,” Eldrich smirked. “That makes you even more valuable in my country’s eyes. To have someone that could meld with thirty Death Dragons – one of our most powerful breeds? You’re one hot commodity, Lydia. Just watch. When they come down here next month they are going to be completely focused on you. Which sucks for me. That just gives the Southerners full access to me to try to convince me over to them. I doubt my countrymen will even look my way.”

 Dennis sighed. “You might want to be careful next month, Lydia. I hope your Generals will be back around and haven’t just abandoned you. I’d almost watch my back if I were you. We might be protected here by our country’s treaties. *You* might not have that protection.”

 Lydia felt sick. Seriously and really sick. Her Generals valued skill. They had made a calculated error. They did not care about her ability to link. They did that naturally. They had thought only of her skill. They had all thought that would make her the better asset in anyone’s eyes. Her determination and her skill. Play up her illness to make her look like an awful soldier. They had not realized that the people would not have *cared* about her skills.

 She swore and swallowed hard.

 “Good,” Eldrich growled. “It’s about time you got rid of that haughty attitude.”

 She looked up and glared at him. She wanted to hit him. So hard. She wanted to do that. She almost did that. She thought for just a moment: ‘what was the point of this, then’, but stopped herself. No. People were easy to impress when they underestimated you. She would wait and hold her temper. It might still be better to play up her illness in the long run. There could still be many more layers that she was not aware of. Don’t give in to anger and stop thinking. If there’s an edge to be had, keep it. Give it away only when you *know* it’s no good anymore. She could almost hear those words spoken to her in Landon’s hard voice.

 She closed her eyes and gathered her patience – found her calm. She licked her lips and concentrated back on the wing. “That’s no excuse,” she growled. “You should learn all you can from me, then.” She glared back up at him. “Tsaul said your Will was Tenacity. The same as me. Something tells me that in your heart, you are not content with the ways things are.’ Obstacles are what make strong willed Riders. Without them, how can they know what they can accomplish?’ That’s what my dragon says all the time. *This* is your obstacle, Eldrich. Find a way to bust through it. Don’t you *ever* let *anyone* tell you what you can and cannot do. Now, I’m going to reset your dragon’s wing. If you want to learn, I will be more than happy to teach you. Otherwise, get out of my way and go wallow in your own self-pity somewhere else.”

 Eldrich’s eyes widened. He gave her a stunned look, taking in her in for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped. He closed his mouth and bit his lip. “You make it sound so easy.”

 She shook her head. “There’s nothing easy about breaking through obstacles. They tried to tell me that I could not become a Dragon Rider. Then my disease has tried to take my life more times than I can count. The only thing I can do is grit my teeth and carry on, forcing my way forward.”

 Elrich looked away. He stayed silent for several minutes. She waited with baited breath. Why was this so important to her, she wondered? He was a kid. Spoiled and overly aggressive. But… he did listen. He had not said a word after she had hit his knife out of his hand. And earlier he had followed her instructions to the letter with his bow. Untrained and undisciplined, but there was talent there. A willingness and a desire to learn. She would love to train him and to see what he would make of himself. He could make a good soldier.

 He took a deep breath and turned back to her. “Fine, but if you hurt my dragon unduly or injure him beyond repair, I swear I’ll slit your throat in your sleep,” he snapped. “Teach me.”

 She could not suppress her smile. Her heart leapt. He was a good kid. Deep down, beneath the cold, hard shell, he was truly good.

 She turned to the wing and walked him through the process with Dennis leaning over to listen as well, both boys soaking her words in.

#

 She reached out and connected with the minds of all the dragons in the area, reaching into their minds in one easy process. She reached into their minds, searching for that part of their mind that produced thought.

 “Now, send them the order and add in the subtle context of encouragement and pleading,” Eldrich explained.

 “What should I have them do?”

 “Who cares – tell them to jump into the air or something.”

 She nodded and sent the thought, adding in the extra elements Eldrich had explained. Barely seconds later dragons all over the area suddenly stood up and leaped up into the sky.

 She blinked and grinned wide. “That’s pathetically easy.”

 She stared down at Eldrich where he was laying down on the grass by the bank, his bare feet dangling into the water. She, too, had abandoned her wheelchair, pulling her tank after her so she could walk through the grass and dip her legs in as well. It was a hot sunny afternoon and the classes had long since ended. Sean and Dennis had went their own ways, while Eldrich had returned to the targets with his bow. She had brought out a book and sat reading until had complained of the heat, thrown his bow down, and headed for the river. Somehow they had gotten into a conversation about their linking abilities which had progressed into her attempting to push a thought into their minds without taking over them completely.

 “Now, what about overriding the thought? Two days ago when you sent those dragons after me like that, how could I have stopped it?”

 “Well I had told them to not listen to you. You kinda have to try to override my order with your own – try to persuade them a little more over to your side. That’s a little more difficult. I haven’t mastered that myself. If Dennis sends out a thought I can’t override it. The dragons seem to like him more, but I could easily override Sean’s.”

 She nodded.

 “Now, how do you do your ‘listen to me now, dragon’ thing when you are trying to fix them up?”

 She shrugged. “No exact method to that one. I just… talk to them. Kinda remind them that I’m a friend. They don’t need to fear me. I reach in and try to take their pain and sorta explain to them all the reasons that they need to listen.”

 “And bribes clearly are not below you. My dragon *insisted* that I pinned that ridiculous hair piece onto one of the leads on our saddle in a spot where he could turn around and look at it occasionally.”

 “It’s not bribing. It’s about making him happy and gaining his trust. It’s about making the dragon your *friend*.”

 “They’re already pretty friendly towards us. I don’t know why.”

 “With that attitude, I don’t know why, either,” she snapped at him. “Try to get a little closer to them. I think dragons are pretty amazing creatures. They’re fun to talk with. I find them more relaxing to talk to sometimes than I do actual people.” She smiled. “That’s how I met my Tsaul. We just started talking. He was still grieving over the loss of his previous rider. I was… a little more shy back then. I knew I was going to die soon so I didn’t really want a whole lot to do with people. They were just extra baggage. I hated the pity in their eyes when they looked at me and I didn’t want anyone to cry over me when I was gone.”

 She grinned and sent out the thought to have the dragons gather around her. Eldrich sat up and looked at her with a frown. He looked behind them as Tsaul walked up behind her and settled so that she could lean against him. Then one by one more dragons came and completely encircled her – and Eldrich, too. She laughed as she ended up with a dragon head in her lap that sat on another’s tail. She reached up and petted the dragons that she could reach.

 Eldrich looked around with wild eyes. “W-what the heck are they doing?”

 She laughed turning to him. “Haven’t you ever done this? It always freaks other people out when they do it. Usually they do it when I’m feeling very unhappy. The first time was when I was kicked out of a dragon outpost because I kept people awake with my coughing. I just went out the stable and they told me to open their stalls. They gathered around me like this and lit their dragon fire. It kept me warm all night and I *swear* it was the best night’s sleep I’ve ever had in my life.”

 “I-I’ve never had them do this for me before.”

 “You should be nicer,” Tsaul commented gently. He reached down and nuzzled Lydia’s face. She laughed and reached up to hug him. “Look, Lydia. It’s a river. Too bad you do not have your swim outfit. You could jump in and train your lungs some more like you’ve wanted.”

 She sighed staring into the water. “You’ve no idea how tempting it is still. I might just jump in with my uniform on.”

 “Wait!” Eldrich snapped. “What else can you do that I don’t know how to do? I’ve never seen this sort of thing before. I can guarantee neither have the others.”

 She frowned and looked at him. “Conner, a friend of mine, showed me a painting someone did of a Meldling wrapped up like this. I thought it was a common Meldling thing.”

 He frowned and shook his head. “I’ve never heard about it before. Ok… so… let’s compare. What can you do and I’ll tell you what I can do.”

 She shrugged. “I can meld with multiple dragons. I can group link them and their riders. I can do this. I can also reach out a little past the five mile mark –“

 He stared at her with wide eyes. “Can’t do. Not just don’t know how to – but that’s impossible.”

 She blinked and looked at him, frowning. “Ok… umm, I can silence them all with a single thought if they are getting too loud and giving me a headache.”

 “Don’t know how to do.”

 She nodded. “I couldn’t do that either until last year myself. I can stop control them and for my mind into theirs. I can control several dragons at once. A full take over.”

 “S-several? How many? Something tells me you aren’t just referring to one or two?”

 She frowned. “No. I think it was about thirty.”

 “Definitely cannot do! I can do like maybe five at the most.”

 She sighed. “I was forced to learn how to do that one. I think it’s supposed to just take practice but I got a little encouragement,” she muttered bitterly. “I think, comfortably, I can take over about fifteen dragons to control them all at once. After that my mind can get a little confused with all the data and trying to dance around between them.”

 “That’s why the method I used is definitely the best. You don’t have to concentrate on so much at a time. Only when a dragon is being terrifically unruly should you ever try to take over their minds wholly like that. What the heck would possess you to even try that?” he asked incredulously.

 She sighed and shook her head. “I’d… rather not go through those particular memories.”

 He glared at her. “I want to know, Lydia.”

 “No. I would rather not go through them. That was a horrific experience. I just barely kept my sanity with it last year and I would much rather not revisit those awful memories.”

 His eyes hardened but he sat back, staring down into the water where his legs disappeared beneath the surface. “I really hate secrets,” he growled.

 She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Stop being such a child. Anyways, I think that’s all I know how to do, I mean, barring the obvious things like melding with multiple dragons and linking minds and such.”

 He nodded, still being petulant. “As you already know, we are taught to *encourage* dragons to do our bidding. We can delve through the memories of multiple dragons and even their riders without their permission. We can collapse and recreate thought channels, and even sense some speaking channels that regular humans cannot feel. Now here’s some stuff you might not know. We can implant memories in both dragons and riders.”

 Lydia’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

 He smirked. “It’s extremely difficult – not the sort of job you want to rush, but if you’ve thought it out, you can insert whole new memories. The bigger the memory the more time and effort. We can’t do anything about existing memories, but if you know anything about memory you’d realize it’s pretty fragile anyhow. You can encourage people to forget names and faces and to replace them with others.”

 “What do you use that for?” she gasped.

 He shrugged. “Well say for instance we took a prisoner. If we are letting him go, we can make him think he had been at some other location. It’s not one of the skills that we are called on a lot for. Oh, we can also make people hallucinate or maybe not notice things – such as a base, for example. We can’t use this skill against other Meldlings, but if you reach into the mind of another Rider you can encourage him and his dragon to not notice that he’s seen you if you are trying to hide. It can’t take care of obvious stuff, just simple things. You can make them think there are fifty dragons surrounding him and panic him. Maybe make him think that he’s heard a sound. This one we are called on a little more often for.

 “And of course, we can extract memories from other Riders. This…” he made a disgusted face. “This is something I’ve been called on for several times in the past. I’ve had to force my mind into a few prisoners to gain information. They’ve even had me force-meld a non-rider with a dragon just so they could take advantage of this particular skill.”

 Lydia gaped at him. “That’s horrible!”

 He nodded. “Wait until your army learns that you can do that. Consider it the way that I do, Lydia. It’s better than torturing the person for the information. If I weren’t there… what other more horrible things would they do to that prisoner to get him to talk. The pain of forcing my way into their minds that deeply is fleeting in comparison.”

 He bit his lip. “I just wish there was something I could do for my own sanity when I do it. I suppose I just wish that… I wish that I were given a choice in the matter. That if I said ‘no’ they would let me walk out. Gods, some of the things that I’ve seen in the minds of those people. I can’t tell you some of the people they have forced me to enter the minds of. Some of them truly deserved what they were getting.”

 He rested his elbows on his legs and dug his hands through his hair, sitting forward. “It would be easier sometimes if they just told me to force them to talk for themselves. I’ve tried to mention that to the superiors at the time but they would backhand me for talking back to them. They were after the information. It’s quicker for me to reach in for it than to have the guy talk through it.”

 She swallowed. “T-they are going to teach me this in the next coming weeks?”

 “Next week is going to be really fun for you, Lydia,” he promised in a hollow voice.

 “Who’s going to teach me? Not that boring teacher that’s reading from his book?”

 Eldrich chuckled. “Nah. He’s pretty cool. I don’t mind him. He’s the only friend that the three of us know. No, they are going to send in an actual Meldling for us. I pray for your sake it’s not Darian. There’s only two Meldlings living right now other than us. Both are in the Southern army – which is why *my* army is a little desperate for us. There’s Darian and Ferrace. Both guys – Meldling girls are pretty rare, I hear.”

 Lydia nodded. “I remember hearing the teacher say something to that effect.”

 He smirked. “You really are a little too diligent. You actually listen to him?”

 “I’m in – “ she stopped herself. Caught herself in time. Damn! She had been about to tell him she was in Advance Tactics classes. Damn, damn, damn herself!

 “You’re in what?” he asked, waiting patiently for her answer, staring at her hard.

 “I’m in a Battle School that takes its training very seriously,” she said quickly, trying to cover up her mistake. “Classes are part of what we have to endure and we are tested quite extensively.”

 He frowned, staring across at her. She smiled trying to give him her most honest and innocent face. She had to be the worst liar in the world, she thought. Finally he shrugged and turned back to the water, splashing his legs a little. “Anyways, Ferrace is pretty ok. A bit impatient, but far better than Darian. Darian is… abusive. The idea that he has to come down here to teach us every year when we know what we’re doing pisses him off no end and he takes out his frustration on us.”

 “How old are they?”

 “Darian is twenty five or so. Ferrace a few years younger.”

 “Not that much older than us, though. Not really.”

 He shook his head. “We’re rare and we have a high mortality rate.”

 “E-excuse me?”

 “Because of the situations we are placed in and because we are so untrained, I think. They really just don’t give a damn about us.” He fingered one of his knives that he had set to the side. “I… I don’t want that to be me. Ferrace is a Field Medic. Darian is a fighter – or at least that’s the tag they’ve given him. He gets pretty pissy about that, too. Two years ago he got drunk while he was here and all he did was bitch about it. He beat Kelly up pretty bad that night. She’s been terrified of him ever since.”

 Lydia pursed her lips. He sounded like serious trouble. And her luck was awful. “If he comes up here, what do you recommend that I do?”

 “Knock your haughty attitude for one. He won’t appreciate it. He won’t care if you’re in a wheelchair. He might just find you an easy target. Just… do what he says and don’t fight him. Even I watch how I act when I’m around him. And for the sake of the gods don’t try to do any Meldling thing against him. He’s the real deal. He’s been at it for far too long. You won’t stand a chance against him.”

 She reached up and nibbled on her thumbnail. “If he comes near me, I swear I’ll slit him wide open,” she muttered.

 “Not likely, Miss Wheelchair-girl. The guy knows how to fight. If you start showing off that you can hit his blade out of his hand he might take that as a challenge and enjoy humiliating you as much as he can. Just… just pray for Ferrace. That’s all you can do. In four days we’ll find out which guy it is when he arrives.”

 Lydia sighed. “Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.”

 Tsaul leaned down. “Should I be concerned, Eldrich? Will he try to do anything to our meld link?”

 “Yeah. He’ll want to make sure you can do all the basic stuff. Lydia will need to disconnect her meld link at least once and join her meld link with the rest of dragons.”

 Tsaul growled viciously, sending out a thought that tore through their minds. Lydia winced while Eldrich smirked. “Better keep your temper, dragon. If it’s Darian and he learns that the two of you have a problem with this sort of thing he’ll go out of his way to continue pressing that nerve. Better to just hurry, get it done, and get it over with.”

 She stared up at Tsaul. She could feel the grief and frustration raging through him. “Tsaul… we’ll get through this. Obstacles. Let’s just get through this. After what we went through last year this is going to be a cake walk. Three weeks.” She swallowed. “Unless –“

 Tsaul growled and stared down at her. “If you ask me that disgusting question, Lydia, I might just take you up on the offer this time and fly the hell out of here and give up on you. I am *not* disconnecting permanently as your dragon and just leaving you behind. You’re right. Compared to Ayvra, this is endurable.” He sighed. “I knew what you were the moment I asked you to meld with me. I do not regret having you as a Rider.”

 She grinned and reached up to hug him. “We’ll endure. Obstacles. At least this is one obstacle I don’t have to face by myself, right Tsaul?”

 “If you think you’ve ever faced your obstacles by yourself how mistaken you’ve been, my Rider. I am always here and share in your pain.”

 Lydia grinned. She leaned back and closed her eyes enjoying her contact with her precious dragon.

 Lydia fell asleep sitting there. She was awoken to the sound of blades hitting each other. She licked her lips at the wonderful sound of a blade fight. She pulled her feet up out of the water and climbed up onto Tsaul’s back to watch. Coughing slightly with her lungs burning, she reached down and slipped her mask on.

 Sean and Eldrich were battling each other. She groaned in delight as she watched them. The sound of the knife blades hitting each other did something to her nerves. Made her excited.

 *“Caution, Lydia. Stay put. You’re not a fighter, remember. You’re not supposed to know a thing about this.”*

 *“I know. I know…”* she almost whined.

 She smirked as she watched them. They weren’t *completely* hopeless. They knew the basics and were giving it their all with their moves. Still… Felix would thrash the both of them. The problem was they didn’t know many moves at all. They were just two dumb kids out there hitting their knife blades off of each other.

 *“Lydia,”* Tsaul said, growling at her now. *“We’re walking away right now before you do something that you are going to regret later.”*

She squeaked as Tsaul stood up. She almost cried as he lead the two of them away from the scene. *“I could help them… Especially Eldrich. He looks so determined. Hee, he looked a little bit like Felix. Determined but unskilled.”*

 *“But he was not nervous. Forget it, Lydia. Let’s get you in your wheelchair.”*

 *“You’re such a spoil sport, Tsaul,”* she whined. But she knew he was right. No. She could not afford to do anything rash. She sighed. “I wish I had my bow at least,” she muttered. “Gods this sucks!”

 *“Not as much as it will if you are forced away from your home and forced to endure the tortures these people have to.”*

 Gods, he was only too right. She bit her lip and considered the information Eldrich had told to her. His superiors frequently forced him to reach into the minds of prisoners for information. If General Sanders and Cassings knew she could do that – what would *their* reaction be? After that, would she have a choice anymore? Or would they want to use that power themselves with little care to her own feelings.

 Her trust in them had never been particularly high, but then again, she had seen Tsaul’s memories of these men as young teenagers. They *did* have morals and the fact that they had went to the trouble of helping her with the farce of being sick suggested that they did care.

 *“Tsaul… did Adrian ever do anything that you did not approve of?”* she asked softly. That man had been a Captain. He would have had to deal with prisoners and gaining information. *“Do you think he would have used me like that? I know he was not a General and I’m sure there’s differences, but he was still a Captain. He would have had to have made decisions about prisoners and the like.”*

 Tsaul stopped and laid down beside her wheelchair where they had left it. She slid off of him, pulling off her mask.

 The dragon turned to her. *“There are many things that you humans do that dragons do not necessarily approve of. However, if you are asking me if Adrian would have ever forced someone to do something that they have serious morals against, the answer is a definite no. I still fully believe in and trust Will, Derrick, and Liz as well. The decisions they have had to make regarding you has always been done in desperation. I was disgusted with them when they set us out against the Death Rider, but that had more to do with me than you. Ayvra was one big accident. This time they themselves had no choice in the matter. When it comes right down to it this is the sort of people they are, Lydia: When they heard that a sixteen year old dying girl was being victimized by a school committee, they went out of their way to come to help her.”*

 *“I think that had more to do with you still, then me. You had chosen a rider and the committee did not approve. If it had not been for you I wonder if they would have even bothered.”*

 *“Yes. Yes, they would have. They set up the program themselves, you may recall. The requisites to become a Rider was a lot different back when they were young. They worked out the new program along with Adrian because they recognized how significantly lacking it was. How discriminating it was.*

 *“If you ask me, would they try to use your power against a prisoner to gain information: yes. There’s no doubt in my mind. They have asked us Will Dragons in the past to try to enter minds like that to see what information could be gleaned. Would they force you to do it the way that boy described? No. Would they try to press you into it, obviously so, but at the end of the day I feel that they would still respect your decision. They did not have to offer you anything last year before they sent you out to Ayvra, but they did to encourage you. To build that trust. You are one of their soldiers and they want you to feel that you can trust them. Eldrich’s superiors do not sound like the type of men that would do that.”*

Lydia took a deep breath and nodded in agreement. Gods she prayed that Tsaul was correct. What other choice did she have?

 “Lydia!” Dennis’s voice calling out to her pulled her out of her thoughts and concerns. She turned to him as he reached her. She watched him with a curious look as he looked across at Eldrich and Sean fighting. He looked back down at her. “How are your lungs doing today?” he asked.

 That made her even more curious. These guys had never shown any care about her medical condition other than the general curiosity and concern when she was having a coughing attack. “The weather is hot and humid. It’s a pretty lousy day for me, actually, but I’m not holding out any hope that it’s going to get any better.”

 He nodded and looked over at Kelly who was busying playing with her stuffed animals splayed out all around on the ground. He turned back to her. “I was thinking something. In four days a Meldling instructor is going to be coming –“

 “Either Darian or Ferrace. Yeah, Eldrich explained that to me.”

 He nodded again. “So he gave you the basic run down of what you can expect?”

 “Basically and added that he hopes it’s not Darian that comes.”

 Dennis sighed and took a deep breath. “Yeah. Not that Ferrace is a whole lot better when instructing, which brings me to my point: I think we need to try to linking you with the rest of us. I know you really don’t want us to, but when one of those guys arrive, they are going to expect you to link with at least one of us. More if they think it’s necessary.”

 Lydia sighed. “So, you don’t think they are going to give me a whole lot of choice in the matter.”

 “Not a bit. And if it’s Darian, he would probably delight in the pain that it would cause the rest of us.”

 She closed her eyes. She was really not looking forward to this Darian person the more that she heard about him. Could she believe in her luck enough to think that she would get to meet Ferrace instead? No. Landon had once told her that he felt that she had pissed off one of the gods, and she was inclined to believe it.

 She reopened her eyes. “Alright. Four days, huh? I can do the same to you guys that I did to my team a few months ago to get them accustomed to me.”

 He blinked and frowned. “And what was that?”

 She grinned. “Feed my pain to you guys slowly over the course of a few days. They had a week so I’m not going to be able to be so generous in this situation, but it should still help. I opened up a group link and fed my pain to them. They had to go through their daily routines that way and the next day I fed them a little more. It worked out very well and even benefited them greatly by making them a little more experienced with their group links.” She turned to look at Kelly. “She’s the only one I worry about.”

 “Me, too, and if you think Darian or even Ferrace would make an exception –“

 “I’d be dead wrong.” She sighed. “Why is nothing ever easy in my life,” she muttered angrily. “I could feed it to her slowly with her sitting in my lap and disconnect quickly. Just to get her use to it over the next few days. At least then when she is forced to link with me it won’t be such a shock. It’s still going to be hell for her, though.”

 Dennis sighed and nodded. “But she doesn’t have a choice like the rest of us. Time she starts to learn that. I’ll go grab Sean and Eldrich. When we’re done with them, we can focus on Kelly.”

 She nodded and watched as he rushed off to the two fighting boys.

 A half hour later the two boys sat on the ground glaring up at her. Dennis finished off his explanation to what they were doing and why. Sean sat forward. “Personally, I don’t give a damn. I would much rather *not* do the ‘little bit at a time’ bullshit idea. Just hit me with it so that way I’ll be prepared for it in the future for whatever the two of those assholes want to do to us.”

 She turned to Eldrich. The boy stared between Dennis and Sean and then he looked up at her in her wheelchair. “How bad is it?”

 “It’s pretty bad. If at the end of me feeding it to you slowly you think you can handle more I can increase it and see what you think. However, I’m telling your right now. There’s a reason I had to feed it slowly to thirty other people.”

 Sean shrugged. “Do it so I can move on with my life already.”

 She glared at Sean and shrugged. “Alright. Fine. I warned you,” she snapped. “Just remember: it’s not your pain. And whatever you do until you get used to it, do not try to take a deep breath. Don’t force the air inwards. It makes it much worse. The air is going to turn into your enemy. Find a rhy-”

 “You talk way too much.”

 She rolled her eyes and reached out with her mind and connected with him. It was purposely abrupt. Well, what did he expect when he pissed her off. …She regretted it almost immediately. She really should learn to control her temper.

 Sean’s face drained of all color. He reached up to his chest with a shaking hand. He sat forward suddenly, gagging. Beside him, Eldrich turned and stared at him with a frown on his face. He said something in his native tongue. Sean shouted something back in an angry hiss.

 Lydia cut the link.

 But it was too late. The pain was still there, lingering. Sean gagged again, trying to force air inwards into his lungs.

 “I said don’t force it!” she shouted.

 “Lydia, he’s choking!” Eldrich shouted at her, getting up to his knees and staring at his friend.

 “I’ve already cut the link,” she said, rising out of her wheelchair and kneeling in front of Sean. “Sean, cough. You have to cough. I know. Your lungs are burning. You feel like there’s stuff trapped inside. You just need to cough.”

 Struggling for air, he finally doubled over and started hacking hard, clutching desperately at his lungs. She reached out to pat his back but he slapped her hand away angrily, still coughing downwards to the ground.

 “Dammit, Lydia, I said maintain your distance,” Eldrich growled.

 “I’m just trying to help,” she snapped back at him.

 Finally, Sean stopped coughing. He sat there for a while, clutching hard at his chest, balling his uniform up in his two fists, as he rocked back and forth. His face was red and sweat poured down his face from both his exertion and the summer heat. He had his eyes closed and every now and again she could see him swallow. Finally he sat back drawing in his own deep breath. He turned his eyes to her, glaring death. “You fucking bitch,” he hissed.

 Her anger shot through her body. Pursing her lips she stood up to her full height. “I tried to give you warning and instructions,” she growled. “Don’t you dare sit there and condemn me.” She swallowed and turned around, knuckling her forehead trying to calm her anger. “I deal with that pain every single goddamn day!” she shouted. She whirled back on him. “Don’t you *dare* sit there and insult me like that!” she screamed. “That’s my pain! You’re right. It’s a traumatic experience. I tried to warn you! You dared to make light of it despite my repeated warnings. You told me you could handle your link. How’s it feel, Sean?” she screamed at him. “Do you think you can handle your link now? You’re so damn lucky. You get to experience that for a few seconds. *I have to live with it every single day for the rest of my life!* You get to link with me and figure out how to push it off to the side of your mind. I spend every single day of my life wishing for that luxury. I can’t even push my pain off and just share it with my dragon – because if I do that I forget to cough. And you have no idea how scary things get when I don’t cough.”

 She swallowed as he continue to glare up at her. It only ignited her anger even more. She reached down and grabbed him by his shirt collar, pushing him back hard. He landed backwards in the dirt with her on top of him. “They tried to tell me that I couldn’t be a Rider,” she screamed in his face, pulling his shirt collar towards her – choking him. “They tried to tell me that because I experienced that pain and it would be forced onto others that I should not have a dragon. Don’t you dare have the nerve to condemn me!” She released his collar and pulled her fist back and slammed it hard into his face. “I don’t care what you or anyone else says! I’m a Rider!”

 Two sets of hands grabbed her by her arms and started wrenching her up and off of him. “Lydia!” Eldrich’s voice shouted. “Calm down.”

 She stumbled back trying to regain her feet, wrenching her arms away from the boys. “Don’t touch me!” she screamed. “I don’t care about any of you.” A sob broke through her body. “I hate you. All of you! Why the hell am I here? My life wasn’t difficult enough? Now I’m stuck here because I’ve got some special ability that I don’t want. I should be back home training and learning how to be a real soldier. Instead I’m stuck here babysitting a bunch of kids who think they can play at being soldiers. You want me to sob over your lives? Your lives are so tragic? You don’t even fight. Not a single one of you know anything about trying to rise above an obstacle. I don’t have time for your self-pity. I don’t have time for your weakness. If that makes me haughty or a bitch, then so be it. I know my place in the world. I know where I’ve come from and where I’m going, and I dare anyone to tell me that they are going to stand in my way.”

 She whirled around, grabbed her wheelchair by a single handle bar, and yanked it behind her as she marched back into the school. Her anger still raged through her body even as she went to her room and laid down on her bed, surrendering to her tears.

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 Sean’s lip was busted at the side. He winced every time he took a bite of his breakfast. Now and again he would glare up at her. Finally he finished his food – a meager plate – and left the room.

 Now and again Dennis would look at her with an injured expression before turning back to his plate. Kelly sat beside him, sensing the mood in the room and keeping quiet, staring between everyone. Finally Dennis left and Kelly fell behind him, not wanting to stay in the room any longer with people she was unfamiliar with.

 It was just her and Eldrich. He watched the two of them leave before he went back to playing with his food. She took another bite of her food, pulling her eyes away from him. When she looked up, though, she found Eldrich staring at her hard. She swallowed and looked away, but he didn’t look away. She could still seem him staring at her from the corner of her eyes.

 “What?” she demanded finally.

 Eldrich turned back to the door, looking at it as if checking to see if anyone were there. Then he stood up and walked across to her, sitting his tray close to her. “You’re not a mail courier, are you?”

 Inwardly she winced, but she was so tired and so mentally exhausted that she didn’t even care to try to produce an emotion on the outside. “What makes you say that?” she growled, staring down at her tray.

 He jabbed his thumb at the doorway. “Because a normal girl wouldn’t be able to punch like that much less a *dying* girl. And it doesn’t fit with your personality. You scream at us that we aren’t pushing past our obstacles, but then you try to pass off the lie that your illness is holding you back? I’m not buying it,” he growled. “You’re on a war dragon who used to fly a Captain. You are super good with your sword and throwing your knife. I’m willing to bet you know more to do with that knife than just throwing it, too.”

 She sighed. “Eldrich. I’m just a mail courier,” she pressed.

 He sat back and glared hard at her. “No,” he growled. “I’m not buying it.” He swallowed and stared down at his plate. “Not when I see an opportunity like this.”

 She frowned. “Opportunity?”

 “Since you’ve been here you’ve already improved my archery skills. You’ve shown me how to take care of my dragon.” He licked his lips and stared back at the door before turning back to her. “I want to be a soldier, Lydia, and I think you know a little more than I do. If you’re able to teach me with those things, I’m dying to see what else you could teach me. *Please*, Lydia. I won’t tell anyone else. I swear.”

 She felt herself redden with embarrassment. She lifted her eyes and stared hard back at him. “I’m *just* a mail courier,” she pressed again. “I’m *dying*, Eldrich.”

 He stared hard at her. “And that’s the part I can’t figure out. I know you’re dying. That’s what you say, and I’ve seen you at your worst, but it doesn’t fit. Lydia, I felt your arm yesterday when I pulled you off. Both me and Dennis had to pull you off of Sean. You have muscles. I see them in your legs, too – yesterday when you were wading in the water. No. Only someone who has been working out gets muscles like that. Tsaul mentioned that you even use to train in the water. No. I don’t believe for a second that any part of you is weak. Something else is going on and I’m not going to be taken for a fool and miss what may be my one and only chance.” He leaned closer to her. “*Please*. I dunno why you’re hiding, but I’ll take your secret with me to the grave. I’m begging you, Lydia. I’m right, aren’t I?”

 She stared across at him. She didn’t like this. She was sure if the Generals were here that they would not approve. Every intelligent thought in her body told her to refuse, to say nothing. To continue the lie. But her heart told her something different.

 She sat there silent for a while before Eldrich finally sighed and sat up. “Look. Think about it, ok. Please. After class today if you feel differently come find me out in my secret hiding place. Just follow the river and you’ll find a rock wall covered by thick moss. Just push the moss aside, ok? I’ll be waiting.”

 He stood up and left the room heading towards the door. He turned around and looked at her one final time. *“You told me my Will is tenacity, the same as yours,”* he said, speaking into her mind. *“So you should know more than anyone exactly how I feel right now. I’m begging you. Please do this for me.”*

After he left she groaned and pushed her tray aside with her arm, burying her face in the arm. When she returned to school, the first thing she was going to do was have Landon help her work on her anger.

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 The teacher had no sooner dismissed them than Eldrich had shot out of his seat and rushed out of the building. Lydia stared down at her paper. She had spent all day drawing. There were several sketches of dragons – including one of Tucaan with Eldrich sitting on his back waving a spear through the air. She sighed and slapped the notebook closed with a snap.

 Sighing she watched as the other three dispersed to their own destinations. She stared after each of them. Sean had headed straight to his room while Dennis had grabbed his bow and quivers. Kelly went running outside with three stuffed animals in her arms.

 Chewing her lip, she followed Kelly and Dennis out the door. She rolled over to Tsaul and climbed up into his saddle. “Come on,” she muttered.

 The dragon chuckled as he stood up. “Need I ask where we are off to?”

 “Shut up, stupid lizard,” she growled. “What are you opinions?”

 “Only that I know what my Adrian would do in this situation.”

 “And what would Adrian do?” she asked, truly curious.

 “He would follow his heart.”

 She smiled. “So Adrian would do the same thing, you think? So you approve of what I’m about to do?”

 “I didn’t say that my Adrian was smart. I just said that he would follow his heart. We would argue about it for about a half hour before finally I would give up and simply concede.”

 She laughed. “So, do you want me to start the argument or do you want to have your go first?”

 “I thought I would just save time and skip it. I’ll simply let you know I am angry, but I respect you as my rider, and we’ll leave it at that.”

 She thought about it for a moment and nodded. “I can live with that. Sorry, Tsaul.”

 “I just hope your impetuous behavior does not result in something even worse.”

 “I hope so, too.”

 The dragon went walking off, following the lake. Lydia stared behind her, but neither Dennis or Kelly were paying any attention to them. They rounded the corner and the two of them were lost to sight completely. A rock wall had started on the left side of them with barely enough clearance for Tsaul’s large body. Eventually, though, she spotted the matting of moss that Eldrich had mentioned. She jumped down and pushed it to the side. She was amazed by what lay beneath.

 Eldrich’s secret base was a huge cave. Large enough to fit at least thirty dragons. She stepped inside indicating for Tsaul to follow, holding the moss back for him as he slipped inside. She looked around as he did and took it all in.

 There were weapons of every kind inside: spearks, a double headed axe, and even swords . On a wall a target was set up for arrows and another one that had a couple of knives stuck inside of it. That’s what Eldrich was doing right now. He had two knives in his hands and was aiming for the target. He had his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth as he concentrated, sighting with one eye before he released the blade. It went whirling through the air, hitting the rock wall beside the target, and ricocheting off of it.

 “I swear I’m going to tape that eye open if you don’t learn to stop closing it,” she snapped.

 Eldrich started and whirled around to her. His eyes widened as he took her in, just before a slow smile starting creeping across his mouth. He dropped the other knife in his hand and came running over to her. He grabbed her hands and pulled her deeper inside. “You came! I-I didn’t think you would. I actually started to doubt but – you came! I was right then, wasn’t I? You’re a fighter.”

 His words were coming out in a tumble in his excitement. She smiled at him and shook her head slowly. “Calm down, Eldrich,” she said gently.

 “Oh. Sorry. I just… It’s just that… Lydia, I’m just excited to have someone who might know something about fighting. You do, don’t you? Tell me you do.”

 She rolled her eyes to the heavens. “Yes, Eldrich. I’m a fighter. I’m not a mail courier.”

 This caused him to become even *more* excited. His grip tightened on her hands. “I knew it! What the hell are you hiding that for? Wait, are you even sick then?”

 “I’m hiding it because my Generals and I thought it would be a good idea. We thought that maybe if I appeared sick and weak, the other nations wouldn’t want to bother with me.”

 Eldrich’s face fell and he shook his head. “But, that won’t work.”

 “So you’ve explained to me. My Generals value skill but it seems that your nations do not – not when in the context of Meldlings. They were worried about my safety but they couldn’t fight the orders they had received to send me here.”

 He blinked. “Wow. Your *Generals* actually *cared* about you?”

 “A little, I guess. It’s enough, I suppose. I guess they feel responsible for me. I made an agreement with them that in return for my Meldling skills whenever they needed them, they would accommodate my medicines and help me attempt to become a soldier.”

 “So you really are sick?” he asked, his face falling.

 She nodded. “I really am sick. Though, I’m usually a little bit healthier than I am now. I have a stronger medicine, but it makes me lose my senses for a little while. In the interest of keeping my cover and because it would weaken me further, we decided to not let me have that medicine. Which is really scary because that’s the one that keeps me alive. It’s what saved my life after my last collapse three years ago.”

 “Damn, so you’re suffering extra just for a cover story that isn’t doing a whole lot of good.”

 “That thought did cross my mind, yes.”

 “So… why were you still so reluctant to give yourself away?”

 She sighed. “Simply because people are easier to impress when they underestimate you. Plus I didn’t know if it *could* do me good. Better to act weak and surprise them later if I need to than to blow away an opportunity.”

 He grinned, releasing her hands. “Cunning. That’s what you said your second Will was, right? I would never think of doing something like that. I just kinda go all out with everything I have.” He swallowed looking around before he turned back to her. “So… how good are you?”

 She shrugged. “I’m only second year, but I worked hard last year. I was opted into an advanced class in aerial tactics where I racked up enough points to make me Commander of my own team. My weapons skills are the top of my class. I love knives mostly but I can also use spears, and you’ve seen my skill with a bow.”

 He blinked and stepped back to view her. She grinned. “See,” she said, “people are easy to impress when they underestimate you. That’s the first thing my own partner taught me.”

 “Partner?”

 She nodded. “I think I’ve explained this before a little bit but each of our rooms has thirty two people. Eighteen are lowerclassmen, while the other eighteen are one year above them. From there they have a Room Commander – me – and a Lieutenant that I chose out of the seventeen other classmen my age. From there the upperclassmen choose one of the lowerclassmen to partner with and to train on an individual basis. My partner was the Room Commander. His name is Landon. This year I got to choose my own partner. His name is Felix.”

 He blinked. “Wow, that sounds intricate. You guys really do the group thing, don’t you? W-wait… Landon, that’s a he?”

 “Yes?” she asked confused.

 “W-wait, how’s a guy the Commander of your Room?”

 She smirked. “Eldrich, our barracks are co-ed. We don’t separate by gender.”

 He grinned. “Wow, that’s kinda messed up.”

 She rolled her eyes. “I have no problems with it. After a while you hardly notice it. What do you think it’s going to be like out on the field? Girls on the right and boys one the left?”

 He blinked, tilting his head. “Oh. I never thought about it like that, I guess.” He looked back at her grinning again. “Sean would flip if he learned that you were not only a fighter but a Commander-in-training. Damn, Lydia. You *really* don’t let anything hold you back. No wonder Sean pissed you off so bad yesterday.”

 She sighed and nodded. “You’ve no idea. Three years ago I was pathetically weak and wheelchair bound. I had to get out of my wheelchair and train my body how to walk again, and then when I turned in my application, I had to fight a bitter battle just to pass the physical. I know what pain is. I refuse to let it hold me back. Sitting in that damn thing right now is absolutely excruciating. I *hate* feeling like I’m weak.”

 He grinned. “Three years ago and now you are one of the top fighters? Gods, I’m looking forward to this. Do you think you can train me?”

 She smirked. “If I can train my younger partner, you are going to be a piece of cake.”

 He frowned. “Why? Your partner that bad?” he asked with a snigger.

 “No, not at all. Actually, my partner’s *that good*. He’s half blind, Eldrich. He’s half blind and he could kick your ass.”

 Eldrich blinked, his eyes widening. “No shit? H-how the hell does that work?”

 “He compensates and he does it really well. His Will is Perseverance. He doesn’t let a whole lot hold him back, either, and I’m proud to call him my partner. It’s killing me right now that I’m not back there with him helping him train.”

 He smirked. “You and your damn haughty attitude. That explains a lot. You’re just use to being in charge and training people. No wonder you tore into us on the first day.”

 “Which brings us to our next point. If I’m going to help you do this, you have to be wholly in. You don’t get to pick and choose what you want to do or don’t want to do. Our diets at the school are strictly monitored, not only by the school but by the partners. You *will* eat only what I tell you to and you *will* train the way that I tell you to. Weapons is only one part of being a good fighter.”

 He swallowed and nodded. “I-I think I can agree to that.”

 She nodded. “The day you refuse and drop your routine is the day I quit, too. You only get one chance.”

 He nodded. “Alright, alright. I get it. I’ll do everything that you tell me to do.”

 “Including still keeping my secret,” she snapped. “I still want to maintain playing the sick girl at least for as long as I can.”

 He nodded. “I can do that. If Sean asks I’ll just tell him you passed on some tips from me from watching other fighters at your school. Not that I really think him or anyone else is going to give a damn.”

 She nodded. “Thank you. At the end of this I just want to go home and put it all behind me and focus back on the stuff that really matters. Gods, I don’t even want to imagine how far behind I’m getting in my studies. There’s nothing easy about those classes.”

 She walked over and started observing the weapons laying up against the wall. “Do you know how to use any of these?” she asked.

 He shrugged. “No. They are just stuff I kinda stole from other places and brought here with me. I always try to bring something new here with me.”

 She nodded and picked up a spear, examining the shaft. She sighed. “And clearly you weren’t very picky,” she muttered. She raised the thing above her head and twirled it just before she slammed it into the rock wall. Eldrich gasped loudly as the shaft cracked, splitting in two. Splinters sprayed the air. “Always check your equipment before you take it out on the field with you. Shafts especially. Come here, I’ll show you what to look for.”

 He walked over and she picked up another spear and showed him the signs of the hairline cracks that were starting to form. “This one could take a few more beatings before it shatters. If you have some stiffening tape we might be able to do something to support it and get a little more use out of it.”

 He shook his head. “No. I don’t have anything like that. Are they all like that?”

 “You look. Let’s see what you can find.”

 He stared at her and then at the spears. He walked over to them and picked one up, staring at it hard. It took him several minutes before he was through the whole lot of them. He frowned at the small pile he had deemed as ‘good’. She nodded her approval. “Good job.”

 “Wow, that nearly eliminated all of them,” he muttered almost sadly.

 She shrugged. “Keep them around but keep them separated. We’ll see if there’s something we can find to strengthen them a little, otherwise they should be ok for basic training. Now – is this the weapon you want to use?”

 He blinked and looked at her. “What do you mean? I want to use them all?”

 She smiled. “As dedicated as that makes you – it’s best to choose one. Don’t spread yourself too thin. You have a lot of hours to invest in training with a single weapon.”

 He shrugged. “Well, I guess when I’m done training with one I can move on to the next.”

 “Eldritch, hon’, you are *never* done with training.”

 “Huh?” he asked with a little bit of surprise.

 “You will spend every day of the rest of your life training with your weapon. There is never a ‘done’ point. There’s always someone out there who is stronger and better. If you stop training not only do you deny yourself to opportunity to try to take that person on, but you also risk losing the muscles that you built up for that weapon. Plus, your dragon can only fit one weapon at a time.”

 “Oh,” he said, a little disappointed. “W-well… I mean, since you’re my teacher maybe it would be best to do spears since you know that one.”

 She nodded. “Probably a good decision. Spears it is, then. So you will be trained with your bow, your knives, and your spear. Pick it up. I know your skill with a bow, and I saw you fighting yesterday with your knives against Sean.”

 He grinned. “Was I any good?”

 She shook her head. “No. No you weren’t.”

 “Damn, Lydia. Break the news to me gently,” he growled.

 She raised her eyebrow at him. “I don’t give compliments easily. I compliment skill. If you want to be coddled and lied to, go find someone else to train you. You were hopelessly slow, your partner was as unskilled as you were, and your moves – the few that you did know – were poorly executed.”

 “And what do you know?” he growled. “You said you were just a second year.”

 “You’re right. There’s a lot that I don’t know. I never stop learning. Landon tells me the same thing. He’s even more brutal than I am. I can’t learn if I’m not told that I’m doing it wrong. When I do it wrong, my partner slices into me. When I do it right – I avoid another nasty injury. I have to say that it only takes a few times for me to get cut by the same move before I figure out how to guard from it.”

 Eldrich smirked. “Yeah. That sounds pretty effective to me.”

 She nodded. “Now, pick up a spear. I want to see your skill so I know what I’ve got to work with.” She reached down and picked up her own spear. “There’s just one thing, Eldrich. I *am* weak right now. My lungs are in seriously bad shape. If I call the fight – you *must* stop. Unfortunately I’m only going to be able to go bits at a time. I wish I were feeling better and at my maximum potential, but even then there are some days I have to have Landon train Felix in my place.”

 He nodded, choosing one of the spears from the good pile. “I think I can agree to that.” He walked to the center of the room and she followed. She took a deep breath and lowered her weapon, the point barely an inch off the floor. “Don’t hold back on me now. Don’t worry about hurting me.”

 He grinned, holding out his own spear. “Who knows, maybe you should be the one who’s worried.”

 She grinned. “Looking at that ridiculous stance, I doubt it. I’ll correct it in just a moment. Come at me for now and let me see what else I’m getting myself into.”

 Eldrich grinned widely as he rushed her, raising his spear dramatically. She rolled her eyes. Oh gods, this was almost painful, she thought.

#

 The room was subdued. Lydia looked around at the group. She had woken up and showered and joined them in the classroom. The teacher had not shown up – she wasn’t too sure if he was going to. Not with their Meldling trainer due to arrive.

 Everyone was unusually quiet and still. Even Kelly who had her teddy bear pulled up close to her chest. Lydia noticed she was watching the clock very closely. Now and again she would notice the other three steal quick glances before looking back down. It was almost as if they were afraid to acknowledge the time at all.

 Finally the clock struck 10am. Kelly stopped looking at the clock. She sniffed, a whimper breaking from her lips.

 Dennis was the first one to speak. “That’s it, then,” he muttered bitterly.

 “It doesn’t mean anything,” Eldrich growled. “He could just be late.”

 Sean sighed. “You know as well as the rest of Eldrich. Ferrace is *always* on time. Early even. It’s Darian. Darian is *always* late. I’m not too surprised, really. Ferrace has come the last two years. It’s Darian’s turn. It was too much to hope for.”

 Eldrich ran his thumb along a small gash on his cheek – a wound she had given him with her knife. “It wasn’t too much to hope for. I’m not taking his shit this year!” he shouted, standing up from his chair. “I’m not doing it.”

 “So what’s your plan?” Sean snapped. “Run and hide? Great plan. Stand and fight – yes, make it rough for the rest of us.”

 Eldrich took his seat again and looked over at Lydia. “I’m sorry, Lydia. You’re going to have to deal with Darian’s terror. It really sucks that you have to be brought into this.”

 Sean clicked his tongue. “Why don’t you take your girlfriend and go run and hide away together. You two have gotten ridiculously close lately and it’s making me sick.”

 Eldrich shouted something in his native tongue at Sean while Lydia simply rolled her eyes. She opened her notebook and got out her pencil and started drawing again. “The both of you are children,” she snapped. “Grow up and act like the fighters that you want to be.”

 Sean leaned forward and gave her a disgusted look while Eldrich sat back thoroughly chastised. Sean then turned the look on Eldrich. He said something else in his native tongue. Eldrich sat upright, his blood draining from his face. He turned and glared at Sean with wide eyes. “Say that again, you disgusting asshole,” he growled. “I dare you.”

 Lydia winced. Something told her that she really didn’t want to know what Sean had just said. Whatever it was – Sean did repeat it. Eldrich shot up from his seat and raised his fist. Sean was waiting though. Before Eldrich had enough time to bring his fist back completely, there was a knife at Eldrich’s chest. The boy gaped, looking down. He took a step back, lowering his fist. “D-did you just seriously pull your knife out on me?” he asked, his voice thick with hurt.

 “Sit down!” Sean commanded. “If it’s Darian the last thing I want is for you to fly off the handle because of some bitch. I have no idea what’s going on between the two of you, but you had better break it off now because Darian *will* make your lives a living hell – along with the rest of us.”

 “There’s nothing going on!” Eldrich shouted. “I have no idea what the hell you’re even talking about.”

 “Every time Lydia says jump these past few days you’ve been all too eager. Don’t tell me that there’s nothing going on.”

 “Because simply being friends is a nonexistent term in your mind, Sean?” Lydia asked softly adding a few more lines to her drawing. “What a shallow, miserable life you live.”

 “At least it’s a life, *dying girl*.”

 She smiled at the quip. “Mine might be short, but at least it’s full and happy.”

 “It won’t be once Darian arrives,” Sean growled. “The moment he realizes the two of you are buddy-buddy, you know he’s going to go out of his way to use that.”

 “The moment you start to fear something is the moment that you have lost. You have placed it in a position above you. You have made yourself weaker.”

 Eldrich stared across at her. “No, Lydia. You really don’t understand. Be careful with Darian. I’m warning you. The guy doesn’t care.”

 She glared at him. “I *refuse* to be bullied or culled.”

 Eldrich opened his mouth to say something but Sean stopped him. “Forget it. She’s just going to have to learn herself. Her and that damn attitude of hers. I hope he beats it out of her.”

 Kelly sobbed. “I-I don’t want him to hurt me again,” she muttered miserably. “P-please, Dennis. M-make him go away. I don’t want him. Please… please make it Ferrace.”

 Eldrich slumped in his seat. Lydia could see the tears starting to rise to his eyes. She bit her lip. *“Eldrich, I’m right here. Don’t do that to yourself. Do not give anyone the authority to place you in a state of fear.”*

 *“You just don’t understand, Lydia. You just don’t understand. I’m so sorry that you’re going to have to find out the hard way. Just, please, I beg you, keep your mouth shut. Don’t give him a reason to notice you. Just… just sit there and act weak. Do what your superiors told you to do.”*

She didn’t have time to respond when suddenly the door to their small room was slammed inward, hitting the wall behind it with a loud bang. Kelly screamed and all three of the boys shot up straight in their seats, fear in their eyes.

 Lydia turned to the door and took in the person who stood there.

 Tall. Taller than Hugh. That was her first impression. The guy, she estimated, had to be a little over six foot. He was broad shouldered, too. He took up the whole space of the doorway. He had black hair and hard, cruel yellow eyes. Staring at him she was reminded of a bull. She winced. Damn. And this guy had struck Kelly? No wonder the little girl feared him. Even without the muscle bulges that she could see through his white uniform, she could sense the power in those arms. She doubted even Hugh would win in a fist fight with this guy.

 The man named Darian glared into the room for a moment before he finally entered. He had not moved. Taking all of them in. He strode inwards slowly before stopping at her desk. She looked up at the guy as he stared down at her.

 “I recognize the other three,” he growled, “but I don’t know *you*.”

 She remained silent. There were two ways to respond here. Either she could provide her name, for which she was sure he would yell at her for speaking out of turn, or she could pop her normal snarky attitude – no need to go that far just yet. Silent defiance would be better. She had to deal with this guy for three weeks, afterall. It would be best to start off evenly and then work their way up to the inevitable that she was pretty sure was coming.

 “Are you going to provide your *name*?” he snapped after several silent moments.

 She nodded. “Lydia.”

 “Your age?”

 “Eighteen.”

 “And why the fuck are you just coming here now? I read Ferrace’s report. He did not mention you last year.”

 “I’m from the East,” she explained softly. “This is my one and only year here to try to keep things civil between mine and the other two nations.”

 “From the East?” he growled. “They have Meldlings out there? Why have I never seen one before?”

 She shrugged. “I suppose my country does not value them the way that the others do. They might go unnoticed. I almost did.”

 “So why are they bothering now?”

 From the corner of her eye she saw Eldrich’s eyes flicker from her to him. He swallowed. “Darian,” he whispered almost too softly to be heard. “S-she’s the Death Slayer.”

 Darian’s eyes hardened, roving over to the boy who cringed under the weight of that stare. “Did I ask you to speak?” he snapped.

 Eldrich swallowed and shook his head. Tears were welling into his eyes already. Darian left her desk and walked over to the boy, grabbing him by his hair and yanking him out of his chair. Eldrich shouted in pain as the man threw him to the floor and kicked the sixteen year old in his stomach.

 Lydia watched in stunned, horrified silence. She stared from Eldrich up to the man who now had a wicked grin of delight on his face. She stood up out of her wheelchair. “What the hell are you doing?!” she screamed.

 Darian’s eyes fell on her. There was a wicked glean of delight. He stood up to full height. “You’re new, so I’m going to make your first lesson fast and quick.”

 Lydia watched in horror as he walked across to her, covering the distance in two easy steps, his hand rising to strike her. She reacted instantly, her body taking over. She grabbed the desk in front of her and lifted it with both hands, crashing it down on his feet. He gasped in pain, snarling. “Damn bitch!” he screamed. He shoved the desk forward with his foot. Lydia felt herself go down hard, pinned between the desk and her wheelchair. Her back hit her wheelchair, sending it flying out behind her. She crashed to the floor on her back. She quickly got up to a sitting position even as the man’s hand snaked out and caught her own head.

 Reacting fast she grabbed at his pants leg and lifted, reaching in for his own knife. Just as his hand clasped around her hair, she drew it out and plunged it into his leg. He released her, shouting in pain. She crawled away on all fours, trying to get to her feet, running past him, wanting to put space between her and him.

 Something hit her hard from behind. She went stumbling forward, hitting the at the front of the room. She whirled around at the same time as two hands grabbed her around her neck. Oh gods – no! No no no no no no! Not that. *Don’t choke her!*

 The hands squeezed, collapsing her wind pipe. Her air way was cut off. She reached up trying to fight the fingers, trying to pry them away desperately. She stared up into the manic eyes of her assailant, a cruel sneer on his lips.

 Before she could think of a way to save herself, suddenly there were two other hands fighting with Darian’s. “No!” Eldrich screamed. “Darian! She has a lung condition,” he shouted, desperately, fighting with the man’s fingers. “You’ll kill her! She’s sick. Stop it! You’re killing her!” he screamed the last words out at the top of his lungs, hitting at the man’s hands now.

 The man released. Lydia went down hard to the floor. She coughed desperately, tried to pull in air, but the air wasn’t her friend, nor were her lungs. Her lungs were burning and the hot, humid air of the day was like trying to breathe in molten lava. She turned over to her knees and coughed hard, fighting to pull in what air she could. In the background she heard metal sliding across the wood floor and the shuffling of feet. Seconds later, her mask fell on the floor close to her. She seized it and pressed it to her face.

 She managed to only get a few whiffs in before she doubled over, spitting up all over the floor. Tears leapt to her eyes at the sight. There was blood. There was definitely blood. Oh gods…

 She closed her eyes, desperate to block out the sight. She heard Eldrich shouting suddenly. “B-blood? Lydia? Darian, you fucking asshole! Lydia, do you need the hospital?” Eldrich sounded panicked.

 “Hospital?” Darian growled.

 “She’s sick!” Dennis’s voice screamed. “She’s dying! Her lungs are bad. She has trouble breathing *normally*. You just went and choked her!”

 Darian’s voice was thick with pain as he spoke, “I’ll be sure to send her flowers for her funeral. Damn bitch, look what the fuck she did to my leg. She had better pray that she dies before I get my hands back on her.”

 Slowly, bit by bit her medicine worked its way into her lungs. Lydia wiped away at the sweat on her forehead as she finally managed to regain control of herself. She looked up and found herself staring into the panicked eyes of Eldrich. He kept looking from her back to Darian – who was still busy wrapping his leg up.

 *“He comes near me again,”* she snarled in Eldrich’s mind, *“I swear I’ll kill him.”*

 Eldrich’s eyes widened and he shook his head wildly, pressing his fingers to his lips. Lydia frowned. Silence? Why? That was just a link between them.

 Darian’s voice chuckled from his place at the desk. “You’ll kill me, huh, little girl?”

 A shudder went through Lydia’s body. What the hell… That – that had been a private link between her and Eldrich. She closed her eyes and searched through her mind and gasped. There was a link attached to Eldrich’s mind. A link that was connected to his speech channels that allowed them to communicate between links.

 She reached out and realized that the man had the same link connected to the other boys – and Kelly, who was whimpering in her desk, burying her face in her teddy bear.

 She frowned up at Eldrich and mouthed the word ‘Disconnect?’

 Eldrich shook his head wildly again, his eyes growing even wider.

 Lydia frowned and crawled up to her feet, getting into her wheelchair, her body shaking hard from exhaustion.

 Darian finished wrapping his leg at the same time. He reached down and picked up his ankle sheath and strapped it on over the bandage and pulled his pants leg down. He walked over to her. “How about we take care of that right now.”

 Lydia felt him reach out and connect his thought with hers. She glared up at him – and did a full and complete shutdown, severing all her channels of thoughts so all that remained was the meld link with Tsaul.

 The man glared down at her. “Open your mind back up, girl,” he growled.

 “Like hell,” she snapped. “While I’m at it – “ She reached out and severed the bonds between him and the four others.

 He grinned large and wide as he stared down at her. “Oh? Someone thinks they are going to be cute while they are here?”

 She leaned forward in her chair. “You have no right to enter anyone’s mind without their permission, and I certainly have not given you mine.”

 “How long will it take to break you,” he growled.

 Lydia’s eyes widened as she felt him pressing into her mind. It was an incredibly strong force. She gasped at the feel of it. She struggled up against the other side of her wall, willing it to remain closed. It was painful. All that existed was pain as he tried to force his way into her mind. She could feel her sanity warping and waning.

 She swallowed hard and done the next desperate thing she could do – she reached out and severed his meld link. He had only one.

 He stumbled back a single step, his eyes wide in surprise. She glared up at him. “The problem with Meldling powers is that you need to be *melded* for anything to work. Otherwise you are now just a pathetic normal human.”

 Darian leaned over and slapped her hard across her face. She gasped as stars leaped into her vision.

 “Lydia!” Eldrich shouted from somewhere far in the distance. “Stop it! You’re making it worse,” he begged.

 Darian grabbed her by the hair on the top of her head and yanked her head back. “We’re going outside, and I’m going to remeld with my dragon. When I do, I hope you are prepared, bitch.” He stood up and looked around the room. “Outside now!” he shouted.

 He whirled around walked back out the door. Lydia glared at him as he disappeared around the corner. “Pleasant asshole,” she growled, pulling her mask over her face, and securing her strap.

 “You’re insane!” Sean shouted as he jumped from his desk. “You have any idea what you just did. Now you’ve gone and pissed him off and made things ten times worse for the rest of us!”

 “You’ve no idea how strong he is, Lydia,” Dennis shouted as he also stood up and headed for the door. “His Meldling abilities… dammit. Damn you, Lydia!”

 Kelly went sobbing with Dennis out the door, holding on to the bottom of his uniform skirt. She looked across at Eldrich who was standing there, staring down at the floor with tears in his eyes. She leaned forward. “Are you ok?”

 “Am *I* ok?” he shouted, whirling on her. “I thought he was killing you. I thought you were dying right then and there. There was blood! Oh gods, Lydia, are you alright?”

 “Pissed. I’m pissed off. I’m fine, but I’m not going to tolerate him treating me like that or anyone else.”

 He walked over to her and grabbed the arms of her wheelchair, leaning his face into hers. “You will! You will because he’s much stronger, Lydia. You have no idea what this guy is capable of. There’s things that he can do that he doesn’t teach us. Things that I don’t think even Ferrace knows how to do. It was a simple request, Lydia. All you had to do was sit and be quiet. Why? Why couldn’t you do it?” He shook his head. “Instead you fucking stuck him with his own knife! He’s going to make you regret doing that.”

 He stood up and stomped out the door, leaving her alone. She drew a breath in, wincing at the pain. Gods, how she longed to be home.

 She wheeled herself out the school, following after the group.

 She had barely made it outside when she gasped. She felt Darian attacking her mind again. She tried to fight it and threw herself up against the wall that she had created that shielded her from him – but it crashed down. Darian had shattered it with one magnificent blow. She gasped at the feel of a group link being connected.

 Damn him! She reached out to sever it – and stopped.

 She blinked and looked around her wildly in astonishment. Suddenly she was not sure where she was at all. The scenery had changed. Instead of being almost outside, she was now inside what looked like a church. She blinked as she looked around her wildly. Where was she?

 And… what had she been doing?

 She swallowed hard at the sound of a church organ playing out a slow, droll melody. She looked up and realized that there were people sitting within the church pews. She swallowed hard at the sound of crying, a strange feeling creeping up her body.

 She wheeled herself forward, slowly, going up the main church aisle. Her heart froze at the sight of a white casket. Bouquets and decorations of white lilies decorated every inch surrounding the casket.

 As she wheeled herself forward, she looked around at the faces seated with the pews. She could see her friends from school. They were all crying hard into handkerchiefs. She continued to roll by and was stopped by an even more frightening sight. Erica. And the twins. They, too, were seated in the delicate oak pews. The twins were hugging Erica tightly. It wrenched her heart. She looked to her other side and found Landon and Tanya, and Conner, too.

 She finally reached the end of the pews, almost up to the dais. She looked to her right and stopped at the sight of her parents. Her little baby brother in her mother’s arms, and both of them in her father’s. Her mother and father were sobbing.

 But none was more chilling than the sound of another voice crying. She looked over to her left and found two boys seated there. Tanis bent in prayer, tears streaming down his face. And beside him was Hugh. Hugh had his face in his hands. He was sobbing so loudly it almost drowned out the music.

 Her heart frozen in fear, she wheeled herself slowly up to the casket to peer inside.

 It was herself. She was laying there inside the casket dressed in a beautiful pink satin dress. Her hands were folded over her heart, a blanket of lilies laying over her body.

 She screamed at the top of her lungs, the sound cutting through her throat. She screamed until she couldn’t scream anymore. And screamed more then.

 And suddenly it was all gone. That vicious funeral scene fell away like a chalk painting being washed away. She found herself still sitting in the doorway to the school. She could see Darian and the four students lined up in front of him. The four of them were staring at her with alarmed, frightful looks, while Darian was wearing a wide, vicious grin.

 Lydia reached up with a shaking hand towards her face. She could feel tears streaming down her face.

 “How’d you enjoy your worst nightmare, sweetheart,” Darian growled. “Heh, maybe you’d like to share with us. Tell us what it was all about and what you saw.”

 “Y-you did that?” she gasped. She felt sick to her stomach.

 “I did. Pleasant experience, wasn’t it? Maybe you’ll think twice next time before you decide to plunge a knife in my leg again. I could have made it even worse for you, too. You *will* keep my link in place. I will take from you only what I find necessary.”

 She blinked. “W-wait, you formed a group link, and you’re not in pain?”

 He smirked. “The links that I form can avoid things like that. I do not need to enter your pain center if I don’t wish to. That is the true power of a Meldling. Maybe one day you’ll figure out how to do it on your own.”

 She glared at him. “Because you’re not going to teach us even though you were sent up here to do just that?”

 “I’m here to teach you basics. Whatever else you learn after that is your own business. That would be like giving away my own trade secrets.”

 She swallowed. She wondered if it was normal to want to hate someone as much as she did this guy right now. She herself could only ever think of wanting to teach someone. To pass on the knowledge and skill that she had. To give someone the same opportunities that she had. This man obviously did not share that desire.

 She could feel her anger rising again, but she swallowed it back. No. She was not going to let it cloud her judgment. She was observant. She would from this guy whether he wanted to teach her or not.

 “So, *Lydia*,” he growled out her name. “Why don’t you come out here and join us and let’s get this over with. Front and center.”

 She reached down to her wheels with shaking hands, licking her lips. She pulled in her control. He grinned as she rolled down to join the other four. Gods she wanted to sink her knife into him again. This was going to be a very, very long three weeks.

#

 “What are you doing?” Eldrich asked from the middle of the room.

 He was busy slashing at the air with his spear, repeating the same series of moves that she had instructed him to repeat.

 “I’m trying to figure out his linking technique,” she muttered distractedly, chasing the links through her mind.

 “You better leave it alone,” he warned. “If he feels you messing with it, he’ll send you another unpleasant thought.”

 She was leaned up against Tsaul. The dragon had his lap in hers. Now and again she would reach down and pet him absently. It had been two days since Darian had joined. There was a black mark on the left side of her face from where he had punched her earlier that day. So far the things he was teaching was simply just basics. Group linking, mostly.

 Group linking had went about as badly as she had expected. He had enjoyed every second of her connecting with Dennis. When she refused to connect with anyone else that’s when he had punched her. When she had still refused he had sent her through another nightmare episode. The second one her holding Hugh’s dead body in her lap. When she finally came back to he had moved on out of boredom.

 She was getting pissed off.

 “So what’s he going to teach us today, I wonder”

 “Melding,” Eldrich answered. “You better get used to the idea that you are going to have to disconnect from Tsaul. If you show a weakness to it he will keep you removed from you dragon. I’m warning you, Lydia. Just do what he says quickly.”

 Tsaul lifted his head and stared down at her. “I could eat him,” he suggested. “How about fry him?”

 She sighed and reached up to hug him. “Don’t tempt me. Personally, I’d rather sink my knife back into him a few times.” She clicked her tongue. “I almost wish I had stayed connected with Ayvra a little longer and learned more things from her. I think I could have really used the knowledge for this situation,” she muttered. Tsaul sent her disgust at that thought. She laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. You know – maybe we should introduce the two of them. I almost feel like they were *made* for each other.”

 “Who’s Ayvra?” Eldrich asked.

 She shook her head. “Nevermind. You really don’t want to know.”

 Eldrich stopped and glared at her. “I hate secrets,” he snapped.

 “It’s not a secret. Just a horrible memory that I’d rather not share. There’s some knowledge you’re better off not having.” He gave her a wounded expression. She rolled her eyes. “Alright, Eldrich. Ayvra is short for Ayvra’mynthia.”

 “That’s a mouthful of a name. Sounds dragon.”

 She nodded. “It’s a dragon that inhabits Dragon Valley which isn’t all that far from here.”

 “Oh! I know that spot. My countrymen were pretty pissed off when someone your country managed to get a barrier set up in there. It’s never been possible before because the dragons there used to attack humans.”

 She nodded. “I did that,” she said. “There was a dragon in there. They called it a Crystal Dragon because of the way it looks. Gods, the beast is huge.” She swallowed hard, going back through the awful memories. She buried her face in her hands. “It’s… it’s not a dragon you would ever want to meet. N-normal humans can’t speak with it. They brought me out there to try to talk with it since Meldlings are able to hear things from dragons that normal people can’t.”

 Eldrich dropped his spear and walked across to her. He took in her pained expression. “I take it the event did not go so well.”

 She swallowed and shook her head. “No,” she breathed. “It didn’t. It turned out that the dragon was a Meldling Dragon.”

 He blinked at her stunned. “T-there’s a Meldling Dragon?” he asked, excitement entering his voice. “There’s a dragon that only we can align with?”

 “Eldrich – you would not want to meld with this thing.” Tears slipped from her eyes. “It… it forced its meld link on me. It’s special. Meldlings cannot force themselves to connect with her, but once connected only the human can break it. I… I had no desire for it, but it took me anyways.” She swallowed hard. “That damn dragon forced its way into my mind and tore my meld link. Oh gods, it was painful.”

 Eldrich frowned. “Lydia – I’ve melded with tens if not hundreds of dragons. There’s nothing painful about melding with another dragon.” He grinned. “Actually, it’s kinda pleasant.”

 She shook her head. “Not this dragon, Eldrich. There was nothing but pain involved. Even with me and my lungs… this pain was on a whole different level. And once it was connected with me… I think it did things to my meld link. I couldn’t disconnect with it. I tried so hard but it refused. There was nothing but pain involved with me trying to sever it. And then, you think Darian is bad? Ayvra was far worse. The things that she would show me… She insisted that I meld with other dragons – even take dragons away from other Riders. I did everything I could to fight her. She would do things like eat dragons in front of me or threaten my friends. She could take over the minds of all the dragons in her five mile radius. She’s… she’s the one who taught me how to take full control over so many dragons and the one who taught me how to silence dragon minds with a single thought.”

 He shook his head. “I don’t get it, Lydia. If she was teaching you things, why the hell would you want to disconnect? Just learn from it. I would have.”

 Tsaul growled. “You don’t understand that beast, boy. She wasn’t giving Lydia any choices. She did not care. She did not like humans. Lydia was a pet to her. Even worse were some of things that she was doing to Lydia’s mind.”

 Lydia swallowed and nodded. “It… it was eating me away. At the end I actually went psychotic. I… I wasn’t me anymore.” She took a deep breath, swallowing hard. “Ayvra offered me something. I’ve always felt so weak. If I took her offer she would fix that. I took it. I was so mentally drained at that point I took her offer. In return she took away my weakness. I no longer felt love. I no longer cared about anyone. It was all gone. Everything I ever cared about. I even attacked my boyfriend and my partner Landon. Hurt them.”

 “W-what happened? How did you return?”

 She smiled and a sob almost choked her. “M-my boyfriend… H-he… He prepared to sacrifice himself to the dragon. To see Ayvra almost about to kill him – no. I didn’t accept that. I couldn’t accept that. I broke free of Ayvra’s grasp. I’m still not sure what I did exactly, but somehow whatever I did… it made me more powerful. I’m able to go beyond the five mile radius. I’m able to control so many more dragons than I should. Things like that.” She smirked. “I stopped Ayvra. The dragon had lost her control over me. Enraged she flew off and tried to hurt the army that was on her lands. When I got there… it was a bloodbath. So many people had died. In the end, though, I managed to figure out how to sever Ayvra’s meld link. She had promised me that if I did that, if I figured that out, she would let me go and let me do whatever I wanted. I could have her lands and even now, if I want, I could still call on her to do my bidding. Trust me, I didn’t even think twice before getting the hell out of there and leaving Ayvra behind. There’s something seriously wrong with that dragon. Every now and again… sometimes… it still feels like she’s in my mind.”

 Eldrich nodded, staring down at her. “Damn. No wonder you don’t want to remember that. I’m sorry, Lydia.”

 She shook her head. “It’s… it’s over now. I’m trying to put it behind me. That lasted for about a month and a half. So… dealing with Darian for three weeks… it’s going to be cake. He can enjoy sending me all the nightmares he wants, but none of them compare to what I’ve already been through. He’s just using a group link.” She smirked. “He should call me back later when he figures out how to do things with the meld link.”

 Eldrich grinned. “How the hell do you do that?”

 She laughed. “How do I do what?”

 “Smile like that? You tell me that awful story – are going through the shittiest situation in the world – and even now you somehow manage to find a way to smile.”

 She shrugged. “I don’t know. My friends wonder the same thing. Maybe after you’ve slain death as much as I have it’s easy to smile about anything.” She shook her head. “Personally, I think it’s just because I refuse to give in to self-pity. I wasted three precious years of my life on it and I’m not going to do it again.” She looked out the cave entrance. “It’s starting to lighten up out there. We should probably be heading back in.”

 Eldrich turned and nodded. “You’re right. Come on. Let’s go see what wonderful fun Darian has planned for us today.”

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 Darian had them all lined up again outside. There were at least ten dragons laying around them. She swallowed hard and stared back at Tsaul who refused to come any closer. She looked forward again and struggled to listen to what Darian was saying.

 “We’re Meldlings. That’s what we do. If there’s no other basic function that we have in our minds it’s that. We can meld with any and every dragon that we please. Riderless or not. We can touch our meld links or other people’s. We can do exactly what no other human can do, what only the dragons can do. For a Meldling, there’s no greater pleasure than connecting with all the dragons you want. You see these dragons around here. That’s what we’re going to practice today. You’re going to sever whatever meld links you currently have in place and you’re going to meld with these dragons out here. A Meldling’s true power only comes from its first dragon. Without being connected to a single dragon we are no different than any other human. Our first dragon is the only one we have to touch – to meld just like any other human. After that you we can connect to as many dragons as we want with a single thought without touch. Our only restriction: we have to have their attribute. Because of that it’s imperative to be able to know the dragon within a split second. To figure out that quickly if we should even bother. Those are the lessons you will learn today.” He looked around at the five of them. “Disconnect,” he ordered.

 Lydia felt her breath quicken. She could feel tears welling up into her eyes. She wanted desperately to reach out her mind towards Tsaul but resisted. Not with Darian in her mind. Not at the cost of revealing how much this was going to hurt her – hurt them.

 Licking her lips she shut her eyes hard and reached inwards and severed the meld link with Tsaul.

 She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw up. For the first time in three years she was alone. There was no Tsaul in the back of her mind. There was no wide open space for her to reach back into. She was… human. Neither a Rider nor a Meldling.

 It took every ounce of her strength to not jump out of her wheelchair and run over to Tsaul.

 Darian looked across at them, his eyes lingering on her for just a moment more. He pushed back her tears – don’t let him see. Don’t let him see how painful this way,” she told herself.

 Finally he looked away and nodded. “Good,” he growled. “Kelly, you first. Step up and meld with one of the dragons out here.”

 Damn… they were going to have to *sit like this*? She swallowed hard and pulled her emotions in check. Deal with it, Lydia, she shouted at herself.

 She watched as the small girl went up to one of the dragons and reached out to it. Lydia watched as the dragon nodded its head at her respectfully. Judging my Kelly’s grin the dragon had melded with her.

 Darian nodded. “Good. Now, standing there, reach out for another dragon.”

 Kelly, smiling wide, closed her eyes. A few seconds later she reopened them. “It’s so tingly,” she said giggling.

 Darian glared at her. “And do you remember what that part is called?” he asked, though Lydia didn’t really think he actually cared if she knew or not.

 “Melding Bliss!” she said, jumping around excitedly.

 “Exactly. It’s an energy charge that we get when we’ve melded. If you are ever feeling tired or run down or need an extra boost of strength – meld. The more dragons you meld with at a time, the more pronounced the effect. I’ve once went two weeks straight without sleep. Disconnecting and reconnecting with dragons. It doesn’t matter what dragon or how many times. You will always get that same energy charge. Now, Kelly, meld with three more dragons at one time.”

 Kelly closed her eyes again. When she reopened them, she began hopping around excitedly, giggling unrestrained. Darian rolled his eyes. “Good,” he growled. “Now, disconnect and get back in line. Sean! You next.”

 Down the line they went like that. Lydia was beginning to feel sick to her stomach. She wanted to reconnect with Tsaul so badly. But of course she was the last in the line. She almost jumped out of her seat when Eldrich returned, a funny grin on his face. “Your turn, Lydia.”

 She swallowed and stared out at the dragons. Of course, now the problem was that not a single one of these dragons was Tsaul. Not that she could blame him. He did *not* want anyone else’s mind in his. She sighed and rolled up to the nearest dragon. She reached out to start to touch it.

 The dragon turned to her and hissed loudly, a low growl in its throat. Lydia jerked back quickly. The dragon stood up and wandered away. What the heck… It had just connected with all four of the others, she thought bitterly. She shook her head and went up to the next dragon. Except the same thing happened here, too.

 Darian clicked his tongue. “Damn dragons,” he growled. “And damn you, Lydia. It’s your death scent.”

 She turned and looked back at him. “B-but no dragon’s ever made a complaint about it before.”

 “Because you were melded already. They don’t want to be your principal dragon.” He jabbed his thumb back behind him. “Go get your dragon – *now*.”

 She almost felt relief at the words. She rolled off in the direction of Tsaul who was already rising to his feet and coming over to her. She hugged his face tightly even as he reached out with his meld link to connect with her. Instantly her mind was opened back up and everything was right with the world again.

 “Now get back over here,” Darian snapped.

 She could already feel Darian reached out and reconnecting with her again. She patted Tsaul gently before rolling back towards the group of dragons.

 “Now, choose another damn dragon to meld with and let’s get on with our day,” he commanded.

 She nodded. She chose a dragon at random in her mind and reached out with her meld link, severing it in two, and connected with with the dragon.

 She gasped as the link clicked in place. An insane charge swept through her body. It was exotic. “Oh my gods…” she gasped. It felt so good it was almost painful. She buried her face in her hands, trembling. Her mind was instantly consumed with the dragon’s thoughts. She was pulled in sharply, as if she had been pushed from behind. She lost herself in its thoughts. She licked her lips and gave up resistance. It felt too good. She didn’t care. She wanted more.

 “Lydia!” Tsaul roared in her mind. “Lydia! That’s too far,” she growled. “S-someone! Disconnect her. Now!”

 Lydia gasped as suddenly the link was gone. She was thrown back into her own body and her own thoughts. “What the *fuck* are you doing?” she growled before she caught herself. She gasped and looked around.

 She was kneeling. She was kneeling on the ground. She winced at the pain that she felt in her knees. She sat back and looked at them. They were scratched. She must have fallen out of her wheelchair.

 And then suddenly she felt sick. Sick to her stomach and to her heart. She groaned, burying her face in her hands. She swallowed and begged for her stomach to regain its control.

 “What the *hell* was *that*?” she heard Darian’s voice.

 She looked up even as he came across to her. She gasped as he reached down and grabbed a fist full of her hair and pulled. She quickly got to her feet, shouting in pain. And then she felt Darian in her mind. She felt him as he reached out and touched her meld link. She gasped in pain at the touch and immediately shut down all of her connections.

            Darian raised his fist and slammed it across her cheek, throwing her back down into the dirt. “You don’t fucking learn, do you?” he shouted. “Stop throwing me out, bitch. What the hell… there’s something different with your meld link. That wasn’t normal.”

            She sat up, giggling. Energy flooded through her. She realized she was still in the throes of her bliss. She could almost feel the edge of insanity calling out to her. She licked her lips. Gods that boundary looked so appetizing. Nothing but strength on the other side. She could sense it.

            She reacted and pulled her mind away quickly. She swallowed and got to her feet, shaking. “Oh gods, I feel sick,” she mumbled.

            Stumbling, she started walking away. Her head felt like it was full of cotton. She stumbled and fell again. This time she really was sick. She doubled over and threw up all of the contents of her stomach. She heard Tsaul growling in her mind and she winced at the feel of it. “That damn dragon,” he hissed.

            “What is wrong with her, dragon?” Darian shouted. “That was not normal. I have no idea what she felt but that was not a normal melding. I don’t even think that was normal bliss that she felt.”

            “No. No it wasn’t. A dragon took over her mind last year and did something with her link, trying to push her towards insanity. There must be some lasting effects still there.”

            Darian was silent for a while. Then she heard him say, “Is there nothing easy with this girl,” he growled. She heard him walk up behind her and reached down for her arm. “Get up!” he snapped. She gasped as he grabbed her arm roughly and yanked her to her feet. He threw her back towards the dragons. “Do it again. Do it and let’s see if you can get it right this time.”

            Lydia bulked and gagged at the thought. She stood there, her thoughts swimming through her mind, unable to focus on anything. “N-no,” she gasped. “No. Please. I… I don’t think that’s a very good idea right now.”

            She gasped in pain as she felt Darian rip into her mind – forcing through her wall. Gods, how the hell was he so strong. It was really starting to piss her off. She was no weakling and she did not appreciate being treated as such. She felt him reconnect his group link, connecting only with a particular point of her mind. She blinked. Something flooded through in her over-charged mind. She tilted her head and frowned. Oh. That’s how he did it.

            “Does it sound like I’m giving you a choice, girl?” he growled. “If you have a problem with melding then we need to figure it out. This is *basic*.”

            She knuckled her forehead. He was right. She might hate it but she could see the sense in his words. She was a Meldling. If Ayvra had some done something to her melding link, she needed to figure it out. She swallowed and pulled herself together, chiding herself for her weakness.

           Gently this time. She could not go that deep. She turned to another dragon and reached out to it with her mind. She almost flinched as she felt the connect.

            This time she was ready. The effect was profound. Her mind was completely consumed with information passing between her and the dragon. Within seconds she knew everything that the dragon knew as it was her. She felt the dragon reach over and nuzzle her. It was so incredibly difficult to not reach in deeper. She felt so desperate for the knowledge of this dragon. She swallowed and backed up, shivering. “D-done,” she gasped.

            “Another,” Darian growled. “Three this time.”

            Lydia winced. She buried her face in her hand but she nodded. She wished her head would stop spinning.

            “Dammit, Darian!” she heard Eldritch shout. “She’s having serious problems, can’t you see that? Knock this off.”

            She stared through blurry eyes, tears filling them. She watched as Darian spun around and punched Eldritch hard in the stomach. The boy doubled over gasping.

[she gets mad at eldrich’s abuse and takes over darian’s dragon and assaults his own mind on an even deeper level than what his link does.]

            She watched as Darian once again drew his fist back, ready to pummel Eldrich again. Lydia shouted angrily at him and rushed forward, seizing his arm. “Stop it! Don’t hurt him.”

            Darian threw his arm back, yanking her off her feet. She fell hard to the ground, her air knocked out of her lungs. She sat up coughing desperately. She gasped as Darian grabbed her by her collar and pulled her up to her feet, almost choking her. He raised his hand and slapped her hard across her face. Lydia gasped and stumbled backwards, falling hard into the dirt.

            “That does it!” she screamed. “I’m sick of you!” she got to her feet, her hand clasped hard to her burning face.

            Darian grinned. “And what do you think you are going to do, little girl.”

            “Let’s see how you like a taste of your own medicine, Darian,” she growled. “Guess what I just learned how to do.”

            She reached into his mind and forced his mind into a hallucination of his own making, throwing in the emotion of fear, encouraging his mind in that direction.

            As soon as she did it, she cut the additional meld links along with his group link and sat back down in his wheelchair. She looked across at Darian who had started to scream and stumble back. She looked back across at the other four. “We can either stand here and watch him scream, or you can come with me and I’ll teach you exactly how to block what he does and how to do it.” She smirked. “It’s actually quite easy.”

            Sean gawked at her, staring between one and the other before shaking his head. “T-there’s something seriously wrong with you,” he growled. “How the hell did you figure it out. Two seconds ago you were throwing up and now you are standing there with your high and mighty attitude again.”

            She grinned and stared back at the dragon. “I had a little help figuring it out.” She shrugged. “Your choice. Personally, I’m getting sick of *him*,” she said pointing to Darian who was still screaming.

            She took her wheels in her hands and rolled off, Tsaul joining her, chuckling in her mind. A few minutes later, the four others, including Kelly, joined her, eager to learn.

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            Lydia groaned as she rubbed her eyes. Her lungs were burning. Her normal morning… gods she couldn’t wait to get home and have her glass machine treatment. She sat up and started coughing and froze. Someone was standing there at the edge of her bed.

            She screamed in panic as a hand reached out and grabbed her leg. She was pulled from her bed, hitting the floor hard. She struggled but it as hard to do with her already coughing so hard. The hand pulled her across the floor and away from the bed. She reach out and tried to snag the bedpost leg, trying to stop herself. The person swore – Darian. It was Darian!

            He walked around and stomped on her arms. She screamed in pain and this time he grabbed her by her hair, pulling her away from the bed and dragging her away from the beds where there was more space at the edge of the room. He turned her over on her back. “This is for humiliating me, bitch,” he growled.

            She watched in horror, still coughing desperately, as he brought his leg up and jammed it hard into her stomach. She didn’t even have the time or the ability to roll out of the way. Pain erupted through her stomach. The air in her lungs was pushed out. She gasped desperately trying to drag in air. She couldn’t even cough like this. But the air was hard to come.

            She heard voices and running footsteps in the distance. Eldrich’s voice cut through the darkness. “Stop it!” he shouted.

 There was another kick to her stomach, and then the sounds of a tussle. She looked up and saw Eldrich hanging from Darian’s neck, trying to pull him backwards. Darian stepped backwards hard, slamming into the wall behind them. Eldrich took the full force of the blow, caught between the wall and Darian’s body. He collapsed to the ground, gasping in pain.

 Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She couldn’t catch a breath. She watched with horror as the man returned to her. She swallowed and started for her pants leg, reaching in for her knife. He grinned and chuckled. “Oh no. I’m done. This should be more than enough,” he growled. “I hope you enjoy your own little living nightmare, Lydia,” he growled before turning around walking out of the room.

            Lydia gasped desperately, trying to drag in air, desperate for it. Pain flared through her body. Her lungs felt hot and restricted. “El,” she gasped in between coughs, not even able to say his full name, “t-tank,” she begged.

            Eldrich got his feet under him and stood up, running over to the tank she had beside her bed. He dragged it over to her with the mask attached to it. He handed her the mask. She pressed it to her face and waited. “T-turn it to right,” she explained.

            “That’s what I’m doing. Lydia, I think it’s empty.”

            She frowned. No way, she had hardly used it yesterday or last night. Whatever, she shook her head and pointed to the others across the room. Eldrich nodded and jumped up running over to grab one of them. He dragged it over and hooked up the tubing. Lydia watched him helplessly, still coughing desperately. Gods this was taking too long! Eldrich reached for the value and then swore. “I-it’s already turned.”

            She blinked and frowned, reaching over for the valve herself. She tried to turn it and was stunned by the tightness. No, it was already turned as far to the right as possible. Coughing hard, she got up to her feet, stumbling over to the tanks. She reached over to every single valve, checking them.

            “All…” Oh gods… all of them… every single one of the had been turned to the right. The medicine in them was gone… How many hours had they been like that? This had to have been down much earlier in the day!

            “S-saddle!” she gasped.

            It took a moment for Eldrich to catch on. He brought her wheelchair over to her and pushed her outside at a highrate of speed while she sat desperately coughing. Now and again she would double over and spit up over the side, but if Eldrich minded he did not make a show of it.

            “Tsaul!” he shouted.

            The dragon lifted his head and peered around at them with a small tilt to his head. “Lydia? What’s going on with her? Why doesn’t she have one of her tanks? She needs one.”

            “I know,” Eldrich snapped. “Darian sabotaged the ones inside. We need the ones in your saddle.”

            “Oh? Oh, dear… No. I don’t have them. Darian came by earlier last night and removed them. He said that Lydia wanted them inside.” He stood up and a low growl started in his throat. “What did he do?” he growled.

            That asshole! Oh gods… she needed her tanks. She… she didn’t have her medicine! She didn’t have her medicine and he had attacked her. Her lungs were in a desperate situation. She could feel her airways closing up. She turned around to look up at Eldrich with tears in her eyes. Eldrich stood there stunned. He looked up at Tsaul and then looked down at her. He started talking in his native tongue but whatever he was saying, she was sure it wasn’t something pretty.

            He gulped after regaining his anger. “W-what do we do?!” he shouted. “Is… Is Lydia going to die?”

            “She needs a medic,” Tsaul said. “Is there one in town?”

            Eldrich blanched. “No! You can’t take her into town. That’s too dangerous. There are people who try to kidnap us.”

            “I am *not* letting my Rider die!” Tsaul snarled.

            Lydia was starting to choke. She needed help. In the worst way. Terror filled every part of her mind. She was starting to see spots floating in front of her eyes.

            Eldrich swallowed. He reached down and helped her to her feet. “Come on, Lydia. Let’s get you on Tsaul. I’ll get you to the doctor’s.”

            Tsual turned to the side and laid down. Shaking and coughing, she managed to somehow climb up into the saddle, Eldrich helping her up. He climbed up behind her. “Alright, hurry, Tsaul, I’ll point you in the right location,” he said. In her mind she could feel him connecting with the dragon.

            Tsaul jumped up high into the air with a single mighty leap. Instead of his normal corkscrew maneuver, Tsaul soared up nice and easy, leveling out when he had enough height, and flapping gently with his mighty wings, but still soaring with great speed.

            Lydia’s lungs were now completely collapsed. The world around her was starting to go black.

            “Lydia? Lydia, you aren’t coughing,” Eldrich said behind her. He swallowed. “I-is that a good thing?”

            She wished she could answer him. Oh… she also wished she was buckled in. She wasn’t sure she was going to be able to hold on, and Eldrich wasn’t holding on to her. She closed her eyes, no longer able to hold on. Eldrich gasped as she started to slip. He caught her around her middle and pulled her back up into the saddle. “Hold on, Lydia,” he begged. “Please… please don’t die.”

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            Lydia’s eyes flickered open. She could feel a mask on her face. Smelled the sickly sweet smell of her medicine. She closed her eyes and allowed tears to slip down her cheeks. No. No no no no no. She did not recognize her location. Where was she? But more importantly – *when* was she? She swallowed, sitting up in the bed.

 Light streamed through the windows. It was really warm and humid. Midday. And it was summer still. That’s what it told her. She swallowed and nodded. Ok, this was a good thing, she told herself. That told her that even if she had slept for a prolonged period of time it was nothing extraordinary in length.

 “Lydia?”

 Relief surged through her at the sound of a familiar voice. Eldrich. She turned to him. He was staring at her with wide eyes – surprise and delight filling them. “Oh gods, you’re awake. You’re alive.”

 She reached up and pulled the mask off her face. “W-what day is it?”

 He frowned, confused by the question. “Day?”

 “Yes. D-did I sleep a long time? I… I didn’t go into a coma, did I?”

 He shook his head. “No. No coma. It’s the same day.”

 A wave of relief washed over her. She threw off her blankets and looked down at her hand with her IV. “Hand me a tissue,” she commanded.

 Eldrich frowned at her odd request but walked over and grabbed one and handed it to her. “You should get back in bed, Lydia,” he said.

 She ignored him. She pressed the tissue to the IV sight, undid the tape, and ripped the needle out. Eldrich gasped. “Lydia!” he shouted. “What are you doing?”

 She looked up at him. “I hate hospitals,” she said simply, while holding the tissue to her hand. She jumped down out of the bed and started sifting through the drawers and cupboards. Finally she managed to find gauze and tape. She pushed the gauze pad to the sight and taped it off, ripping the tape off with her mouth.

 “Lydia, you should get back in bed,” Eldrich argued.

 “No thanks,” she answered simply, returning the items to their spots in the cupboards. “Where’s my clothes?” she asked.

 “Lydia! They had a damn tube stuck in your throat barely an hour ago. Your heart even stopped. Get back in bed.”

 She turned to look at him and gave him a large smile. “Oh? Is that all that happened this time? Damn, Eldrich. What are you going to be like if you ever see me go through a real medical crisis.”

 *“You stopped breathing!”* he shouted. “I’d say that constitutes a serious medical crisis.”

 She looked around and found her clothes but there was no place for her to change away from Eldrich. “Turn around,” she demanded.

 “No! You’re going to get back in bed.”

 She shrugged and turned around. “Suit yourself.” She reached down, grabbing the bottom of the gown, and pulled it up over her head. Behind her she heard Eldrich hiss and heard the squeak of his boot as he spun around on the heel.

 “You really have no shame, do you?” he growled.

 “Actually, my boyfriend normally calls me a prude,” she says as she pulled her uniform on. “Oh… well, I guess that’s actually my ex-boyfriend. Either way, I’m not in the mood for shyness. Actually, I’m seriously pissed off,” she snapped, her voice a low growl. “I don’t appreciate being made that weak.”

 “I tried to warn you, Lydia. I tried to tell you what sort of guy he is.”

 She nodded as she pulled up her zipper. “He’s about to find out what sort of girl I am.”

 “Lydia… you’re only going to make things much worse.”

 She smirked. “No. I seriously doubt that.” She lifted her pants leg and buckled her ankle sheath in place, and then did the same for the other leg.

 Eldrich turned his head slightly, afraid to turn around. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found her dressed. He turned around to her. “Lydia, just let it go. Just survive this.”

 “Nobody! Nobody has the right to push me that far and get away with it!” she shouted at him. “I’ll not do it.”

 “Lydia –“

 She crossed over to him, grabbing his chest and pushing him backwards until he hit the wall. “He thinks he can treat me like that? It’s time you see me in action, Eldrich. Watch. You might learn something about being a fighter. *Never* let fear control you.”

 She whirled around and picked up the tank sitting on the floor and pointed to another one sitting not too far away. “Grab that one,” she demanded.

 She didn’t wait to see if he would obey. She opened the door to the room and stepped out. She looked around to get her bearings before marching out. Someone shouted something at her, but she didn’t stop to see what they were shouted as she exited the building.

 *“Tsaul. Come.”*

 Tsaul chuckled as he came around the building to greet her. “A little testy this morning, aren’t we?”

 She grinned at her dragon. “What do you think?” she said with a smirk. She reached up and slid the tanks into their bags, climbing the stirrups. On the other side, Eldrich slid the other tank into the other bag before he too jumped up and slid behind her.

 She turned to him even as she slid her front straps into their buckles. “Better hold on.”

 “To what?” he demanded.

 She grinned. “Me.”

 “Forget it!” he snapped.

 She shrugged as she turned around. “Suit yourself.” She leaned forward, placing her hands on Tsaul’s neck in front of the saddle. “Tsaul! Fly!”

 Tsaul leaped up into the air with a mighty bound. Behind her she heard Eldrich gasp and immediately reached around her, grabbing ahold of her middle. She smirked inwardly. Tsaul corkscrewed through the air, soaring up into the heavens before he opened his wings. Undulating his body, he flapped them once and they soared through the air at a high rate of speed.

 *“Holy crap this guy’s fast,”* Eldrich gasped in her mind.

 Tsaul chuckled. *“You think this is fast, boy? Ha! You’ve not see anything.”*

 *“Let’s show him what a real dragon can do, Tsaul,”* she said, excitement rushing through her body.

 Tsaul gave one more mighty flap of his wings, pressing them hard to his body. He dipped down, angling his body in a downwards slope, allowing gravity to push him to a higher rate of speed.

 Eldrich pushed his body down as hard as he could on top of hers, trying to get out of the drag of the wind. *“Oh my gods… make it stop! Too fast! This is* way *too fast!”* he panicked.

 Lydia laughed. Though he was panicking, she could sense the adrenaline rushing through his body. Felt the excitement pumping through his blood. Eldrich was enjoying every second of this. Not that she needed to be a Meldling to sense that.

 But all too soon it ended. But she had needed that. It had pushed her anger aside and cleared her mind. She was thinking more clearly now. They landed a small distance away from the school. She slid off of Tsaul’s back, unbuckling herself, landing with a hard oomph on the ground.

 She turned to Eldrich as he jumped down. “In a way, I should be thanking Darian,” she said with a small smirk. This took Eldrich by surprise and he gave her a curious look. Her smirk stretched into a wide smile. “The medicine they give me during one of my episodes is a lot stronger than my tanks.” She took a deep breath. “Gods, I haven’t been able to breath this deeply since before I got here.”

 “Lydia? What are you planning to do? You aren’t seriously thinking of fighting him?” he asked incredulously.

 “Yes. Yes, I am.”

 “Are you insane?! He’s older than you and far *far* bigger than you.”

 She grinned. “Isn’t that the best part? Gods, this is going to be fun. Tsaul. Time to have some fun.”

 “Looking forward to it, my Rider,” he said a low growl in his throat.

 She turned and began walking towards the school. She could see Darian standing there with Sean, Dennis, and Kelly in front of him. He was shouting something at the top of his lungs. Dragons lay sprawled out in the yard around him.

 One by one the dragons turned and looked up at her. Slowly they rose to their feet and began to walk towards her, joining and making a crowd of dragons behind her and Tsaul.

 Darian became aware suddenly that something was going on. Tsaul stopped and she continued to walk forward even as Darian turned around to face her. Behind her she could see the three stunned faces of the others. Sean’s eyes were wide as he took in the sight of the dragons behind her and then her herself.

 A slow cruel grin spread across Darian’s face. “Oh? Look who’s alive,” he said with a laugh. “I didn’t expect you to be here breathing already.”

 “Haven’t you heard, Darian?” she growled. “I’m the Death Slayer. Death lost its control over me a long time ago.” She bent down and pulled her knives out of their sheathes beneath her pants legs, not looking away from him.

 He smirked. “You want to *fight*, girlie? Careful, you might cut yourself with those things.”

 She grinned widely. “Oh, I don’t think so. You see, I’ve been playing with these things for the past three years. I’m actually rather quite good at them.”

 Darian sneered. “That’s cute. A mail courier that thinks she knows how to use knives.”

 “Mail courier? Do what?” she said with a large grin. “Oh? That. You see, my superiors thought that it might be a better idea that I kinda play up my illness. You see, I made a deal with them. For full access to my Meldling powers, they provide full medical accommodations so that I can be a *fighter*. They thought that it might be safer for me while I am here if I sit in my old wheelchair and play at being a sick dying girl. You see – they actually value skill. What a joke. I came here and no one even gives a damn about skill. Two fighters that hardly know the correct end of a spear. This *dying girl* knows more about fighting than you ever will. I swear to the gods I am so sick of acting weak in my wheelchair but even more I am sick of *you*.”

 “You come out of the hospital after almost dying and think you actually stand a chance against me, bitch?”

 She grinned. “Kinda funny, isn’t it? Would you believe that after having a tube shoved down my throat and medicine delivered to my lungs directly has a greater effect than just sniffing it through my mask? I’ve not breathed this good in days. Now, *draw your weapons*,” she growled.

 Darian burst out laughing. “Oh gods, you *are* full of yourself. I don’t have to take you out with my weapons. I’m a *Meldling*. I’ll let the dragons do all the work for me.”

 She felt Darian’s thought as it was sent out through the channels between all the dragons. It was a soft thought. The suggestive command that Eldrich had taught her. Lydia did not even bother to turn around to stare at the dragons behind her.

 Not a single dragon made a move against her.

 Darian frowned and repeated the command. Nothing.

 She grinned wide. “What’s the matter, *Meldling*? There a problem?”

 Darian’s face twisted into a sneer. He took a step forward. Behind her there was one single united roar that shook the very ground. Darian gasped and stumbled back. Dragon heads began to appear around her, lowered to the ground. Growling and hissing.

 “H-how… you aren’t even connected with them?” he gasped.

 She shook her head. “No. I’m not. *This* is their choice. Didn’t you know, Darian? That in addition to controlling them we are also called Dragon Friends? Dragon Tamers? What need have I to control them? They will do my bidding without me even asking them to.”

 Darian snarled. She felt him reach out and force a link with three of them. She cut the links instantly with a single thought. “Pathetic,” she growled. “Let me show you how it’s done. You want to force dragons to do your bidding? Don’t just stop at three or four.”

 She reached out with her mind and took control of every single dragon behind her. She filed them around her, splitting into two groups, one of her left and one her right. The groups fanned out, encircling the area, growling low and viciously. Darian glared at them and made several feeble attempts at reaching out to them, trying to force a link. Doing what he could to slam against the wall she had built up around them. He was good. He was strong. She had to give him respect, but between her and the dragons themselves – there was nothing he could do to get through the dragon minds.

 She licked her lips enjoying his frustration. He spun around to her and narrowed his eyes. “So, you truly think you have the upperhand. I’ll admit these tricks are impressive,” he growled. “But you know nothing about the power of hallucinations.”

 “Another fun daydream, Darian?” She felt him reach out for her mind. She could feel him trying to make a connection. She clicked her tongue. “Honestly. You should for something more real. More immediate. Let me show you something a demented dragon taught me. I hope you enjoy it. I certainly did when she used it against me.”

 She reached out for his meld link, folded her mind around it, then engaged it.

 Darian gasped in pain. A scream ripped from his throat. He fell to the ground to his knees. She tightened her grip, increased the pain. He scratched at the ground.

 She walked up to him, placed her knife to his face. “How many times have you hurt these people?” she growled. “How many punches and kicks? How’s this feel, Darian? What do you think of this pain, you sick asshole?”

 She raised her knife and slashed it across his face. Blood went skittering across the ground. She turned around and walked away. Licking her lips, she released him.

 “I’m going to kill you!” Darian roared.

 She did not turn around. She waited. She could see him in her mind’s eye. Saw him draw out his blades. Heard him rush her. She took a single step to the side and dropped to her knees, slashing out with her own blades to the side. He rushed past her, his knife swinging harmlessly above her head, but hers cut deeply into his side.

 She jumped back up to her feet and danced back, putting space back between them. He spun around. She grinned at him, flipping one of her blades up in the air and catching it. “Just let me know when you’ve had enough, Darian.”

 Like a charging bull he rushed her. She dropped to the ground and swung her legs out, catching his feet. He fell hard to the ground on his back, his leg taken out from under him. She jumped back up and rushed to his left hand, kicking his blade out of his hand, sending it skittering out across the ground and out of his reach. She danced back as he tried to make a grab for her.

 “Come on, Darian!” she shouted. “You’re making this almost too easy. I was hoping for at least *some* sort of challenge. Of course… I have a twenty one year old friend who rushes me with a battle axe. I guess a twenty five year old with two knives can hardly compare after that sort of match.”

 Darian got to his knees, snarling at her. She waited for him, expecting him. Suddenly he reached down and grabbed at handful of dirt and threw it at her. She gasped in shock as the dirt hit her hard in the face, instantly blinding her.

 Blind, she quickly danced back, struggling to clear her eyes, but not losing control. Not panicking. Her eyes stinging, she made out just enough through her pained vision to see him raise his knife and swipe downwards at her. She danced quickly to the sound, pivoting on her feet. She practically twirled around him, slashing out blindly at where she imagined his side would be. She was rewarded with the feel of her blades slicing into flesh – two seconds before a blow connected with her skull. She stumbled backwards, spinning around and falling to the earth.

 Her ears rang and she was seeing stars. Quickly she batted at her eyes, trying to dig out the dirt, and tried to pull her thoughts together. She heard the feet approach her from behind. Somewhere Eldrich shouted her name.

 Acting quickly, she rolled her body forward, flipping head head over heels out of the way. She gasped at the feel of a knife slashing across her back. She rolled to her feet and whirled around, dropping into her stance, her muscles tensed, expecting the worst.

 She was just in time. Darian was running towards her, swinging his single blade at her in an upwards slice. She grinned. She caught the blade in one of hers. She could feel the strength behind the blade. Gods, Darian was strong. Too strong. He relied on his muscles too much. He didn’t care about wit. Did not appreciate that Lydia *knew* he could easily overpower her.

 “Rule #1!” she shouted. “Turn your weaknesses into strengths!” she screamed.

 She released her hold on the knife. Darian, who had expected resistance, stared at her with a startled expression. His knife and arm flew upwards unimpeded. She dropped to her the ground, swinging her legs out. She caught the back of his knees. He went sprawling forward into the dirt.

 Calmly, Lydia walked over to him and placed the point of her blade against the back of his neck, digging it just slightly into his unprotected skin. Blood welled up beneath the point. “Give me a reason to kill you, Darian,” she growled. “You see there’s a difference between me and you. You see yourself so much stronger than everyone else. Everyone is so beneath you. Especially a flippant, arrogant, little dying girl.” She dug the knife point in a little harder with each of the three words. “Me, personally, I see people. I see their weaknesses, their strengths, their potential, and sometimes even their own disgusting nature. I’m *stronger* than you will ever be. Go ahead. Try as many times as you want to kill me. Destroy every single one of my tanks. Take away my medicine. Hit me and punch me. It changes *nothing*. You are not a being even worthy of being called a Meldling much less a fighter. You ever come near me or any of these others while we’re here, I swear I’ll cut you into tiny strips and feed you to the dragons.”

 She pulled the knife free of his skin and walked away across the yard where her other knife had landed. She reached down to pick it up.

 “Lydia!” Eldrich screamed.

 She whirled around in just enough time to see Darian standing up, aiming his blade. Her hand moved on its own. She lifted it and threw. Before Darian’s blade could leave his hand, hers hit his out of his hand, sending both flying through the air. Darian’s eyes widened. He lowered his hand and stared at it, amazed that it was not only empty but unharmed as well.

 She glared across at him. “Did you have anything else you wanted to try?” she growled. “No? I didn’t think so. Now, why don’t you go inside and get a dressing on that wound on your face.”

 Darian’s fists tightened at his side. “You better watch your back, girl,” he growled.

 “Don’t worry. I intend to. But Darian – I meant what I said. You ever strike me or one of these guys ever again, I swear I’ll slaughter you.

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 Lydia wiped her hands, standing up after placing the last tank down. There had been a shipment of new ones arrived a few hours ago. She had dragged them all inside of Eldrich’s cave with his help. She looked up at the dragon sitting inside the moss and grinned at it. “You going to be fine watching these for me?”

 The dragon nodded. “It will be delightful. Anything for Tsaul’s Rider. You can count on me. No one except you or Eldrich will be allowed to touch them.”

 She grinned and ran over to hug it. She turned around smiling but frowned as soon as her eyes fell on Eldrich. He was sitting in a corner with a spear in his lap, staring at the ground.

 “What’s wrong?” she asked.

 He looked up at her with a petulant look on his face. “Nothing,” he muttered bitterly.

 She sighed. “Look, Eldrich, I’m telling you – you’re going to be fine. I’ll protect you. Are you seriously going to remain mad at me for having done that to Darian?”

 “I’m not mad, Lydia,” he snapped. “Least ways… not at you.”

 “Well then, talk to me? What is it?”

 “I’m… I’m mad at myself. You see an obstacle and you think of nothing else but blasting through it. You never feared Darian, not once. Even after he nearly kills you you just stand up and say ‘I’m going to go kick this guy’s ass’. I’ve never done that. I see obstacles but I can never find my way around them. The only thing I’ve ever done is act like some punk kid taking my frustrations out on everyone and everything else. You – someone tells you you’re going to die and you’re like ‘Uh, no. Not today. Thanks and bye.’ You’ve done more in three years than I ever have in a my whole life time.”

 He swallowed and shook his head. “Lydia, after you leave, what’s going to happen to me? That’s going to be it. I’m going to be thrown back into the same situation as before I came here. What about next year? And the year after that? I have two more years of this. I’m only sixteen. I can make my decision any year I want, but I *still* have to come back to this place. After his humiliation, you think Darian is going to just go away? Next year it’s going to be even harder. And it’s not like I’m yelling at you. I would kill to see you do that again. But it’s just… there’s no end for me. You get to go home and this gets to be a bad nightmare for you. Just one more obstacle you had to overcome.”

 He looked up at her. “I-I almost wish that you had never come here. All you did is show me what I’m missing.” He laid his spear to his side and hugged his legs, tears welling up in his eyes. She walked across to him and knelt down beside him. Before she could open her mouth to speak suddenly his arms reached out and wrapped themselves around her. He buried his face in her neck sobbing. “You’re the only friend I’ve ever had, Lydia. What happens when you leave next month?”

 She swallowed, tears welling up in her own eyes. She wrapped her arms around him. “I… I don’t know, Eldrich. But… I promise, I’ll think of something. Don’t give up hope. Never give up. Keep fighting. I don’t think I’m really all that special. That’s all I’ve ever done. My choice has always been to keep fighting or to just give in and die. Please, Eldrich. Don’t give up. We’ll figure something out. I promise.”

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 She rubbed her eyes, sitting up. She smiled looking across at Eldrich. She was almost reluctant to remove her hand from his. Had they been holding hands all night? He was leaned up against his dragon with her leaned up against Tsaul. Around the two of them were as many dragons as could fit in the tiny cave.

 Ever since the day of the fight with Darian, she had chosen to sleep outside in the cave with the dragons. It was just safer that way she decided. She had no delusions that their fight had solved anything except how he treated people when she was awake. He was still verbally abusive and aggressive, but he was no longer hitting people. He *had* put a fist through a wall – but she was sure the wall would be ok. Mostly.

 She slid her hand out from his and he groaned, coming to life almost instantly. He knuckled his eyes before opening them. He looked at her and grinned immediately. “Morning, Lydia.”

 She grinned. “We keep sleeping together like this and people are going to start to talk,” she said teasing.

 He shrugged. “It’s comfy out here,” he mumbled, a light blush on his cheeks. “Gods, Lydia, you’re awful teasing me like that first thing in the morning. You know I hate those sorts of jokes. You’re like an older sister to me. That’s all. Well, either an older sister or a Commander. Depends on what we’re doing at the time,” he said with a light groan as he sat up and stretched. He looked at her. “Morning practice?”

 She bent reached over and grabbed the trashcan she had set out here. She coughed hard into it – the start of another glorious morning, she thought bitterly.

 *“Nah,”* she answered in his mind while she struggled. *“We should get cleaned up and all primped. You know what today is.”*

He sighed. “I was trying to forget,” he muttered bitterly. “Let the fun begin. At least it means we don’t have to deal with Darian as badly. He’ll reign in his shitty attitude. Though having the officials swarm all over us is a bit unsettling in its own way. Having them watch us being tested… and then the one on one sessions.”

 Lydia sighed, setting her trashcan to the side and reaching up for her mask on Tsaul’s saddle. It was a good morning, fortunately. She wasn’t sure what it was about dragon fire and their warmth but it did help her lungs a bit. *“Is there anything I should be wary of?”*

 He stood up, grabbing up a spear as he did and swung it around in a circle in front of him. “Nah. Not really. In the past, I’ve always kinda made fun of them by making ridiculous demands. Kinda pissed them off a bit,” he admitted with a laugh. “But – they will do *anything* you want. Give you anything you want to try to win you over.” He swallowed and kicked at the dirt. “I remember one year… gods, how old was I? It was before Ferrace had graduated. Twelve? Thirteen? I know I started coming when I was ten. Well – anyways, Ferrace once asked for a girl.”

 A shudder went up Lydia’s spine. She pulled her mask away from her face. “A-and?”

 He shrugged. “And what? They got him one and sent her home the next day. I don’t know anything more than that. I… I didn’t really completely understand at that age, you know. I didn’t clue in until a few years later when I thought back on it. But, yeah. That’s the sort of lengths they’ll go to. As if all those disgusting favors actually make a difference to us. Once the month is up, we go back to where we came from. The end. Even if they did promise us something after that month, they forget about it. It’s the only promises that they don’t keep. Just… be careful, Lydia. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

 He tossed the spear up into the air and caught it skillfully. Lydia grinned at him. She wondered if he realized how strong he looked now when he was playing with his weapons. She turned away and considered the information he had told her. It was disgusting on so many levels. Still, she was glad that he had told her. It was a good warning. It had painted the sort of picture she had needed.

 “Do you think your generals will be here?” he asked.

 She smiled at him, though he still had his back turned to her. “I have no idea. I’ve told you this before. They didn’t mention anything about it to me. I mean, we aren’t exactly part of this whole alliance thing, you know. I have no idea what to expect. And honestly, even if they do show up, I have no idea what they’ll say to you if you do try to talk to them.”

 He swallowed and turned to look at her. “B-but if they do… y-you’ll help me, right?”

 She stood up. “Of course I will, Eldrich. Just don’t get excited.”

 “I-I know. I know. I keep telling myself that, but… damn, the hope just kinda takes over.”

 She nodded. “ I know what you mean. Come on. Let’s go start getting ready.”

 He agreed and turned around. “It’s so weird. I’m both super excited and super afraid all at the same time,” he said as he pushed out of the moss with her. “There’s so many things that can go wrong and so many things that could go right all at the same time.”

 “But even if things go wrong, don’t lose hope. There’s still things we might be able to do.”

 “I won’t.” He punched the air with his fist grinning at her. “Keep fighting, right?”

 “Always!”

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 She played with her hair. It was getting long enough again that she contemplated sticking it up in a ponytail. She discarded the idea and simply pulled her brush through, allowing it to fan around her shoulders. She watched Kelly dancing around in a bright yellow dress, two stuffed animals in her hands. The little girl turned to her grinning wide. “I’m going to ask for brothers and sisters for my teddy!” she shouted excitedly. “And… and a new dragon! I want one just like yours Lydia.”

 Lydia smiled at her and nodded. She couldn’t speak. Her heart felt heavy. She wondered how much of this the child understood. She wondered… how long could the child keep that innocence before they dragged her into the same situations that Eldrich had described. Even Dennis had shared a few stories with her, including the time that he had been pulled into a room where they had been torturing someone. They had wanted him to take the pain from the person and feed it to another, all in an effort to make the other person more compliant.

 He still woke up with nightmares from the screams.

 She swallowed and shook her head. Would she ever be asked to do things like that…? In a way, this day almost seemed a mockery of what she had already gone through. In exchange for a promise she had sold herself over – agreed to her superiors that she would lend her talents for whatever they wanted. She had just never in her wildest dreams imagined the things she *could* be asked to do. Would she ever be asked to do them? No, would she even be asked? Eldrich was praying that if her superiors came he might be able to plead with them to let him cover over to their country. But… would that truly help? Would that solve any of his issues?

 All she could do was hope.

 She wondered when Hugh had pleaded with her to not enter this agreement if deep down he had suspected. She wondered what he would say to this situation.

 And why was she still thinking about him? What did she care what his thoughts were.

 Damn ex.

 “Alright! All five of you,” Darian’s voice barked down the hall. “It’s time. Get lined up outside.”

 She swallowed, a cold tingle going up her spine. Gods, please let *something* go right today. Please help see her through this.

 She rose up off her bed, calling out to Kelly, and the two of them walked out of their room, joining the boys as they marched single file outside. Once outside, they were lined up in front of the school. Darian went to stand off to the side, his eyes roving over them and nodding his approval before turning around to watch the skies with the rest of them. To her left, Eldrich reached out and grabbed her hand. His palm was sweaty and shaking. She fought the urge to wrap her arms around him, but instead interlaced her fingers with his. Whatever happened, for however long their time together was, she would be there for him.

 Lydia’s eyes settled on dark shapes starting to appear in the skies. Slowly Riders were beginning to come in focus in the air. She watched as the arched down and began to land. She gawked at the number of people arriving – not just people but the dragons, too. Dragons of every type, many of them without riders. And several of them loaded down with things that were tied down. Boxes, suitcases, and the like.

 Dragons and gifts.

 She swallowed as the Westerners showed up following the first group. She felt sick almost immediately. There were two Death Dragons in the group that landed. Eldrich’s hand tightened on hers, willing strength into her.

 As the superiors landed, they walked over to them and looked them over before going over to Darian and exchanging words with him.

 And then they began to break off into groups. The Westerners and the Southerners. The Westerners called Eldrich and Sean over while the Southerners called out to Kelly and Dennis. They walked over and bowed to their superiors who began to talk with them.

 Lydia remained the only one standing there. Her eyes scanned the skies. Nothing. Oh, so… that was it, she supposed. She really was on her own, then.

 She looked down at the ground. She wasn’t sure how she should feel about that. Obviously they did not share in this whole alliance thing. Maybe they *couldn’t* come. Still… a part of her, deep down, had longed for something, some reminder of happier places. Of home.

 She stood there, her eyes raising briefly to meet Eldrich’s eyes who was stealing a quick glance at her. Sadness was etched on his face, too.

 A dash to hope.

 She looked back up at the skies, praying… still retaining some vestige of hope. Or maybe she shouldn’t. Maybe this was a good thing. She sighed. She felt so confused.

 A gasp escaped her lips. Dots were appearing in the blue of the sky far off in the distance. She blinked, straining her eyes to make sense out of the shapes. No, Lydia – it could just be birds. … But… no, birds don’t move that fast.

 Excitement flooded through her as the shapes came closer and became more defined as dragons. Will Dragons. A wave of excitement swept through her as she felt a thought pass between Tsaul and one of the dragons. Myrillia! General Sanders was up there.

 With that thought then came another knot of apprehension. Oh gods… she hadn’t considered… what was she even going to *say* to them. She had went from disappointment, to hope, now to fear within the space of a couple minutes. Gods, get a grip, Lydia!

 Minutes later the Will Riders began to land. Her eyes found not only General Sanders but Cassings as well. Relief and more apprehension. She did not see a single sign of General Bell, though. She swallowed as she watched the two men slide off their dragons. She did not wait for them. She couldn’t stand there any longer. She walked across to them, clearing the distance between the school and where they had landed.

 General Cassings turned and his eyes fell on her. She stopped, swallowed, and bowed.

 He laughed.

 “I win the bet, Will.”

 “You’re kidding me,” Sanders grumbled as he walked around Myrillia and came into view. He stared down at her and shook his head. He sighed. “So you do.”

 She stared between them curiously, feeling herself redden. W-was she a part of some *joke?* “I’m sorry?” she asked hesitantly.

 Cassings smirked. “We were betting to see if you would be in your wheelchair or not. If you had managed to successfully keep up the weak girl routine.” He folded his arms, turning serious. “I was not holding out much hope, and I see that I was correct.”

 She swallowed and reached up to the side of her face where she knew there was still signs of a bruise. “I-I had a little bit of difficulty,” she growled.

 Cassings’s face grew tight and serious. He walked across to her and took her chin in his fingers, turning her head to look at it. “That looked serious.”

 “That was two weeks ago before I wound up in the hospital because the guy wasted all of my tanks in a single night. Sorry. After that I just didn’t exactly feel like playing little sick girl anymore. I fought the guy and got him to back off a bit, though I decided to hide my medicine in a more secure place.”

 Fury. That was what passed through Cassings’s eyes. Cold fury. It… touched her. So in some part of her superior’s mind he had *not* appreciated her being treated that way – did care for her. He closed his eyes, dropping his hand. He reopened them a moment later and nodded. “Then I can hardly condemn you. Sounds like you did what you had to.”

 She nodded. “It hardly matters anyways.” She turned and looked across at the black dragons not far from them. She looked down and swallowed. “T-they don’t particularly care about us or our skill anyways. The only care about our Meldling abilities. That I’m sick just makes me more suitable in their minds. I get one more dragon type that I can control for them. They are only interested in us as tools.” She swallowed. But then… maybe they were, too. She didn’t know these men. That Cassings had been angry for even a moment over her was touching but when a decision came down – a choice between using her or doing something the hard way – what choice might they give *her*?

 She drew in a deep breath and shook her head. “I-I just can’t wait for this month to be over,” she confessed.

 Sanders was staring across the yard, surveying everything. He crossed his arms across his chest. “What in the world is with this many Riderless dragons,” he muttered. “And all of those packs.”

 She blinked at him and then up at Cassings who was surveying the whole area with the same confused expression. She swallowed. “Gifts.”

 Sanders frowned and stared down at her. “Gifts?”

 “To try to win us over. Dragons, clothes, jewelry. Anything. That’s all this is about. They’re trying to bribe us. We have only to ask for it and it will be given. All in an effort to get us over to their side. See those two Death Dragons over there? Doubtless those are for me. The other Meldlings told me the Westerners are going to be the ones drooling over me the most.”

 Sanders sighed, raising a hand to the bridge of his nose and squeezing the spot just in between his eyes. “So this is going to turn into a politics battle afterall. Damn.”

 She swallowed. “You’ve no idea the lengths they’ll go to. I wasn’t even allowed to go visit any of the towns nearby. They make kidnap attempts on us if we are not in neutral territory. The others, they don’t even bother anymore.”

 “Will –“ Cassings growled.

 “I know, Derrick,” Sanders hissed. “I’m getting really sick of placing this child in these situations. No small wonder that we’ve never bothered with Meldlings before. I’m sensing a few months of headaches over this.”

 She swallowed and stared down at the ground. She was starting to shake. She was beginning to lose control over her emotions. She bit her lip. Keep it wrapped up, Lydia. She drew in a deep breath.

 Sanders sighed and dropped his arm. “And we had only planned to stay here for a week,” he grumbled.

 Her head shot up and her eyes widened in horror. Oh gods… she felt sick. Now that they were here she realized how much she did not want them to leave. They were her hope. She swallowed hard and stared back at the scene behind her. She turned back. She wanted to argue. She wanted to beg, but… she kept her mouth shut. They were her superiors. Not her friends. They had no obligations to her.

 Cassings shook his head. “I’m not going to leave this child in this situation alone,” he growled. “I told you from the start that I did not like it. I wouldn’t have done this to any soldier. We’re pulling her!” His voice actually rose into a shout.

 A shiver went through her body.

 “You do that and you can deal with the fallout,” Sanders growled. “It’s already going to be a politics battle. You pull her out now and it’s going to be one more thing stacked up against her.”

 “Then I’m staying,” Cassings growled. “No one left behind, Will. Those were Adrian’s words. Don’t forget them.” Cassings looked down at her.

 “Derrick –“ Sander’s started.

 “We’ll talk more in length about this later,” Cassings snapped, interrupting him. He spun around and walked back to his dragon. She watched as he messed with something in his bags and then pulled out two black cases.

 Lydia gasped in spite of herself. “My medicine!” she shouted, unable to contain her excitement.

 He nodded, handing the cases over to her. “I had a feeling you would be excited to see them. I was worried about how might be holding up without it.”

 Relief flooded through her. She actually took the cases and hugged them, unable to stop herself – no longer even caring. She bowed to him deeply. “Thank you!”

 He nodded. “Where have you been keeping your medicine? Should we continue to be concerned?”

 “I’ve been keeping it in a cave not far from here that’s covered over and well hidden. I’ve also had dragons watching over it.”

 “Even with the other person being a Meldling?”

 She shrugged. “He’s not as good as I am, and I’m afraid that’s going to be something else not in my favor. Melding with Ayvra did something to my meld link. The others felt it and as the lessons progressed there were a few… oddities. It helped to keep the guy at bay,” she said, reaching back up to her face. “I know he won’t do anything to us during the day with his superiors here, but I’m not so sure about at night when we’re alone with him again. They don’t exactly treat us Meldlings all that well after our final decision. He enjoys taking his frustrations out on us.”

 Cassings sighed. “I think we’re going to need a full debriefing later, Miss Alvincia. Personally I’m getting very curious about all the tiny details.”

 She looked around at the groups behind her. “Might be better to just ask them,” she mumbled. She stopped and started. Eldrich was standing there, apart from his group, staring at them hard. He met her eyes. She swallowed. Oh gods… how was she going to tell Sanders and Cassings… There was this much debate just over her. Was there anything they could do for him? Would they even want to bother?

 Her stomach twisted as she watched Eldrich seem to gather himself and then start to come over to them.

 Instead of walking up to them, though, he leaned into her ear. “Be careful, Lydia. My superiors haven’t stopped asking questions about you. Darian hasn’t kept anything back, either. They’re especially interested in your medicines and your illness. They mentioned Ayvra. They already knew.” He reached up and squeezed her arm, his voice going even lower. “They aren’t thinking in ‘maybe’ terms. They’re acting too strange.”

 A shiver of fear went up her spine. She turned to talk to him but he was already walking back away. She felt sick. Horribly and undeniably sick. She turned back around. The world seemed to have faded away. All she could think about was being taken. Taken and made to do things against her will.

 Her legs gave out from under her. Cassings shouted her name, catching her and lowering her to the ground slowly. Her head was spinning. She clutched the cases to her chest tightly. She no longer cared. The tears slipped out, coursing tiny rivulets down her cheeks.

 *I want to be a Rider, right… That’s what I’ve always wanted. To be a Dragon Rider. To fly into battle on my beautiful dragon. To do great heroic things. To save people. Why… why was this so hard? I have that. I have that now but at what cost? In the effort to have that, have I lost everything else? Why… why can’t I just be normal? Wasn’t it enough that I have a lung disease? Now I’m at risk of losing it all because of some special talent? Because through a dragon I’m telepathic? I… I don’t even know who to trust anymore. I never could trust anyone. Can I even trust my friends? Hugh turned his back on me. Who was next? Landon had wanted me to trust in people. Was it only so I could experience betrayal? Haven’t I had a lifetime of that? Was that it? Were the fates just setting me up with happy memories so that the unhappy ones were even harder on me?*

 She looked up at Cassings. Once, not so long ago, he had said that she had a dark future. Somehow those words just no longer seemed to do it justice.

 *Obstacles.*

 The word jarred her.

 “Alvincia!” Cassings shouted, his hand tight on her arm.

 She realized he had been shouting at her for some time now. She blinked and pursed her lips. Dammit. Damn herself. She released her cases and quickly wiped away at her tears, suddenly furious with herself for having dared let them slip. She picked her cases back up and got back to her feet. Cassings released her with a small look of surprise on his face. She took a space back and bowed. “Sorry, sir,” she apologized.

 Fight or *die*.

 *It’s a good thing I’m a fighter*, she thought. *And I swear* I will fight*!*

 She turned her head and looked at the Westerners. Two of them were staring at her. She gave them a hard look, glaring at them. She wanted to scream at them – to *dare* them. She was not going down without a fight and if she went down she was going to take as many of them with her as possible.

 Sanders chuckled. “Maybe we should give her a chair, Derrick. I think it would be fun to see her throw it at them.”

 Cassings stood up, grunting with pain as he placed his weight on the leg with the brace. “I don’t think a chair is what she’s wanting to throw at them. Maybe we should disarm her?”

 She turned to look up at him. “You could try that, if you think it would help. But I think every single person here has a blade of some kind on them. That’s a lot of knives to collect to try to stop me.”

 He grinned. “I was joking.”

 She blinked. “I wasn’t.”

 Sanders chuckled. “It’s a good thing Miss Alvincia is on our side. I almost pity the first person she ever goes up against in a fight.”

 She turned to him. “But I already did that, didn’t I?” she said with a grin. “That’s how I got the title Death Slayer.”

 Sanders burst out laughing. “Right you are. It amazes me that someone ever actually had the audacity to tell this young lady she could not be a Rider. Come on, Derrick. Let’s go meet our new friends. You’re right. No one left behind, and Miss Alvincia is more than worthy of a being a soldier to fight for. Let’s go make sure we can keep her.”

#

 Lydia sat happily among the group of Will Riders eating with them. They had set up camp outside. Instead of going inside to eat at the ridiculous buffet set up for the Meldlings as usual she had opted to stay outside and eat with them from the meat that was roasting on the fire. The Generals were nowhere in sight, but she was not short on company. The twenty Riders they had brought with them made her feel right at home, giving her her own plate. They were swapping war stories with her and were enjoying her own stories of Battle School hardships.

 It helped. Ridiculously. Something this small and simple. Yes. This was what she wanted. To be a Rider among her team. She could almost imagine that the next day they might be all going off to battle together. That thought sent a thrill up her body.

 That feeling of acceptance was back. Even better, they enjoyed her small size and big attitude, and despite their frequent teasing, not a single one of them doubted her stories or what she had claimed she had done in a fight.

 “Oi, I think we got a spy,” one of the guys in front of her said with a chuckle.

 Several heads including hers turned. She grinned at the sight of Eldrich standing a small distance away. He was guarding his emotions but she could almost feel the longing in his body. She turned to them. “Maybe we should invite him over? I hear it’s easier to spy on people when you are actually part of the group.”

 Several of them laughed. The men scooted over and she patted the ground beside her, waving at him to come. There was only a moment of hesitation before he came across. He sat down beside her, looking up uncertainly at the ground up beside him. The man laughed and stuck his hand out. “Lieutenant Graund,” he introduced himself.

 Eldrich stared uncertainly at the hand. Lydia rolled her eyes. “It’s called a *handshake*, El.”

 He looked back at her. “What is it with you people and touching?” he muttered. He turned back to the guy and reached a shaky, uncertain hand out. “Eldrich,” he said as the man shook his hand.

 The man smiled. “Got a problem with touching?”

 Eldrich shrugged. “We like to maintain a certain distance,” he muttered, looking down at the ground.

 Even in the firelight she could see the light red on his cheeks. His shoulders were hunched over and he looked ridiculously uncomfortable. She grinned at him. “Relax. We’re not going to bite.”

 He looked at her and nodded. She watched as he took a deep breath and forced his body to untense. Several of the men laughed at him.

 “Have you eaten?” one of them asked.

 He shook his head and someone handed him a plate. Another guy cut into the meat on the fire and laid it on his plate. Eldrich grinned and chewed into it, wincing when it burned him – causing more laughter.

 He grinned with them. “So, are you all Will Riders?” he asked, looking around.

 “As if there’s any other dragon worthy of flying,” someone shouted.

 He grinned. “I dunno. I’ve seen Battle Dragons in action.”

 Someone sniffed. “Lot of them is only good in a swarm. Get one of those things by themselves and they’re nothing better than rats with wings.”

 Eldrich smiled. “Yeah. Lydia taught me that the hard way. I didn’t stand a chance against her. I’ll admit it. I was impressed.” This was received with a great shout. Eldrich grinned wide. “Now… all of you have different Wills, though?” he asked curiously. “Our dragons… they aren’t too picky. One Rider is as good as another to them.”

 “Ooh, I bet that causes a few fights,” someone said with a laugh.

 Eldrich frowned. “Fights?”

 “Yeah? Ain’t you ever had a dragon fight over you?”

 Eldrich frowned. “Fight over a human?” He shook his head. “I’ve never even heard of something like that.”

 “Woah! How do meld with a Battle Dragon? Don’t they choose you?”

 This increased Eldrich’s confusion. “Choose a human? Hardly. A Battle Dragon just melds with whoever touches it first. Wait – Will Dragons *choose*?”

 She blinked and stared at him. “I thought I told you that. I know I’ve mentioned a few times that Tsaul chose me.”

 “I thought that was a figure of speech,” he protested.

 She grinned wide. “Nope! The committee that makes the final decision for trainees tried to tell me that because of my illness I would not be a Rider. It was fantastic! I’ll never forget it! Tsaul jumped up on the stage and attacked them. He completely trashed the place. He had the guy pinned down to the floor. He was so furious that they would try to deny me. He had wanted to see me be a Rider so much. He tried to argue with the guy, but the guy just said that it was unfair to ask a dragon to take on my pain. Then Tsaul turned around and said ‘I’ll do it. I’ll meld with her!’ He told me it would be an honor. He melded with me for my sake. It was… amazing. I swear, there are days that I hardly feel like I ever deserved him. I still can’t fathom why he, such a great war dragon, would have ever wanted to meld with a sick child like me.”

 The men around her laughed. “You shoulda heard the story the way we were told,” one of them said. “Oh gods, the day we learned that the famous Captain Townsend’s dragon had taken on a sick girl. It about floored all of us. Even I had mixed emotions about that. You have any idea the sort of men and women he turned down as suitable Riders? No lie, Alvincia. It’s an honor to get to meet you especially after hearing of all your exploits.”

 She grinned, excitement pounding through her. She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just a sick dying girl.”

 This caused more laughter. “After battling the Grim Reaper your whole life,” one of them said, “taking on the Death Dragon was probably like going to a tea party.”

 She laughed. “I think he’s finally started to give up, too. Every now and again he tries to pay me another call but I think I’ve finally managed to beat him back. Our battles are just nowhere near as intense. Thanks gods, because he was honestly a very awful fighter. A scythe? Please,” she said sarcastically with a flip of her hair. “What a bulky weapon.”

 More laughter, even from Eldrich.

 The talk progressed on much like that for another half hour, Eldrich slowly warming up to the group.

 “Oh? Looks like I suddenly have an extra soldier?”

 Cassings voice cut into the group’s laughter. All eyes turned up to him standing slightly behind and off to the left of Lydia. Eldrich, smiling, turned to see who had spoken. He froze, sitting straight up and going completely stiff, his smile vanishing as if it had never been there – replaced instead by a cold terror.

 “Yo! General Cassings!” several of the men shouted with a laugh, lifting their cups respectfully.

 Cassings walked closer, coming up to the boy with a wide smile. “Good evening, young one,” he greeted. “I’m General Derrick Cassings, and you?”

 Eldrich looked like he would much rather be anywhere but there. There was panic and terror in his eyes and he was starting to shake. Lydia reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “El?” she asked lightly, concerned for him.

 His eyes flicked to her for a moment before they were back on Cassings. He swallowed. “E-e-e-e-eldrich, s-s-s-sir,” he stuttered uncontrollably.

 Lydia watched as Cassings’s eyes narrowed, his brow furrowing. Cassings turned to Lydia. “Miss Alvincia, why don’t you and your friend join us for a moment?”

 She nodded getting to her feet. Eldrich stayed down. She stared down at him and sighed. She bent over and laid a hand on his shoulder and whispered softly into his ear. “Nothing bad is going to happen, El. I won’t let it. I promise. Come on. This could be your chance.”

 He stared at her, tears in his eyes. He licked his lips and nodded. She held her hand out and he took it. He rose and together the two walked across, following after Cassings. Cassings held back the flap of the tent that had been erected for the two Generals. Inside Lydia found a table that had been set up for the two men. Sanders was slouched forward, reading through a stack of papers, a plate of food almost forgotten to his right with a mug of coffee sitting beside it. He looked up, his eyebrow raising as he took in Eldrich. He looked across at Cassings as he entered. “Picked up a stray cat?” he asked.

 “As terrified as the boy is of me, I felt like I was the cat and he was the mouse,” he said walking across the room.

 He picked up two stools and brought them over. Lydia bowed politely before she sat down. Eldrich stared uncertainly from the stool, to her, to the two Generals. The terror was still there. Sanders chuckled. “The last time someone refused a seat in my presence it was thrown at me barely five minutes later. Since you happen to be a friend of Alvincia’s, this almost makes me concerned.”

 “I didn’t throw it *at* you,” she protested.

 Eldrich turned to her with wide eyes. “Y-you did what?” he asked, his throat raw and the words weak.

 She sighed even as General Cassings sat down with a laugh. “She had a little fight with some men who were overstepping their boundaries. They seemed to think that she shouldn’t be a Rider. She disagreed. One minute she looked like she was about to pass out but then the next she suddenly ran up took the chair that we had offered her and threw it across the room screaming at us. Not many people ever have the nerve to get that spirited. I was expecting her to shout a little. A sixteen year old committing that sort of act of defiance in the presence of three Generals was not something that I think any of us expected.”

 She stared downwards. “I guess I never did apologize for that,” she mumbled.

 Sanders laughed. “Don’t. There are some situations that throwing a chair is exactly what’s needed. It certainly proved your conviction – well, as if the rest of what you went through that day hadn’t.”

 She grinned wide. Beside her Eldrich shook his head. “If I did that,” he muttered, “they would have beaten me to within an inch of my life.” He looked up at them, slowing coming around to sit down. “Y-you’re not like any of the superiors I’ve ever dealt with.”

 “Considering some of what Alvincia’s already told us, I might just take that as a compliment,” Cassings said. “I was going to ask Miss Alvincia for a detailed report on the situation but considering that most of it is still third hand knowledge and since I have you here, how about you start off for us, Master Eldrich?”

 Eldrich reddened. “W-what would you like to know?”

 He shrugged. “Why don’t you start off by telling us about what we can expect these next few weeks.”

 Eldrich nodded, taking a deep breath. “It’s simple, really. The two nations are trying to win our favor. The Southerners want me to defect, while my countrymen want me to continue to stay loyal. They are given this one month opportunity to do so. At the end of the month I make my choice. Then for the next year I get moved there and serve them until the next year comes around. This whole process continues until we’re eighteen and make our final choice.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter a whole lot to me. One’s as bad as the other.”

 Sanders frowned. “What about your families?”

 He shrugged. “What about them? I haven’t seen my pa since I was ten. They take us from our families and pay them off. My pa and my whole family are probably living a grand life right now. For kids younger than ten, like Kelly, they let them stay with their families. Kelly doesn’t have to make a choice at the end of the month, but they’ll still give her things to try to win her affection.”

 “I thought this was called a skills analyses,” Sanders asked.

 Eldrich smirked. “Pretty much in its own way. They test our skills as Meldlings. See how fast we can do certain things – see if we have any special skills that another one doesn’t have. Dennis, for example, is good at taking pain and generating emotions. Me, I’m good at…” he stopped. His eyes looked down. “I’m good at pulling information from people’s minds,” he finally admitted. “Sean is good at controlling dragons. And Darian is fantastic at hallucinations. We all have these skills but some of us are better than most – though until Lydia figured it out, Darian was the only one of us that could do extreme hallucinations.” He looked across at Lydia. “She’s good at controlling dragons. They’ll see that. They’ll like that the most. Especially with her Death Scent.”

 Cassings’s brow furrowed. “You can pull information from people’s minds?”

 He nodded. Lydia swallowed. So now the secret was going to be out. She looked down, not wanting to hear Eldrich’s explanation. “W-when they have a difficult prisoner… one of those who really won’t talk… t-they bring me there. I-I pull it from their minds. T-they’ll even force the person to meld with a dragon just so I can do it.”

 Cassings’s eyes narrowed. “And I’m going to guess they don’t give you a whole lot of choice in the matter.”

 “The last time I tried to disobey they whipped me and refused to give me water for two days. T-the prisoner died while I was refusing.” He reached a shaking hand to his face. “I…They… I… didn’t get out of the hospital until two months later,” he said barely speaking above a whisper. “That was when I was fourteen. I’ve never refused since then.”

 “So why haven’t you defected?” Cassings asked, his voice a low, deep growl.

 “Oh… the Southerners…” He closed his eyes, his breath quickening. “T-they uh… T-they made me share the prisoner’s torture. Every lashing or anything else that was done until I finally relented. I think I preferred the beating.” He swallowed and shook his head. “T-they don’t care about us. We’re just tools. It’s a little nicer when our superiors aren’t calling on us for those special jobs. They set us up in nice places by ourselves and let us have all the dragons we want and do what they can to make us happy. I try to get my normal commander to teach me how to fight. I honestly don’t mind being a soldier. I would love to be in the action, but… my superiors don’t want to chance losing me in some battle. The most I can hope for is a little glimpse of the action since I need to be within a five mile radius.” He looked across at her. “She can control things outside of that normal five mile radius. Yeah, if Lydia gets stuck with one of our armies she can say goodbye to ever seeing a fight. You shoulda seen them when Darian told them that part.”

 Lydia looked away. “W-we tried to hide it,” she muttered. “Believe me I did. But that damn asshole reached into my mind and forced me to go further. I think he was hoping to hurt me. By the time I forced him out it was too late. I went past five miles. He doesn’t know my full extent but that information is enough.”

 “If Lydia wasn’t able to beat the shit out of him, I think he would have tried to force himself into her mind to figure out what else she was hiding.” He grinned. “He tried to punch me the other day when Lydia wasn’t around but she’s been teaching me in secret. I managed to get the upperhand. Gods that felt good.”

 “Darian is a Meldling, too?” Cassings asked. “Why is he beating on you?”

 Eldrich shrugged and looked down. “I… I use to beat up on Kelly a bit. We don’t get a whole lot of choice or things we can control so when we get the chance it just… kinda comes out. Darian is just cold, though. I thought… I thought he had killed Lydia when he had wasted all of her medicine. That was the last time she stopped pretending to be wheelchair bound and too weak.”

 Lydia gritted her teeth and balled her first. “You know how bad mornings are for me. He managed to waste my medicine that night – even grabbed the ones from Tsaul’s bags. Then he ripped me from my bed that morning when I was already having difficulties and kicked me twice.”

 “I had to risk taking her to town for the hospital.”

 “Risk?” Cassings growled. “I remember Alvincia mentioning this earlier. Care to explain it a little deeper?”

 Eldrich shrugged. “What’s to explain? We leave neutral territory we are fair game. I’ve been kidnapped three times. For me, it’s no big deal. Whatever. They still have to return me at the end of the next year. I just have my choice forced. It’s a bigger deal when you’re eighteen. I was afraid for Lydia, though, since I know how dangerous things are for her anyways.” He grinned. “Like I needed to worry. She got up a few hours after having collapsed, just pulled her IV out, got up, and left. Ten minutes later she was fighting Darian. How the hell does someone go from nearly dying one minute to beating the shit out of someone else the next?”

 She felt herself blush and shrugged. “I told you. The medicine they give me during an attack is a lot stronger. It helps when you’ve been through it a thousand times prior.”

 Cassings sighed, leaning back in his chair. “And to think I was going to yell at you today for being out of your wheelchair,” he sighed.

 She looked down. “I’m sorry. I tried hard.”

 Sanders shook his head. “No. Don’t apologize. Sounds like you managed to sit longer than I would have.”

 Eldrich shrugged. “It wasn’t very convincing anyways. Lydia’s attitude is all wrong for someone who is in a wheelchair. That’s how I figured out something wasn’t right. I’m the only one who guessed it, though, not that I think the others are all that intelligent anyways.”

 She glared at him. “I was in a wheelchair since I was eight up until I was your age for your information.”

 Eldrich smiled. “Maybe it just takes that long for us tenacious people to get pissed off about our crappy situations and want to do something about it,” he suggested.

 Cassings leaned forward. “What I want to know is what you said to Alvincia today to make her lose her head the way that she did.”

 Eldrich looked up at him and then back at her. He swallowed. “T-they’re acting weird. My superiors. I mean, I knew that a lot of their attention was going to be focused on her. They’re going to promise her everything under the sun. But… something’s not right. T-they aren’t talking in ‘maybe’ terms. They were asking pointed questions about her medicines and things. They were acting like they were preparing for her to come over to them. Just… something felt off. Something feels terribly off. I can’t exactly put a finger on it with the things they were saying but it’s the way they were saying them. Their attitude about it.

 “Even stranger, Dennis told me that the Southerners couldn’t have cared less about her. That… they were even referencing her with the same attitude that they would if she were on the Westerner’s side. They don’t have a single gift for her. That’s *so* not normal. And then Sean… our superiors don’t have anything for him, either. That’s seriously weird. They questioned the heck out of the both of us and then practically ignored Sean once they were done. This is his eighteenth birthday. He should be the focal point. I… I think they made a deal. Sean for Lydia. It makes sense since they both specialize in the same thing. Controlling dragons. The difference – Lydia can do Death Dragons. The Southerners get Sean, the Westerners get Lydia.”

 Lydia felt herself pale. “Except that’s *not* going to happen!”

 “No. It’s not,” Cassings growled. He leaned forward to Sanders. “What do you say *now*, Will. You still think we shouldn’t pull her?”

 Sanders sighed. “Derrick, we can protect her. We know there’s a problem and we can prepare for it. Let’s just keep her here for the month to appease the politicians.”

 “Yes,” Derrick shouted, standing up and dumping his chair behind him, “because we did such a fantastic job of doing that last year when we told her we were going to protect her from that damn Crystal Dragon?”

 “These are different situations, Derrick. You act as if *we* have a choice here.”

 “We do. We can actually *protect* her by getting her out of this situation. What would Adrian say if he were here?”

 Sanders stood up this time, slamming his fist into the table. “Adrian is *not* here,” he roared. “You pull her out now and it’s going to be one more chip stacked against her. You want them to threaten to go to war because of *her*? If it comes down to that what do you think the choice is going to be then, Derrick? They’re trying to hammer out a treaty right now –“

 “And if she’s thrown into it?” Cassings growled.

 “She won’t. We’ll play nice with the neighbors for now and appease them. This whole damn situation is mind boggling. I just *barely* see what the fuss is about with these people – these Meldlings.”

 “Because all Lydia has to do is ask a dragon to stop fighting and it will,” Eldrich’s voice murmured.

 Both men turned to him. “Do what?” Sanders growled.

 Eldrich swallowed and took a deep breath. “All Lydia has or any of us has to do is go up to a group of dragons and ask them to stop fighting. They would obey. Lydia can control thirty dragons at a time. What happens if she asks them to stop breathing? They would. She wouldn’t even have to ask. The day that she fought Darian, every single dragon in the area was behind her – she didn’t even send out a single command. You don’t understand us at all because you are only thinking of our group linking powers. You couldn’t stop the Death Rider until Lydia came along. What if the Death Rider had been a Meldling? Lydia doesn’t need to be sitting on it to control it. She can be laying in her bed five miles away giving them orders. That’s what I do. I sit on a Battle Dragon camouflaged into the wall, someone with a knife to my throat telling me what to make the dragons do. Not just *our* dragons – but the enemy’s dragons. *Your* Will Dragons. You want to know how many of you I’ve killed? You don’t even know because the Riders die before they can report that someone had taken control of their dragon’s mind. *And I’m not very good at it*. Lydia *is*.”

 He looked away snickering. “She told me she is learning advanced aerial tactics in her classes? What bullshit. We aren’t taught that stuff because we don’t need it. There was once a Meldling that could get the dragons to turn on their own Riders. Another that could actually shred a dragon’s melding link. Darian is able to drive men to insanity.”

 He swallowed and shook his head. “That’s what the fuss is about us.” He put a hand through his hair, grabbing a the locks. “At one time in history they actually tried to breed us to figure out how to not make us not so rare. That failed, but I hear every now and again, women Meldlings…” He swallowed but did not finish his sentence. “And then another point they went through and started murdering us.” He shrugged. “So now they have a disgusting treaty to share us.”

 He looked down at his hands in his lap. “Did that help? Now do you get the fuss? You’re fools if you think this is going to ever stop. That all you’ll have to do is wade through this month. Do yourselves a favor if you want to save yourselves a lot of headache and save Lydia a lot of grief. Just kill her. It will be easier. Especially for her.” He swallowed. “At least she’s lucky. Sounds like you care for her. At least I hope that’s true. Maybe you won’t turn on her the way my Generals do. Or maybe now that you understand her usefulness you’ll just treat her like a tool, too. I hope not. It’s… nice to be delusional for even a moment and think there could be a better place for one of us Meldlings to go.” He slid off his chair and bowed. “For my part… if you decide to fight for her, if you’re those kinds of people… maybe you’ll fight for one more? Well, I’m not delusional enough to hold out much hope but it will be something nice to daydream about anyways. Thank you.”

 He turned and walked out. Sanders and Cassings both wore conflicting emotions. Lydia swallowed and slid off her stool, too. She started to bow but her legs gave out from under her. She fell to the ground, her eyes filled with tears. She couldn’t see. Her head was spinning. She managed to push herself up to her knees before a comforting hand landed softly on her back. She looked up into Cassings face. He was furious. Not at her.

 He held out a hand. “Stand up, Alvincia,” he snapped. “Never show the enemy your weakness.”

 She nodded numbly. She swallowed, her throat constricted. She forced her heart to be still, struggling to pull herself together. She reached out and took his hand and allowed herself to be pulled back up to her feet. By the time she was standing on her own again she felt better. Pissed even. What Eldrich had said was tragic. Disgusting even. She could feel her anger raging through her. “No one will *ever* treat me like that,” she growled. She stared up at him. “You better figure out how to stop this, because otherwise I don’t care how much blood I have to spill before I’m free of it. I will kill every damn dragon that I have to if that’s what it takes. They want me to meld with a Death Dragon, that’s exactly what I’ll give them. Death. And believe me, I know more about it than anyone else should.”

 Cassings grinned, his smile as dark as hers. “That’s exactly what I would expect someone with the title Death Slayer to say. Give them hell, Alvincia.”

 She smirked. “Hell is way too good for them. I’ll make them wish they were never born.”

#

 The boy sitting beside from her was a charmer. She had to give him that. He was her age, perfectly tanned, with light blond hair. She glared at him as he smiled at her.

 She wouldn’t lie. Gods, he was hot.

 She sat with her leg crossed, trying to appear nonchalant and uncaring. On the other side of the table, one of the Western Generals was speaking to her. Telling her what all they could for her if she joined their army. Empty promises.

 She reached up and scratched at the back of her head. She had had it cut two days ago by one of Sanders’s and Cassings’s men. It was a clumsy haircut but it made her feel better all the same. She did *not* want to project the image of some empty headed cute female. She had also replaced that stupid mail courier pin with her a fighter pin. It was not her own – which was colored green for her rank in Battle School. The one Cassings had given her was an official Fighters Emblem. It had sent a thrill up her body as she put it on. “Are you sure?” she had asked, her voice filled with awe, feeling unworthy yet of wearing it.

 He had grinned at her. “If you’re going to prove to them you’re a fighter, might as well show them. I almost think at this point it’s a mute gesture. You’re more fighter than any of the men in our company now. Besides, I don’t think I could have stood another second of seeing you wear that stupid mail courier training badge, either. Adrian would have probably ripped it off of you himself if he were here.”

 Her eyes had softened. She looked up at him. “I wish I could have met him. Tsaul talks about him so rarely, but everything I hear sounds incredible.”

 Cassings nodded. “He was. He would have loved to meet you. I think he would have been proud to hear that someone like you was on the back of Tsaul. I think he would have had the same reaction as the rest of us at first. He would probably have walked into that room with us, taken one look at you, and laughed.”

 She sighed. “That’s everyone’s first reaction,” she muttered.

 He grinned. “But isn’t that more fun? No one was laughing when we left that room. You impress and inspire people. If the price of that is few laughs and insults I think that’s more than worth it in the end.”

 She shook her head. “I have no idea *why* I inspire anyone. I’m just doing the best that I can. I think people are too easily impressed.”

 “I’ve met a lot of people in my lifetime, Miss Alvincia. Trust me when I say that the respect you’re given isn’t even half of what you should be receiving. If Adrian were around now I think he would be dying for the honor of getting to fly with you as one of his own soldiers. He would be even more disgusted by this whole turn of events than I am. Give them hell. Don’t show them that you are weak – because you aren’t. Hold that head up high. Show them that strong spirit that made you throw a chair at three Generals.”

 She laughed, rolling her eyes. “It wasn’t *at* you,” she protested lightly. She grinned even wider. “Trust me. I have excellent aim. I don’t miss.”

 He laughed. “So I hear.”

 And right now, she *really* wanted to throw something at this boy staring at her. If he stared down at her chest one more time, she might just stab his eyes out with her knives.

 He leaned across to her – way too close for comfort – to sniff at her neck.

 She turned to glare at him. “Are you fucking stupid?” she growled at him. “If you are searching for perfume you’re not going to find any. It closes up my lungs, asshole.”

 Nonplussed, the boy reached over and grazed her ear lightly with his fingers. “You don’t need any. You smell wonderful anyways.”

 “Last warning,” she growled. “The last boy that touched me like that walked away bleeding. I would not advise doing it again.”

 “Touched you how?” the boy asked, grinning. Suddenly he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. She gasped at the feel of his hand reaching between her legs and grabbing her thigh.

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 Cassings jumped up out of his seat as she walked across the yard. The General’s table had been moved outside so they could sit and read over their papers while others flitted around them. Other Generals had done something similar she noted.

 “Alvinicia? Are you hurt?”

 She blinked and looked down at her uniform. There was a blood stain on her uniform the size of her palm. She clicked her tongue. “Not mine,” she answered shortly.

 Sanders stared across at her. “Please tell me you didn’t kill anyone. I realize you were threatening…”

 She shrugged. “He’ll live. He’ll be limping for a while, but he’ll live. They must be getting desperate, though.”

 Cassings frowned. “You’ve rejected every gift they’ve tried to give you. What was it today?”

 “Solicitation.”

 Cassings sighed. “I take it the boy didn’t want to take no for an answer.”

 “In all fairness I *warned* him.”

 She turned around at the sound of angry voices being spoken in another tongue. She found Sean and Eldrich arguing as the stomped across the yard. Eldrich was chasing Sean as he walked up towards *her*. Suddenly Sean whirled around and punched out at Eldrich. Eldrich ducked with lightning fast reflexes and dropped to the ground swinging out his leg. He caught Sean’s leg and the boy fell hard down to the earth. Lydia resisted the urge to clap. It had been a perfectly executed maneuver. She felt a surge of pride.

 Eldrich stood up and again shouted something in his native tongue. Sean sat up with a pained grunt and responded back.

 Sanders sighed. “Here we go,” he muttered.

 Lydia looked back over at him. “You can understand them?”

 Cassings nodded, his expression was hard. “Might want to get those knives back out, Miss Alvincia.”

 She shook her head. “I wouldn’t want to hurt him. My fists will have to do. I don’t suppose you’re going to give any hints?”

 “We wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise,” Sanders said with a chuckle.

 She sighed and walked across to them. By the time she reached them Sean had gotten back up to his feet. He whirled around, away from Eldrich. His eyes fell on her. There was hot anger the moment he realized it was her. He rushed her. She danced to the side and buried her fist into his stomach, his own charge working against him, adding more power to the blow.

 He doubled over, but she caught him and helped him down to the ground. Once he was seated she glared down at him. “What is your problem?” she shouted.

 He coughed violently, gasping for air. He pulled in a deep breath. “You,” he snarled. “You’re my fucking problem! Ever since you came here. You know, I didn’t think my life could get any shittier, but then *you* showed up, you damn bitch.”

 “And *what* could I have possibly done to jack up your life? You think *I* want to be here?”

 “Why don’t you go back to where you fucking came from.”

 “Would love to. Brilliant suggestion. I’ll be happy to help you work on that with me.”

 “I don’t get a lot of goddamn choices in my life!” he screamed. “This was one that I *did* have, and you stole it from me!”

 “What are you talking about?”

 “They don’t want me! They rejected my choice. My own fucking country just rejected me! It was *my choice.*”

 “And how is that my fault?”

 “Bullshit. Don’t tell me you haven’t figured it out on your own. They want *you*. Heh, guess what they told me. If I want to choose them, I have to convince *you*. If I can do that they will give me whatever I want – even take me. *Even give me real fighting lessons!*” He got to his feet and looked over at Eldrich. “Tell her!” he screamed at him. “Tell her, you fucking coward.”

 Eldrich winced, taking a step back. He swallowed. “It’s none of her business,” he said hollowly.

 Sean reached over and grabbed him by the shirt collar. “You fucking *coward*.” He raised his fist and punched Eldrich. Eldrich did nothing to stop the blow, but took it. He fell back into the dirt, his lip cracked open and bleeding. Sean whirled back to her, pointing down at Eldrich. “He has a *way out*. They promised him that if he convinced you to go with them he would be *freed*. He would *never* be called on for his Meldling talents ever again. He can even join as a regular Rider. He would be no different than any other soldier.”

 Lydia felt her breath catch and her eyes widen. Oh gods… they had promised Eldrich *that*. Her… for him. She swallowed and looked up the Generals sitting behind their tables – all staring at the scene playing out. Anger raged through her. “You think that’s *funny*?” she screamed at them. “You assholes!” she screamed. She reached down to her boots and drew her knives. Screaming she rushed at the table, her knives held ready at her sides.

 Someone caught her from behind, grabbing her underneath her arms, and lifted her high up into the air. She screamed several obscenities, struggling to break away. “Let me go!” she screamed. “I’m going to kill them!”

 “Alvincia! Calm down!” Sanders’s voice shouted in her ear.

 “No! They have no right!”

 “Dammit, Alvincia,” Sanders snarled. “I said calm down *now*.”

 Lydia swallowed. Every fiber of her body wanted to fight him. Only some tiny inner voice recognized that it was the voice of a superior. Listen! Obey. She went limp, pulling herself together, despite the anger coursing through her. Sanders sat her down slowly and she immediately started coughing. Her anger and her energy getting the best of her in the heat.

 The Generals on the other side of the table grinned. One of them spoke up, “Join us willingly, Alvincia,” he spoke in a thick accent, “and we’ll honor *both* of your friend’s requests. Refuse and I can’t guarantee that your young friend’s fate will improve. Maybe it will even get worse.”

 Lydia’s breath caught in her throat. She swallowed hard. Dammit. Dammit dammit dammit! Damn her rash actions. She had just shown them the way to get to her. She had given them the edge that could work against her. The edge that they had been seeking all week.

 Another one of the Generals leaned forward, a wide grin on his face. “Let’s make this even more interesting. You join us and meld with our Death Dragons, we’ll let *all* of your friends go free.”

 Across the yard the Southerners stood up and started shouting at them, but the Westerners did not even acknowledge them.

 She swallowed and glared at them, searching her mind desperately for something to say. Some quip or some witty comment, or even something to improve or reverse the situation. She came up a complete blank. A hand squeezed her shoulder from behind. “Alvincia, stand down. Come on. To our tent. Let’s talk and get you calmed down.”

 She whirled around and stomped off towards the tents. Cassings joined her, limping along after her. “Alvincia. Knives please,” he requested softly, holding out his hand.

 She blinked and stared down at her hands, not having realized that she was still holding them. She swallowed and nodded, handing them over. She didn’t like it. The feeling of no weapons. It made her feel weak. She almost started to argue but stopped herself. Cassings’s request had been softly spoken but it had been firm. Now that she was thinking a little clearer she realized he was angry with her.

 She entered the tent first, Cassings limping around her to her left. Behind her Sanders entered. “Stand at attention, Alvincia!” he commanded, shouting it as he came around on her right side.

 Lydia choked. She tried to search her mind for any time, any *one moment* in the history of knowing this man that he had ever come across as angry. She swallowed as she drew a blank. Never. Not once. It was always General Cassings. Cassings was the angry one who did the shouting while Sanders relaxed back.

 She balled her fists and stood at attention, swallowing hard and searching through her mind for the part of her that was a Room Commander. That part of her persona seemed to be evading her at the moment. She could not find it.

 Cassings brought his chair around and took a seat, wincing as he adjusted his leg. Sanders remained standing, glaring down at her. He did not speak for several moments. Neither of them did. She realized with a start that they were pulling in their own anger. Gaining control before they opened their mouths.

 Finally Sanders took a breath and started to speak. “Do you realize what you just did wrong out there?” he asked patiently, his words coming out slow and even.

 She swallowed. “I revealed what could work against me,” she answered shortly.

 “You lost your temper, Alvinicia,” he growled. “Instead of keeping calm, you lost your temper.”

 “And in doing so, you revealed your weakness,” Cassings continued.

 “I can appreciate and fully understand the stress that you are under right now. I understand how angry you feel right now. Like the day that you threw that chair at your physical, though, you let your anger consume your judgment. You are *very* intelligent, Miss Alvincia. Up until five minutes ago you’ve used your anger wisely. It helped you to steer yourself and remain on course. Up until five minutes ago you have not done a single thing that has ever made me disappointed in you. You revealed your weakness. They finally got a rise out of you. Normally doing so would only get *you* in trouble. The situation would play out and you would be the only one hurt – except not the this time. Your rash actions just condemned every single person out there. You just condemned that poor boy you were hoping to protect. If you think things were hard up until now I can almost guarantee that they are going to get harder.”

 She nodded, closing her eyes. “Yes sir. I realize that.”

 “You ever react that way again and I swear I will wash my hands of this whole situation. I have no idea how to reverse what you just did out there. We are already on shaky ground out here as it is. Our hands are tied. Any action we take could work against you. There is nothing we can do to protect those children out there.”

 Lydia swallowed. She felt numb inside. She had no idea how to even respond. All that they had said was correct. And she knew it – she had known it the second after it had happened. She had lost her anger and control and now everyone else was going to pay for it – as if they weren’t already.

 Sanders drew in an even breath. “I want to know *right now*, Alvincia, what your choice is.”

 She blinked and frowned. “Sir?”

 “If there is even a flicker of doubt about your choice I want to know it. Is there even the slightest possibility that you are considering their proposal.”

 She shook her head. “No. No, it was a threat followed by empty promises. We are way too valuable to them. I saw how the Southerners reacted. They would never agree to letting everyone go. Eldrich has told me this before. They have made similar ‘too-good-to-be-true’ promises that turned out to be just that.”

 “Good. So you’re thinking again. After that display out there I had my serious doubts.”

 She bowed. “I am sorry, sir.”

 “Don’t apologize to me, Alvinicia,” he said, his voice curt. “Apologize to your friends after all of this is over. They *will* work this angle. Have no doubts about that.”

 Cassings leaned forward and set her knives on the table. “Can we trust you with these again, Alvinicia? Not everything can be settled with a fight. Sometimes holding back is just as important in a fight as attacking. *Never* let anger cloud your judgment and force your hand.”

 She felt thoroughly chastised. The worst part of it was, she already knew everything they were telling her. To have to stand here and take the reprimand – that they needed to yell at her for this – was degrading. Even worse, she knew the magnitude of her mistake. She closed her eyes and nodded. She felt disappointed in herself. “Yes sir,” she answered softly. “I-I can be trusted with my knives again.”

 “Good,” he said with a snap. He stood up, picked them up and handed them back to her. “Never force me to take them away from you ever again.”

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 Lydia rubbed her eyes and sat up. She looked around. The sky was starting to darken. Damn. Had she fallen asleep? She bent over starting to cough. Gods, even this late in the evening the heat was taking its toll on her body. She turned around and looked at Tsaul. He was staring down at her. “How long was I asleep?” she asked him.

 “Just an hour or so. I was beginning to get concerned about your lungs, but it seems you woke up on your own. Perhaps you should put your mask on for a while?”

 Sighing, she reached up and around for it. She pulled it on and stared across the yard. She could see the Generals already starting to pick up their things to carry them to their tents. All that paperwork seemed so annoying. She wondered all the work it went into running things. It seemed to be a universal problem between the three nations.

 As she watched, she caught General Cassings looking around. His eyes fell on her and he nodded before turning around and limping away. “He looks like he was in pretty bad shape today,” she muttered out loud through the mask.

 “Orisius says he’s trying out some new medicines. Not going very well, though, it seems.”

 She sighed and leaned back. “At least his isn’t killing him. Though I’m sure that’s very little consolation. Damn this heat. I feel like I’m choking on the air every time I breath it in.”

 She looked around and frowned. She sat up and looked harder. Her breath caught. Darian was walking with Eldrich following behind around the corner. She swore. He was going in the direction of their cave.

 She stood up and pulled off the mask. Tsaul looked up at her. “Lydia, where are you going?”

 “I smell trouble,” she muttered.

 Tsaul looked around. “You may want to get the Generals.”

 She shook her head. “They can’t help. They said as much.”

 She started off in that direction, but she had not gotten far when Tsaul called back in her mind. “Lydia, I don’t like you running off on your own right now.”

 She paused and looked around to him. “I’ll be fine. I’ll call with my mind if anything happens.”

 Tsaul started to his feet. “I should come.”

 She shook her head. “Not necessary. There’s three other dragons back there. I’ll be fine, Tsaul.”

 Tsaul stood there reluctantly but made no further attempt to follow her as she rushed off, keeping low and trying to muffle the sound of her footsteps. *If Darian’s laid a hand on Eldrich, I swear I’ll rip into him*, she thought.

 She creeped along quietly until she rounded the last corner. The moss wall now in sight. She licked her lips as she approached it and pushed it back gently, trying to be as quiet as possible.

 Once inside, she stopped. There were no dragons. She swore angrily. Why? Where were they? And then her eyes landed on Sean, leaned up against a wall. He was glaring at her angrily. She blinked and looked around to another far wall. Darian was standing there, Eldrich in front of him, with a hand squeezing Eldrich’s shoulder.

 He grinned at her. “Damn girl, you are way too easy,” he snarled.

 An alarm bell went off in the back of her mind. She whirled around to run back out but was met with two Western Riders. One of them punched out at her, the blow connecting with her face. She went down to her knees, almost blacking out. *“Ts-Tsaul –“*

 Her mind was shut down. Forcibly. She realized with sickening horror that her meld link had been severed. It had been so quick that she had not even felt the pain of it.

 A rag was forced into her mouth and her arms were wrenched behind her back. She felt a rope tie around them and then another one at her legs – and then hands reached into her pants leg and pulled out her knives. It was all done within the space of seconds.

 Terror flooded through her. Her heart quickened pace. She started coughing.

 “Oh, I’m going to enjoy this,” Darian almost purred.

 Eldrich was staring down at her in wild terror, but he did nothing to try to stop anything. And what could he do? Darian shoved him forward back out to the middle of the cave. He slammed a foot into the middle of his back. Eldrich fell hard to the ground with a grunt. “D-don’t look, Lydia,” he gasped.

 “Be silent!” Darian roared.

 He reached down to the collar of the boy’s uniform. Lydia realized suddenly there was a knife in Darian’s other hand. She winced as the blade slid downwards. The blade ripped through the fabric and must have nicked Eldrich because he winced.

 Darian threw the knife to the side and grabbed something that was leaning up against the wall. Lydia recognized it instantly. It was a flogging whip. Terror raced through her mind and body. She struggled against her bonds, but the men also had her by her arms, restraining her. She was completely and utterly *helpless*.

 She looked over to Sean, pleading with him to try to do something, but the boy closed his eyes and looked away.

 Eldrich leaned down on the floor, supported by his knees and hands. His breath was coming in quick gasps. This position… seemed *familiar* to him. She swallowed hard. Oh gods… how often had he been put through this? Dammit! She had promised to protect him but there was nothing she could do.

 He looked up at her, sweat rolling down his face. “Don’t look, Lydia,” he shouted again.

 But she did. She saw every minute detail as Darian raised his arm, the ropes of the whip swinging wildly, and then brought it down hard across Eldrich’s back.

 She screamed. Or at least she tried to. The cloth in her mouth cut her off. She started coughing. She was struggling against it. As if the summer heat was not already difficult enough to bear for her lungs, she was now trying to pull air through her nose and a rag that was stuffed into her mouth.

 She watched as Darian brought the lash down again – and again – and again. Eldrich gasped in pain as each blow landed, but there no tears, and he bore the whole whipping with a practiced dignity that made her feel sick. After one particularly hard blow his arms slipped out from under him – and he did not get back up. He laid there, his hand clawing at the dirt in pain as the whip came down even more times.

 There was a loud roar that echoed through the whole area. She did not need to be connected to know the sound of that powerful voice. Tsaul!

 Sean stepped forward. His eyes took on a distant look and Lydia knew that he was reaching out and doing *something* to Tsaul.

 But there were voices, too. Lydia heard the moss part and heard footsteps rushing in. “Release her!” Sanders’s voice shouted, echoing through the cave.

 The Westerners did just that. The released her, stepping away and to the sides of the cave, smiles on their faces. “We didn’t do anything to her,” they said with chuckles. “Here. Here’s her knives even.”

 She heard the clang of metal on stone. Someone bent over and picked them up. Lydia felt hands at her bonds, but she was hardly paying attention.

 Darian was not stopping! He had brought the last down hard again against Eldrich’s back. This time a cry of pain broke through Eldrich’s mouth.

 “Assholes!” Cassings voice shouted. “Stop this!” he demanded.

 “Not your problem,” one of the Westerners said curtly.

 Behind her Sanders muttered a few curses. Finally her bonds were severed. She reached up and pulled the gag out of her mouth, coughing as air hit the back of her throat.

 “S-s-stop it!” she screamed. She tried to jump to her feet, to run over to him, but Sanders had grabbed her from behind.

 “No,” he hissed. “We can’t do anything for him. Control your temper,” he growled.

 She turned to him, horror stricken. Tears were now streaming out of her eyes. “I’m not leaving him!” she screamed.

 “Will! Get her the hell out of here,” Cassings shouted.

 Sanders grabbed her arm and pulled her up to her feet. She struggled with his grasp but his grip was powerful. He yanked her out of the cave and pressed her to the cave wall. “Tsaul! Dammit. That boy must still be doing something to him.”

 She looked up and saw Tsaul sitting there – unmoving. Completely frozen. She longed to get up and reach out and touch him, but Sanders refused to let her off the rock wall. She slid down it and collapsed, crying into her knees. Inside, she could still hear the flogging lash.

 Cassings limped out moments later. He looked down at her and then up at Sanders. “I’ll get her out of here. You got the boy?”

 “As soon as that asshole is done with him,” he growled.

 “This situation is so disgustingly messed up,” Cassings snarled. He came across to her and grabbed her arm. “Get up, Alvincia,” he commanded.

 She struggled to her feet somehow. Cassings kept his hand on her tight as he limped away with her, leading her back to the schoolyard. “What the *hell* were you thinking?” he shouted at her. “Dammit, Alvincia. We can’t protect you if you go running off!”

 “Darian,” she sobbed. “H-h-he had Eldrich. Oh gods… I promised to protect him and I couldn’t.”

 “No,” he growled, stopping her roughly in place. “No, you can’t. *You* did that. That show was completely for you. You just thank the fates that that was all they were attempting to do tonight. What if they had decided to kidnap you instead? Dammit, Alvincia. Your brain can’t switch off like that! The only person you need to be concerned about right now is *you*.”

 “N-n-no one left behind. Isn’t that what you said?!” she shouted.

 “He’s not *ours*, Alvinicia. Not leaving him behind is a struggle for another day. That’s a battle that has to be fought differently. You are *not* abandoning him. I agree. I’ll be damned if we don’t fight for him.”

 She doubled over, coughing hard. Her lungs were burning. The heat of the evening and all her emotions were hitting her lungs hard. Cassings released her arm. She crouched low and worked her lungs hard, spitting up phlegm several times. She managed to somehow regain control. She ran her hand against the back of her mouth. It was getting more and more difficult to draw air in.

 “Come on,” Cassings said. “You need your medicine. There’s a tank in our tent that I had placed there for emergencies.”

 Lydia nodded and allowed herself to be lead towards the tent. She stumbled several times, clutching at her chest which was becoming too tight – too painful. Inside the tent, she found the tank and practically collapsed beside it. She pulled the mask over her face and turned the valve. The sickly sweet smell permeated the whole of the mask. She breathed it in, sucking it into her lungs. She coughed several times until she finally managed to bring herself under control.

 By the time she looked up, Cassings had the table cleared off and a man stood by with a small case that was similar to her own. There was also water and bandages.

 Cassings swore. “Come on, Will. They can’t still be beating that poor boy.”

 Suddenly there were shouts outside. Lydia’s eyes widened at the sound of someone screaming. Eldritch. He was screaming.

 Sanders burst into the tent. Eldrich was held tight in his arms. Blood stained the gold of the General’s uniform. He set the boy on top of the table as gently as he could. Cassings reached around and helped turn the boy around.

 “Why’s he screaming like that?” Cassings asked desperately. “That doesn’t sound like pain.”

 Sanders shook his head. “I have no idea. The guy stopped beating him – I think he enjoyed doing it in front of me. He dropped the lash and walked away. I thought the boy was unconscious but then he started screaming.

 Lydia swallowed getting up to her feet. She pulled her mask away and shook her head. “H-he’s hallucinating. Darian can do that. He’s fed Eldrich a nightmare.”

 “When’s it stop?” Sanders asked.

 Lydia shook her head. “He can make it last as long as he wants, and if he’s still connected he could still be feeding it to him.”

 “Can you stop it?” Cassings asked desperately.

 Lydia shook her head. “I could – but I’m not melded right now. Darian severed my meld link.”

 Sanders swore. The two of them and two others that were in the room had started to work on Eldrich’s back. Cleaning it off and applying cold dressings to the wounds. “And Tsaul is still frozen back there.”

 Lydia nodded. “Sean can keep him that way all night if he wants.”

 “Could you help if you were melded?” Cassings asked.

 “Of course.”

 “So go find a dragon and meld with it, Alvincia,” Sanders ordered.

 Lydia swallowed. “I-it’s not that easy. I’m not melded. I’m no different than any other dragonless human right now. Normal rules apply. I need a principal dragon before I do my other creative stuff. And no dragon wants me because of my death scent. Maybe I could do a Will Dragon but –“

 “There’s none that’s Riderless,” Cassings finished for her. “Or any that would take Tenacity.”

 Sanders tore a bit of cloth. “Another ploy against her. With Tsaul out of commission like that there’s only one dragon she *can* take.”

 A shiver went up her body. “Oh gods… the Death Dragons…” she gasped.

 They room went silent as the Generals worked – all except for the screams of Eldrich. “G-get something to put this boy to sleep,” Cassings ordered. “We have to have something.”

 Minutes later, though it seemed like an eternity, someone came in with a needle filled with a clear liquid. They injected it into Eldrich and seconds later there was silence.

 Cassings shook his head as they finished all they could do for Eldrich’s back. “Our neighbors play dirty, Will,” he growled. “They’re nothing but goddamn *kids*. They are attacking *children*.”

 Sanders sighed. “First thing’s first. Alvincia you *will* now be escorted by someone at all times starting today onwards. That was too close a call.”

 Lydia barely heard. She swallowed and walked around to Eldrich. He was sound asleep. She ran a hand through his hair, brushing it out of his face. Tears were filling her eyes again. “I did this…” she muttered miserably.

 “Yes, you did,” Sanders replied coldly.

 Cassings fell hard into a chair, a moan of pain escaping his lips as he rubbed at the brace on his leg. “I have a feeling I know the answer already, but have someone escort Miss Alvincia out to Tsaul and see if she can meld with him in his current state. I would do it but I think that just finished me off for the night.”

 Sanders looked over at Cassings with a great deal of concern. “Do you need –“

 “No. No, I don’t,” Cassings replied coldly before Sanders could finish his sentence. “Take Miss Alvincia to try to meld with Tsaul and then let her take her medicine for the night. I’ll fetch someone to get the boy moved to somewhere more comfortable.”

 Lydia swallowed hard. Her throat felt constricted and tight. Sanders looked down at her and turned without saying anything. She looked down at Eldrich one final time before she followed after Sanders.

 He lead her out towards Tsaul. Tears filled her eyes again. She reached out and touched her dragon. He was completely stone still. She could see him breathing, but that was it. He was not moving, standing in a the middle of walking, a furious look on his face – his face plumage even puffed out in rage. She swallowed and closed her eyes to try to reach out to him – but realized with a start that she couldn’t. The part of her mind where she reached back for her meld link was completely shut off. It was like it idd not even exist. Of course. She was completely human now. She had no powers unless she was connected with another dragon.

 Only the dragon could reach out and meld with a human.

 She swallowed, looking around for another dragon. She found a Battle Dragon that was standing nearby watching her. She walked up to it and tried to reach out to touch it. The dragon bulked and hissed at her.

 She shook her head. “N-no, no. I’m not going to hurt you. Come here. Hi.”

 “What you want?” it snarled.

 She licked her lips. “I-I want to meld with you. Just temporary. My dragon – it’s in trouble, but I can’t save it because I’m not melded. Please. I’ll give a shiny. I’ve got lots of shinies.”

 The dragon glared at her and shook her head. “I is already melded. I can’ts help. Even for shiny.”

 “Do you know of any dragon in the area that’s not melded?”

 Again the dragon shook its head. “No. Meldlings take all up. Only two free is big blacks.”

 Lydia shivered but shook her head. “No. Those won’t work. Look, I’m a Meldling, too. We can split the link.”

 “Only Meldlings do this. Dragons no do this. Talks to Meldling.”

 She nodded and turned away. She looked across at Sanders who was staring angrily at Tsaul, a hand laying on him. He looked down at her. “Any luck?” he asked her.

 She shook her head. “The others have taken all of the dragons. There’s only two that are not melded. I-I could try to talk to Dennis or Kelly to see if they could help me –“

 “And then you would get them punished by assisting you.”

 “But they’re Southerners.”

 He raised his eyebrow and stared down at her. “You think that will stop them, Miss Alvincia?”

 She choked but shook her head. “No. No, it wouldn’t.”

 “Your best bet is to try to wait tomorrow and see if that boy wakes up.”

 She nodded numbly. She looked over at the cave. “All my tanks are in there,” she mumbled.

 Sanders turned and nodded. He walked inside with her in tow. She reached down to grab them and swore. She could hear faint hissing noises coming from them. She quickly dashed around, closing them up. Sanders joined her, helping her to quickly close them off. “Never a dull moment,” he growled.

 “At least my glass machine is safe at the camp. As long as I have one or the other I’m not as vulnerable.”

 He nodded. “I’ll have the shipments start coming directly to us.”

 She nodded numbly. She grabbed two of them. She tried lifting but immediately doubled over coughing at the exertion. She shook her head. She was going to have to drag them. She looked up at Sanders who had on under his left arm and then one in each hand. She gritted her teeth and started dragging them across the floor, heading out of the cave with him following.

#

 Lydia woke up to the sound of screaming. She sat bolt upright along with the guy who was across from her in the tent. He swore, looking around, trying to shake off his daze. She sat up in her cot and started coughing hard. She grabbed her trashcan and immediately proceeded to be sick. The man stared at her with wild concern but she shook her head and waved him off.

 She reached down and grabbed her mask, alternating between being sick and trying to drag medicine into her lungs.

 “Someone’s not having a fun morning somewhere,” he muttered.

 Tears rose to her eyes. Eldrich. He had woken up – probably to find himself wrapped up in the throes of a nightmare again.

 She regained control of herself and swung her legs out of bed. She reached down and pulled her boots on.

 “Good luck out there today, Death Slayer,” the guy called after her as she stood up and began walking out.

 She stopped and closed her eyes. “I-I’m not feeling very Death Slayer-ish right now, I’m afraid.”

 The man clicked his tongue. “You better start feeling it,” he chided. “Things might seem hopeless but that’s the moment you need to fight back the hardest. Right now more than any other time is when you should be focusing. Don’t stop thinking and don’t give in to the enemy.”

 She turned around and studied him, considering his words. She took a deep breath and nodded. “You’re right. Thank you.”

 He smiled at her as she turned and walked out of the tent. Licking her lips she nodded. “Death Slayer mode it is, then,” she mumbled, reaching inward and drawing out her strength and courage. “Obstacles. Obstacles, Lydia.”

 She followed the sounds of the screaming. Sanders was already out at the tent. Cassings joined her, limping painfully.

 Sanders disappeared inside the tent, and Lydia followed after. Inside she almost choked. Two men were trying to hold Eldrich down. His back was red and swollen, ripped open. It looked painful. Eldrich was screaming and despite the two soldiers and his own wounded back he was thrashing about, trying desperately to escape whatever nightmare was being shown to him.

 She swallowed and walked up to the him, walking around the men and to Eldrich’s head. “Eldrich!” she shouted. She knelt down and placed a hand on his head. It was soaked in sweat. “Eldrich,” she shouted, trying to still manage to put calm in her voice. “El, it’s Lydia. I’m here, El. Please, El. It’s just a nightmare. It’s not real.”

 But if Eldrich could hear her, he showed no signs. She looked up at them and shook her head. Sanders sighed, a hand kneading his forehead. “Medicate him,” he ordered one of the men standing nearby. “Sleep is better than whatever they are doing to him.”

 Lydia stood up and walked out of the tent. Outside Cassings was talking with some of the other men, giving brief orders. He turned to them as they walked out. Sanders shook his head. “I don’t even want to imagine what this is doing to that kid’s mind,” he growled.

 Cassings nodded. “What scares the hell out of me is that could be any one of us, couldn’t it, Alvincia?”

 She nodded numbly. “As long as you are connected to a dragon.”

 Cassings knuckled his forehead. “Will. I have half a mind to send some of these men away from here. If they start to get a little adventurous trying to force Miss Alvincia’s hand…”

 Sanders sighed. “That thought had crossed my mind, too. This could get ugly and I would rather not have more innocents get attacked if we could get them out of here. They don’t need to be far. We could get them over to Dragon Valley.”

 A shudder went up Lydia’s body. She turned to him and licked her lips. He frowned down at her. “An idea, Miss Alvincia?” he asked.

 Lydia closed her eyes. She felt like she was going to be sick. “Ayvra.”

 “You’re not serious,” Cassings hissed. “Alvincia – rash decisions!”

 She shook her head. “It’s not a rash decision,” she snapped. “I’m thinking it through. Without a meld link I’m absolutely powerless. It doesn’t matter even if you took me to that valley to find a riderless dragon. The same thing can happen. Sean controls dragons as well as I can. They can sever my meld link as easily as they did last night. *Any* meld link I try to form.” She took a deep breath. “Except Ayvra’s. Even more – she could easily assist in putting an end to whatever those Meldlings could possibly be forced to try to do to me.”

 “And if you lose control of that dragon again,” Cassings growled, “think of the loss of life. It’s already a tenuous relationship that we have with that dragon. It’s a psychotic dragon, Alvincia. There’s no help there.”

 She shook her head. “No. Ayvra would listen to me. Yes, she’s psychotic, but she also knows that I *can* control her. That thought delights her.”

 “Yes. She seemed positively excited when she attacked us,” Sanders growled.

 She shook her head. “No. She attacked because she had lost control but she had not taught me what she wanted me to learn. She knew she had lost.” She sighed. “It’s either this or things are going to get even more ugly.”

 Sanders clicked his tongue. “Speaking of ugly,” he growled. “Here comes our friends.”

 Lydia blinked and turned along with Cassings. Two Western generals were coming towards them. They were both wearing sadistic smiles. They stopped a few paces away. “You have one of our men,” one of them said pointedly, his voice thick with accent. “We would like to have him back now, if you would be so kind.”

 A shudder went up Lydia’s body. Her eyes flicked to Cassings who was shaking his head at the other generals. “He was assaulted by one of your own men last night,” he growled.

 The blinked curiously, frowning. “I had heard Darian had assaulted him. He is Southern. We will address that situation. That is between the two of us. Right now what I could like is to have our soldier back.”

 “He’s *still* being assaulted,” Cassings growled. “Those screams are from that other soldier being in his mind.”

 “And, again, we will deal with that in due time. You have absolutely no right nor authority to keep one of our own troops.”

 “You can’t possibly be delusional enough to think we’re going to just hand that boy back over,” he growled.

 A slow smile spread across the general’s face and he stared down at Lydia but then back up at Cassings. “You can keep him and our country can consider it an attempt at stealing him. Are you sure you really want to cross that line? Lydia’s protection here is already on shaky ground. This *is* neutral territory unless an action is taken that voids that neutrality.”

 Lydia swallowed and backed up, bumping into Sanders. Sanders reached down absently and squeezed her shoulder. “Derrick,” he growled a warning.

 Cassings glared at him and then back at the foreign generals. “Your men assaulted Lydia last night!” he shouted. “They bound and gagged her.”

 “They restrained her. She walked in on the middle of our troops trying to save our soldier. With a Southerner already attacking our boy, you would have to forgive them being a little wary when an Easterner comes into the picture.”

 “Bullshit!” Cassings shouted angrily. “Are you seriously going with that half assed story!”

 They shrugged. “That is the way that it was told to us by our troops. You will have to forgive us if our information could possibly be a little off. You know how troops are. Barring that, though – our soldier? Our soldier or the young lady’s protection.”

 “Give it up, Derrick,” Sanders snapped. He turned to a soldier behind him. “Get the boy.”

 Lydia whirled around, staring at him with wide eyes. She backed away. Oh gods… this wasn’t happening! Eldrich! “N-no!” she gasped. She whirled around to the other generals. “Stop this!” she shouted.

 “Alvincia,” Cassings shouted in warning.

 She forced herself to be calm. Pushed her panic aside. She closed her eyes.

 She could hear the men chuckling. “That’s the problem with young troops. Undisciplined. It takes a few years for that to beaten out of them. Until they learn to not be so insubordinate.”

 She gasped as a man walked past with Eldrich in his arms. Eldrich was wrapped up tight in a blanket and was being cradled. He had stopped screaming. Obviously now in the throes of whatever medication had been given. A Western soldier came around and took Eldrich. He placed the boy on the ground and ripped the blanket away. Another soldier came around and grabbed Eldrich’s other arm and together the two of them dragged Eldrich away – his torn back exposed for the world to see.

 She felt sick.

 “So tell us, Miss Alvincia? Have you considered our proposal? You meld with our Death Dragons and defect over to us and it could be all over for the boy. Say the word right now and I’ll snap my fingers and the boy will be returned right now to your generals.”

 “Yeah, because right now your side looks so appealing what with how you treat your soldiers,” she snapped.

 The man grinned. “Oh, I assure you. We would not treat you like that. You meld with our Death Dragons and you would be given full titles and rank. That is what we do for all who meld with a Death Dragon. They are made captains right there on the spot – just like the one that you killed a few years ago. Full medical accommodations included.”

 “I don’t have time for this conversation,” she growled. “You’re nothing but sadistic humans. You’re his superiors. What you are doing to him should *never* cross your mind. Your first role is supposed to be the protection of the ones who are throwing their lives on the line for you! If this is the true shape of your *rank* there’s no way in hell I would ever want to be a Captain of your disgusting army. No thanks. Maybe one day I *might* be Captain, but I promise that I will get that rank because I have worked hard to earn it, and I will certainly no more than you ever will about how to treat my troops.”

 The men grinned. “You’ll learn that sometimes it is unfortunately necessary to discipline an unruly soldier. You are young and still very naïve. Do you believe for even a moment that the man behind you has never had someone flogged.”

 “Discipline and cruelty are two very different things and you are so far over the line that you almost insult the word discipline by claiming that’s what this is. Get out of my face. I want *nothing* to do with you. If you thought for a second that this – beating my friends – was going to work against me you know even less about me than I thought you did. As for taking my dragon from me. Great job. You have now completely reduced me to a simple human – you now have even less power over me than you did before. Your plans aren’t very well thought out, *generals*.”

 The generals glared at her. Cassings stared at them. “You have the lady’s answer. Leave,” he growled.

 The generals’ eyes flicked to him and then back to her. One of the turned around and walked off. The last one stayed for a moment and grinned again. “Just let us know when you have reconsidered, child. That boy’s medication will wear off in, what, maybe four hours? Even now, I wonder what nightmares he’s having.”

 She watched the general turn and stalk off. Lydia swallowed and turned back to Sanders. “Take me to Ayvra, *please*, sir. I assure you. This is not a rash decision and I have thought it out. I know what I am doing.”

 Cassing sighed behind her. She turned to see him running a hand through his hair. “You’ll have to hurry, Will. They’ll be wondering where she is. I can stall them for a little while if necessary, though they shouldn’t come bothering her for a few hours.”

 Sanders sighed next. “This is such an insane idea.”

 Lydia grinned up at him. “Those seem to be my specialty, actually.”

 He stared down at her and nodded. “Let me go get my Myrillia.”

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 “Be careful, Alvincia,” Sanders ordered as he followed behind her.

            She nodded, though she really did not feel any fear. She knew in her heart that Ayvra would not attack her. For whatever reason the dragon did truly view her as her Rider.

            She slid down the sloped floor when her feet stepped on pebbles. Somehow she managed to keep her balance, though Sanders reached out and grabbed her shoulder to steady her. “Sorry,” she apologized.

            He smiled at her and nodded, releasing her so that she could continue on.

            She reached the large center room and was once again floored by how large the room was – and the rock mound situated in the exact center – and then, as if those were not large enough, the brilliant white, sparkling dragon resting on top. Ayvra’s head as resting on the edge, her wings flowing down on either side of the rock formation. Her eyes settled on Lydia and she rose her head up in surprise.

            The sound of windchimes filled the air.

            Lydia shook her head. “I am sorry, Ayvra. I cannot talk with you. I am not melded with a dragon.”

            Ayvra’s head lowered down to her, sniffing her. Behind her, she heard Sanders draw in a breath through his teeth, making a hissing sound in his fear.

            A dragon, a small tiny dragonet landed near to them from out of nowhere. “Why are you not melded?” the dragon growled, its voice filled with anger.

            Lydia nodded. “I’ve run into a bit of a problem to put things simply. I was attacked by another Meldling. He cut Tsaul’s tie to me and there is no dragon that I can remeld with.”

            “Then meld with this one!” the dragon growled. “I can provide you all the dragons in the world that you would want to meld with. The very idea,” it growled. “How could you allow yourself to have become so vulnerable. So *weak*.”

            She looked at the dragon and nodded. “You’re right. And believe me, I’m angry about it. I *could* meld with any dragon, but I think they would get the upperhand on me again.”

            The dragon snorted. “If you had let me teach you, this would not *happen*.”

            She nodded. She swallowed hard. “Ayvra. I want you to meld with me again. My friends are in trouble and I’m in over my head. I can’t protect the people I love and I would like to have your assistance.”

            The dragon chuckled. “You were so eager to be rid of me. Now you come calling back on me?” it growled.

            She put her hands on her hips. “Have a problem with that?”

            Ayvra titled her head. “No. Not really. I like moments of entertainment without being fully committed. I can approve.”

            “I thought you might feel that way.” She swallowed and flinched. “This is going to be painful again, isn’t it?”

            “Obviously,” the dragon chuckled. “As long as you do not fight this time, however, it will be much quicker and much less.”

            She drew in a deep breath. “Let’s do this, then. I’m ready.”

            She braced herself as Ayvra stepped down and encircled her with her long snake-like body. A scream escaped her lips as soon as the pain started.

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            She slid off of Myrillia and almost fell as her legs buckled. Cassings reached out and grabbed her. “Are you alright?”

            She nodded. “Sick. It’s… still taxing being melded with her.”

            “So she agreed?”

            “It’s a game in her mind. She’s… looking forward to this.”

            “You can control her, though. She’s not going to kill anyone?”

            She smirked. “I can control her. Don’t worry.”

            He looked up into the skies. “Where is she?”

            Sanders slid off as Lydia was answering, “She’s way up there, calling out to a few dragons in the area.” She smirked.

            “Lydia,” Cassings cautioned, “you can’t use this to try to bully them into possibly releasing the others. Be careful with this. This is about *you*.”

            She closed her eyes and nodded. “I understand. I hate it, but I do understand it. But, at least I can stop them being attacked while I am here.”

            She drew a deep breath and looked around. In the distance she could hear someone screaming. It tore through her. “H-how long…” she asked, barely able to complete the sentence.

            “For about an hour,” he said, his voice thick with anger. “Now and again the boy will get a few minutes reprieve before it starts all over again. I swear I’m about to go over there and lose my own temper.”

            Sanders stepped around her shaking his head. “Let’s keep calm.’

            Lydia nodded. “I’m… I’m not going to make a big deal of this. I’m going to sever the links and watch what happens. I can’t do anything for Eldrich other than protect him from those vicious hallucinations.” She took a deep breath. “I’m going to do it now.”

            “Please,” Cassings said, his voice low, looking over towards the Westerners.

            Lydia nodded and reached out with her mind, severing the connections between Darian and Eldrich, and Sean and Tsaul. She also reached out at the same time and reconnected with her beloved dragon. *“Tsaul? Tsaul are you ok?”*

            *“Y-yes. Yes, Lydia. Oh lizard tails that was dreadful. I could feel that boy in my mind and could sense everything going on but I could not do a thing about it. Oh, Lydia. Your meld link – y-you reconnected with* her*.”*

            *“No one is going to take my dragon away from me. I will do anything that I have to do to fight for you.”*

*“Aw, it is the dog,”* Ayvra’s voice broke into their thoughts. *“Always a pleasure, cur.”*

*“Better than a dog than a snake,”* Tsaul growled back. *“I-I need some food. I’m far too weak to fight with her…”*

*“Then get over here, you dumb lizard!”* Lydia snapped.

            Barely a minute later Tsaul landed nearby and rushed over to the food trough where the dragons were fed.

            At the same time, Eldrich’s screams finally died away. The Westerners frowned and looked up at her and around at the tent where Eldrich’s screams had been coming from. Cassings shook his head. “He’s probably still going to be in serious pain with those lashes. Damn I can’t stand this. What is *wrong* with these people. He’s their soldier – and he *wants* to be a good one.”

            She swallowed and looked up at him. “G-General Cassings… do you think that there is something that you *might* be able to do for him?”

            “Honestly, Miss Alvincia, I wish I could say one way or the other. I can promise that as far as I am concerned I will do whatever I can, but I am not too sure how far my authority extends in this situation. Even Will’s.”

            Lydia closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s too cruel and I feel like my being here is just making things worse.”

            He stared down at her and shook his head. “I saw the way that he stared at you, Alvincia. He admired you. You have helped. Even in a small way. You provided him with some hope. You showed him how to fight – and I’m not just talking about with weapons, but with his own fate. The value of that is worth its weight in gold.”

            “Fighting is all I know how to do. I’m not really sure that’s something to be admired. I don’t even feel worth of it.”

            Cassings chuckled, placing a hand on her shoulder. “And that makes you more than worthy of it, Miss Alvincia.”

            She opened her mouth to start to say something but stopped as Darian burst through the door from the school. She took a deep breath. “Here we go,” she mumbled.

            “Remember to keep your calm and to think before you speak. I know you want to help but be careful that you don’t make things worse.”

            She started away from him. “No. I already did that once and I’m not going to make that same mistake again.”

            “Why did you *stop*?” one of the Western generals shouted at him.

            “I didn’t,” Darian answered without bothering to look at them, glaring across at her with a cold steady gaze.

            “Disconnect her!” they shouted.

            She grinned. “He can’t,” she answered calmly. She had felt him trying even while she had been talking to Cassings. She had felt his thoughts slipping desperately against her meldling link with Ayvra, unable to gain purchase.

            “What the hell have you done to your meld link?” he growled.

            “Me? Absolutely nothing.”

            “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

            “Not really. I’m too serious. Not a lot of funny things have ever happened in my life.”

            *“What the hell did you do to your meld link,”* Darian roared.

 She grinned. “I melded. Ayvra’ mynthia, why don’t you come down here and introduce yourself.” She spoke the words and sent out the thought all at the same time. She looked around. “Oh. We might want to back up. She’s going to need a lot of room.”

 She whirled around and ran out of the way, even as Ayvra landed barely a second later. She whirled around. “You almost crushed me, stupid dragon!” she snapped.

 Ayvra turned to her. “Oh? Did I? Well, learn to get out of my way next time.”

 Darian had been blown off his feet and was on his back in the dirt. He sat up wincing. When he looked up he froze. Lydia grinned, feeling a sick feeling of evil delight. She looked around at the other generals. The Southerner’s table had been blown back and the Westerners had papers flying everywhere in the wind.

 No one moved. Their eyes wide as they took in the dragon that was well over the size of the school.

 Ayvra looked around. “Oh… Oh dear. Hrrrm, this could be a problem.”

 She frowned. “What’s going to be a problem?”

 “Oh… well, you may want to back up. Perhaps I brought too many dragons with me.”

 “W-wait! Ayvra!” she shouted. She looked up at the sky and quickly ran even further back, grabbing her Cassings’s arm as she ran. “Look out!” she shouted.

 Dragons of all shapes and sizes began landing out of the sky. Not a single one of them paying much attention to the *where* or the *place* – and in some cases even the *who*. The Westerner’s table was demolished and several of the Southerner’s tents were wiped out. Even Sanders’s and Cassings’s table was not spared. She looked up and even found several half-human sized dragonets land on the school roof.

 Lydia lost count of how many dragons landed. She winced and buried her face in her hands. Cassings stared down at her in astonishment. “Y-you said she’s under your control, right? Alvincia!”

 She winced. “Ok… so I forgot a detail here or there. Oh gods, Ayvra!”

 “What?” the dragon asked defensively turning around to stare back at her. “I brought them for you. These humans tried dared to try to take your dragon away by cutting off your meld link. I thought maybe you might have learned the danger of having only one dragon as your pet. Oh! Death Dragons! Lydia! Look, Death Dragons!”

 Ayvra walked across to them, ignoring the Westerners screams and shouts. The dragon looked them up and down, analyzing them carefully. The both backed up, hissing, and throwing violent scenes of death and ripping through Ayvra’s mind – and Lydia’s too.

 “Oh, Lydia. You should meld with them. They are not superior quality at all, but you should. You could do it, you know. Oh, be still! See, the problem with these curs is that they they go about trying to drive a person to insanity all wrong.”

 Lydia sighed. “Ayvra. Please leave them alone. They belong to those humans. And no, forget it! I’m not melding with them. That’s what those humans want. They want me to meld with them to do their bidding.”

 Ayvra whirled around and looked down at the humans. “Hmph. The insult. Humans thinking they own dragons who are unmelded. And these stupid curs are dumb enough to follow them like the dogs that they are. Tamed. Worthless. Maybe I should kill them. It has been a long time since I feasted on Death Dragon.”

 The two Death Dragons roared at her and whirled around, attempting to take off into the air. Ayvra sent out a thought that rippled through the air, cutting even into Lydia’s mind. The sound of a chime rang through the air. The Death Dragons stopped immediately in midstride and began to roar in obvious pain.

 Lydia swore. “Ayvra! You will *stop!”* She sent out her own thought, freezing Ayvra instantly. “You will do *nothing* to these dragons and you will *not* eat dragon flesh while you are connected with me. Do you understand?” she growled, stomping over to the dragon and releasing the thought that had suspended her.

 Ayvra put her foot down and lowered her head. “Aw, I have made my Rider angry with me. Fine. I will obey. But a Death Dragon is a fine meal. I still think you should meld with them. Oh, I even found a Will Dragon for you – one that takes Tenacity.”

 She breathed in deep calling for patience. “Thank you. I might consider that. Look I need you to –“

 She didn’t have time to finish the thought as a scream rent the air. Followed by a loud panicked shout. She whirled around to stare at the school door. Kelly was clawing at Dennis, hugging his leg, while he was trying to reach down and pick her up. “W-what the hell is that thing?!” he shouted.

 The dragon rose. “Meldlings! Oh look, Lydia! They are just like you.”

 Ayvra walked slowly towards them. Darian, still in the dirt, panicked and tried to crab walk backwards, pushing out with his legs to put as much distance between him and the approaching dragon.

 Lydia winced. She had not considered Kelly in all of this. “Ayvra. Stop. You are scaring the small one.”

 Ayvra obeyed and sat down. “So I am. Such a young Meldling. Oh the things I could teach her. Do you think she would want to meld with me.”

 “No! You cannot meld with her. She’s way too young for you.”

 Dennis blinked, staring between the two of them. “T-that this is *talking*?”

 Lydia grinned and nodded at him. “You have to reach out and form a connection with the dragon-only link. Ayvra is very special. *We* are her attribute. She’s a Meldling Dragon. I’m warning you right now, though. *Don’t* meld with her.”

 Ayvra turned and glared at her. “As if I would offer my meld link to these inferiors. Look. How pathetic they are. The one is far too young. The other is far too weak to even bother with. And this one…” she turned and glared at Darian. She laughed, the sound coming out as a low growl to others. “*This* one is so deliciously flawed. I have fought his type in the past. Epic battles. Forcing dragons to attack me, send me hallucinations to try to push me past insanity, trying to force a meld that would never connect. So *sure* of himself. Think I should give him a try? I have not fought a Meldling in so *so* long.”

 Lydia shrugged. “That is between him and you. I wash my hands of that situation and refuse to be held accountable for that outcome. I ask only that you wait. Three weeks. That’s the time that I have left and then I will unmeld and you can do whatever the hell you want to do, Ayvra.” She turned to the Westerners, walking up to them. “Tell me. Do you still want me?” she demanded, her voice low. “Do you still want to play your games with me? You *will* leave me alone for the remainder of our time here. You’re right. There’s nothing that I can do to stop you. They are your soldiers. But you will *not* use them or anyone else against me. You try to force me to meld with your Death Dragons and I will have them slaughtered. You try to take me against my will and I cannot promise a very favorable outcome for you.”

 All of the dragons in the area suddenly lifted their heads to the heavens and roared. All of them stared down at the men below and unison spoke, “You try to take my Rider or harm her, and I will delight in the feast of human flesh. You curs dare to insult her by taking away her mounts? You are lucky I do not slaughter every single one of you now.”

 Lydia looked around. She licked her lips. A shiver went through her meld link. She could feel the power surging out from Ayvra into every single one of the dragons surrounding them. She both delighted in it and choked on it.

 She closed her eyes and whirled around. “Ayvra! To me. We need to find a place for you. A space big enough for you. I think behind our camp should be a good spot. And get rid of some of these dragons. We hardly have enough food delivered for them all.”

 Ayvra chuckled. “Absolutely, my Rider,” the dragon said, almost purring with delight.

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 Lydia groaned and fell to her knees, clutching her head.

 “Alvincia?” Cassings gasped, bending down to her.

 She looked up with bleary eyes. The General must have just left his tent. She shook her head at his concern. “I-I’m fine. It’s… just a rough morning.” She turned her head and coughed hard. “C-controlling Ayvra’s link is just taxing on my body and my mind.”

 “It’s only been three days? You were melded with her a lot longer last time.”

 “And it was awful then, but I wasn’t trying to control her then, either. It doesn’t help that she’s doing things like sending me random bits of information.” She sighed as she got to her feet. “I actually melded with a dragon last night before I went to bed without realizing what I was doing. I was so deep into the throes of the bliss that I went too deep into the dragon’s mind. I almost pushed it and myself into insanity before I realized what I was doing.” She shook her head. “I-I’m sorry. I’m complaining.”

 He got to his feet, hissing in pain. He swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment until he regained himself. “Alvincia be careful. If you think it’s too much, disconnect.”

 She nodded. “Thank you, sir. I will.”

 She walked away and went to join the men at the campfire. Like usual they greeted her loudly, handed her a plate and began to fill it up with scrambled eggs and sausage. She took the fork in her hand and winced. She swallowed and closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths. She made another attempt with the fork but gave up again. She stared sadly at the food.

 The man beside her noticed she wasn’t eating. “Oi, Lydia, you alright? You haven’t hardly touched your food.”

 “I-I’m just not hungry,” she lied.

 “Come on. Bottoms up! You can’t slay death on an empty stomach,” one of them said, laughing.

 She sighed and stared sadly at the plate that was propped up on her knees. She shook her head. “No. No, I’m ok, really.”

 Her stomach rumbled. The man beside her laughed hard. “I’m calling someone’s bluff! Come on, Alvincia,” he said, slamming a hand hard on her shoulder. He frowned almost instantly and she looked away, not wanting to meet his gaze. “Hey, you ok? Lydia? You’re shaking like a leaf, girl?”

 She closed her eyes. “I-it’s nothing. Just a bad tremor day, that’s all. My body is just going through a lot right now, I guess, so the extra stress is kinda getting caught up with my medicine’s side effects.” She felt so embarrassed. Embarrassed and weak. She reached and tried to scoop up her food with her fork – but her hand refused to stop shaking long enough for her to get the food to her mouth.

 The guy beside her clicked his tongue. “I remember seeing a guy going through liquor withdraws. I don’t think he was shaking half as bad as you are now.”

 She sighed. “I-It will calm down in an hour or so. I guess I’ll just save my plate and eat then.”

 The man sat his almost finished plate down beside him and took her fork. He began shoveling food onto it and lifted it up. “Open.”

 She turned bright red. “I-I’m not having you feed me!” she gasped.

 This was met with raucous laughter from everyone. He glared around at them before turning back to her. “And what would you do, Alvincia, if I were the one having problems? You would do the same thing I’m doing now, wouldn’t you?”

 She swallowed. “W-well… y-yeah, but…”

 “We’re Will Riders. We look after each other. Even if it’s something as mundane as helping you to eat on a bad medicine day. As much as you go through if something stupid like this will help I’m more than happy to do it.”

 The men around her shouted their agreement, punching their fists into the sky. She looked around at them, feeling herself redden even more. But she smiled at them. That feeling of acceptance back again. “You’re all idiots,” she muttered.

 “Probably. Now – eat up!”

 She swallowed her pride and embarrassment and opened her mouth, allowing the guy to help her eat. She grinned after swallowing a few bites. “My boyfriend helped me eat once,” she said with a laugh.

 This was met with chuckles. “Woah. The Death Slayer has a guy?” one of them exclaimed in mock surprise.

 She glared at him. “And what’s wrong with that?” she demanded.

 He grinned wide at her. “In between slaying death and commanding dragons, it’s hard to imagine that you have a mundane side to you.”

 “You really are an idiot!” she snapped at him, taking another mouthful of food.

 “I dunno, I kinda agree,” another said with a grin equally as wide. “Now I’m curious. What kind of guy does a Death Slayer like?”

 Lydia grinned wide. “Tall, buff, and handsome.”

 This was met with lots of laughter. “Tall?” one of them asked, wiping tears out of his eyes.”

 “What’s wrong with tall?”

 “And what is *tall* in your mind?” one of them asked chuckling. “Four foot six?”

 More laughter.

 She glared at him. “Meanie. You’re making fun of me.”

 He chuckled. “Only a *little*.”

 “I bet I’m not the only small thing in this group,” she snapped, giving him a pointed look.

 This was met with lots of laughs. One of them slammed a hand hard into the guy’s back. He grinned and punched out at the person. “Nah, seriously, though. How tall is your boyfriend, then?”

 She sighed. “Tanis… he’s… he’s actually pretty average, I guess. He’s sweet and wonderful and I like how he treats me.”

 “Uh oh. You don’t sound fully committed.”

 She took another bite, lowering her eyes. “I… I guess it’s wrong, but… I just don’t think I’m over my ex is all.” She closed her eyes, feeling the return of a familiar pain. “Now he is buff and tall. He was perfect,” she muttered.

 “Nothing worse than a broken heart. What happen? He dump you for another? Damn fool. Who dumps the Death Slayer?”

 She shrugged. “It was my fault. I think. No. Just… I guess I am partly to blame but I just don’t feel like I was wrong. He got mad. It was day three of Battle School. His first year. His partner sought me out to help curb his attitude.”

 The man across from her winced. “Damn. I remember my first days there and what my partner did. Yeah – that could be a relationship killer real fast. What did you do to him?”

 She chewed another mouthful of food. “He plays pranks and likes fights. So for every prank and fight he got into it… I got a knife blade scratch. Nothing serious but… I think it worked a little too well,” she mumbled. “He flipped out on me the next day and dumped me.” She hugged her knees. “I was just trying to help him. I think it worked for the most part. His partner tells me that he’s never been in a fight or played a prank since, but I’m not too sure I liked the cost of helping him.” She swallowed. “He did so much for me. I probably wouldn’t have become a Rider if it weren’t for him.”

 One of the men gave her a sad smile. “I dunno. Doesn’t sound like the sort of break up I’ve ever heard about. I wouldn’t cross him out of your life quite yet. A break up happens when someone falls *out* of love. Probably fell in love with someone else. That sorta thing. A guy flipping out that bad because he couldn’t stand you being a hurt – that’s not him no longer being in love with you. If he didn’t care it wouldn’t have bothered him.”

 Another grinned and nodded. “I think you just took him by surprise. You wounded his pride. Most guys like to think of themselves as the protectors. What you did probably just threw his emotions all out of whack. He probably had no idea how to handle that situation. You confused the hell out of him which just pissed him off. Give him some time. He’ll probably be back around.”

 She sighed and nodded. “He didn’t speak a single word to me after the incident. The day that I was coming out here he suddenly reappeared trying to convince me to stay. But… how am *I* supposed to react to that? He certainly didn’t give a damn about my feelings when he dumped me. I’m just supposed to take him back after that like nothing ever happened?” She sighed. “But then there’s the part of me that dreams and hopes he will.”

 The men laughed. “There’s nothing more complicated than relationships, Alvincia!”

 She sighed. “I agree,” she said, slumping forward in defeat. “I’d much rather risk my life in a knife fight any day of the week rather have to deal with relationships. At least in a knife fight everything makes sense.”

 This was met with lots of laughter. The man across from her leaned back. “That’s it, We’ve found the Death Slayer’s true weakness. A broken heart!” And even more laughter.

 She grinned at them. “You’re all impossible,” she shouted at them, unable to keep her delight out of her voice.

 The man beside her laughed and raised the fork again full of food. She accepted it happily, her heart too full to even bother feeling embarrassed anymore.

 They had lost themselves in another conversation when a voice broke in, cutting them off abruptly. “Now this is too amusing to not remark on. What in the world are you guys doing to her?”

 Lydia felt herself go bright as she turned to stare up at General Sanders. The men immediately burst into peals of laughter. She buried her face in her hands, which refused to be still even on her face.

 “She’s got the shakes,” one of them finally answered, his laughing. “So we were just helping her out.”

 Sanders frowned. “Shakes?” he asked.

 The man beside her nodded. “Her medicine. I’ve seen her struggling with it in the mornings when she wakes up but never quite this bad.”

 “S-some days are just this bad. It’s very rare,” she muttered. Gods, that feeling of weakness came back over her again. To have to admit some deficiency to her superior was the epitome of embarrassment. “I-it will be over in a few hours. W-well… maybe not completely, but it does get better.”

 “Hold out your hands. Let me see,” he said.

 A feeling of dread came over her and even the rest of the men quieted. She swallowed and held out her hands after taking several deep breaths to attempt to steady herself.

 His frown deepened. His eyes lifted to hers. “Are you able to handle a knife like this?”

 She pursed her lips. “Yes,” she answered, feeling her anger starting to rise a little. “It doesn’t weaken me. I make sure it doesn’t. I’ve even induced it in myself so that way I could get use to the feel of fighting while dealing with it. Even my partner has worked with me on it extensively.” She sighed and looked down. “It’s one of the reasons, though, he thought I should be placed more in a support position than a full fighter. He thought it better that I work on my aerial tactics and leading.”

 Sanders smiled at her softly and nodded. “That almost sounds like it disappoints you?”

 She shrugged. “Not really… I mean, I’d much rather be out in the midst of the action, but,” she shook her head, “devising plans and watching them get carried out to take down an enemy is fun, too.” She grinned. “Some obstacles are just impossible to break through. At least I have a detour for this one. It’s better than it stopping me completely. I’ll take my blessings where I can get them. There are far worse fates. At least I have the cunning to make up for my handicaps.”

 Sanders chuckled, “If you can learn to control that fiery spirit of yours and control your rash decisions.”

 She grinned at him. “I’ll work on it, sir,” she promised.

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 She glared at the target. She took several deep breaths to steady herself. Peace… calm… Steady. She raised her hand. She could feel it still shaking. Three hours later and she had still not calmed. This was not going to be a problem. She promised herself that. She had not liked the looked on Sanders’s face when he had noticed her problem. It made her scared. Would he reconsider her as a fighter. Maybe she was no good at this at all.

 No! Lydia Alvincia – empty your mind!

 She threw all her thoughts out. There was no room for them. There was only room for her knife and the target. She drew in a breath and threw the knife. The blade went singing through the air, spinning over and over itself before it buried in the exact center of the target.

 She stepped back and allowed herself a moment of satisfaction.

 She looked over and stared at Ayvra. The dragon was watching her with a bored expression, laying on the ground, sprawled out. The dragon closed her eyes, completely ignoring her.

 Hmph, some things couldn’t appreciate a good shot when they saw one.

 She walked over to the target and dug out the knife and walked back. She took her spot. Ok. Faster this time. That was way too slow. She dropped her knife arm to her side. Clear your mind, aim… release. Her arm shot up and over in one quick fluid movement. She swore as soon as it left her hand. She had not applied enough power to it. The blade went flying through the air almost lazily. It hit the target still but dropped out of it, not having buried itself deeply into the wood of the target.

 She shook her head and walked back out there to retrieve it, chiding herself even still when she walked back. She blinked and looked over at a space near the back of a tent, having caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She blushed almost immediately. Three men were standing there watching her – and they looked like they had been standing there for some time.

 “Can I help you?” she snapped at them.

 They laughed. “Oh? Now she notices us? You should be more aware of your surroundings than that, Alvincia.”

 She smirked at them. “I only worry about people who might be a potential threat.”

 This caused even louder laughter. They walked up to her. “The lady likes to talk a big game. How about we give that a try?”

 She grinned at them. “You wanna fight?” A wave of excitement swept through her body. These men were skilled. They had been fighters for many years. Gods the things she wondered she could learn from them.

 “Feeling up to it? Looks like you’re still shaking pretty hard.”

 “That makes this the best time for me to learn. My body does not dictate for me what I can and cannot do.”

 “Sounds like fun, then. Let’s give you a try, Alvincia.” The guy grinned at her as he bent down, lifting his pants legs for his blades.

 Grinning in anticipation she reached for her own second blade. “Don’t hold back,” she ordered. “’Cause I won’t be.”

 The man laughed as the other two stepped back out of the way. “Then don’t get mad at me if you get cut.”

 “What makes you think I’m the one who’s going to get cut?” she said with a smirk. “Awfully sure of yourself.”

 “Doesn’t sound like I’m the only one.”

 Lydia dropped down into her stance. “Let’s do this,” she said, barely able to control her anticipation.

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 Cassings looked down at her. “What in the world did you guys do to her?” he asked with a little alarm in his voice.

 She was coughing pretty heavily, even with her mask over her head. The men were around her laughing pretty hard even as two of them helped bandage her up – there was a nasty slice down the inside of her arm.

 Cassings’s reaction only caused even more laughter, which is probably what brought him over. Every single soldier was gathered around, all teasing her and being really loud.

 “Just a friendly little sparring session, sir,” someone answered.

 “Well – several,” another said, still laughing.

 Cassings sighed, rubbing his forehead. “You thrashed her.”

 Which was a pretty fairly accurate description. There wasn’t a single part of her body that didn’t feel scratched in some way. Most were tiny cuts and gashes. The worst one was the one they were bandaging up now and one on her cheek.

 He looked around them, seriously annoyed. “Didn’t one of you think to take it easy on her? She’s only a second year in Battle School.”

 They laughed and jabbed a thumb at another guy who was sitting on the ground, bandaging up his leg. “The lady gave as good as she got, sir.”

 He looked around and noticed that there were several others with bandages on them. Several of them laughed as they held up their wounds. “She ain’t half bad, sir. And she’s a pretty quick learner.”

 “All this and she’s still got the shakes too bad to even try to bandage herself up,” one of the men explained as they taped her bandage in place.

 “She’d probably want to fight more. We had to make her stop and get her mask on her.”

 She pulled it away. “I’m fine! That’s what I keep telling you.”

 This caused more laughter. The man in front of her grinned and held up the tape. “I’ll use this on that mask if you don’t keep it around that face of yours.”

 She sank back angrily, crossing her arms and glaring at him. “Moron,” she snapped angrily at him.

 More laughter. “We’ll try again some more tomorrow – I’d like to give you a try when you’re not this shaky.”

 “Shaky or not I can fight!”

 He laughed. “You’ve proved that, but I’d still like to see you in top form.”

 She sighed, doubling over and coughing hard again.

 Cassings shook his head as he stared down at her. “Those lungs of yours sound awful.”

 One of them smirked. “Yeah, the girl’s in extreme pain and you wanna know what she does when she was in the middle of fighting? She fed it to the one she was fighting. Surprises the hell out of you when she does it. That’s how she got me. She forced me to take her pain. Gave her a little longer to hang into the fight and weakened me. Nice little trade-off for her.”

 She grinned and pulled her mask away. “It’s what me and my partner came up with together. When I first joined the school, the stupid jerk would wait until I was coughing bad to take me out. It’s not completely fool proof, of course, but it does help.”

 The man laughed. “I didn’t know which part to be more surprised about. That she fed me her pain when we weren’t on dragons, that she did it in the first place, and that she was in that much pain and still fighting as hard as she was.”

 She shrugged. “It’s easy to forget pain when your mind is focused on something else. Half the time I don’t even notice it. I’m too busy concentrating on the fight.”

 Cassings smiled softly, reaching down and touching is brace. “I know exactly what you mean. Still – your lungs do sound awful, so take it easy for the rest of the day. No more fighting. That’s an order for all of you,” he said gently, staring around at all of them.

 He turned and went limping back off. Lydia watched him go, disappointment flooding through her. She hugged her knees. “Not fair. I was having fun.”

 The men laughed, one of them reaching over and messing up her hair affectionately.

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 She was having problems. Her lungs were burning in the heat of the sun. She had her mask on but it was not doing her a whole lot of good. She was slumped up against the log in front of the spot that was used for a campfire. She was hugging her legs, her face buried in them with her mask on her face. Every breath felt like she was breathing in fire. She did not even feel like coughing. The act of it was far too painful.

 Damn. Damn. She had pushed herself way too hard today. Now she was paying for it dearly.

 She wanted to take a treatment. She needed to but she did not have the guts to go talk to the guy who normally watched over her. She did not want to admit her weakness.

 She could almost hear Landon’s voice in her head telling her to get over herself. She was sick. Deal with it and move on. How many times had he screamed that at her when she had finally come to him to ask him to watch over her while she took an additional treatment during the day. Even Ori would say similar things.

 She got to her feet slowly, feeling dizzy. She looked around trying to catch sight of him. She swore. He was by the Generals talking with them.

 She really did not want to show Sanders another weak side of her today. The shaking had been more than enough. She sat back down and tried to wait the guy out. Several minutes passed. No. No good. Even worse, it was sounding like the sort of conversation that she probably shouldn’t interrupt.

 The *last* thing she wanted to do in a million years was collapse, though. The idea of that – showing that much weakness – disgusted her. She stood up and walked around. Her eyes spotted the guy that had helped her with eating today. Uhh – no. One embarrassing thing per person, she thought. She swallowed and turned away from him. The next group of men she saw were busy with a card game that included dice. She wanted to walk away but chided herself. Stop it, Lydia! You need help – ask for it.

 She walked up to them. Their eyes rose to her as soon as she neared and smiles spread across their faces. “Yo, Death Slayer!’ one of them greeted humorously.

 She smiled and pulled her mask away, trying to gather in her courage.

 One of them frowned. “Damn, are you alright?”

 She shook her head. “Having some problems,” she muttered. It almost hurt to talk.

 Alarm went through their eyes. “We need to get the Generals?” the man asked.

 She shook her head. “No. Umm. I need my medicine. T-the guy who normally helps is talking with them. I… I don’t suppose…”

 The man that had addressed her grinned. “You hardly need to ask. What can we do?”

 She swallowed. “I-I just need one. Umm… my medicine makes me high for a little while. I just need someone to watch over me. Make sure I don’t do anything stupid.”

 He grinned and jumped up along with the other three. “Sure. We can take our game with us even while we do that.”

 She smiled at them and nodded. “T-thanks.” Gods she felt so embarrassed. Having to ask for help like this. She wished dearly for the billionth time in her life that she was normal. To be able to take something as simple as breathing for granted the way that everyone else did.

 Several minutes later her glass machine was set up. The men sat on the floor with their game while she pulled her mask on, giving them brief instructions. She laid down on her cot and waited for her medicine to steal her mind away.

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 She awoke with a start. Something was wrong. Really, really, terribly wrong. That was the impression she got almost immediately. What was it? What was wrong? What had given her that impression?

 First off… the bed. That was the most obvious part. She was in a bed. How the hell was she in a bed? She should be in her cot. In her cot in her tent. That was the next thing that was wrong. She was not in a tent. She was in a room.

 She looked around. What sort of room? Oh… it was white and sterile. She could hear beeping sounds. That was when she also became aware of the gentle prick of an IV in her hand.

 Oh gods… Oh gods, no. No no no no no no no.

 She sat up and looked around. Yeah. She was in a hospital room. It looked roughly midday. She could see light streaming in through the window. She turned to the monitor that was beeping. It was a heart monitor. She recognized it easily.

 She reached down and immediately began ripping off the wires and the stick tapes. Angrily she pulled the tape off her hand and ripped out her IV. No! This was *not happening*.

 What day? What day was it? How long had she been asleep for? A day? A week? A month? *A year*?

 She pulled her legs over the side of the bed and jumped down – and almost collapsed instantly. Her legs unprepared for her weight. She gasped but got back up. Dammit. She was even in a hospital gown.

 She yanked it over the top of her head, not able to stand the feel of the fabric for even a second longer. Past caring if anyone walked in to find her laying on a floor, naked. She managed to get back up to her feet. She looked around wildly. Her clothes. Her clothes would have to be around here somewhere.

 She found them inside of a set of drawers, her boots sitting beside them. She pulled her uniform on angrily and sat down to pull on her boots and lace them up as quickly as she was able to.

 This was so not happening. This was a nightmare. Was that what was going on? Maybe Darian had figured out some way to give her a nightmare. It had to be because this *just could not be happening*.

 Tears were starting to well up in her eyes. She fought them back but it was a losing battle. She broke down. Sitting on the floor trying to manage her boot laces she broke down, sobbing hard. She buried her face in her hands and let herself go.

 One day. Not even. A few hours of fun. She had pushed herself too hard. She had enjoyed herself. Now she was paying for it. Oh Gods… what would Sanders and Cassings say. This was it. Yeah, probably. She had collapsed after just a few bouts of sparring. How could she ever hope to be a fighter.

 The door opened.

 She tensed and froze, wondering who it was, but the bed impeded her view from this position. Not that she could see much around her tears anyways.

 There was a muttered curse. “Alvincia? Jacobson, where is she?”

 It was Cassings. Oh gods… it was Cassings’s voice.

 There was a muttered curse and the sound of a chair scratching on the floor as someone stood up quickly. “She was in there. I just checked her not even five minutes ago.”

 There were footsteps as they entered the room. She supposed the nicer thing to do would be to call out – but Gods she dreaded seeing him. She just wished the earth would swallow her up right now. She hid her face in her hands, giving in to her tears once again, wishing she could stop those footsteps.

 “Alvincia!” Cassings shouted as he came around the bed. “What are you doing?”

 She felt him kneel down beside her, he tried to pull her hand away from her face. She freaked fighting him, trying to push him away. “No! No. No no no,” she cried.

 “Alvincia, calm down,” he ordered.

 A sob wracked her body and she shook her head. This couldn’t be happening. This was too unreal to be happening. “D-day,” she gasped finally. “What day is it?” she cried, pleading with him.

 “It’s only been two days, Alvincia. You only lost two days.”

 “Two days… oh gods…” She buried her face back in her hands.

 “Your heart stopped, Alvincia. You stopped breathing and your heart stopped.”

 This news cascading down her body and then back up, bringing out a fresh wave of tears. “I died again?” Oh gods… no… no no no no no. “Why?” she wailed desperately. “It’s been so long. I know I pushed myself but I’ve been that worse off before! This is insane! Dammit!”

 “Alvincia, calm down,” Cassings snapped. “It wasn’t your fault this time. You’re right. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was your medicine.”

 She jerked. She dropped her hands. “M-my medicine?”

 Cassings nodded. “The doctors think that your medicine went bad in the summer heat. This far south the heat’s a little more intense then you’ve had it in before. All of those vials in your case went bad. It was an error. We should have considered it.” He took her hand and looked at it. Blood was dripping from the sight where the IV had been in. He turned to the man standing behind them. “Jacobson, get me a damp cloth.” He turned back to her and stared down at her boots that she had been lacing up. “Where do you think you were going?”

 She swallowed hard. “A-away. I-I don’t want to be here. Please don’t make me get back in that bed again,” she begged, staring at it while tears still continued to fall from her eyes.

            Cassings sighed and shook his head. “Alvincia, are you going to refuse a direct order?”

            She stare back at him. “That’s why I am asking you to not give me one to disobey,” she said softly, her heart beating hard in her chest. “Please… just get me out of here. Just let me leave.”

            The man named Jacobson came around and handed the cloth to Cassings. Lydia looked up and recognized him as the man who had fed her yesterday – no, three days ago. Cassings turned her hand over and cleared up the blood trail on her hand. He turned to Jacobson after a moment. “Tell the doctors that Miss Alvincia will be leaving. I don’t like it, but this panic can’t be any better for her heart.” He turned back to her and glared at her. “You get *one* of these, Alvincia. The next time you end up in the hospital you *will* stay.”

            She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “No. I’m sorry, but… that’s one order I cannot follow. Not anymore. Please… I need to get out of here.”

            Cassings sighed and dropped the cloth. “Alright. Lace up your boot and pull yourself together.”

            She reached down and quickly tied it. She jumped up and rushed past him and out the door, wiping her eyes even as she ran down the hall for the doors.

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            Lydia was leaned up against the side of the building when Tsaul landed followed by Myrillia. She jumped up instantly and ran over to him, needing familiar contact with her dragon. Sanders slid off of Myrillia and stared across at Cassings, his eyebrow raised.

            Cassings shook his head. “She panicked and the only thing she could think about was getting out of there.”

            “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, reaching up to her chest. Her heart was still racing pretty hard. Two days… it had been so sudden. That was the worst part. She could remember laying down. It was such a normal event for her. She had her mask on and could feel her thoughts scattering. So, even if the medicine was bad she would still be high, it seemed.

            “Fighting death is always a terrifying experience,” Jacobson’s voice spoke out. “Even for someone as familiar with the battle as the Death Slayer,” he added lightly.

            She looked up and stared across at him, a smile spreading across her face slowly. His words oddly made her feel better. Reminded her that she was still alive. That her world had not been dramatically shifted or painfully ripped away. She stepped away from Tsaul and bowed to Cassings. “I-I really am sorry. I just… didn’t even know how long I had been asleep. I just got… a little scared.” She swallowed. “I know it’s no excuse for my behavior but waking up like that has never resulted in good experiences in my life. I’ve just been doing so well these past years. It was jarring to not at least have had a warning. At least in the past I had either been coughing up blood for the past week or I fell unconscious choking.” She buried her face in the palm of her hand. “Gods this was horrifying.”

            Sanders shook his head. “The young lady can stare down a horrifying, rampaging dragon, but you put her in a hospital and that’s what makes her lose it.”

            Tsaul snorted, growling slightly, “Try building up a lifetime of fear and see how you deal with it when you’re suddenly thrown in the middle of it.”

            Sanders stepped back chuckling, his hands held up in defense. “My apologies. Haha, someone’s a little touchy over their Rider this morning. Come on, Miss Alvincia. There are several men that are extremely concerned for you,” he said, laughing even more. “It was all I could do to keep them from all rushing over to come see you.” He grinned. “You’ve got quite a following of admirers.”

            She felt herself blush. “W-well… they are all sweet people. Oh gosh… I probably scared the heck out of the three I asked to watch me.”

            Cassings sighed stomping across the yard to his own dragon. “That’s an understatement,” he growled. “One ran out to get us and the other two were trying to resuscitate you. It was all I could do to get them off of you so I could get you here.”

            She reached up and climbed up the stirrups into Tsaul’s saddle. She was still shaking from her panic attack.

            “Alvincia,” Cassings voice called over to her. “I’m going to ask one more time. Would you *please* go back into that hospital and make sure nothing else is going to go wrong with your heart after what you just went through? Think of those guys that you just scared. Do you really want to put them through that horror again if something goes wrong with your heart.”

            She froze. Oh gods… she hadn’t thought about it like that. She swallowed and stared across at him. He was giving her a hard stare. She turned, feeling a tear slip out of her eye. She knuckled her forehead, fighting with herself. Go, stay. Go, stay. Gods she did *not* want to stay, but what if something *did* happen again? It would be cruel to do that to them again. How would she feel if one of her friends did that to her?

            She swung her leg back around off of Tsaul and slid down off the dragon. She buried her head in his side. “F-fine…” she breathed.

            “Derrick,” Sanders snapped angrily. “Are you seriously going to do that to her?”

            “Yes. The last thing we need to risk is for her to have some ridiculous fear of hospitals considering her medical problems. If something happens to her in battle I do *not* want to risk her losing it if she wakes up like that. And do you truly want to risk her life by taking her all the way back out there instead of keeping her here where she can receive quicker medical attention if something happens again?” He walked across to her, staring down at her. “You’re insane if you don’t think that in battle you’ll ever wind up needing treatment at a clinic or a hospital. I do not want to risk this being a fear for you.”

            She swallowed and nodded. “Y-yes, sir.”

[she gets kidnapped that night? Jacobson taken as hostage? Told to unmeld]

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            Lydia tossed around in the bed. She could not get comfortable. How odd. She used to sleep in a silk feather bed at home, but now instead of thinking of that, she would give anything to be back in her uncomfortable cot back at camp. She also felt ridiculously alone. When was the last time she had slept by herself in her own private room? She smiled as she pulled up the answer: before Erica had become her roommate in her junior year.

            She sighed and closed her eyes, trying to calm herself and to try to get some sleep. She wished she could at least have still stayed in her uniform, not this ridiculously small, child-sized hospital gown – and that she wasn’t still covered with wires.

            She started to feel herself drifting off finally when she heard some noises outside her door. She sat up, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

            A crash resounded from outside the door. Instantly Lydia came awake. She stared at the door. She could hear angry loud shouts, all spoken in thickly accented voices. She swore, her heart starting to pound in her chest. She swung her legs out of the bed, quickly ripping the wires of her body and pulling out her IV. She ran over to the cupboard where her things were stored.

            She had not even made it halfway to the cupboard when her door burst open. She resisted the urge to turn around or scream, instead focusing on her knives that seemed suddenly so close yet so very far away. Her hand landed on the handle just as arms grabbed her from behind.

            *“Tsaul! Ayvra! Help!”* she sent out the frantic thought as she was gagged and bound, her arms wrenched behind her back. And then she thought of an even more brilliant idea. She reached out even deeper, followed through their minds, finding General Cassings. *“Cassings! The Westerners! Help! They’re taking me!”*

            Something cut her link and a voice leaned down in her ear. “Try that again,” Darian’s voice growled, “and I swear we’ll kill that soldier that was outside your door.”

            Jacobson… oh gods… no…

            Darian picked her up and hoisted her over his shoulder. He carried her out the door where he joined four other men. She stared in horror as she saw Jacobson unconscious, blood trickling down the side of his face from a bad gash. The men followed her, dragging Jacobson behind them. They rushed out of the hospital and ran down several side streets. Lydia was lost almost immediately.

Suddenly Darian stopped and hoisted her down, slamming her against the wall of an alley. He reached down and pulled a knife out of his pants leg and walked over to Jacobson. “Cut your meld links,” he growled. “Now!”

            Lydia swallowed, hesitating, trying to search her mind for something – anything that could help get her and Jacobson out of this situation. Dammit! Why did Cassings have to insist on her remaining here? If she cut her links, there was no way they would ever be able to find her.

            Darian pressed the blade into Jacobson’s shoulder and began to dig it in slowly. Jacobson in his semi-conscious state grunted in pain. She watched as a circle of blood began to spread out from the knife wound.

            She tried to scream out but the gag stopped it. She closed her eyes and let tears fall. She reached inwards and severed her meld link with both Tsaul and Ayvra. Her mind slammed shut.

            Darian pulled the knife out and nodded at her. He turned back to the soldiers. “Dump him.”

            The nodded. One of them swept around Jacobson and slammed his fist hard into the side of the soldier’s head. Jacobson fell where he had been kneeling, collapsing to the ground in a heap. Darian whirled around and hoisted her back over his shoulder and took off down the street. She watched Jacobson for as long as she could until they rounded a corner and he was lost to sight.

            At least he was safe.

 Lydia waited. Her heart was pounding in her chest. They were going even deeper and further into the town with its large three storied buildings. They never entered the main roads, but stayed to allyes and side streets.

 She waited because she did not want them to reconsider going back for Jacobson.

 And then finally she began to struggle. It wasn’t hard struggling – she was bound with her hands behind her back and her legs tied up. But she was be *damned* if she was going to be taken without a fight.

 She flailed her legs and struggled desperately on his shoulder, trying to fall off. She wasn’t sure what she would do once she *was* down, but the thought of remaining still and doing nothing did not appeal to her.

 “Damn bitch!” Darian roared. “Knock it off,” he shouted, trying to keep her on his shoulder.

 Not likely. She fought him with every inch of her soul, even tried screaming around the cloth that had been shoved in her mouth. She actually rejoiced in pushing it out of her mouth and began screaming – loud and at the top of her lungs.

 Darian dropped her hard to the cobblestone ground. Pain flashed through her body and the wind was knocked out of her. She rolled over coughing hard. Darian shoved the cloth back into her mouth before she had a chance to recover. The cloth hit the back of her throat and she almost choked on it.

 “Knock it off, boy,” one of the Westerners growled. “You do anything to kill her and our bosses will rethink their deal with you and your disgusting Southern generals.”

 Darian stared down at her in frustration. She could see the muscles in his arm flexing – he wanted to hit her. Do something to her. “Gods,” he growled. “You better count your blessings bitch,” he said to her. “If I had my way I would make you wish you were dead.”

 Damn. She really was useless on the ground with her legs tied up like this. She contemplated for a moment trying to get up – but then what? Did she think she was going to try to hop away? Think, Lydia! There had to be something she could do to rescue herself.

 Darian stooped back over her to pick her back up and she did the one and only thing she could think of – she lifted her legs and kicked out. Her feet, bare as they were, made a direct hit to Darian’s crotch as he bent down. Darian gasped and fell to his knees, clutching at himself in pain.

 Lydia, unable to grin around her cloth, grinned inwardly. Again she raised her legs and kicked out. This time her blow connected with his face.

 The blow whirled him around. He went falling forward before he caught himself with his hands.

 Well… it wasn’t much, and it did nothing to solve her problem of escaping, but there was no denying how good that felt.

 Darian got to his feet and whirled around. He stepped to her side and reached down, grabbing at her hair and pulling her up to her feet. “You fucking *bitch*,” he roared. He raised his hand and slapped her hard across the face, releasing her at the same time. She fell to the ground, landing hard on her face, unable to break her fall. Stars flashed through her vision.

 “Knock it off, asshole!” the soldiers shouted. She felt two pair of arms seize her under armpits, raising her off the ground. “Strike her again and we’ll kill you.”

 “You’ve done your part, Meldlin,” another said in a thicker accent. “Get out of here. We’ll take care of the rest since you are clearly incapable of handling a tiny *child*.”

 Eighteen years old and people still referred to her as a child. Gods why could she not have grown taller? Uh… was there more messed up things to think about right now than age, Alvincia? Focus! Escape!

 How? Dammit… *how*?

 “I am not leaving until I get what was promised me,” Darian growled.

 “Then get the fuck out of our way,” the man said with a sneer.

 They began to drag her down the road, her feet scraping along the cobblestone painfully. She tried to pick her feet up in some way, but they were holding her down far too low.

 Again she fought the rag inside of her mouth. It was difficult, but she really had nothing else better to do, though she did wiggle as desperately as he could, but in this position it had little effect.

 Then she got another idea.

 She jerked her feet out in front of her and dug in with her heels. The men, who had not been expecting it, stumbled forward and she managed to jerk herself out of their grasp.

 Fine! Hopping it was!

 She whirled around to start but was met with the two soldiers who had been walking behind her. They grabbed her roughly again. “Dammit! Grab the bitch’s legs already!”

 The two men grabbed her under her arms while a third grabbed her by her ankles. She was now staring down at the ground as they rushed off with her at a higher rate of speed now.

 Gravity assisted in helping her with the one thing she had so far been unable to manage. She spit out the rag from her mouth and started screaming again. Screamed anything – everything. She shouted obscenities and nonsense words. Screamed at the top of her lungs. She started struggling even hard now, wiggling and kicking out with her legs.

 “Dammit! I’m about to fucking knock her brains out,” one of them snarled.

 “Hurry up and get that damn gag in her mouth!”

 Again they attempted to force the gag back into her mouth. This time she bit down hard and was rewarded by the sound of a painful shout. She did not relent but instead bit down even harder. She could taste blood now and that only strengthened her jaw.

 “Get the fucking bitch off of me!” the man screamed in pain.

 A blow struck her hard across the face. She saw stars but she did *not* open her jaw. She let out an animalistic growl as she clamped down even harder.

 “Get her off! Get her off!”

 Her feet fell to the ground as the man holding her legs dropped her. Then suddenly a fist buried itself deep into her stomach. She gasped in pain, her jaw unclenching. The finger left her mouth. Damn. She had wondered if she was strong enough to bite through a finger. Now she might never know. She didn’t waste time with that. Once again she started screaming at the top of her lungs. Not that it was really a scream but more like a string of words. She never really was the wailing type she supposed.

 “Fucking gag her!” someone screamed.

 “I’m not getting my fingers near her.”

 “Knock her out,” Darian snarled.

 Lydia realized with a start that only one man now had ahold of her. The other had released her when he had buried his fist in her stomach. She struggled against him and managed to pull herself free. She went rolling onto her back at the same time she felt a whoosh behind her. She turned around just in time to see a man stagger having thrown all his weight into a punch that did not connect.

 She began to kick out across the cobblestone with her legs. It painful on her butt, and it did horrible things to her underwear, and it was definitely not the most productive mode of escape, but with little other choice she did it, putting her all into it. She would escape to freedom on her backside if that was possible. As she did it she continue to keep screaming and shouting, praying someone might hear and come to her rescue.

 But then… it was the middle of the night and she was in some dark alleyway. Maybe if she could find a street? But she had absolutely no idea where she was or where the nearest street might be.

 “And where the hell do you think you’re going?” Darian snapped, walking up to her – covering the distance she had managed with three footfalls. He reached into his pants leg and drew out his knife. She silenced. Her heart hammered in her chest as he walked to her side and then stepped over her with his right leg, straddling her. He crouched down, hovering over her, and grabbed a fist full of her hair.

 “Maybe,” he growled, “it’s time I make you more compliant to your current situation. How about I start with your pretty little face, since you so enjoyed jacking up mine.

 He pressed the blade up to her skin at her right cheek. She swallowed and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the pain.

 And then there was the soft whoosh of dragon wings overhead. Lydia’s heart leapt into her throat. She opened her mouth and started shouting at the top of her lungs, praying that whoever that was could hear her. Please, *please*, hear her.

 Darian swore. He looked around at the men behind him who were shouting at.

 “Grab that bitch and shut her up. We gotta get the hell out of here!”

 Darian turned back to her, his eyes wild with fury. She watched helpless as he raised the blade up over his left shoulder. She closed her eyes.

 The hilt of his knife connected with her skull.

 How she managed to not pass out she wasn’t too sure, but she lost full control over her body. So close to the brink of unconsciousness that she didn’t make a move lest she lost her battle. She felt arms seize her again and began hauling her off, her feet dragging painfully across the stone. She felt blood trickle down the side of her face. No doubt the blow had left a pretty bad gash, she thought. This must be what Jacobson had felt like. She really hoped that he would be alright.

 They rounded a corner and suddenly one of the men holding her grunted and staggered. His arms left her body and she heard him land with a thud on the pavement.

 “Oh fuck,” the other man swore. “No wait don’t-“

 Whatever he had been about to say was abruptly cut off. Lydia fell face first into the pavement. Her eyes fell on two things. The first was the man that had been the first to release her. He, too, was lying face down in the street. A puddle of blood was slowly growing beneath him. She blinked and realized there was an arrow sticking out of his neck. It was not like any arrow she had ever seen before or released. This one was thick and the shaft was black. The feathers were also black except for the cock feather that was edged in red.

 The second thing she saw was a man standing in the shadows of a nearby alleyway. She could not make him out all except for the bow that was held out in a single shaft of moonlight. It was jet black and was nothing like the wooden bow that she used. This one was almost in the shape of an M, though its curves were a lot softer. The ends of it curved outwards as if wanting to fight against the string. Just looking at it she could feel the power of that bow. She marveled at the strength and beauty of that magnificent weapon, wondering what it would be like to hold it.

 Two things happened all at once. One of the Westerners rushed forward, trying to make a grab for her even as Darian did the same thing. She watched as the man in the shadows nocked an arrow, pulled it back, aimed, and released with lightning speed. The arrow found the Westerner first, even as Darian pulled her up off the ground and lifted her up, raising her off her feet. She felt a knife blade press up against her throat.

 The last remaining Westerner stood stalk still in fright. He swallowed and then turned and tried to flee. The man limped out of the shadows, turning to face down the alley. Lydia watched as he reached over his shoulder and pulled out another black arrow, nocked it, and sent it flying. The arrow buried itself into the middle of the man’s back, slaying him instantly.

 He reached back and pulled out another arrow and turned around to face Darian, raising the bow and pulling it back. “Let her go,” Cassings spoke, his voice low and dangerous.

 “Drop your bow,” Darian ordered, “or I swear I’ll slit her throat.”

 “I doubt your superiors would appreciate that. This is your one and only chance, boy. Release her and I’ll let you go free. Don’t force me to kill you.”

 “And don’t make me kill her!”

 “You kill her and you’re dead. You have no ground to stand on, boy.”

 “Oh, but you’re forgetting, *General*. I’m a Meldling. You’re the one with no ground to stand on. How about I send you a nice little nightmare.”

 Lydia’s eyes widened. She swallowed pulling herself out of her semi-conscious reverie. She did the only thing she could think of doing. She moved her forehead down, opened her mouth, and bit down hard on Darian’s arm. The taste of blood entered her mouth once again.

 Darian screamed in pain, jerking his arm away, wrenching himself free. She fell hard to the ground. She heard the tang of the bow string and the zip of an arrow. Darian grunted. She turned around, pushing herself off the ground with her elbow, almost losing herself into oblivion again. Her eyes widened at the sight of an arrow sticking through Darian’s neck. Darian tumbled forward, blood spilling across the stone of the alley.

 Cassings limped quickly over to her, dropping the bow. He pulled up his left pants leg and grabbed out his knife. He turned her around and severed her bonds.

 “H-how did you find me?” she gasped.

 “Ayvra,” he answered shortly, pulling the ropes off of her. “She could feel the Meldling boy and fed it to my dragon. Damn, that looks serious,” he said, tilting her head to get a look at the blow Darian had given her with the hilt of his knife.

 She nodded. “I… I’m having trouble keeping conscious,” she mumbled. She swallowed back a wave of nausea.

 “Are you hurt anywhere else?” he asked, checking her over, wiping away the blood on her lips with his thumb and even looking at the spot on the back of her hand where her IV had been ripped out.

 “D-did you find Jacobson?” she asked.

 He stared up at her and gave her a soft smile. “Yeah. He’s fine. I had a soldier take him back to camp.”

 She nodded. “I-I was afraid they had killed him.”

 “As devastated as he is that he failed you, that might have been a kinder fate,” he mumbled, going back to checking her over.

 “Sir?” she asked after a minute.

 “What?” he asked distractedly, checking the wound at her head again.

 “D-do I have to go back to the hospital again?”

 He gave her an exasperated sigh and glared at her. Then he shook his head and chuckled. “No. No, you don’t.”

 “Thank you, sir,” she mumbled, laying back and finally giving in to the wave of darkness. Unimpeded it took over her mind and consumed her consciousness.

#

 The men laughed as she retold her story for the third time. They enjoyed every second of her story of giving her kidnappers as much hell as she could manage. She grinned along with them. It helped. Somehow laughing about it with them removed the terror from it. Not all of the terror, but even a little removed was better than nothing.

 “Yeah. There was no way they were getting you out of that town,” one of the men chuckled. “We had just about every exit we could think about blocked off and that sparkle dragon had every other dragon in the area flying around looking for you. General Sanders found the carriage that was going to whisk you away. He couldn’t just kill the man but he buried his axe into the wheels. That carriage wasn’t going anywhere. You weren’t getting anywhere.”

 She grinned and reached up and hugged him. “Thank you,” she gasped. “All of you. I think the most horrible thing was thinking they might have killed Jacobson,” she said, turning to him.

 He gave her a wounded expression. “I was caught completely off guard. Gods, I feel so ashamed failing you like that. Wish I coulda been there when General Cassings ended those assholes’ lives.”

 Lydia looked over at General Cassings where he was seated at his normal spot at the table outside. She swallowed as her mind leapt back to the moment that he had come to her rescue.

 The moment that she had seen that bow.

 She turned back to the men. “It was incredibly impressive,” she admitted. She stopped for a moment but decided to ask. “H-he had some strange bow. I’ve never seen one like it before.”

 The men laughed. One of them said, “Oh gods, that bow of his. His favorite weapon. I’ve never seen him use any other weapon besides that one. Well, I guess for obvious reasons,” he said, tapping his own right leg pointedly. “That black bow is how he got his nickname, you know.”

 Lydia blinked and shook her head. “H-he has a nickname?”

 Jacobson chuckled. “Yeah. Like how yours is Death Slayer. His is Night Striker.”

 She turned to look back at him again. “I had no idea,” she said. She grinned. “After what I saw the name definitely fits him.”

 The men laughed. “It’s almost a shame to not see him out on the battlefield as often as he used to be.”

 She bit her lip. “W-what kind of bow is it?” she asked.

 The men shrugged. “Not a clue,” one answered and the rest also shook their heads.

 Inwardly she felt defeated – thwarted even. At least with the name of that beautiful weapon she might have felt *somewhat* appeased. “Does he get it made special for him or something?”

 Again a round of blank shrugs. “Why you asking?”

 She swallowed and shook her head innocently. “Oh, no reason. Just curious is all.”

 A few hours later, after the crowd had dispersed to go take care of their duties, Lydia had leaned up against the log they had been sitting on, her sketchpad in her lap. She closed her eyes, trying to draw out the details from her memory, putting them down on the paper, drawing out every line and curve that she could recall.

 In all honesty she had to admit that when she was younger weapons had never been a big seller for her in terms of fighting. All she could ever think about what aerial moves in the sky on the back of her dragon. It was Hugh that had awoken her love for weaponry. Seeing him fighting for the first time trying to save her life against two enraged Riders whose dragons she had just helped kill when they had fought after Hugh, desiring to meld with him. They were fun. A hobby. Maybe a bit of a passion.

 But never an obsession.

 Not like this. Not like what she felt right now every time she closed her eyes and saw that weapon in Cassings’s hands. And it really didn’t have a whole lot to do with the fact that it had saved her life. A regular bow could have done just the same thing.

 But it had looked so *powerful*.

 She loved her own bow. If she had to pick a principal weapon it would definitely be the bow, despite her love for her knives. But still, the ache in her heart to see that weapon again was a bit surprising even to her. She almost wanted to laugh at her own self. Had she just fallen in love *with a weapon*?

 It was a ridiculous idea, but she could not shake the possibility.

 And the worst part – it *had* to belong to General Cassings. The fates were being cruel to her again. At least if it were Sanders she would feel a little more comfortable going up to him and questioning him about his weapon. Able to laugh it off as general curiosity. Sanders would probably have even been eager to brag about it.

 Cassings not so much. There were times the guy downright intimidated her. The times he smiled were far, few, and in between. He was more ready to chastise than compliment – which on the flip side did mean that when he did compliment it was that much more special – but it did not make him feel so approachable. Well, neither General felt all that approachable sometimes.

 Still, she could not so easily convince her heart to drop the idea.

 Taking a deep breath she stood up and walked back towards Tsaul. He was sitting talking with Myrillia, his mate, and Cassings’s dragon: Arkrithian.

 She walked up to Tsaul and petted him. He turned and nudged her, briefly acknowledging her before returning back to his conversation. Lydia licked her lips staring over at the Tsaul-sized storm gray dragon. She bit her lip, climbing up onto Tsaul and trying to get a better look at Arkrithian and what he might be wearing. She clicked her tongue. Nope. She could see no sign of the bow on the dragon. She sighed in disappointment.

 The dragon stared up at her, tilting his head in confusion. “Is there something wrong, young Rider?”

 She blushed. It was odd, but she never had any problems talking with any other dragon in the whole world but there just always felt something off-limits between the two Generals’ dragons.

 She shrugged. It was still a long ways better than going to Cassings. “I-I was wondering, does Cassings always take that bow off of you when he’s not Riding?”

 “Bow? Oh, his weapon? Yes. He rarely keeps on me. He has to be careful with it, I think. Not that I know a whole about it.”

 Frustration flooded through her. Stymied again!

 She climbed down off of Tsaul and left. She stalked back across the camp, her eyes flicking briefly towards the General’s tent. That was the only place it would be kept, then. She closed her eyes and tried to recall if she might have seen it in passing. She had been in that tent only maybe two or three times.

 No. She would remember it if she had seen that bow. She was sure of it.

 She looked at the tent with longing. It would probably take barely a few seconds to try to locate the weapon…

 *What the heck was she thinking?!*

 Ok, so she had done a few rebellious things in her life, such as break into the principal’s office to steal keys, or raid supply closets with her friends, and play a few random pranks on people, but that idea was a different caliber of offense.

 No. The last thing she wanted to ever do was be caught in the Generals’ tent without permission. She didn’t even want to imagine their disappointment – their anger. Cassings’s anger in particular.

 She whirled around and left before another dangerous thought could enter her mind.

 Gods, was this what Hugh felt whenever he looked at a spear that he wanted so desperately. No wonder he went to such lengths to acquire them. If she at least had the *name* of the weapon she could look into possibly getting her one in the future. That might appease her heart.

 Oh, Lydia! You’re being foolish. It’s just a weapon!

 Angrily she stomped off to grab her own bow. Maybe shooting a few rounds might help. It had been a while since she had gone shooting. Maybe it would help?

 It did not. An hour later and all she could dream of was shooting that bow. The one in her hands felt so weak – so *inferior*.

 She gave up, put her bow away and went back to her spot at the log with her sketchpad.

\*\*\*

 Just ask. What’s the harm? Just go up and ask him, Lydia. What’s the worse he could say? ‘Absolutely not, Alvincia. It’s my weapon. Back off.’ Well, what he would say would probably be a lot harsher than that.

 But at the very least he *might* offer the name of the weapon. Just go up and ask: ‘So, hi, General Cassings – what’s the name of your bow?’

 That was way too embarrassing. Like he had time for her and her silliness. Even now he looked far too invested in important documents. It was bad enough that she was taking up his time just being *here* for her. Dealing with her and the multitude of problems she was probably causing him.

 She stared down at her current drawing. It was her on the back of Tsaul with that beautiful bow in her hands, firing it off into the distance. She licked her lips and added some more details into the drawing, carefully shading it and adding depth.

 She looked back up at Cassings. She would ask. Sooner or later an opportunity would present itself. She was sure of it. At least the name of that weapon. But what if it didn’t have a name? What if it was something he had specially made for himself? The other fighters didn’t seem to know a whole lot about it and it was certainly the first time that she had ever seen it.

 This frustrated her. There were too many unknowns.

 She sighed and flipped the page over and started another drawing. This one, she was determined, would *not* feature that damn bow. She had to get her mind off of it. She was acting like a spoiled child that could not have something she wanted. She clicked her tongue. She blamed her upbringing. How many times had Hugh called her spoiled rich girl? She was beginning to see how right he was.

 She rubbed her eyes and set about drawing. It would be epic. Something really epic to pull her mind away. To totally invest her mind. She smiled gently and thought about her friends back at the school. Conner, Landon, Felix, Tanis, and Hugh. She licked her lips and began drawing.

 “Whew, look at this. Secret talent of the Death Slayer revealed!” someone chuckled behind her, breaking her out of her reverie.

 She blinked and looked up, rubbing her eyes. Oh, wow. The drawing had worked better than she had thought. It was starting to get dark out and her light was failing. She had not even noticed that much.

 She squeaked as suddenly her sketchpad was pulled out of her hands. She gasped, spinning around, to see one of the men staring down at the drawing which had featured her five friends on the backs of their dragons, fighting and flying, with weapons in their hands. She jumped up. “G-give that back!” she gasped. She felt her face redden, horrified at the thought that someone else was looking at something personal in her mind.

 “This is incredible, Alvincia,” he said with a laugh. “I had no idea you could draw.”

 She attempted to make a grab for it but the guy danced back, laughing. He flipped it around and began going through the pages, thumbing through randomly. Others were beginning to gather to see what was going on as she yelled at him. She watched in horror as he began to show it to others – and then it started to get passed around. Oh gods! All her drawings!

 “Stop!” she shouted. “This isn’t funny. I-I didn’t draw those to be viewed by other people. Come on,” she pleaded. “Return it to me.”

 “These are incredible, Lydia,” one of the men looking through complimented her.

 She stood there in horror, watching as more people gathered and her sketchpad was passed around. She gave up and just buried her face in her hands. “I never wanted anyone to see those!” she pleaded. “Please return it,” she begged again. She could feel tears starting to well up in her eyes. It felt like a part of her was being passed around for the world to view. She had drawn so many things in there. Everything, from her little baby brother (from the single one time that she had ever seen him), to her parents, her friends, her dragons… everything. Not to mention the bow, which someone turned to and laughed at. Complimenting her and saying that it looked exactly like the real thing.

 “Attention!” Cassings voice rang out suddenly. The troops gasped in surprise and everyone quickly jumped to obey the General’s command, even Lydia, her heart pounding in her chest. “What the *hell* is going on?” he demanded, his voice cold and stern. “Ericson?”

 The man swallowed. “Sir, we were just looking through Alvincia’s sketchpad,” he explained quickly.

 Cassings limped around to them, appearing in Lydia’s eye sight. He walked towards Ericson who was the current possessor of the sketchpad. He looked across at her and then back at Ericson. “It doesn’t sound like Miss Alvincia appreciates it. Is this how you treat her?” he growled. “You take something personal to her without her permission, pass it around, and laugh at it?” He held out his hand. “Sketchpad,” he commanded.

 Ericson handed it over. Cassings glared at the men as he took and closed it without looking inside. “I’m sure if you had *asked,* Alvincia would have been more than happy to share her drawing skills with you. Instead you just violated something personal to her. You just violated her trust in you. I want all of you to clear out and leave her now. It is almost dark. You can’t possibly tell me that not a single one of you have something else that you shouldn’t be doing. Dismissed,” he barked.

 He turned and handed the sketchpad back to her before turning and limping back to the table with Sanders who was starting to clear up the table for the evening.

 She hugged her sketchpad closed to her body. She felt so embarrassed as she looked around at the men who gave her guilty looks before turning around and walking off, returning to their duties. She whirled around and headed for her tent.

 Two hours later she stomped out of her tent towards the campfire where she could smell food cooking. In her hands she held another notebook. She stomped towards the group, all of whom instantly silenced as soon as she approached. They all gave her thoroughly chastised looks. She glared at them before holding out the notebook in her hand. “These. I don’t mind showing off these,” she snapped. “These aren’t so personal.”

 For a moment no one moved. Finally, though, the temptation turned to much and someone reached out tentatively to take it. He opened up the book and began to thumb through it, several of the men around him, trying to crowd close to get a look. She took her normal seat and watched as the notebook was passed around.

 “These are really really good, Alvincia,” they complimented her.

 She grinned, her good humor starting to return. “Thank you. My father’s a lot better than I am, though. I don’t practice a whole lot. It’s just a bit of an outlet. Those there, though, are from my advanced tactics class. It’s easier for me to ask the teacher questions when I have it drawn out and can show what I’m trying to explain.”

 “What’s your father do?” one of the men asked, thumbing through. “He an artist?”

 Several men chuckled. She grinned with them. The others looked up and stared around at them. “What’s the joke?” Jacobson asked, puzzled.

 “Damn, you guys are seriously morons,” one of the men said, bursting out laughing. “How the *hell* do you *not* know?”

 Jacobson glared at the man. “Instead of insulting, how about you *explain* so the rest of us can clue in. I’m clearly not the only one here.”

 “*Alvincia!* Her name is *Al.vin.cia,*” he said stressing the syllables of her name.

 “I know what her name is,” he growled.

 She held her hand out for her notebook. “Maybe I should draw it out for him,” she said with a wide grin.

 The man who had her tablet passed it back. She reached into the back for her pencil and drew out her family emblem. A stylized AV with the letters joined. She turned the notebook around and held it up. “Maybe this will trigger the connection. Alvincia.”

 Jacobson frowned and reached out for the notebook. He shook his head. “I-it looks vaguely familiar.”

 “Oh gods!” one of the men shouted.

 Laughter broke out. “Well, there’s one. Come on. Think about it. You’ve probably looked at the emblem without realizing it a million times a day.”

 Jacobson returned the notebook shaking his head. “Sorry, I’m not cluing in.” Several others shook their heads while about three of them were staring at her with wide eyes.

 “Alvincia,” one of them gasped. “That’s too insane. Alvincia as in the dragon gear creators.”

 She grinned wide. “Everything from your saddles to your uniforms. We also do horses and my favorite part of our estate is our horse breeding operations. We also own several hospitals – I’m sure you can imagine why – and have dealings with the Andrews who deal with weapons. I’m sure you’ve probably seen copies of the Double A magazines we publish with them.”

 The men who knew laughed. “Alvincia is the richest man in the world. And Lydia here is his daughter. How did you guys *not* realize that? Whoever marries Lydia is going to be set for life.”

 She winced. “Uhh… no. As of December of last year I’m out. Well, my father still sends me money to take care of me and covers my medical expenses still, but for the most part I’ve been disinherited.” She scratched her head innocently. “He doesn’t exactly approve of my career choice. But yeah – so in answer to your earlier question, he makes blueprints. He draws out all of the newest designs before he sends them off to his staff. Dragon saddles are his obsession. I can’t tell you how many times he would have the living room of our mansion filled with dragon gear. Testing everything from leather strength to new metallic pieces. He’s supposed to be trying to get some new gear launched, but I think there’s been some issues in manufacturing. It’s not right and until he’s sure of it – it’s not getting released. Especially now that he knows I’m going to be using it. Actually,” she grinned, “he’s releasing the new line specifically for me. It’s going to make our straps and buckles easier because of my tremors. That’s the whole idea anyways.”

 She pointed off towards Tsaul. “You know my saddle? He made it. Well, my ex and current boyfriend came up with the idea and created it, but my father perfected it.”

 Jacobson shook his head. “High class lady, huh?” he said with a laugh. “I did kind of wonder where that high and mighty attitude came from.”

 She grinned at him. “I’m not *that* bad.”

 The men burst out laughing. She glared around at them. “I’m not!” She crossed her arms. “Jerks. Well if you think I’m bad you should meet my father. He’s three times worse. If you aren’t a name he recognizes he doesn’t want to have any dealings with you. Honestly, I’m so glad that my baby brother was born. He gets to inherit the estate and I get to concentrate on being a Rider.”

 “We’re learning all kinds of things about you today, Alvincia,” one of them said with a laugh.

 She grinned wide. “All you had to do was ask. Really, though, I think that’s about all there is to know of me.”

 The men grinned. “Oh, I’m sure we can figure out a few more questions. I’m going to take that as a challenge.”

 She rolled her eyes. “Fire away,” she said with a laugh.

#

 She licked her lips as she finished up her current drawing. Last night had been fun and a nice distraction but with the return of daylight had come the return of her plight.

 She *really* wanted that bow.

 If anything, the desire was even stronger now. She blamed her dream last night. Half way between nightmare and dream it had at first featured her kidnapping with far more gruesome details. Eldrich was even involved, his screams searing her mind. This time in the dream, though, Darian was cutting into her face and doing far worse sick things to her. And then the black arrow had appeared in his throat. The nightmare ended there and her thoughts had turned pleasant as she thought about that bow. Her memories of Tanis first teaching her how to draw back a bow somehow got wrapped up with the idea of her holding onto the bow and learning off of that.

 She had woken up that morning, thoroughly shaken up. Fortunately it had not triggered a bad tremor day. That was perhaps the only good thing she could say about it all.

 She sat up against the side of the school building now, staring across at Cassings now and again. Gods how she longed to ask him about the bow. She winced as suddenly he looked up and their eyes met. She blushed and quickly dropped her gaze, hastily returning to her drawing, adding in some more shading and detail, careful to not look back up again. She even turned the sheet and began another drawing. This one of Eldrich, a spear in his hand. She looked towards the Westerners’ camp. She wondered how he was doing. She hoped they were taking care of him. She missed him, but maybe them not being together was better for him. She did not even try to reach out to Dennis or Kelly. No. She did not want anyone else to risk getting hurt because of her.

 She rubbed her eyes about thirty minutes later and looked back up staring across again at Cassings. How could she ask? What would be the best most serious way to ask? Should she even bother? He was sealing something up an an official looking packet and handing it off to a mail courier. His eyes dropped and again met hers.

 Dammit!

 She returned back to the drawing. Ok, Alvincia. You are going to seriously piss him off like this. Great way to start the awkward questions. This obsession of hers was *stupid!*

 She slammed her notebook closed and got up. She walked past and into the camp, grabbing up her bow and arrow to make another attempt at target practice. She wished she was back at school with its moving targets. Then at least she might feel challenged. Maybe she could tie a target to a dragon and jump onto Tsaul and have some fun that way. She dismissed the idea. There were too many people below. If she missed she did not want to imagine what would happen with the stray arrow.

 She lost herself in the practice. She enjoyed the feel of the burn in her shoulder from her continuous shooting. After two hours spent practicing she grabbed the arrows from the targets and returned back to her start position, staring at Cassings again. Her mind pulled inevitably back to her problem. Just ask. Just ask and get your answer already, Lydia.

 Cassings’s head turned to the side to talk with someone standing on that side and again their eyes met. This time he gave her a frustrated look before she dropped her gaze again. Oh gods… Yeah. Great job, Lydia. You *are* pissing him off. Feeling herself redden with every possible second, she returned her arrows to her quiver and once again focused on her shooting. Maybe a third hour would dash the thought out of her mind.

 She *really* wished she had a more difficult target to focus on and shoot at.

 That bow had looked a lot stronger than this one. Would she even be able to pull it back? She had no doubt Cassings was far stronger than she could ever dream to be. It was just one of many thousands of questions that she had. Honestly, the whole thing was starting to get overly annoying for her. Was she seriously *this* scared of Cassings?

 …Yes. The guy intimidated the hell out of her. She could deal with it when he initiated the conversation, but coming up to him to bother him… seriously. He was a General. She was just an eighteen year old barely out of her teenage years. She still remembered her first impressions of him when she was sixteen as he had glared across at her in the physical training room, looking pissed off at the whole event. She was still not convinced that he had been more pissed off at what she was being put through than the fact that he had to be there for her at all.

 If she wasn’t on the dragon of his best friend who had saved his life, she was sure he probably wouldn’t give a damn about her in the least.

 She released the last of her arrows, grouping them tightly in a single target. She walked across to retrieve them and started back. Her eyes inadvertently strayed up in his direction again and this time she got the start. He was staring at her – and now *glaring* as soon as their eyes met. She flinched.

 She sped up her walk, shoving her arrows into her quiver and grabbed her bow, running away from the area, to get away from his stare.

 At lunch time she joined the men at their campfire. One of them had already went to the trouble of making a soup that he was dishing out to everyone. She lost herself in their conversations. She winced, though. The seat she had chosen gave her the perfect spot to stare across at Cassings. She forced her eyes down and concentrated on the conversation with the men. But now and again her eyes roved up again. Damn, she wished she could control herself better.

 She winced. This time Sanders had turned in his seat and stared back at her. She felt herself go even redder this time. She watched as he chuckled and leaned over to Cassings saying something to him that immediately caused him to turn around as well to stare at her. This time he gave her an exasperated look.

 Ok, she was really making a fool of herself.

 She struggled to focus on the men and her lunch, trying to loser herself in their conversation again. A soft hand fell on her shoulder barely a minute later and a soldier leaned over and into her ear from behind her. “General Cassings wants to see you as soon as you’re done, Miss Alvincia,” he said before stepping away and leaving.

 A shudder went up her body. Oh damn. The men around her laughed. “Uh oh. What did you do now, Alvincia,” they laughed.

 She groaned inwardly but outwardly she shook her head giving a blank and innocent expression. “I-I have no idea.”

 This only caused more laughter. “Well you’re going to find out. Better not keep him waiting,” Jacobson said, pointing to her lunch.

 She quickly dug into the soup which suddenly did not taste quite as good as it had a moment ago. Her stomach felt like she was eating lead. Looks like she going to get her conversation with him afterall. She wished she would just die, right then and there.

 She finished and handed her bowl off to one of the guys and stood. She drew in her courage. Let’s just go get this over with then. That part she was kind of looking forward to. An answer. And then her agony would be over. Whether he got pissed off at her, laughed in her face, or whatever. At least it would be done.

 She stepped over the log and walked purposefully over to the table. When she got there she swallowed hard and bowed low. “Y-you wanted to see me, sir?”

 Cassings was staring down at a document, not looking up at her. “With the way you’ve been staring at me all day, Miss Alvincia, I think it’s the other way around,” he responded distractedly with an edge of agitation in his voice.

 She felt herself redden and felt her courage slipping away. This was *really really* stupid. She swallowed. “N-no, sir,” she lied.

 He dropped the paper and sighed, staring up at her. “Miss Alvincia, if you have a question or a concern, you *can* ask. Regardless of being in Battle School or not, you are still one of our soldiers. You have a right to address us.”

 This only increased her embarrassment. She shook her head. “I-it’s nothing. Actually, it’s really really stupid. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t bother you.”

 Sanders chuckled, raising his eyes from the papers. “No question is too stupid, Miss Alvinicia, and believe me being bothered by one of our soldiers is the best distraction we can get from the damn endless amounts of paperwork here. Now out with it. I’m curious, too, now.”

 She groaned inwardly. That did not help. Now *both* Generals were waiting on her. All because of her stupid, ridiculous obsession. If they laughed at her she was going to well deserve it. Her courage was gone. “N-no. Really. It’s fine.”

 Cassings’s eyes hardened. “Are you seriously going to make me order you to tell me?”

 She sighed and dropped her gaze to the ground. She swallowed. Just do it, Lydia! Just ask. Get it over with before you piss them off even more and then you won’t be able to walk away with just them laughing at you. “B-bow,” she murmured softly, unable to get out anything else.

 “Alvincia, I can’t hear you if you don’t speak up.”

 She swallowed and looked up at him. “Y-your bow, sir. I-I was curious about your bow.”

 There. Done and out.

 Cassings blinked, clearly surprised by her words. Beside him Sanders broke out into laughter. She buried her face in her hands. “I’m sorry!” she exclaimed. “I told you it was stupid!”

 Cassings turned and glared at Sanders. “As soon as you’re done,” he growled, his voice low.

 Sanders waved his hand through the air. “Sorry,” he chuckled. “I just never know what this young lady is going to say next. Here I thought she wanted to thank you again for saving her life the other night.”

 She blushed. “I-I can. Wait, I have. I mean… Yes, of course. Thank you both of you.” She stomped her foot, feeling her anger starting to rise. “Look! I was just curious is all. I’ve never seen a weapon like that and not a single person could answer my question. I know it’s stupid but in all honesty the bow is my favorite weapon. So I think I have a right to be curious. Just a little.”

 Cassings stared across at her and frowned. “I thought that was your knives?”

 “My knives are fun when I’m down on the ground, but they don’t do a whole lot of good up in the air unless I’ve been boarded. I use spears, but that was more my boyfriend’s style. I still only really use those when I’m boarded. I’m an archer.”

 Sanders chuckled. “I remember that you were a good one if I recall your first final out of your Class 1 training.”

 She grinned. “I’ve gotten even better. Even on my worst tremor days.”

            Cassings sighed and rose out of his seat. Sanders stared up at him. “Where are you going?”

            “If I thought for a second that Miss Alvincia would be appeased by just knowing the name of the bow, I’d tell her and be done with it, but everything she has done so far has always been in excess.”

            Sanders chuckled. “Spirited,” he corrected.

            Cassings nodded. “And then, between you and Adrian always showing off your weapons, I finally get a soldier interested in mine.” He shrugged, a slow smile coming across his face. “Let me enjoy my own moment. Enjoy the mounds of paperwork, Will.”

            Sanders gave him a wounded expression as he stared across the table. He sighed. “Bastard.”

            Cassings smirked. “Come on, Alvincia.”

            A thrill of excitement went through her. “R-really?”

            He rolled his eyes as he went limping off in the direction of the Generals’ tent. Lydia followed, her heart pounding in her chest. She could hardly believe her extreme turn of luck. He pushed back the tent flap and disappeared inside and she followed after him, licking her lips in anticipation.

            Inside, Cassings stepped over to the corner behind his cot and picked up a bulky object covered with a leather cloth. Behind that he reached down and picked up the strap of his quiver. He sat both of them down in front of her and then walked over to a nearby chair. “Enjoy,” he said.

            She blinked and stared up at him in surprise. “W-wait. You’re giving me permission to handle them?”

            He shrugged. “I want to see how you handle them.”

            “B-but they’re yours. Isn’t that kind of personal?”

            “It is,” but he supplied nothing further after that.

            Swallowing she stared between him and the cloth. She turned and bowed deeply to him. “I have your full permission to handle your weapon?”

            Cassings rolled his eyes. “Alvincia,” he growled. “You have my permission.”

            Her intimidation quickly fell away to eager excitement. She licked her lips and got down to her knees and undid the cloth. A tremor swept through her body as her eyes beheld the bow once again. Instead of the curved shape of the wooden bows she had always used throughout her life, this one looked closer to an M with the edges pointed outwards at the very ends. She marveled at it for a moment, taking it in. “Does it have a name or is it just a special type of bow?”

            “It’s called a recurve bow,” Cassings answered, his voice containing just the hint of a little bit of pleasure.

            “I’ve never seen one like it.”

            “Not in our kingdom. It’s something I have to get from the Southerners.”

            “Would I be able to get one from them?”

            He chuckled. “If you decide I could get one ordered for you. Let’s try and avoid talking with them for a while, though, until this whole damn situation is brought under control.”

            She turned and glared at him. “I wasn’t suggesting asking today. I have no interest in their handouts. I would purchase it.” She froze and winced. “Oh… I might not have the money,” she mumbled.

            He smirked. “Yeah. Your father informed us quite aggressively about your disinheritance.”

            She sighed. “Sorry about his attitude.”

            “Never apologize for someone else, especially when it’s a family member who clearly loves you.”

            She turned away from the bow and picked up the quiver. She undid the leather straps and pulled the fold back. She reached in and pulled out one of the arrows that she had watched kill all five of those people that night. “These are a lot thicker than ours.”

            “There’s a lot more power to the bow which means that it carry more weight through the air. Which in turn means I can have much stronger arrows.”

            She examined the arrow closely, analyzing it and trying to search for any other possible differences but could not find any. She carefully returned it back to the quiver. She stared down at the bow. Gods she wanted to pick it up so bad, but it almost seemed forbidden for her. She once again stared across at him but he was sitting with his head leaned in his hand, looking almost bored. He raised his eyebrow at her. She looked back down at it and finally dared herself to reach down and pick it up.

            It was heavier. That was the first thing she noticed. The woods that made it were stronger. She stood up and looked at its size. It was heavier but it was also smaller by about a good three inches. That was a delicious improvement she thought. She examined the bow string and the arrow rest. She reached out and pulled at the string experimentally, not bothering yet with a full draw. She groaned. It was far more powerful and she was beginning to wonder if she would have the needed strength to pull it back at all.

            Pulling herself together, she took her stance, lifting the bow and raising it. Licking her lips she gave an experiment tug on the string with her fingers, struggling with it, trying to get it back to full draw. It took every bit of her strength, but she grinned in success as she won her battle. She loosened her grip, easing her muscles and allowed the string to slip back in place without releasing.

            She turned around to him, grinning. He too was also wearing a smirk. “So you actually managed it,” he said. “And you have enough damn sense to not dry release it.”

            She blinked and pursed her lips. “I would never dry release a bow.” She licked her lips and stared down at it. “I *really* want one of these bows.”

            “Yeah. I got that from that big goofy grin you’re wearing on your face. Still. You pulled it back only once. What about the third time – the thirtieth?”

            She shrugged. “I don’t give up very easily.”

            “As small as you are I’m also worried about the recoil.”

            She shook her head. “Not a big concern. I’ve had to fire a crossbow before when the dragon medic at school got injured.”

            “Why is your dragon medic getting hurt and what does a crossbow have to do with that?”

            She turned to him. “Not every dragon is very friendly to me. Some of them attack me. Our dragon medic had to invest in a crossbow to shoot tranquilizers at them during one of those attacks. One of the dragons actually hurt him and I had to grab the crossbow up and fire it myself.”

            He shook his head. “Is there anything that you *don’t* go through?”

            She grinned. “My partner thinks I’ve pissed off one of the gods. My luck has never been very good. Personally I sometimes think that it’s all just going into keeping me alive.” She licked her lips, turned and pulled the string back one more time, a little more sure of it this time and having even better results. “It’s gotta feel good firing this thing off,” she muttered.

            He smirked. “It is vaguely satisfying. You want to give it a try?”

            She spun around to him, her eyes wide. “Y-you would let me do that?”

            “I’m curious to see how good you would do,” he confessed with an evil grin on his face.

            “You don’t mind me firing off your own weapon?”

            He rolled his eyes. “It’s only a weapon, Alvincia, and you’ve already shown to me that you know how to handle it. As long as you aren’t going to damage it, I have very little concern otherwise. And as I mentioned, I’m curious. I think your group of admirers would also be entertained.”

            “I don’t know why they admire me,” she muttered, reaching down and picking up the quiver.

            “Alvincia,” he said, his voice sounding exasperated, “you are four feet tall, sick and always on the edge of death, and yet your personality is – to use Will’s word – spirited. I have *yet* to see you back down from a single thing, except a hospital stay, and you are not afraid to push yourself. And somehow after everything you have been through you manage to smile again. You are, for lack of a better word, entertaining. As Will stated, we just never know what it is that you are going to do next. Those men enjoy watching you, enjoy your flippant attitude, and, more importantly, enjoy seeing you push yourself. And you respond in turn by caring about them.” He smiled. “You go through a kidnap attempt and the first question out of your mouth is if Jacobson is alright. You even go out of your way for a young boy to remeld with a psychotic dragon that you had prayed last year to be rid of. Alvincia, I can’t even begin to *imagine* why those men adore you,” he finished off sarcastically.

            He grunted in pain as he got to his feet, favoring his right leg. “Let’s go give them a bigger thrill watching you attempt to use my bow.”

            Honestly, it felt embarrassing hearing Cassings compliment her like that. She didn’t really feel that she was all that special. Wouldn’t anyone else do the same exact things that she did in her situation. She felt a little undeserving of the praise in all honesty, but she pushed that to the side of her mind. All that truly mattered right now was the bow in her hand.

            He walked up and held the tent flap open for her as she stepped out carrying his weapons. She made her way quickly across the yard, barely able to contain her excitement – giving only a moment of thought to the stares that followed her and Cassings.

            Until some of them got up and began to follow, their eyes filled with curiosity. She looked back at Cassings who was now wearing a scowl and glaring at them. She turned back around and something clicked in her mind. So that was his game. Two seconds ago he had almost been laughing at the idea that they would be watching – now in front of them he was going to glare at them and act like he disapproved? Hardass.

            She walked up to the archery range and set the quiver up at her feet. She was practically shivering in anticipation. She looked back over her shoulder one more time. Cassings had his arms crossed, glaring at the men, keeping them back with his gaze alone. Several of them chuckled.

            “The Death Slayer with the Night Striker’s weapon,” someone said. “How did this come about?”

            Cassings did not answer and she wasn’t really interested in responding, either. Instead she licked her lips and drew out one of the black arrows, nocking it with her usual validity. She cleared her mind, staring down at the target. She raised the bow  and sighted down the shaft – and drew back. Gods it was hard. It made her feel like she was a newbie at this all over again, fighting to build up her muscle strength. Don’t worry about getting it right. The act of drawing the bow back was what was the priority. Still… no reason to go lax.

            She held the draw back for a while, aiming and getting use to the feel of the pull, waiting for the burn to begin in her arm. Gods she wanted to release it so bad, but she wanted her muscles to get use to this. This felt good, too.

 She exhaled and brought her aim in tighter and prepared to release.

 An alarm bell went off in the back of her mind. She caught herself. Something wasn’t right. What was it? She closed her eyes and considered it. Something was missing.

 A shudder went up her body as she realized her almost-painful error. She eased the string back in place and turned to glare at Cassings. He raised his eyebrow. “Something wrong, Alvincia?”

 She pursed her lips and felt her anger rising. “You were going to stand there and just let me do that weren’t you?” she accused him.

 “I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

 “I’m sure you don’t. Arm guard.”

 A slow smile spread across his lips. “Those are awfully nice things to be wearing, aren’t they?”

 “I don’t even want to imagine what that would have done to me.”

 He shrugged. “Give you a bruise you wouldn’t soon forget any time soon.”

 Several of the men chuckled around them. She sighed. “Do you have one?”

 “You’ll find a flap with a zipper inside the quiver close the front. You’ll find two useful items in there.”

 Pulling the bow over her head to rest on her shoulder instead of sitting it on the ground, she bent low and reached into the quiver. She found the flap and unzipped it open. She reached in and pulled two items out. She instantly recognized the arm guard and strapped it in place. The second one took a moment for her to contemplate. It looked like a glove but only had three fingers and was open palmed with a strap at the wrist. “Oh, a finger guard,” she said, recognition dawning on her.

 “It might not fit you perfectly but it’s better than nothing.”

 It was three sizes too big for her. The half fingers came up to her almost as full fingers and the wrist strap was about an inch above where it should have been tied off, but it should be better than nothing, she decided.

 She pulled the bow back over her head and drew the arrow back out of the quiver. Once again she drew back. This time her muscle protested slightly. Something about it felt good. It would hurt later but right now it was a familiar pain that meant she was working her body.

 She exhaled and focused her aim again. Her lungs started to protest almost immediately but she pushed that pain aside, too. She adjust slightly and finally released the arrow.

 Even with the arm guard she gasped in pain as the string struck. Somehow she managed to keep her bow straight through it all – waiting until she was sure the arrow was free. She didn’t even care where the arrow had gone. She reached back into the quiver almost immediately and fitted it to the string. She pulled back faster this time, now feeling more familiar with the bow. She adjusted her position, aiming for the second target. She exhaled and forced herself to be still – to not rush the shot. Focused and dialed it in. Forgot about the world around her. She released it the arrow. Pain flared through her arm again. She reached back into the quiver and nocked another arrow and aimed for the third and last target. She released. She anticipated the pain this time. Almost reveled in it. Gods this bow was powerful.

 She released shot after shot. Lost herself in her own world. Her shoulder was beginning to scream in pain and even with the finger gloves she could feel the string cutting into the flesh of her finger. She didn’t stop. Not until she reached down for another arrow and found the quiver disappointingly empty. She pulled the bow back over her shoulder and walked out to the field to gather the arrows back up. She reached out and tugged at one. A shiver went up her body. It didn’t budge. She blinked and considered the arrow. She realized with a start that it was buried into the target almost halfway up the shaft. Holy crap this bow was powerful! Digging in with all her strength she yanked the arrow out, almost falling backwards when it came free. Grinning wide, she did the same for the others, pulling them out with a great deal of work.

 All twenty five of the arrows gathered back up she ran back across the field. The men were all staring at her with wide grins. Oh, she had completely forgotten that they were even there. Cassings was still standing there, too. He remained unmoved and his face clear of all emotion. Neither approving nor disapproving. She dropped the arrows back into the quiver carefully and turned back around pulling the bow off her shoulder.

 “You’re going again?”

 She blinked, a feeling of disappointment quickly coming over her. Was that all he was going to give her? One round? She swallowed and looked back at him. “W-would you rather I didn’t?”

 He frowned and walked up to her. He took his bow from her and pulled it over his shoulder the same way that she had been done. “Arm,” he commanded.

 Wondering if she had done something wrong she reached out her left arm. He twisted it over and undid the arm guard and then shoved her uniform sleeve up her arm. She choked back a squeak of pain as his hand slid over the underside of her arm. With her sleeve up she could see why. Her arm was black and blue. Even with an armguard.

 “Hand,” he commanded again.

 She held out her hand and he undid the glove. Her fingers had bad horizontal slits across them and were bleeding slightly.

 He looked up into her eyes pointedly. “You’re going to shoot again?” he repeated his question.

 She swallowed. “Y-yes? It’s not that bad.”

 He sighed and reached up to rub at his forehead. Chuckles passed through the men. He glared across at them before turning back to her. “You’re seriously going to continue shooting like this?”

 She shrugged. “It’s really not all that bad. I had worse when I first started training with my bow. I didn’t have an arm guard back then.”

 “You practiced without an arm guard?”

 She nodded. “I didn’t have a choice. Erica didn’t send one with the bow she sent me when I was in the hospital.”

 He blinked at her. “You want to explain that one?”

 She sighed. “My last coma three years ago. When I was in the hospital. One of my friends sent a bow when my boyfriend came to visit me.” She grinned. “I think she had just wanted me to have something fun to look at, to remind me of what I had to return to her. My medicine keeps me awake at night – that’s why I have to take sleeping pills now – but I would get up in the middle of the night and escape outside to practice. It was about the only fun thing I had to look forward to while I was there.”

 He stared down at her blankly. It was almost as if he were having difficulty processing the information. One of the men standing nearby was the first to speak. “You were in a hospital practicing *archery*?”

 She sighed and rolled her eyes. “You try being stuck in a bed for several months. It was really annoying, too. My IV was in my left hand. Making a fist while gripping the bow got pretty painful.”

 Cassings closed his eyes and shook his head. “I give up. I’m done. I’m done trying to keep up with you. Fine, Alvincia. Shoot to your heart’s content. I have nothing for that story. It’s like Will said, we never know what the hell is going to come out of your mouth next. Do you have a history or something of being an awful patient?”

 She shrugged. “When I was young I use to like to try to hide from the physicians that would come to the estate. Yeah… I guess I’ve never been a model patient.”

 Several men burst out laughing. Cassing glared across at them. “Don’t encourage her,” he snapped. He turned back to her. “I ever hear of you do something to give doctors or any other medical providers a hard time while in service and I swear I will put you up for disciplinary measures.”

 She winced. “Y-yes, sir,” she answered softly.

 He handed her back the arm guard and the finger glove. “Go ahead. As much as you like. Let’s see how long you last.”

 She grinned and took the items back, pulling them back on, not even bothering to fix her sleeve. Cassings pulled the bow back over his head and handed it off to her.

 She licked her lips turning back to the targets.

 She heard a dragon’s chuckle suddenly ring through her mind. She blinked and turned to stare at Tsaul. Her dragon had lain down not far away, watching them. “How about a wager, Derrick?” he suggested with another laugh.

 Cassings turned to the dragon. He studied the dragon for a while. “I haven’t entered a wager with you since before Adrian…” He closed his eyes, a brief moment of pain passing across his face. He swallowed and reopened them, his emotions brought back in check again. “If I recall correctly I was usually on the losing end of our wagers.”

 The dragon chuckled. “Yet you could never resist.”

 “Alright, Tsaul. What is it you would like to wager?”

 “Which one of you outlasts the other. I wager that Lydia will still be shooting by the time you will have to sit down because the pain in your leg will be too great to withstand.”

 Cassings placed his hand on his hip and glared across at the dragon. “Impossible. There’s no way she’ll still be shooting by then. I’m not *that* weak, dragon.”

 “No, of course not, but Lydia is that diligent.”

 Cassings frowned and stared across at her. He studied her. “And what are we putting down?”

 “Simple enough. If Lydia wins you let her have full access to that bow to shoot as much as she wants in the future.”

 Cassings smirked. “That won’t be often. That’s hardly a fair bet. That’s barely even a reward.”

 “Then you shouldn’t have a problem with it.”

 Cassings shrugged. “Alright.” He looked across at her. “Now, what should *my* wager be?” he muttered, considering hard.

 The men chuckled and began to throw out random ideas. “Make her sit in her wheelchair for the remainder of the stay!” someone suggested.

 She glared at that person. “I’m holding a bow,” she said threateningly. “I will shoot you.”

 This caused lots of laughter. Then one chuckled. “I don’t like that one, anyways. I was hoping to have another sparring session with her.”

 “Make her do all the cooking,” someone else suggested.

 She blinked and stared at the person. “I think you’d be the ones to suffer from that. I’ve never cooked a thing in my life.”

 This caused even louder laughter. “Over privileged spoiled brat!” someone shouted.

 She nodded. “Yeah, that’s a pretty fair description.”

 Cassings tilted his head. “Actually that’s not a bad idea.”

 She blinked, her eyes widening. “W-wait? What’s not a bad idea? Me cooking?”

 “Yes,” Cassings answered. “If I win you will start learning how to do just that. It’s a skill you’re going to need to acquire anyways, Alvincia. Food doesn’t cook itself and every soldier has to pull their own weight.”

 She pursed her lips considering this and shrugged finally. “I have no qualms with it if Tsaul is ok?”

 The dragon chuckled. “Agreed.”

 “Two stipulations. Alvincia cannot go more than half a second in between shots and cannot spend more than two minutes regathering her shots.”

 She considered this and nodded. “Agreed. That makes sense even.”

 Cassings nodded. “Agreed, then. Get started Alvincia.”

 Lydia grinned and turned to the targets. A thrill of excitement swept up her body. She had *every* plan to win this.

#

 Lydia’s arm felt impossibly numb. Every new shot was a new experience in pain. She drew a deep breath and ignored it, threw it out of her mind. She didn’t care. Even the pain in her the back of her shoulders which had turned into an intense heat screamed out for her to stop. She did not. No way. This was too fun. This bow was too powerful for her to want to stop – even her fingers which she swore was cut down to the bone.

 She threw the pain into the back of her mind. There were only three things that mattered. Her, the target, and her next shot. She raised her bow again, drawing in a deep breath, and then exhaling slowly and holding, tightening her shot.

 She released and a shiver of excitement as real as the first moment passed through her body. Oh yeah. She wanted her own recurve bow. She was going to get her one. Somehow. Someway. She was almost tempted to play with the idea of going over to the Southerners and demanding one from them. That’s how intense her desire for this weapon truly was.

 She gave Cassings a quick look back. Whatever pain she was experiencing was nothing compared to his. He was actually sweating, his eyes closed. He looked so far lost in pain that he barely looked like he was registering what was going on around him.

 He really couldn’t care about his wager all that much. This had to be more about pride than anything. She shrugged and turned back around. Once again she held up the bow and pulled back the string, releasing it easily. She wondered if she should tell him that she was starting to find her proper grip and stance and that the string was not hitting her inner arm all the time anymore. She knew she still had a long way to go, though. Part of the problem was that she really needed to build up her arm muscles. Until she was no longer fighting with the string, this was going to keep happening, but at least she was finding ways to reduce it.

 Sanders’s voice started to speak behind her where Cassings was standing. “The two of them are still at this? Yo, Derrick, you’re not looking so good.”

 “Go the hell away right now, Will,” Cassings growled, his voice low and thick with pain.

 Sanders chuckled. “How you doing, Alvincia?”

 She grinned as she took another shot. “Great, sir!” she shouted.

 The men burst out laughing at the cheerfulness in her voice. Sanders chuckled along with them. “I dunno, Derrick. When are you going to learn that Tsaul doesn’t take bets that he doesn’t think that he can win?”

 Tsaul snorted. “I’ve taken many bets that I have lost.”

 “The catch of course being that the only person you’ve ever lost against was Adrian,” Sanders said.

 Tsaul chuckled. “And Lydia.”

 Lydia licked her lips, taking aim again, and releasing yet another arrow, not having stopped while the group of them were talking. She really wished out of all of her pain, that it was her fingers that would stop hurting. If she weren’t currently in the middle of this bet she would stop to take time to bandage her fingers up and maybe add a little more padding to them. She was actually starting to get a little bit worried about them.

 She pulled back and released another arrow, this time a hiss of pain actually escaped her lips. Tears actually entered her eyes. She shook her hand and looked down at her fingers. There were blood stains now on the glove. She swallowed and choked it back. She reached down and picked up another arrow.

 Sanders sighed behind her. “The both of you are masochists, I swear. I’m a few minutes away from ending this whole bet before one of you hurts yourselves beyond what you should be doing.”

 “All she has to do is call it,” Cassings hissed.

 “The sad part of it is, even if this bet were to end right now, I would simply tape up my fingers and go at this some more,” she confessed. “It’s only been a little over two hours. Ask Tsaul what my normal training regime was back at school when I started out as a Class 1.”

 Tsaul chuckled. “Oh those were delightful days. In the middle of winter and you would first start out running with your horrible lung condition, then practice your meld link with me going through the obstacle course for an hour. And then spend two hours practicing the bow and another with your knife. All outside still. I can’t even count the number of times that mate of yours had to pick you up kicking and screaming to bring you inside. Those were entertaining days. You’ve grown a bit more sense since then though sometimes I still worry.”

 “Thanks, Tsaul,” she growled. “You coulda left out that last part.”

 “Just wanted to make sure they got the full picture, my dear Rider.”

 Lydia opened her mouth to snap at him when the men shouted. “Whoops,” Sanders’s voice rang out behind her, his voice thick with concern, “Derrick? Damn. Come on, buddy.”

 She turned around to find Cassings being supported by Sanders. Sanders had his arms beneath Cassings’s who was leaned up against his chest, clearly not even trying to support himself any more. Sanders carefully and as gently as he could, helped get Cassings down to the ground.

 Lydia swallowed, pulling the bow over her head and walking up to them. Sanders turned to one of them and barked out some quick orders for a damp cloth and a glass of water.

 “Damn,” Cassings hissed, reaching up to his head with a shaky hand. “She actually won the bet.”

 “You’re both fools. I’m not sure I like the cost of this particular bet,” Sanders growled. “Derrick, do you –“

 “No!” Cassings growled, cutting off Sanders’s question viciously.

 Sanders sighed. “I have a feeling you’ll be thinking differently tonight.”

 Lydia swallowed. “I-is there anything that I can do, sirs?”

 “Go tape up your damn hand,” Cassings snapped viciously, not even looking at her.

 She stood up, his words biting into her. She felt awful for him. Maybe this bet really had been a very stupid idea. Still, he didn’t have to act so cold to her. She could almost feel tears well up into her eyes at the rejection.

 Sanders met her eyes and smiled softly. “You’ll have to forgive him, Alvincia. He’s never dealt well with this. It’s nothing against you. Not everyone deals with their pain as admirably as you do. That aside, though, you should probably go take a look at your fingers. Looking at that glove, I doubt that it’s going to look pretty when you get it off.”

 She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

 Before she could walk away, though, the man that had been sent away returned with the cloth and water. He handed the items off to Sanders and then walked over to her and handed her some tape and bandages and her own cloth. She smiled up at him with a wide grateful grin.

 She sat down not far away, leaning the bow up against a boulder. A few of the men came across to her. She swallowed as she prepared to remove the glove. Now that she was no longer firing the bow her body was starting to crash down hard. Her exhaustion was overcoming her and the pain was starting to set in. She undid the strap at the top of the wrist and slowly, carefully pulled off the glove.

 “Ooh, damn,” Jacobson was the first to remark. “And you kept shooting like that.”

 There were two vicious gashes in her middle and ring fingers. She choked back the pain. “It didn’t feel half this bad while I was shooting,” she mumbled. “Damn, it’s starting to not feel so great right now.”

 “I don’t think cleaning that up with a cloth and taping it off is going to be the quick easy solution. Come on. Let’s get you down to the river for that.”

 “I’m going to go grab some more medical supplies for that,” another man suggested. “I think that’s going to need sterilized with something.”

 She wrinkled her nose and smirked at them. “I think you’re all creating a big fuss over nothing,” she said with a small laugh.

 Jacobson flicked her forehead. “That wound is hardly nothing, Alvincia. Sit still and let us get it taken care of. If that gets infected it’s going to mean even less days that you can shoot that bow.”

 “And you’re a bigger fool if you think this is going to stop me from shooting.”

 This caused laughter from the others standing nearby. “You sure your Will is Tenacity and not just downright Stubborness?”

 “Nuance,” she responded shortly with a bright smile.

 She gasped in surprise as suddenly Jacobson reached around and picked her up.

 “Be still,” he responded shortly. “Let’s get you taken care of and then we’ll go from there. The Generals might not get the chance to refuse you shooting. I might just do that for them.”

 “P-put me down! I can walk!” she gasped.

 This caused only more laughter. Jacobson ignored her, standing up straight with her in his arms and carrying her over to the river. “Grab that glove,” he said over his shoulder. “Let’s get that blood cleaned off of it before it stains it.”

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 She glared at the glove and sighed sadly. It was wet still, and there was no way she was getting it near the bowstring. She glared up at him. “I feel like you just sabotaged me.”

 “Get over it, Alvincia,” he said with a small smirk. “No one’s sabotaged you. It’s not as nice as the glove but I have some finger tabs that you can use. Are you seriously going to try to shoot with that?

 She shrugged. “It’s going to be clumsy, but really it’s not about accuracy right now. More important is to try to build up my muscles to pull that string.” She licked her lips as she stared across at the bow. “I want my own so bad.” She sighed. “I wonder how much it’s going to cost me. I have a little money saved up,” she mumbled. “I’ve never actually purchased anything so my money just keeps building up. Maybe I have enough?” She groaned. “Two weeks left. Suddenly that doesn’t seem like a long enough time.”

 Jacobson snorted. “Bow aside I can’t wait for this damn situation to be over. Two weeks is far too long as it is in my opinion. How about we focus back on that.”

 She turned and grinned at him. “Yeah. You’re right.”

 He stood up. “Let me go get those finger tabs for you. Just one or two more rounds.”

 She grinned wide as she got to her feet. “I make no promises,” she responded.

 With Jacobson’s finger tabs, which was nothing more than a thick piece of leather held in place between her middle and ring fingers and stretched out to protect her two fingers, she was able to get in three more rounds before even she had to concede that perhaps she had done all she could for the evening – that and plus she was starting to lose daylight.

 It was with a heavy heart that she returned the beautiful black arrows to their quiver and picked it up. She carried the two items across the yard towards the General’s tent. She looked over at the table. Sanders had long since cleared up the items on the table. She wondered how General Cassings was doing.

 She swallowed as she approached the tent. There were two soldiers standing on either side of the tent at attention. One of them stared down at her. “I’m returning General Cassings’s bow,” she explained.

 Before the man could turn or respond General Sanders’s voice rang out. “I’ll take that, Miss Alvincia.”

 A moment later Sanders pushed the flap aside and stepped out. Lydia bowed deeply and reached the quiver and the bow out for Sanders to receive.

 He smiled down at her as he received them. “Had some fun for yourself?” he chuckled.

 “Yes, sir. I was hoping I could thank General Cassings personally.”

 A pained looked came across his face for a brief moment. Lydia wasn’t sure she had seen it at first. Sanders shook his head. “I’ll pass your gratitude on, but I’m afraid Derrick is a little indisposed at the moment.”

 Lydia swallowed. “Oh. I’m sorry. I… I hope he feels better.”

 Sanders smiled softly. “He will. By tomorrow he’ll be his normal cheerful self,” he said with a chuckle.

 Lydia smiled in return. She bowed again. “Well, thank you, General sir.”

 He nodded. “Have a good evening, Alvincia. You might want to put some ice on that bruise of yours,” he suggested as he turned.

 Lydia turned away as well but stopped as Sanders lifted the flap up for as he disappeared back inside his tent. She caught a brief look at the inside before the tent fell back in place. Cassings was sitting on the floor, leaned up against his cot. His hands were on the floor on either side of him, but his head was rolled back, resting on his cot. His eyes were closed but there was a strange expression of relief on his face. An expression of relief masked over by one of obvious delirium. Lydia swallowed as she realized the sleeve of his uniform was pulled up with a band on the upper end of his arm tied off.

 A needle was lying on the ground beside him.

 She swallowed again, closed her eyes, and rushed off quickly. That was not something she should have seen. That was not something that Cassings would have wanted her or anyone else to see. She wished she had not seen it. Instead she forced the image of Cassings stepping out of the shadows to save her life to the foreground of her memory.

 She walked over to where one of the men were starting to light the campfire. He looked up and smiled at her. “How’s it going, Alvincia? Your fingers feeling alright.”

 She grinned and nodded, looking down at them. “They’ll survive.” She looked around at the items that he had around him. There were several large trout laid out, along with several uncooked, unsliced vegetables. “Getting ready to cook?” she asked.

 He grinned at her. “My turn,” he confessed. “Not that I mind. I prefer my turn compared to some of the other less favorable cooks in camp.”

 She smiled wide and sat down. “If I lost General Cassings had wanted me to learn how to cook.”

 He chuckled. “It’s something you should know how to do, princess, if you want to be in the army with the rest of us Dragon Riders. Everyone in a unit takes turns.”

 She nodded. “I agree. I never bothered to learn because I never thought about it, and I certainly want to hold up my own weight in the future.”

 He chuckled. “Well, it’s nowhere near as fun as weapons training but do you suppose you want to learn anyways?”

 “You have an eager student right in front of you.”

 He grinned. “You know, most women your age should already know how to do this.”

 She wrinkled her nose. “In between living a pampered lifestyle or fighting death I guess I just never managed to fit into my schedule.”

 He chuckled and waved her over. “Well, let’s take care of that. I know you’re good at carving your knife into people, but let’s see how good you are at carving it into vegetables.”

 She grinned and sat down closer to him, giving him her full and undivided attention.

#

 Her dream started out rather pleasant. She dreamed Tanis was lying on top of her, his lips pressed to hers, kissing her passionately. His hair was down and tickled her cheeks. He grabbed her hands and interlocked her fingers and raised them up to her head, pressing them down into the ground. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his lips.

 And then he shifted and his leg forced itself in between her own. She opened her eyes and found she was no longer looking up at Tanis, but now it was Hugh. He pulled away, his gorgeous smile on his lips, and his eyes twinkling. He moved his other leg so that both were in between her own. He reached back down and pressed his lips back down on hers, his tongue slipping inside of her mouth.

 She delighted in the feel of him. Gods how she longed for him. Her heart felt like it was going to break any second now.

 His right hand left her right. He reached up and unzipped her uniform, pulling the collar open so that he could get at her neck. She closed her eyes, eagerly anticipating the feel of his lips on her neck.

 Except suddenly it wasn’t lips that she felt, but hands – hands on her throat, pressing down hard on her windpipe. She gasped and opened her eyes. Now it was Darian! Darian was on top of her choking her! Blood was pouring from a vicious wound in his neck. She realized she was also in a tiny kid’s sized hospital gown, the cobblestone of the alleyway biting into her back.

 Desperately, she reached up and tried to pry his hands away from her neck. Struggling with his strong grip. Her lungs were burning. She needed air in the worst possible way – but there was no way to get it to her. Tears were starting to rise to her eyes even as she clawed uselessly at his hands.

 She was dying. Suffocating. And there was no way to save herself. She was going to die like this. No one was coming to rescue her this time. She looked around desperately, searching the shadows. Searching for Cassings with his bow. Praying for him to come rescue her again!

 Her eyes landed on someone, but it was not Cassings. It was Hugh. There were tears in his eyes. He was crying for her. Crying because she was dead. And there was Tanis, too. And Erica and the twins. Ori joined them, sobbing uncontrollably. The loudest of them all so far. Finally someone did step out of the shadows and walked up to her. It was Landon. Landon holding a single lily in his hands.

 “For the dying girl,” he said coldly. “Lilies for Lydia.”

 He reached down and sat it on her chest, placing her hands over it carefully. She realized with a start that Darian was gone. She was also no longer on the street in some dark alley. She was inside something. Landon was standing over her, bending over the side of a something she was now laying inside of. It looked like a black wooden box, but it was lined on the inside with soft white silk.

 A casket.

 “May you find peace on the other side, Lyz,” Hugh’s voice spoke as he stepped beside Landon to stare down inside with him. “The Death Slayer has finally lost her match with death.”

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 Lydia shot up out of bed, a scream on her lips. A few feet away she heard someone give a shout and heard a brief crash. Her heart felt like it was trying to jump out of her chest. She could not focus on whatever or whoever that had been. Her scream immediately turned into coughing. Violent coughing.

 Arms reached out for her. “Alvinicia?” a man’s voice called out to her.

 As if she were still dreaming, she was immediately shot back to the night of her hospital stay. She screamed again and hit out at the person. She kicked out and tried to jerk her body away. She fell with a hard thud down to the floor, rolling out of her cot.

 “Alvinicia!” the man shouted. “Alvincia, it’s alright. It’s a dream. You were having a bad dream.”

 The man and the hands returned but this time she let them land on her shoulders. She started but immediately recognized the man in front of her as her tent-mate. She doubled over coughing again. Her lungs felt tight and filled.

 Tears filled her eyes at the pain. She pulled away from the guy’s hands again, jumping up to her feet. Without bothering with her boots, she rushed out of the tent, her mouth pressed hard to her mouth. She had barely made it outside and to the side of the tent she she collapsed to knees and became violently ill. She dry heaved several times, her body trying to be ill to her stomach but having little success with it being empty. Instead all of the energy went into ripping her lungs open. She threw up mucus and phlegm several times – her body violently rejecting it.

 And then blood. And not just a small splattering, but a palm sized puddle. Thick and red.

 “Lydia!” her tent mate shouted, his voice behind her.

 Half a second later she heard the sound of metal striking the ground and her mask was forced into her hand. Desperately she placed it up against her mouth and breathed in – and choked immediately. She gagged and coughed up, spitting up another coin size dob of blood. She experimented trying to breath in again, but couldn’t.

 She swallowed, forcing her throat to clear. It was disgusting. She could taste the blood in her mouth. The harsh metallic taste of it permeating through her body. It was difficult forcing it all back, but it worked. Her airway was clear. She pressed the mask to her face again and breathed in her medicine eagerly – desperately. Her body begged for it.

 She felt it as it entered her lungs and began to clear them for her. Slowly, bit by bit, she began to calm down. Pulling the strap over her head, she leaned back, sitting down on the earth. She reached her arms back behind her and leaned back a little further, opening her lungs up and relaxing – giving the medicine its best chance of assisting her.

 “Alvincia?”

 She winced at the sound of Cassings’s voice. She opened her eyes, trying to blink out her tears of pain as she stared up at him. He was bending over now and placed a strong hand on her shoulder, squeezing slightly. “Alvincia? Do you need a doctor?”

 She shook her head and reached up to her mask, pulling it away from her mouth briefly. “N-n-no, sir. B-bad dream,” she confessed, panting heavily. “J-just made morning little harder than normal.”

 “Harder?” she heard her tent mate gasp incredulously. “With that amount of blood?”

 She swallowed, pulling her mask away again. “Normal. It – it happens,” she gasped. “Aslong s’not every morning,” she said, her voice starting to come in a slur. Somehow she managed to pull a smile. “I’m a-alright. Promise. J-just… need to calm down.”

 “Lydia!” the man snapped, but before he could say more, Cassings stood and cut him off.

 “It’s Alvincia’s illness. She knows better than anyone what her body can take. If she’s lying, she also knows that the repercussion for that is her own death.”

 She winced and closed her eyes. Tears slid out of the sides of her eyes, both from pain and the horror of her dream. She swallowed. “I’m *not* dying,” she snarled finally. “Not yet.” She placed the mask to her face again and leaned back again, closing her eyes, filling her lungs with her medicine.

 She heard Cassings’s footfalls as he limped away, saying nothing further. Her tent mate stood there for a while longer before also walking away, a frustrated growl in his throat.

 After several long minutes of sitting there she finally stood up feeling better. Her heart had slowed its pace and she was breathing normally. Licking her dry lips, she pulled her mask off and carried her tank back inside the tent. Her tent mate had returned back to bed.

 She reached down and pulled her boots on before whirling around and rushing back off outside. She forced the soft summer morning to push away the last vestiges of her nightmare. She ran over to the nearest bucket of drinking water, dipping the ladle in deep. She pulled in a small amount of the cool liquid into her mouth and swished it around before spitting it up, clearing her mouth of the last of the taste of blood. Then she pressed the ladle up to her mouth and drank deeply.

 Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she returned the ladle and rushed off to the campfire. Sanders and Cassings were both standing not far from it. Out of respect she bent low, bowing to them, before she ran past them. They did not seem to acknowledge her, but she hardly cared. She ran up to the campfire that Jacobson was working on getting lit.

 She grinned. “You have breakfast duty?” she asked.

 He stared up at her and smiled. “Good morning to you, too. You’re up early.”

 She winced. “R-rough night.” She pointed to the basket of eggs and uncooked sausage. “Teach me?” she asked. The men the previous night had gotten a thrill out of her poor attempts at the dinner, but they had also been encouraging, and she definitely did not like the feeling that there was something that she could not do. So she pushed away the feeling of failture and focused on learning. Like when first training with a new weapon, she was no doubt going to be clumsy and filled with mistakes. Diligence and determination. That’s all it was going to take for her to get over even this small hurdle.

 Jacobson grinned at her. “Absolutely. This meal is a lot simpler than last night’s. Eggs are one of the easiest things in the world to prepare, especially when you’re just doing scrambled like I plan. This should be a perfect opportunity for you.”

 She listened to his instructions as he laid out two skillets and handed her the spatula. They waited as the pans heated up. Then he laid out the sausages in one and with her help began to crack the eggs into the other pan.

 By the end of it, he was laughing at her. She glared across at him. “I’m not that bad.”

 The spatula was back in his hand and he was quickly doing what he could to remove the eggshells that had managed to fall in during her attempts. “Haha, Alvincia, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone that’s had this much issues with cracking eggs.”

 She sighed, trying to hold her patience. “Keep laughing,” she snapped. “Once I get this figured out, I bet I’ll end up being a better cook than even you,” she said with a flick of her head.

 “I certainly hope so, but you’ve definitely got a long way to go.”

 She grinned. “That will just make my achievement even more sweeter when I succeed.”

 He laughed and returned the spatula to her and walked her through more instructions. The rest of the breakfast proceeded without further incident. Which made her feel a heck of a lot better after her fiasco with eggshells.

 Actually, in all honesty, when the men began to gather for the food, it actually gave her a good feeling that she had done something for them. That while they were working and being forced to stay in this sad situation instead of out on the battlefield, that there was some way – no matter how small and flawed – that she could show her gratitude. Listening to them talking to her and giving more instructions about other meals only gave her more of a sense of that feeling of belonging.

 One of the men laughed at her as she sat back with her own plate. “I don’t get it, though. You won your bet. Technically you do not have to bother with this.”

 She smirked. “I have to lose a bet in order to take up a new skill? Until it was mentioned yesterday I honestly never gave it a lot of thought. Cooking, I guess, has always been something that I took for granted. I get hungry – the food is served. I’ve only ever been three places in my life. My mansion, high school, and Battle School. Oh, and here, too, so I guess that’s four. Oh, and the few times I’ve stayed at Dragon Outposts. Point being: I never realized it was a problem. I have no problems with learning, either. Actually, last night and this morning was kinda fun. Even if I did screw up a little bit. I also can’t stand the thought that there’s something that I do not know how to do.”

 The men chuckled. “Well, for your sake,” one of them said with a laugh, “I hope you learn. If you ever get married that’s something your husband is going to expect from you.”

 She wrinkled her nose. “Like hell. He better be prepared to fix some things for himself sometimes, too,” she said with a snap. “Doting wife I am *not*.”

 This caused an uproar in laughter and some pats on her back. She grinned with them. Gods she was going to miss these guys when she arrived back at Battle School.

 After breakfast she grabbed a medical kit and walked down to the river. She pulled off her boots and knives and dipped her legs in, opening the kit up. She slowly began pulling off the bandages on her fingers. Pain flooded through her digits. She choked it back, pushing it to the far side of her mind and not giving it much attention. She reached down into the river and cleaned the wounds in the clean water. Drying them off carefully she looked them over. Good. She couldn’t see any signs of swelling. They looked horrible, but it did not look like they were in danger of becoming infected.

 She reached into the kit and pulled out some cream. She smeared it on carefully and reapplied bandages. By the time she was done, the pain felt greatly reduced. She closed the kit back up and leaned back, stunned for a moment by the sudden feel of a dragon behind her. She looked up and grinned at Tsaul. “I swear sometimes I think you were a cat in your last life, dragon.”

 Tsaul chuckled. “Hardly. You are just not as observant to your surroundings as you should be. You get a task in your mind and you tend to close off all the rest of the world around you. As a fighter, you should definitely work on that. Are you going to be shooting again today?”

 “Gods I want to, in the worst way, but I think I better leave it alone, and wait until tomorrow. These cuts aren’t anything to laugh at. They should look a lot better tomorrow. I’d rather have them heal up quick than simply reopen them and make the situation worse.”

 “How’s your head feeling? I felt your panic this morning from your nightmare.”

 She sighed. “I’m… alright. I’m connected to a psychotic dragon right now, so I wonder if that has something to do with? Or maybe it’s just a mixture of everything that I’ve been going through these past two weeks? Gods that dream was so sick,” she said with a shudder. “Maybe going through Darian’s nightmare-hallucinations is still wreaking havoc on me.”

 “What was the dream?” Tsaul asked. “I was asleep so I am afraid that I did not get to view it for myself.”

 She swallowed. “W-well, Darian was choking me. That part I could deal with. It’s the parts afterwards that scare the hell out of me. In the dreams I’m dead. My friends are all crying over me – and I’m in a coffin. I know everyone fears death to a certain degree but until that first hallucination he gave me, I guess I did not realize how afraid I am of it. It’s pretty stupid, I guess.”

 Her throat felt tight. She could feel Tsaul’s sadness sweep through her. She closed her eyes and tried to push her fear to the side. “You want to know something, Tsaul?” she asked after a moment. “I… I miss Hugh. He always made me feel like I had so much life to live. He always made me feel that he could share the life that he had with me. I loved his passion for everything. Tanis is wonderful, but… he makes me feel breakable. He’s too gentle. I like being treated like I am something precious, but… that’s not what I want. Hugh reminded me that there were so many wonderful things in the world. He tried to give me as many good memories as he could.”

 She closed her eyes and allowed tears to slip out. “Oh Tsaul. I know he treated me so poorly, but I’d do anything if he would just take me back. I wish I never did that to him. I don’t care anymore who’s right or wrong.” She swallowed. “If… if he ever asked me to not be a fighter… if he would take me back at that cost… I would do it. If he wanted me to be a doting girlfriend and sit around waiting for him – I think I would. Even if it meant giving you up. Does… does that make you mad?”

 Tsaul wrapped his head around her. “It makes me sad, and I think you would be sorely miserable, but I can understand. But I will tell you something else, Lydia. Your mate would never ask you to do that.”

 She swallowed hard and turned to him, pulling her legs out of the water. “Oh Tsaul… do you think he would ever take me back? That last night we saw each other, his words did something to me. They gave me hope. I’m not delusional, am I? The men here said the same thing. They thought he might come back to me, too.”

 Tsaul chuckled. “Lydia, I believe that he will come back. He had to take a few months to get his perspective back in line. I talked with him the day that General Sanders arrived.”

 She tensed at that. “Y-you did? What did you say to him?”

 “I told him a story about Adrian that I felt would help him.”

 “What story?”

 The dragon chuckled. “That is between me, my old Rider, and now Hugh-boy.”

 She glared at him in frustration. Damn him and his stupid secrets. A dragon with secrets. But she also knew Tsaul and his stories. Three years ago when she had needed it most, he had told her the story of Adrian’s friend: Derrick Cassings. A young trainee who was so concerned about the vicious pain in his leg impacting his partners, that he had become drug dependent. Only when Adrian and William Sanders became involved after a suicide attempt did he manage to pull his life back together.

 The dragon’s stories were always powerful. Whatever Tsaul had told Hugh she knew it had doubtlessly gave Hugh something to think about.

 “W-what did he say at the end of it?” she asked.

 “He realized what a fool he has been. Not just towards you but to other areas of his life.”

 She bit her lip. Would Hugh return to her? The possibility seemed almost too impossible to believe. And then what would she do, though? She realized with a jolt that she was *Tanis’s* girlfriend now. She… she couldn’t do that to him. Tanis was absolutely delighted in having her as his girlfriend. He was just as truly in love with her as she was with Hugh. And a part of her did feel like she could be in love with Tanis, too. Would she able to do that? Could she do that? Break Tanis’s heart to be with Hugh again? A part of her felt that she could. That she would. And what sort of woman did that make her? Tanis knew her heart. He knew how in love she was with Hugh, but did that absolve her? But, wasn’t it better to be completely honest with Tanis than to lead him along like that?

 She sighed. She wished she was at school right now so that she could try to address these situations. She reached over and pulled her boots back on and rebuckled her knives onto her legs. She closed her eyes and remembered the one part of her dream that had been particularly enjoyable: Hugh on top of her. It brought a grin to her face and made her body tingle.

 Standing up, she grabbed the medical kit and walked back towards camp. She returned it to the person she had borrowed it from and returned back outside, considering what she should do with her day since archery was clearly out of the question. Apart of her wondered if someone would want to spar with her, but dismissed it. Not with the blood that she had coughed up this morning. It would probably be better to simply let her body rest.

 She stepped back out of the tent and started across the grounds when Cassings’s raised voice caught her attention. She looked up at the Generals and froze.

 One of the Western generals was standing in front of them, addressing them.

 “I have a *right* to request audience with the Meldling,” the General’s voice growled in his thick accent. “That is what this skills analysis is about. All of the Meldlings are made available to viewing at any time unless another is currently supervising them.”

 Lydia swallowed hard, fear creeping up her body. She pushed it back. No. She was not going to fear *anyone*. A hand fell on her shoulder from behind. She looked up and noticed Jacobson standing there, glaring across at the Westerners himself. Three other men had also gathered behind her. She grinned, her heart filling with emotion. Gods these wonderful people. What did she have to fear with these wonderful men standing behind her. She felt honored. Honored and safe.

 “After your half-assed attempt at kidnapping her,” Cassings growled, “whatever rights you had have been revoked. I hardly understand why we are still here.”

 The Western General’s mouth twitched. “She was not on neutral territory. She had wandered beyond the safe boundaries set here. Whatever happens to Meldlings outside of this territory has little to do with us. Do not accuse *us* of attempting to take her. We cannot be made to be held responsible for the actions of a few unruly soldiers.”

 Cassings stood up. Lydia could only see his back from here, but she could imagine the rage on his face. Sanders reached up and put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Derrick,” he said, his voice cold steel. “Be still. Rash actions will not help.”

 Cassings whirled on him. “You’re not seriously going to give in to this bastard?!” he asked incredulously, his voice high. “Goddamn it, Will. She’s one of our troops! I will not allow her or anyone else to be treated in this manner! They placed her life in danger.”

 “Sit down!” Sanders shouted, his voice angry.

 Cassings swallowed, his jaw working, and his fist balled at the side. But slowly he sank to his seat. Whatever happened, at the end of the day Sanders outranked him and was a superior.

 Sanders stared at him for a moment, allowing for a his friend to get his anger under control before he turned back to the General in front of them. “Do not mistake me. I feel exactly the same way that my General Cassings feels. You may have your audience because I can do nothing to stop it, but do not try our patience. Our soldier has little desire to speak with you. Whatever possible *favor* you had attempted to gain from her was lost the moment you attacked that young boy.”

 The Westerner chuckled. “*Soldier*? The young *dying* girl? When you really get down to it in truth you are no better than us: winning affections with titles and gifts. Tell me, what’s next? If the young lady asked for it, would you give her the title of Captain?”

 “If you think Alvincia has done nothing to earn the title we have given her,” Cassings spoke, his voice low and deadly, “then you are gravely mistaken. You know so very little and you assume far too much. Someone like you that hardly cares for his troops would hardly understand that.”

 The General leaned forward, placing his hands on the table in front of Cassings. “I’ll tell you what I understand. At the end of the day you view her just the same as the rest of us. A tool. Full medical accommodations in return for her Meldling powers? You have bought her affections very cheaply. It’s a shame that she cannot realize that.”

 Cassings jumped out of his seat, his fist raised back, but Sanders had also jumped up and was quick to catch his friend’s arm. “Dammit, Derrick! Control yourself!”

 “The deals we make with our troops are little of your concern,” Cassings shouted. “And at the end of the day there is still a very big difference between us. These children – these *Meldlings* are not tools. They are *humans*. I’m done with this. This is your game, Will. Play it how you like. I will not be a participant in it anymore.”

 He jerked his arm out of Sanders’s grasp and limped away from the table, heading towards the General’s tent. His eyes fell on hers. They were filled with rage and looking at her did nothing to appease it. “Alvinica!” he barked. “General *Sanders* requests your audience.” He did not wait for her to answer before he limped off.

 Lydia swallowed and pulled away from Jacobson’s hand, giving it a single pat as it slipped off. No fear. She would not allow it. She walked up to the table, General Sanders standing there watching her. She bowed deeply to him. “You requested my audience, sir?” Her eyes slipped towards the Western General who was standing back up straight, a cruel smile on his lips. What a pity that Sanders had stopped Cassings’s fist, she thought.

 Sanders swallowed and stared across at the General. “General Diederich wishes to speak with you,” he said, his voice also tight with anger.

 Lydia steeled herself and turned to the man. She said nothing. Just glared at him, her fists balled at her sides, showing him nothing but defiance. Hugh and Tanis had both told her on multiple separate occasions that they loved her look of defiance. She hoped this asshole enjoyed it, too, because that’s all she was going to give him. If this bastard wanted her – he was going to get her at her best and most powerful. Not the little dying girl, but the Room Commander who had struggled and worked her way up for everything she had so far achieved. Think: DRAGON. Think: Obstacles.

 The smile slowly faded from the General’s face and his eyes narrowed. “Do you teach all your troops to be so insubordinate?” he growled.

 “If you think Alvincia is being insubordinate you are gravely mistaken. Personally, I call her spirited, and I wouldn’t touch that for anything in the world. You have your audience with her. Get on it with it,” he growled.

 Diederich stared between the General back to her. His jaw worked for a moment before a slow smile was fixed back to his face. He held out his hand. “Miss Alvincia, would you accompany me for a walk?”

 She stepped back in shock but Sanders answered before she had her chance. “No!” he shouted. “You may talk with her here.”

 The General dropped his hand and glared across at Sanders. “I have a right to attend an audience anywhere with a Meldling that I wish as long as it within the boundaries of this neutral territory,” he snapped.

 “Your reputation is on shaky ground,” Sanders growled. “You have done nothing to gain my trust. You can speak with her right here or take her into the school, but you will not take her anywhere else!”

 “I am asking you and her out of *kindness*. Technically I have every right to throw this *child* over my shoulder and carry her wherever I desire. As long as she remains alive and available to the other countries there is little that you can do to stop me. If you insist on this childish behavior I will put in a formal complaint with your country and this can turn into a politics game. You are trying my patience. I am paying you all due respect possible attempting to understand that you are new to these proceedings.”

 “I’m sure you are,” Sanders growled. His jaw worked for a moment. “Alvincia?”

 “Yes sir?” she responded, not looking up at him.

 “Do you have your knives?”

 No choice, then. As much as he hated it, she would have to go with this guy. She nodded. “Of course, sir,” she answered smoothly.

 General Diederich grinned wide. “Knives? What do you think I will be doing with her?”

 Sanders glared across at him. “I promise you I haven’t the foggiest notion, but if you attack one of my troops I do give them full permission to fight back in defense of themselves.” He leaned forward, “And I don’t care how much paperwork that will cost me.”

 Diederich glared at him, his smile still remaining unfazed. “And say that I did attack her, what do you possibly imagine a tiny four foot child could do?”

 “Give you the worst hell on earth that she could manage,” Sanders responded smoothly. “I assure you. I have seen Miss Alvincia fight and I have seen her scores from her classes. Laugh at her as much as you like. You attack her and you won’t laugh for long.”

 The General shrugged. “I’ll bear it in mind. Miss Alvincia, please follow me.”

 The man whirled around and walked off towards the direction of the river – towards the direction of the rock wall that eventually headed towards Eldrich’s cave.

 She swallowed and followed.

 “Alvinicia,” Sanders shouted at her.

 She turned. “Yes sir?”

 “Keep your head. Anger can be powerful, but do not let it cloud your judgment. You have your knives but there is also no dishonor in running away if necessary. Be careful.”

 She smiled and bowed deeply. “If something goes wrong I’ll call out through the dragon channels, sir.”

 Sanders smirked. “I keep forgetting that you can do that, too. Take care, Alvincia. I don’t like this, but show no weakness.”

 “Yes sir,” she answered with another bow.

 She turned around and went walking in the direction of General Diederich.

#

 The two of them walked. Lydia kept a strict distance in between them as she followed. Even when he slowed to try to wait for her to catch up, she matched his pace. Never allowing for less than about a foot in between them.

 Finally he sighed and turned around to her. “This would be a lot easier if you were beside me so that we could talk.”

 “Like hell,” she responded.

 “Miss Alvincia,” he said, murdering her name with his thick accent, “I promise that there is nothing that I’m going to do to you.”

 “I’m sure Eldrich has heard that promise before.”

 “So sure of yourself and things that you know nothing about,” he growled.

 “You had one of your own soldiers beaten! You gagged me and forced me to watch that. Please explain to me what part of that was supposed to be endearing?”

 “That was –“

 “And then you used Darian to give him a slew of nightmares one after the other,” she pressed on, cutting him off.”

 He smiled, “We still –“

 “I had to go remeld with a psychotic dragon just to put an end to that. How do you like my pet, by the way? She’s a real beauty, isn’t she?”

 “Yes, she –“

 “And as if that weren’t enough, you then attempted to kidnap me,” she shouted, cutting him off again. “You used Darian to try to whisk me away from people that I care about. It’s a good thing my Generals care a lot more about me than you do your own troops.”

 He sighed, finally losing his smile. “Are you done?”

 “I haven’t even gotten started,” she growled. “How about we talk next about how you treat Simon and El-“

 She gasped, caught off guard as the General suddenly rushed her. She jerked downwards going for her knives but she did not make it in time. The back of his hand hit her hard across the face. She fell back seeing stars. She felt his hand grab her hair and lift her up to her feet. He slammed her against the rock wall, a hand on her throat.

 “How much,” he hissed, “do you *not* want me to squeeze right now, Alvincia?”

 She glared up at him. “That promise didn’t last for very long,” she snapped. “Go ahead and choke me,” she dared. “Let’s see how my Generals handle you doing that.”

 “You must think a whole lot of your Generals,” he growled. “You enjoy defending them? For what reason? I am quite curious.”

 “They care about me far more than you ever will your own troops. They would never do what you have done to Eldrich.”

 “No. No, they threaten to take your dragon away from you. That’s what they did, wasn’t it? Of course, I am only going off of the information supplied by that boy Eldrich. So please correct me if I make any mistakes. They threatened to rip your dragon away and sent you into Dragon Pass.”

 She blinked. “I never told Eldrich that.”

 He chuckled releasing her. “You did not have to. You are truly a moron Meldling. Every second you have spent melded with a dragon has given Eldrich one more opportunity to enter your mind. You have not even felt him. The information that he has given us has been quite fascinating, Alvincia. The days you spent wheelchair bound, receiving your expiration date – the day you went up against the committee and your dragon claimed you. The day that you died and woke up two months later. The day that you met your wonderful Generals. They went through that with you and despite that they still tried to rip your dragon away from you. That sounds honorable to you?”

 “They were desperate,” she growled.

 “And how desperate were they that they sent you to stand before that Crystal Dragon? I wonder, do they even feel remorse for what they put you through? They have their border protected. End result achieved.”

 He stepped back and pushed back his dark bangs from out of his eyes. “You ridicule us for attempting to offer you gifts in exchange for your services. We want to put you on Death Dragons, give you titles and a life of luxury. In comparison what did they offer? Full medical accommodations and a position as a fighter just so that you will be at their beck and call whenever they so desire? We are offering that and so much more.” He grinned. “You have made it very clear with that Crystal Dragon that you will not be easily curbed. I have no desire to do. You can be the fighter that you desire to be. You will be placed in charge of troops. You can have your choice of where you want to serve. If Dragon Pass is too hard for your body, we can send you elsewhere.”

 “And the moment you give me a task that I don’t want to do?” she asked, spitting out the question with as much venom as she could manage. “What would you do then? Have me flogged and beaten?” She reached up to her face. “Hit me and choke me?”

 He grinned. “Oh no. For someone as weak as you, we could not afford such rash actions. What would that help anyways? You will be in charge of several of our finest Death Dragons? Why would we ever risk your wrath? You would be holding all the cards, Alvincia. The power would be in your hands.”

 “And I suppose you’re next going to tell me that you would free all of my Meldling friends and get them across the border to my country?”

 “If that is what you desire, we can do that, but I hardly can understand they why. For such an intelligent young lady you are certainly very ill informed.”

 “What do you mean?” she asked hotly.

 “You act as if your country is so innocent. As innocent as your wonderful Generals. You know *nothing*. Do you want to know why your country stopped caring about Meldlings?”

 “Because we don’t need them,” she answered. “We have Will Dragons.”

 The General grinned and nodded. “A very apropos response. Your Will Dragons are incredibly special, aren’t they? The only dragons in the world that can form a group link. The only dragons who *choose* their Riders. So devoted. Tell me, Alvincia, have you ever considered *why* your dragons are so special?”

 She frowned and shook her head. “No. I can’t say that I have.”

 “Because your dragons were specifically engineered to be that way. You want to know what your country did to Meldlings? They forced them to work in squalor conditions breeding dragons. Your wonderful Will Dragons are a combination of Meldling Dragons and Peace Dragons, and a few other dragons besides. Only Meldlings can meld with Meldling Dragons. They used you Meldlings as tools. Forced them to go up against dragons like your Ayvra. If they died, your country cared little. If they succeeded, they took the Meldling and threatened their life to get the dragon to breed with one of their choices. It was long and arduous work. Many Meldlings died and there were a number of poor incidents in which many of their own men died, but finally the end result was achieved: Will Dragons. After that, they sold whatever Meldlings they found to the Southern countries. They lost interest in you. You no longer served a purpose for them. They stopped even searching for you.

 “Would you like to know one more piece of delicious information, Alvincia?” he growled. “It was one person. One Meldling that finally achieved what they had wanted with her Meldling Dragon. They took that person from her family when she was very young and paid them off with riches. That family did *very* well with its new found wealth. Their child died after being sold off, but that family grew quite large and is now the richest in the world: *Alvincia*. Isn’t that interesting? It’s never been proven before, but perhaps Meldlings is a family trait. Or it’s just a ridiculous and insane coincidence.”

 Lydia felt sick. Ridiculously sick. No. No no no no no. That wasn’t true. None of that could be true. She searched her mind. Tried to trace her own family’s wealth through history. T-they were horse breeders. Horse breeders until her one of her ancestors began to make dragon gear. Dragon gear for Will Riders. That’s been the family business ever since. She swallowed. “Y-you’re lying.”

 The General shrugged. “Believe whatever you want, Alvincia, but your country has shared in its own disgusting past with Meldlings. Now because of what you have done, because you succeeded in slaying our Death Dragon, you have successfully placed Meldlings back in the eyes of your country. You managed to bring history full circle.” He grinned and actually started to clap. “Congratulations. I am sure future generations will hold your name in high esteem. Your Generals, too, for having forced you out there. Yes. The three Generals who sent a *student,* a young dying girl,out to a battlefield. It must have frightened you. Without your precious Tsaul what chance could someone with a death scent hope to have with another dragon. You should go and ask them, Alvincia. Did they ever think in a million years that you would have returned back alive? It must have been pretty shocking for them. The dying girl returned back from the battlefield *still* on the back of their most precious war dragon. Do you think they really sat back and thought ‘aw, it must be because of her great skill’? Or do you think that they sat back and thought ‘that must be the power of a Meldling. What else can be accomplished with it, I wonder?’”

 He grinned wide. “Tell me, Alvincia? Which one do you think they thought since barely a few months later they sent out a letter asking you to sign yourself over to them. How did their letter read? ‘Due to your skill and prowess, we wish assist with your dream of being a fighter?’ Or did it read closer to ‘Become our tool and we’ll do what you can to help with your medicine so we can get as much use out of you before you perish?’”

 Lydia choked. Anger and hatred flooded her body at the sound of this man’s voice. But she had come up with no counter argument for him. She could think of nothing and worse, her anger was pushing her thoughts aside. She didn’t dare speak unless she screwed up again.

 He batted at his bangs again. “I saw you use that General’s bow yesterday. It was a very entertaining display. I wonder… how many men has he ever let touch his bow. But for you – to keep you happy and entertained, he let you shoot. Is that what it takes to win you over? Maybe we are overshooting with you and that’s what’s throwing you off. You seem to like cheap, fake kindness more than gifts. I believe that you can be greater than that, but because of how your vision has been colored you will not even listen to my warning. The first year was the Death Dragon, last year was the Crystal Dragon. This year they could not even stop you from being forced here. What is it going to be next year? And the year after that? When you are finally made into a soldier? What happens when they want you to do something that you do not want to do? Will they revoke your permissions as a soldier? What bullshit. All we want is for you to meld and control Death Dragons. We would expect nothing else from you.”

 Lydia stepped back and away from him. She wanted to be away from this guy. She wished to the heavens that he would stop talking.

 “Think about it, Alvincia. If it’s your friends and family you are worried about never seeing, we could make accommodations for that. You may even still keep your beloved Tsaul. The world would be yours. You have only to voice a single concern and I will be more than happy to provide you with an answer.” He held out his hand. “I am willing to be your friend. I would treat you like a daughter. You want to learn how to battle? I will make sure you have the finest teachers. I will even pay off a whole research team to look into finding better medicines. You could even become an advocate for improving the lives of other Meldlings.”

 “Shut up!” she screamed. She doubled over, shutting her eyes desperately, and trying to plug her ears with her hands. It was too much. It was all so sickening. She couldn’t stand another word of it. “Liar! You’re such a goddamn liar!”

 He stepped up to her and grabbed her underneath her chin, tilting her head forcibly. “Search my mind, Meldling,” he growled, his voice low and vicious. “You can do that. Search my mind and find any traces of me having lied at any time during this conversation. If you like I will bring your precious boy Eldrich forward and he can do it. I will even draw up the papers *right now* and get him signed over to your Generals. We can do that first and then you can meld to one of our Death Dragons. How about this as a promise? If at any time you do not like serving us you can go back home. I would do that. You will not be bound. What do you want to do, Alvincia? Go talk with your precious Generals first? Let’s see what they would have to offer you in comparison? Why don’t you go up and ask them what they would do if you asked to cancel your contract with them *right now*. I wonder what face they would make then? What promises they would offer you? You think they care about you? What a ridiculous notion. You have dealt with the men they have around them. You think they give a damn what happens to a young 18 year old? You are nothing more than a pawn. A single valuable pawn because of your Meldling abilities. *I* care. I wouldn’t lie to you. Whatever has happened or will, you cannot say that I am a liar.”

 He grinned wide and moved his hand away from her chin and stroked her cheek. She backed up feeling even sicker to her stomach at the gesture. This only made him grin wider. “I would even do what I could to keep you out of the Meldling tests they sometimes throw you into. Just as I have done for Eldrich and Sean. You should go up and ask them about that. As a woman Meldling I can promise you that you would not want to endure what they would put you through. There are reasons that Sean and Eldrich have not wanted to defect to the Southern countries. Even *I* have problems with those tests.”

 “Or I can stay in my own country and not have to worry about those,” she snapped.

 “Is that what you believe? Is that what you think? Until one of them grows curious about you. It will not take your country long to want to test you. And what if the decide to send you over to us?”

 “Do what?” she demanded.

 “You think my superiors aren’t trying to force some treaty right now that includes you in it? This could be your one and only chance, Alvincia. Your country may decide you aren’t worth the keeping; not if there’s something they could get out of it. I am offering you a choice right now with a lot of promises. If you are forced to come over, these promises may no longer be made available to you. My hands will be tied. I doubt I could even come near you myself at that point to put a stop to those tests.”

 He stepped back and took a deep breath. “That is the full truth of your whole damn situation. This is my final offer. I have provided you with all the possible warnings. Whatever happens from between now and until you have to leave that is my offer. You should do some talking of your own. Go ask your Generals how they feel about you. See what they have to offer. Let’s see if you are as smart as you seem or if you’ll just buy into their lies.” He gave her one last grin. “Thank you for the walk, Alvincia. I hope it was educational for you.”

 He turned around and walked off. “Oh, and for the record, Alvincia,” he called back. “I beat Eldrich and Sean not out of cruelty but because I know Meldlings. As a race you people are sickeningly sweet and friendly and far too innocent. I put them through cruelty out of necessity. Better that I be mean to them now than for them to deal with the wrong person who would handle them in a far worse manner than me.”

 Finished talking he finally walked away completely, turning the corner and vanishing completely.

 Lydia allowed her tears to fall finally. She felt disgusted. Disgusted and lost. She walked over to the edge of the river and threw up the contents of her breakfast. She wiped away desperately at her tears but it did nothing to stop them. She closed her eyes and tried to search for the cracks in his story. The areas where his lies would break. They had to be there. Her country was not like that. And even if it was, it couldn’t still be like that. Right? Her own family. The Alvincia name. That was the sickest part. It made her mind reel.

 Not much time had passed when she heard someone shout her name loudly and then the sound of running feet reached her ears. “Alvincia!”

 She choked. It was the voice of Sanders. She swallowed and opened her mouth to speak but her voice refused to come out. She swallowed and tried again as the voices shouted louder, coming closer. “Here,” she shouted, her voice cracking in the middle of the word.

 Sanders, followed by Jacobson and two other men rounded the corner. The rushed up to her. Lydia swallowed at the sight of weapons in their hands. She closed her eyes and looked away, her tears falling again. They were worried about her.

 Why? Because they truly cared or maybe it was just because she was a Meldling. An irreplaceable tool.

 Sanders stopped about a foot away from her. “Alvinica? Are you hurt?”

 She swallowed and shook her head. “N-no, sir,” she said, still barely able to speak.

 Jacobson walked past Sanders and knelt down beside her. He tilted her head, staring closer at her left cheek. He put a thumb to it and she winced. “Liar,” he growled.

 She shrugged. “I forgot about it,” she mumbled. “He only did that once. Sorry.”

 “What happened, Alvincia,” Sanders demanded.

 She swallowed and shook her head. “Nothing. He just talked.”

 “And judging from you expression that was more than enough.”

 She swallowed and nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ve definitely had more pleasant conversations.”

 “Did he threaten you?” Jacobson demanded. “No. What am I thinking? You could handle that. He threatened your friends again, didn’t he?”

 She shook her head. “No. No, he just gave me another bunch of promises trying to get me to defect again.”

 Jacobson frowned. “What else did he do? Lydia, you look too shaken for that to have been all that he said to you.”

 She closed her eyes and stared down into the river. She shook her head.

 Jacobson reached out and grabbed her arm. “Lydia!” he snapped.

 “Jacobson,” Sanders barked. “Leave her be. It may be something she needs to process first on her own before she shares it. Can you walk, Alvincia?”

 She swallowed and nodded, slowly getting to her feet. “Y-yes sir,” she mumbled.

 Jacobson stared down at her sadly before turning and rejoining Sanders even as he himself turned around and started walking off. Lydia swallowed and followed after, stumbling at first, but regaining her feet slowly. Diederich’s words would not leave her head, though.

 “Don’t let them into your head, Alvincia,” Jacobson muttered. “That’s the worst place for them to be. Don’t start listening to them. If you do, it’s all over. They’re nothing but liars. Keep that thought in mind.”

 She swallowed and closed her eyes. “S-sometimes it’s hard to figure out who the liars are, though, and who is actually telling the truth.”

 “No. Not it’s not. Us, Lydia. We are the ones telling the truth. We care about you. Me and the other men. The Generals, too.”

 She swallowed. “You have no idea how much I really do want to believe that.”

 She noticed General Sanders tense and his head turn at her words. He stared back at her as they walked around the corner. But before he could say anything, Jacobson swore. “What does that asshole want *now*.”

 All heads turned forward again. General Diederich was standing out in the middle of the yard, waiting, something in his hands. The moment they noticed him his mouth widened into his normal smile. He waited for General Sanders to reach him before he spoke.

 “I have something that I wish to give to Miss Alvincia,” he said, his voice a soft purr.

 “We’re not interested in your handouts,” Sanders growled.

 Diederich’s smile widened even further. “Oh, I promise this is nothing like that. I just heard that she loves to read. History is her favorite subject. I thought she might enjoy this book.” He started towards her with it but Sanders’s hand jerked out and caught it, ripping it from the General’s hand. Diederich blinked and smiled. “You should read it, too. It would be very educational for the both of you. Page forty-four is where I think you should start. I already gave her a brief synopsis, but since the young lady seemed to have trouble believing me, I thought it might be better if she read it for herself. If it helps, it was the Southerners who published it.” He chuckled. “I hope you will be as entertained by it as I was.”

 Saying that, he waved his hand and turned around, walking off again.

 Sanders stared down at the book before turning around. “Alvincia. Get to your tent and lay down for a while. Get yourself calmed down. General Cassings and I will call you later to debrief you. I don’t want you to be a mental wreck by the time we do that. Understood?”

 She swallowed and nodded. “Y-yes, sir.” She bowed and started to walk off.

 “Alvincia. What Jacobson said was right. Never let the enemy into your mind. Always trust in the things that you believe and feel in your heart. It can be amazing how people can twist the truth against you. Don’t fall prey to that sort of deceit.”

 She turned around and looked at him. He was staring at her hard. She licked her lips and nodded, not trusting herself to speak, before she continued back towards her tent.

#

 “The Generals want you take your food into their tent with you,” Jacobson said, leaning over her shoulder and talking into her ear.

 She winced. Well, she had expected it. She had at least gotten through lunch and had been hoping to take her time with dinner, putting more of her thoughts into place. Talking with the men and forcing her mind away from her conversation with Diederich had helped a great deal. She was not ready to go delving back into it.

 But like so many other aspects of her life, she was not given a choice.

 Swallowing hard, she filled her plate with some of the fish (more fish? Well, they were by a river, she supposed) and vegetables that she had helped to prepare.

 She stood up and walked towards the tent, nodding her farewells to the rest of the men who wished her luck.

 There were two soldiers standing outside the tent again. They nodded to her and one of them pulled back the tent flap for her, allowing her inside.

 She stepped in and bowed, feeling awkward with her plate and cup in her hands. General Sanders chuckled. “Get in here, Alvincia, before you accidentally spill everything.”

 She sat her plate down, feeling red in the face. She looked up, General Sanders was busy with his own plate, staring across at her, while General Cassings was chewing, his eyes roving over the book that Diederich had given to them. The book was sat in between the two of them. She looked around and found the stool that she had sat on before when she had been in here with Eldrich what now seemed like an eternity ago. She pulled it over and sat down. She felt intensely awkward, though, eating with the two Generals.

 Sanders chuckled. “You didn’t get much, Alvincia.”

 She felt her face redden to an even deeper shade. “I-I’ve never eaten much,” she answered simply.

 Sanders nodded and turned back to Cassings, giving the book another cursory glance. “So I take it that Western General gave you a wonderful history lesson this morning?”

 She sighed. “Yes sir.”

 Cassings sighed as he pulled his eyes away from it. “I wouldn’t have ever imagined half of the stuff that this book talks about.”

 “Did it get any better?” Sanders asked him.

 Cassings winced. “Depends on how you define ‘better’. If by better you mean that our country finally stopped caring and turned a blind eye to everything, yeah, it got better. At least we weren’t participating in the shit anymore.”

 He picked up the book and threw it across the room. “If I read another sentence I think I’m going to throw up.”

 She swallowed and stared after the book. She looked back down at her plate. “D-did it mention my family in it?”

 Cassings’s eyes rose. “Seems like your family created more than just dragon gear,” he answered simply. He shook his head. “It was thousands of years ago, Alvincia. Don’t let that shit into your head. Our country is better than that now.”

 She looked up to him. “A-are you sure? How can you say that?”

 “Because I have to,” he growled. “Because if I thought for even one damn moment that there was a drop of that in any of the people that I serve I would rip these damn stars off my chest and tell them to go to hell.”

 “Agreed,” Sanders said with a growl in his throat. “At the time that stuff in the book was talking about we were still a kingdom and not a democracy. Don’t give it much thought, Alvincia. It’s just propaganda. That General is trying to defame us. Trying to put us on the same level as him so that you start doubting whether it matters which one you go to.”

 She nodded meekly. “Yeah,” she responded simply.

 “That’s not the only thing that you discussed, though, is it?” Cassings asked.

 She flinched. “N-no sir,” she answered after a moment.

 Sanders sighed. “Now’s not the time to be a closed book, Miss Alvincia.”

 She closed her eyes. “No, sir, but, I’m not sure the other stuff is things that I would want to discuss with you,” she said honestly.

 Sanders shook his head. “Miss Alvincia, if there is a problem that you are having, it’s rather difficult to address it unless you let us know. Didn’t you go through this yesterday after your continuous spying on Derrick yesterday? When you finally asked your question you ended up not only getting your answer but had a wonderful day of shooting.” He turned and grinned wide at Cassings. “And even knocked a General’s ego down a few pegs.”

 Cassings glared at him. “You’re enjoying that fact, aren’t you?” he growled.

 “Immensely,” Sanders confessed with a large smile.

 Lydia stared down at her plate, trying to be amused by the two in front of her, but unable to catch the humor. “T-the rest was about the two of you,” she confessed finally.

 Cassings nodded. “Makes sense. First defame your country, and then the people you serve, and maybe if he’s lucky a few of your friends and family. We have country and family – he did a lovely job of that. So that just leaves friends and superiors. I’m on pins and needles to hear what he had to say.”

 She licked her dry lips. “W-well, he got friends rather nicely, too. S-seems wherever they have Eldrich they have been keeping him busy. Apparently they’ve been forcing him to enter my mind and been picking through it. I’m tempted to go have a long talk with Ayvra about it because she hasn’t mentioned it and I haven’t felt it, but then again, no telling when he did it.”

 “What did he have the boy go searching for?” Sanders asked.

 “Anything and everything, I guess. He knew about my being wheelchair bound and the committee’s first answer and Tsaul melding with me. He knew about me receiving my expiration date and then living through it. He also knew about when you sirs came to my second physical. And then he attacked you for having gone through that and then tried to rip Tsaul away from me.”

 Cassings sighed and nodded. “Another other fun facts that he chose to bring up?”

 She closed her eyes and nodded. “H-he attacked you two a lot for our agreement.”

 Cassings nodded. “I had a feeling. He tried that shit when he came up and talked with us. I don’t know how much of that you heard.”

 “All of it.”

 Sanders turned and glared at Cassings. “Yes, Derrick. It was a brilliant show you put on out there losing your temper like that. Perfect example for Miss Alvinicia on how to behave.”

 “I dislike having my decisions questioned when it is something that is hardly any of their business. That agreement was strictly between us and Alvincia.”

 “Yes, except that now, in light of recent information, with that agreement we now appear no better than our wonderful enemies, giving gifts in exchange for services rendered through her abilities,” Sanders said with a sigh. He turned back to her. “And now I suppose you are filled with a lot of doubt in regards to us?”

 Lydia swallowed. She took a deep breath. “I-in all honesty, sirs, it’s not a new doubt.” She closed her eyes. “I-I have received nothing but bad remarks considering my agreement with you from all sides – Tsaul included.”

 Cassings raised his eyebrow. “And yet you signed the agreement?”

 She nodded. “It was my decision to make. Considering the circumstances at the time I felt that it was a sound one. Tsaul’s main concern was that he was still enraged by your recent demand to attempt to have me removed from him.”

 Cassings’s eyebrow raised. “And your argument to him?” he asked.

 She looked up at him and licked her dry lips. “When the pass fell and I was sitting there at school listening to everyone talking, I knew your demand was a possibility. I actually ran to Tsaul and begged for him to release the link. I knew you needed him. I agreed to go that day not because I did not want to be removed from Tsaul but because Tsaul did not want to be removed from me. I did not and cannot fault your words on that day. I have never felt deserving of Tsaul. A captain’s dragon? I first spoke to Tsaul when I was still in a wheelchair. He was the third dragon that I ever spoke with. I met him while skipping class one day to watch my friends on their dragons. A part of me still wonders if I would have ever talked with him had I known. The day he asked me to meld with him was so whirlwind and insane I have always questioned my decision.” She shook her head. “No. Tsaul may hold ill feelings about that day’s demands, but I do not. It still amazes me that you gave me a choice at all. It amazes me even now that you do not pull me off of Tsaul’s back.”

 Sanders smiled. “And were there any other concerns?”

 She swallowed. “That you would ask me to do something that I do not want to do.”

 Cassings nodded. “A very real concern, and your counterargument?”

 She nodded. “You’re my Generals. Whether I entered into an agreement then or waited until I graduated Battle School the result would be the same. The moment you hand me orders that’s the end of any choice that I have. If my concerns were that deep then why the hell was I joining in the first place? And maybe I could have become a fighter on my own, but with the way my life has always been if I’m offered the possibility of a more favorable solution I’ve always felt that I should grab it. Full medical accommodations or attempt to figure it out on my own? I’m sure I could have, but considering all the other difficulties I have faced since day one, I am glad that was one that I have never had to worry about.”

 “And have you regretted your decision even once?” Sanders asked.

 “No,” she answered almost immediately. “No. Even last year with Ayvra. Despite what my friends have thought I have never once blamed you for that. That was one tragic accident. We all nearly lost our lives on that one. Even now. I’m sure that you have a million and one far more important things to do, but instead you are here babysitting an eighteen year old with an attitude problem who isn’t even all that great of a fighter. Half the time I do not even know why you are still here. You could have left but instead you’re here protecting me. This doesn’t even technically fall under our agreement.”

 “Alvincia. Your self-deprecating attitude is beginning to grate,” Cassings snapped. “Your disparaging comments aside, though, it sounds like you gave the agreement all the due thought process needed. It amazes me to hear that you don’t even hold us accountable for last year’s nightmare because honestly I’m not sure that I do. You are our soldier and we take care of our own. We failed to do that. We came to you not out of typical orders but for a request that fell under a more personal agreement.

 “In my mind this falls under it, too. If we had not thrown you out there into Dragon Pass you would not have had those awful experiences and you would have continued to remain as just another Rider, but unfortunately your Meldling powers got advertised trying to save your own life. If we had not been so desperate no way in hell would I have ever sent you out there. Despite what those General may be trying to warp it into, we did not offer you our agreement to make you into a tool. We offered it because we felt you had potential, not only as a fighter but perhaps because your powers could be used or other things to make the lives of the rest of our troops better. We had no idea what your potential was. Until you I had never even heard of a Meldling.”

 Sanders nodded. “This is all new territory for us. That something like *this* has been going on without us knowing about it disgusts me to my core. When we dropped you off here we knew it was risky, but again it seems to we have underestimated the risk. I had assumed Meldlings would be held in high esteem. *Not* beaten. There is a difference in seeing potential and in seeing a tool.”

 Lydia nodded and stared back down at her plate.

 “There’s still something bothering you, though,” Cassings said after a while.

 She licked her lips. “If… if I wanted out of agreement?” she asked, staring up at them.

 Both of them stared across at her. Their expressions were hard but unreadable. Finally after several moments Sanders stirred and leaned forward to say something but Cassings reached out and caught his arm. Sanders blinked in surprise and turned to him.

 Without speaking, Cassings stood up and limped across the room. He opened up a trunk that Lydia started at the sight of what seemed to be a thousand official documents, folders, and letters. Cassings reached in after studying the pile for a moment and fingered through several of the folders. Finally he picked up one and reached into it. He pulled out an official looking document that Lydia recognized instantly.

 He limped back across to her and laid it in the middle of the table. “If you want out, Alvincia, then rip it up. We will finish off with this situation and you won’t hear from us any further until the day of your graduation.”

 Sanders sighed. “Derrick.”

 “It’s Alvincia’s decision,” he snapped, his voice hard and angry. “I, personally, do not appreciate being accused or place in the same class with the other assholes out there, and after the disastrous situation we placed her in last year she has more than earned her right to have a say in this.”

 Lydia looked down at the paper. Her mind instantly came alive. Thinking and rethinking through all the possibilities. Examining all the doors that it opened and closed.

 On the one hand she would be free of the obligation that she would be doing their bidding, but did that fully absolve it? Did this truly solve anything? Last year would not have happened, perhaps, but what about this year? *They* had not placed her in this situation. And what of future situations? Next year – she would be freed of any calls from them. And her senior year. But what about after graduation? No, return back to school. This agreement covered her medicines. Not just full accommodations with *travel* but… *money*. She swallowed hard as another realization came over her. Had she not been the daughter of Alvincia, but a regular simple girl how different would her life have been? The best medical and physicians. Now that she was eighteen she was that person. She could never hope to afford her medicines. Hadn’t she said as much to Landon not so long ago?

 And out of school? If they wanted her to do something she would *have* to do it. She was clearly on the world’s radar now. This situation wasn’t even caused by the generals but by their own superiors. They were here – oh!

 They were here offering her protection. Not only did this paper mean she would have to follow their orders, but through those orders it also obligated them. This was a personal agreement. They had just got done hinting as much. Cassings had said he felt responsible for last year. *Because of this paper*. Had he ordered her to do it callously through more mundane orders in the future then it was out of their hands. It was a soldier’s duty and part of that included inherent risks. This way, no matter what happened, if they called on her for her Meldling powers they were under obligation to protect her just as she was under obligation to perform the orders.

 She shook her head. “No.”

 “Think it through carefully, Alvincia,” Cassings ordered, his voice still hard. “This will be the last time you get this opportunity. I will not be questioned a second time.”

 She gathered herself and sat up straight, meeting his eyes. “No. My answer remains the same as the day I first signed it. Actually I have more reasons now to want to keep it. I have no money for my medicines and it offers me protection.”

 “Which brings us back to your depreciating comments towards yourself,” he growled. “Do you think for a second that we would waste our time with this sort of agreement on someone we did not view as possibly being worth the time? At the time we sent it out to you, you had only conquered the Death Dragon, and we saw your scores in Classes One through Four. We had reservations about sending it out at the time but decided we would see how far you would make it through Battle School.”

 Sanders chuckled. “No, Derrick. *You* had reservations. Elizabeth and I felt it more than worth the effort. General Bell has not forgotten the life debt she owes you for that day, Alvincia. As for me, I have always liked Alvincia’s attitude. Who gets in a pool with a lung condition to hold their breath for an absurd amount of time, coughs up blood, and *still* refuses to stop.”

 Cassings shrugged. “I’m harder to please, I suppose. The point being, since then every time we’ve had dealings with you, it’s been one moment of amazement after another. Melded with a psychotic dragon – you manage to somehow keep your sanity and keep it from slaughtering hundreds of troops. Now you are remelded with it all to protect some boy you hardly know. You are also now a Room Commander making top marks in classes that Adrian floundered in and I dropped out of. This after seeing your high school transcript which was woefully inferior.”

 She blinked. “Oh…but that’s because I’d never been to school before and my personal tutors hardly ever bothered. I mean… they didn’t even think I would make it to high school.” She winced. “Try learning basic multiplication tables in a class that they are teaching more advanced calculations.”

 Sanders burst out laughing. “Alvincia strikes again. Another random comment that throws me for a loop.”

 Cassings stood up and stared down at her. “Not a single class?”

 She shook her head. “No. That’s why I joined at all. I received my expiration date and I wanted to go somewhere to escape my parents and that depressing atmosphere. I wanted to go someplace to forget and to pretend to be normal for my last year. Before I took the Dragon Riding aptitude test I actually cheated during my tests. Heh. I dunno which was worse. Training for the physical or crash studying to pass the aptitude test.” She grinned. “I actually had permission to fall asleep in my classes during those days because of how bad my sleep and mornings were. You thought this morning was bad? That was nothing compared to how it used to be.”

 Cassings swallowed and knuckled his forehead. “I wish I could go back to that day with those committee assholes and rip into them even harder than what we did. Alvincia,” he reached down and picked the paper back up, “it only proves my point. You may never be front line material but you are more fighter than anyone I’ve ever met. You may hate your Meldling abilities right now, but in all honesty that is what has given you an opportunity you may never have received. The next time you doubt your decision to have signed this piece of paper let us know immediately and we will take a hard look at what we are doing wrong. I cannot promise you that we are never going to ask you to do things you would rather not, but for my part I do promise that I will never treat you the way those assholes out there are treating those children. You *can* trust us. Just as I feel that I can trust you even after learning that you, like that boy, can pull thoughts out of my mind and send us vicious nightmares.”

 Sanders sat forward laughing. “Careful, Derrick. It’s not like you to compliment someone this much in one night.”

 “I give praise where it’s due,” he snapped, glaring at his friend.

 Sanders chuckled. “If anything, I am almost glad that we have been forced to have to sit and ‘babysit and eighteen year old’ as she put it. It has given us a wonderful opportunity to get to know more about you, Alvincia,” he said turning to her. “Now, have you gotten that rotten General’s words out of your head?”

 She grinned. “I think. For the most part. I’m sorry that I doubted you sirs.” She slid down off of the stool. “Was there anything else we needed to discuss?” she asked.

 Sanders chuckled. “Eager to be out of our presence?”

 Cassings was turned around returning the paper back to its file. She looked back at Sanders and grinned. “I-it’s intimidating. Yes, sir,” she admitted.

 Sanders shrugged. “It’s Derrick’s fault. I keep telling him to lighten up.” Cassings glared across at him but said nothing. Sanders simply smiled. “Yes, Alvincia. You are dismissed.”

 Feeling a wave of relief, she grabbed her plate and cup and started heading out.

 “Alvincia?” Cassings called.

 She tensed and turned back around. “Y-yes sir?”

 “How’s the cooking coming?”

 She felt herself redden slightly and laughed. “W-well… the men keep laughing at me, but… they’re eating it, and I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

 He nodded. “I’m pleased that you did not shy away from it.”

 She shrugged. “I just want to be able to help pull my own weight, too. Besides, it’s fun learning new things, and trust me, there’s a *lot* of new things I have yet to experience.” She grinned wide. “I’ve not regretted a single day since I got up out of that stupid wheelchair.”

 Cassings stared across the room at her and gave her a rare wide smile. “Neither have I.”

 A jolt swept through her. She blinked and stared at him with wide eyes, before she allowed her eyes to fall down to his braced right leg.

 His smile softened. “You were leaving?”

 She stared back up at him and returned his wide smile. She nodded and turned around and walked out.

#

 “Don’t give me that attitude, Tsaul!” she snapped. “I want to hurry and get this done and see if I can practice some with that bow.”

 The dragon sighed. “We really need to have a more lengthy conversation about this.”

 “Fine, you talk while I work.”

 She reached down and unbuckled the saddle from him and set it to the side. She looked his back over carefully, looking for any signs of chipped or molding scales. She nodded in approval finding nothing. She crawled under him and looked good at his underside, too, and the backs of his legs.

 “You don’t see any other men doing this to their dragons,” Tsaul grumbled.

 “That’s between the Generals and their own men. Nor do I need to be *commanded* to give my dragon a bath.” She pulled out from under him and patted his back. “Ok. Lay down and I’ll start at your back.”

 The dragon obeyed, laying down. Lydia dumped a thick cloth into a bucket of soapy water and slapped it onto Tsaul’s scales and began washing.

 “Adrian only bathed me every couple of months,” he cried plaintively.

 “I don’t know why you are fussing. I’m the one doing all the work here!”

 “It’s degrading. Completely unnatural. I can go take a dive in the river over there. I’d be done in two seconds.”

 “It’s no good without soap. Now hold your neck still.”

 “I’m a great war dragon, I’ll have you know!”

 “So you love reminding me. Being that you *are* a great war dragon. Don’t you think you should look your best for whoever is looking?”

 “You treat me like a horse.”

 “No. Horses actually enjoy getting baths. And they are soft and cuddly. Just think, Tsaul. A stupid equine acts better than a mighty war dragon. Maybe I should go fetch you an apple to chew.”

 Tsaul sent her a list of very unpleasant nasty thoughts. She giggled but did not stop her attacks with the cloth on his back.

 *“This is truly entertaining,”* Ayvra spoke. Lydia looked up at the giant Crystal Dragon who was sitting not far away.

 “No lip from you or I’ll come over and do the same thing to you, too, Ayvra.”

 Tsaul growled at that. “Why don’t you bathe her, too! Since you’re so keen on having her as your second dragon and it’s very well and fitting you should treat her like that.”

 Lydia rolled her eyes.

 *“Oh, yes. Please. I would delight in my Rider bathing me. My Rider giving me that sort of attention. I have never experienced that.”*

Lydia winced and spun around gaping at the dragon. She groaned. “I-it would take me all day to do you!” she whined.

 *“Did you have any other pressing business?”*

 “Yes! I want to go practice archery.”

 *“A Rider’s duty comes first. Isn’t that what they say?”*

Tsaul chuckled. “That will teach you to want to bathe me.”

 She turned back to him and glared at him. “Shut up, Tsaul!”

 She sighed and got back to work. After she was done she whirled around on Ayvra and stared the dragon down. “Let me go get some more soapy water,” she growled.

 *“Oh! How delightful! This will be an amusing experience!”*

 She marched back towards the school, feeling hot and angry. As she stomped towards it, her eyes caught General Diederich’s. He gave her a large smile and attempted to wave her over.

 Like hell.

 She ignored him and walked into the school. Dennis and Kelly were playing marbles on the floor. As usual they all but ignored her. It hurt but it was better that way.

 She found the school’s store room, walked in and grabbed the soap flakes. She set the bucket down and poured in how much she debated she was going to need. She stood up and looked at the box. Actually… on second thought, maybe she should just take the whole box. Gods it was not going to be fun washing that dragon.

 She heard a floorboard creak behind her. Thinking it was Kelly or Dennis she started to turn around. She gasped as suddenly she was slammed from behind into the shelves. Her forehead knocked hard into the wood, instantly dazing her.

 Then a hand grabbed her hair and yanked back and something sharp was pressed into her back. “Just so you’re aware,” a thickly accented voice spoke in her hear. “I do not appreciate being ignored,” he growled. “When I summon you, you are expected to *come*.”

 She gasped in pain as the point of the blade sank slightly into her flesh. “Give me a reason,” she growled. “I swear I’ll call my Generals in here telling them you’re attacking me.”

 He laughed. “By then, you would be dead, child. Now – how about an answer.”

 “I’m not interested,” she snapped.

 “So, you really are that dumb and simply just bought into their lies,” he hissed.

 “No. You’re the dumb one thinking that I would buy into yours,” she growled.

 Tensing her body, she stepped back, cringing in pain as the blade bit even harder into her flesh, but she ignored it. She picked up her foot and slammed her foot back as hard as she could into the man’s foot.

 He gasped in pain and she whirled around instantly. He was still bent down low where he had been talking in her ear. Reaching quickly she brought up her fist and slammed it down hard into his face. It was not a seriously hard blow. She was not Hugh or Tanis. But she was also no weakling. If anything, her archery had given her muscles in her back shoulders and every single bit of that went into his punch.

 The man’s head jerked hard to side and knocked into the shelf. He collapsed dazed, his knife dropping to the floor. Nonchalantly, she reached down and picked the knife up along with her bucket and the box of soap flakes and stepped over him. She walked calmly out of the school and into the sunlight, the box of flakes pressed to her chest with the bucket dangling from her left arm. The knife dangled from her right.

 Wait for it, she told herself.

 Two seconds later she heard hard footfalls from inside, then General Diederich’s shout. “You goddamn bitch!” he shouted.

 She whirled around, taking him in quickly. He was leaned up heavily against the left side of the doorframe, obviously having trouble holding himself up. Blood was pouring down the right side of his face from where his head had slammed into the shelf. She raised the knife and sent it flying.

 The General gasped and jerked back as the knife point buried itself into the wood barely a paper’s width from where his face had been. He gaped at it for a moment before his eyes flicked back to her.

 “That’s your goddamn answer,” she said low but clearly, “just in case I did not make it clear enough before.”

 She spun around and marched towards her camp. Cassings jumped out of his seat as she tried to walk past. “You’re bleeding,” he gasped, catching her head in his hands. He lifted her bangs and looked at the gash. “That’s going to need stitches,” he muttered.

 She swallowed hard. “S-so’s the one in my back,” she muttered.

 Sanders jumped up out of his seat at that. “He stabbed you?”

 She shook her head. “A little. I did the worse damage. I had to step back into the blade to slam my foot down on his.”

 Cassings turned her around and she felt him move the cloth of her uniform. “There’s blood but I can’t see anything. Come on. Tent,” he ordered.

 She blinked. “I can get one of the other men to do it.”

 Cassings nodded. “Yes, but I also want to know exactly what happened. Come on.”

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 Lydia sat red faced in the stool with only a sheet held up in front of her as the medic worked on her back. Cassings sat there, glaring at her. She already finished her tiny story in full. Not like there was much to tell.

 She sighed. She really wished he wouldn’t stare at her like he wanted to kill her himself. “Did I do something wrong?” she asked finally.

 He blinked. “No. Why?”

 “Because you’re acting like you’re mad at me.”

 “I *am* mad, Alvincia, but it’s not with you.”

 She hissed in pain at the bite of the needle again. She swallowed and sat back up straight again. She looked around trying to see what the guy was doing. “Turn back around, please,” the man ordered her softly.

 She sighed and sat forward again. She reached up and touched at the threads on her head and winced in pain. She immediately dropped her hand again.

 “Now,” the man said, “you’re going to have to be careful with these ones in your back. We don’t want you going and ripping them on us.”

 She blinked and turned to look up at him. “They can rip?” she asked.

 He smiled. “Yes. They can. So nothing arduous.”

 “Oh.” She sat forward again. Then she turned back around. “I can still shoot, can’t I?”

 “Alvincia,” Cassings growled a warning in front of her.

 The man chuckled. “You should be able to, but just be careful. If it feels like a lot of pulling at the sight, you might want to avoid it.”

 She bit her lip. “Do I have to have these then? I mean… do I really need stitches?” She flinched at the bite of the needle again.

 The man grinned. “You wouldn’t be getting them if you did not need them.”

 She sighed. “I swear if I can’t shoot I’ll slit that bastard’s throat in the middle of the night. At least I have a good excuse not to bathe Ayvra.”

 Cassings’s eyebrow raised. “Bathe her?”

 She sighed. “I bathed Tsaul and Ayvra decided that she wanted me to bathe her, too. She had that ‘do not refuse or you’ll regret it look’ so I just decided to give in. That’s what I went in for. Soap flakes. Gods, it was going to take me all day to do her.”

 Cassings chuckled. “I’m trying to imagine you bathing Tsaul. He was never too fond of the practice and Adrian had a tendency to let the chore lapse. There were a few times that Will and I attacked Tsaul for him.”

 She wrinkled her nose. “That’s kinda gross. A pity for Tsaul. I happen to love bathing him. A bit of a hold over, I guess, from taking care of my own pony when I was little.”

 “Alright, Alvincia,” the man behind her announced. “All done.”

 She nodded and stood up. She turned around from the men’s view and let the sheet drop. She reached back and got her sleeves up her arms and finally zipped herself back up. She reached down and picked the sheet up, folding it carefully.

 She turned to Cassings and then looked over at his bow in the corner. She turned back to him, catching him rolling his eyes. “Go get them,” he said finally. “A bet’s a bet.”

 Grinning widely she rushed over and picked the items up. She laid the bow out on the floor, carefully unwrapping it.

 “Give it a test while we are in here and make sure it’s not going to pull on those stitches,” he ordered.

 Obediently she took her stance and pulled at the string to full draw. A grin spread across her face. “I’m not feeling anything,” she announced.

 “If I catch that you lied to me and you pulled your stitches you won’t touch my bow ever again,” he said coldly.

 “Fair enough,” she answered evenly. She smirked and looked across at him as she eased her grip on the string. “I don’t suppose I could just sorta… *accidentally* shoot at Diederich. Not to kill him or anything, but, you know… just a fright.”

 He smirked. “As tempting as that sounds, let’s avoid that. I think he got the message with the knife you threw at him. His *own* knife besides. Besides, I want to avoid pissing him off too much. I don’t like the idea of him having attacked you inside the school. When we were *right there* outside. From now on, Alvincia, do me the favor and let us know immediately through a group link if he attacks you again. Even then I still think it’s too dangerous. Alvincia, do what you can to avoid being separated from us. I hope this was just an isolated incident, but I don’t like the idea of this guy working up his courage to actually attack you. We’re almost through this. Let’s not have any more major incidents.”

 Lydia nodded in agreement.

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 She removed the glove again and glared at her fingers. Even with extra layers of tape she had put on, it was still extraordinarily painful. It felt like the string was cutting into her again. She rotated her arm. The dull ache in her shoulder was also starting to turn into raging pain.

 She stared off at the targets with longing and shook her head. “I might not be able to do one more round,” she muttered. She could push herself but after the extreme abuse she had put her body through only two days ago she wasn’t sure that was a great idea. No. Not with the pain in her arm being what it was.

 She sighed and walked out across the field to gather up the arrows. Her arm screamed in protest as she dragged the arrows out of the targets. Yeah, it really was time to call it quits she decided. It was going to be a rough night for her when the pain settled in.

 Finally done, she carried the arrows back to the quiver and picked up the bow. She walked up to the General’s table and bowed to Cassings who noticed her almost immediately. He smirked. “How many rounds did you get in today?”

 She sighed. “Only eight.”

 He titled his head. “That’s still a decent number,” he said, considering it. “Two hundred arrows on the mark.”

 “I was hoping for ten rounds, though.” She reached up and rubbed her arm, “But I know when it’s starting to get a little too dangerous, so I’ll deal with it.”

 He smiled. “Just hand the bow and arrows off to one of the soldiers outside the tent. Maybe go get you some ice from down by the river where your medicine is being kept.”

 She bowed. “Thank you again, sir.”

 “Still wanting your own?” he asked as she turned to leave.

 “In the worst way,” she admitted with a laugh as she walked off.

 She took the bow and arrows and gave them to the soldier as Cassings had requested and walked down to the river side. Her medicine vials were being kept chilled within a bag of ice that was then suspended within the water. For extra security one of the soldiers was kept by it at all times to ensure no one tampered with it. She nodded to the man and explained her desire for some of the ice in the bag.

 He stood up and reached in for the bag. “Might not be much left. With this heat, it goes pretty quick and the river isn’t the most chilled.”

 He was right. It was barely ice shavings. Still it would be something. She gave him the cloth she had brought over and had him dip it in the chilled slush and then she tied that around her arm, waving to him as she left.

 As she started back across she stopped. Her head whipped around to the side of the school building. Tears immediately rose to her eyes as she took in the person leaning against the side. “Eldrich!” she shouted.

 Eldrich, who had been leaned up against the building on his arm, watching her, stood up straight grinning. She rushed over to him and took him in her arms, hugging him tightly.

 “L-L-Lydia!” he gasped in embarrassment.

 “I know! No touching! But I can’t help it! Oh gods, how are you? Are you alright? I’ve been so worried about you. It’s so great to see you, Eldrich. Have they been treating you alright?”

 He struggled free of her arms, pushing her away and laughing. “I’m fine. I’m alright. It’s great to see you, too. And, yes, they’ve been treating me well enough. Be careful with my back, though, it’s still pretty tender. You pressing on it isn’t helping.”

 She winced. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

 He shook his head, grinning wide. “It’s alright. Umm, Lydia, how about you? How have you been?”

 She clicked her tongue. “Well enough for the most part. Had an incident with my medicine going bad and got stuck in the hospital again.”

 He swallowed and looked down at the ground. “I heard. Heard about Darian, too. I’m glad that he didn’t hurt you. Guess we’ll never have to fear him again, huh?”

 She winced and looked down at the ground silently. “Are you sad about him getting killed?”

 “Honestly, no, but… he was still one of us. But, he had no right to try to help kidnap you like that. Besides, I saw it in your mind. Your General warned him.”

 She sighed. “So, you have been poking around.”

 He nodded. “Sorry,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

 She shook her head. “Not your fault,” she growled.

 He looked up and grinned. “Saw what you did to him today. He was livid as he was getting cleaned up. Gods you’re amazing, Lydia.”

 She felt herself redden. “I-I dunno about amazing but I don’t appreciate getting a knife shoved into my back.”

 She grabbed his hand. “Come on. Let’s go over and talk. Can you?”

 He nodded. “I’ve got to talk with the Southerners later, but I’m a little bit free right now.” He licked his lips and reached up scratching his head. “W-was actually hoping for a little bit of weapons training,” he confessed. “I’m so pissed. I was really hoping to get a lot more training in with you.”

 She grinned. “If you go get your spears and knives I’ll be more than happy to help.”

 His grin increased, taking over his entire face. “Be right back!” he shouted, taking off at a dead run towards his cave.

 Barely five minutes had passed when he came running back, two spears in his hands. His eyes were almost glowing with anticipation. “Come on. We can go practice behind my camp,” she said.

 He nodded following after her. He paused only for a moment to bow to her Generals as he walked past. Sanders grinned at him while Cassings gave her a hard look. She pursed her lips and nodded to him, knowing exactly what was going through his mind. Be careful. Things could go badly again for the boy. She could almost see him wanting to tell her this was a bad idea. To maintain her distance from him, but… no, this might be the last time this boy had any sort of a friend.

 Back behind the camp Lydia chose a spot and walked across to it, expecting Eldrich to follow. She looked back at him, however, and found that he was not there. She blinked and looked back up. He was not looking at her but was instead looking over towards the other side of the field.

 Looking at Ayvra.

 His eyes were round in amazement. “I-is that…” he gasped.

 “Ayvra,” she answered. “My psychotic Meldling dragon.”

 He swallowed and stared across at her. “Y-you remelded with her?” he asked, stunned. “I thought you hated her?”

 “I do. You’ve no idea what it’s like being connected with her. There are times that if I don’t keep my mind busy I feel like she’s pushing my mind towards insanity. Stay away from her, Eldrich.”

 He swallowed and nodded. He pulled his eyes away and went across to take his stance.

 “How is Sean doing?” she asked as lowered down into her own stance.

 “Absolutely hates your guts,” he said with a laugh.

 “Not that I can blame him,” she said sadly. “I took away his choice.

 Eldrich shrugged. “I just dunno why he’s blaming you personally. You had little to do with it.” He licked his lips. “Are we going to stand here and talk or we doing to do this?”

 She grinned wide. “Let’s see if you remember what I taught you.”

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 Eldrich’s grin was wide as he stepped around the tents. “You waited.”

 She pulled her mask off and grinned at him. “I told you that I would.”

 “Sorry that took so long. Gods, I couldn’t get the stupid Southerner to shut up. How you feeling?”

 “My lungs are holding up. That break should have be more than enough.”

 Eldrich grinned wide. “Wanna do knives now?”

 “It’s your choice,” she said with a laugh.

 “Just watch those stitches!” one of the men gathered nearby called out with a laugh.

            She rolled her eyes. “Mother hens,” she shouted at them with a smile.

            “If she gets too tired, we’ll take over again,” another shouted.

            Eldrich flinched. “Not sure I want that. I’m still smarting from the blow one of you gave me to my skull. Lydia’s good but she is still rookie enough to not get too violent.”

            The men burst out laughing. “Lydia, rookie? Thrash him for that comment, Lydia! She’s hardly rookie. Not quite at our level but definitely not a newbie.”

            Lydia grinned as she got down into her stance after pulling out her knives. Eldrich did the same. He then grinned. “Oh and try that trick with the pain thing – I wanna see if I figured out a way to block it.”

            She grinned. “Good then I can figure out a way so you *don’t* block it.”

            Smirking, Eldrich rushed her. She danced backwards quickly before catching on of his blades with her left one. She gave it a hard twist but swore when Eldrich managed to keep it in his grip. He lashed out with his other blade and she backed away quickly, spinning around his side and unlocking her blade from his. This got her behind him. She pivoted quickly on her feet and lashed out at his back. He spun around and danced back before the blade connected.

            “Going for my back!” he snapped. “Gods, you’re cruel.”

            She blinked. “Ah! I’m sorry, “ she gasped as realization dawned on her. Guilt ate into her and pierced her heart.

            He turned around and gave her a wide grin. “Lydia, I was joking – sorta. I’m not really that mad. Still… how about we avoid each other’s backs.”

            “Agreed.”

            “Why am I not surprised?” a voice shouted, cutting into their conversation.

            Both of them turned to the voice. Sean broke out through the tents and stepped past the men and into the field. His eyes were filled with hot rage and his mouth was twisted into a sneer. “The moment you are released,” he growled at Eldrich, “you come running back to her. Was what they done to you not enough?”

            Eldrich sighed and turned to him. “Sean. They do not control me. I really don’t give a damn. Whether they beat me today for talking with Lydia or they beat me tomorrow for some other random thing, it’s not changing my fate. I refuse to allow them to control me like that.”

            “And if they take away your choice or kill you?”

            He shrugged. “One country is as bad as the other. It’s hardly a choice. If they kill me that’s their decision. They can choose to do that at any time. My decisions are hardly a factor in it. Either I’m valuable to them or not.”

            Sean swallowed. “And if you make it worse for the rest of us?”

            “Then start learning how to fight back!” he shouted. “Look around you, Sean! We have a week left with these people. They are here willing to teach. I’m going to soak up all the information that I can right now. Maybe there might even be something Lydia’s generals can do for us –“

            “So you would defect to these asshole?!” Sean shouted incredulously.

            “And why not?” Eldrich demanded, anger starting to rise into his voice. He stomped across the field towards Sean. “Look at Lydia, Sean. Look at the way her people treat her. They don’t beat her, they encourage her, they teach her. I’ve even talked with her Generals. Have you? They don’t know if they can help but they said they would try and they just might.”

            “And then what? You truly think that they won’t just use as tools the way the rest of the world does. You’re delusional. We won’t even fall under the normal laws then. You aren’t going to have any protection.”

            “Like we have a whole lot of protection right now. You could be right, Sean. Maybe this is a ridiculous nonsense daydream. They might not even be able to do anything for me, but it’s not going to stop me from trying to improve my life when I can.”

            “You should be focusing on the other countries right now. Not playing *knives*.” Sean reached down and snatched one of the knives out of Eldrich’s hands. “Ever since she came *nothing* has gone right. Do you even realize that it was her and her Generals that killed Darian?”

            “Good riddance,” Eldrich replied coldly.

            “He was one of us!” Sean screamed.

            “He was an abusive terror! I don’t miss him.”

            Lydia gasped as she watched Sean raise his left hand and punched Eldrich across the face. She rushed over to them to stop Eldrich from taking his own blow, throwing herself in between them. She grabbed Eldrich’s fist, and grappled with him for a moment. “Knock it off!” she shouted. “Stop this,” she ordered. “Eldrich. Calm yourself.”

            “It would be better if you were dead, Lydia,” she heard Sean growl behind her.

            She watched as Eldrich’s eyes widened in terror. At the same time several men shouted curses and jumped up off the ground. And then she felt pain. A hot intense searing pain that erupted through her right side and ripped through her body. She stood in shock facing Eldrich for a moment before she looked down at her ride side. Eldrich’s knife was stuck inside her, almost up to full hilt. Sean growled and wrenched it violently out of her side.

            It was like he cut her strings holding her up. She collapsed to her knees, grabbing at the wound. Her blood was pouring out through her fingers. How strange. She couldn’t feel anything. There was… nothing. Not even noise. She watched as one of the men shoved Eldrich out of the way hard. Watched as he fell back to the ground. There were tears in his eyes. She turned around and watched as one of the men had wrenched Sean to the ground and were pummeling him. And then she as in someone’s arms being lifted up. She felt hands at the wound over hers. Thought she heard people calling her name.

            Heh. This was almost kind of… ironic. She had spent her entire life in fear of dying from suffocation. No, instead, she was actually going to die from a knife wound? Damn. She hadn’t even defended herself. It was a total sneak attack. Not even the honor of being in the skies in a dragon fight.

            General Cassings was going to be pissed with her.

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            Pain. Searing pain in her side. She groaned and tried to turn over.

            “Don’t move,” a familiar voice ordered gently.

            She swallowed and opened her eyes. “M-my side hurts,” she mumbled.

            “It has been a while since we’ve given her some pain meds, sir.”

            “I tend to be a little overcareful with those. If you think it’s been too long, please give her some.”

            Lydia felt someone pick her arm up a moment later and felt a small needle prick into her skin. She groaned but minutes later the pain lessened considerably. She opened her eyes and looked around, feeling a familiar swaying and realizing she was in a carriage. She looked over and found Jacobson and Cassings sitting across from the bed-seat that she was laying on. She swallowed her mouth feeling dry.

            “W-water?” she asked softly.

            Cassings, who had been staring out the window turned to her. “I figured you would be back out of it again as soon as he gave you those meds. How you feeling, Alvincia?”

            “T-thirsty, sir,” she rasped.

            Jacobson was already working on it, though. He had already uncapped a waterskin and was leaning over towards her mouth. He poured a gentle trickle in. The chill of the water hit her mouth hard surprising her – and naturally setting off a chain reaction of coughing.

            “Damn that cough of hers,” Jacobson growled. “Go easy, Lydia. You don’t want to rip those stitches in your side.”

            “Is she even able to control the coughing?”

            “Not a bloody clue,” Jacobson answered.

            It was hopeless. She needed to turn over or sit up to spit up what was trapped in her lungs. She tried to sift over but there were two shouts of alarm.

            *“Spit up! I need to spit up!”* she reached out desperately. Tears were starting to stream down her eyes.

            “Ok,” Cassings spoke softly. “We’ll get you turned over. Let us do it. Jacobson, you have a cloth or anything for her?”

            “I got a small cloth here for cleaning the needle.”

            “It will have to do. Alright. Grab her legs. Lift gently.”

            Lydia felt herself lifted up in two powerful sets of arms and slowly felt herself tilted over. She was no sooner turned over that she coughed up, unable to hold it back any longer.

            Cassings sighed. “So much for that. We’ll get it cleared up, don’t worry about it Alvincia.”

            She was too busy still lost in coughing to really care. She coughed up several more times, though this time they had the cloth ready for her. It was several minutes before she managed to regain control. She groaned feeling ridiculously dizzy.

            “Ok. I don’t want to keep her on her stomach like this. Not with the wound being where it is. We’re going to turn you back over, Alvincia.”

            She swallowed. “Y-yessir,” she mumbled. Again she was lifted and rotated back over gently. She groaned in pain, a few tears slipping down her cheeks. She swallowed and pulled them back, gritting her teeth and dealing with it. She wasn’t sure what hurt worse. Her lungs or the pain in her side.

            “D-day?” she gasped.

            “You only lost two weeks, Alvincia,” Cassings said gently.

            “Oh… oh, I didn’t get to say goodbye to Eldrich or the men,” she mumbled sadly.

            “He was glad to hear that we were getting you out of there. He did a trade. Himself to the Southerners and Sean to the Westerners. In exchange he gave up his Battle Dragon and took up a Peace Dragon. I think there were a few more conditions added in there, but he did not discuss those.” Cassings smirked. “Of course, that Peace Dragon was in addition to another dragon that he acquired. You remember that Will Dragon Ayvra brought for you?”

 She blinked. “Oh, yeah. What about it?”

 “It chose him. His Will is Tenacity, along with Defiance, and Passion. The dragon seemed to approve.”

 Lydia swallowed and looked up at the ceiling of the carriage. The pain in her side was nothing compared to the one in her heart. “I… I should have traded myself for him. I could have done that.”

 “And how do you think that would have made him feel?” Cassings snapped. “You think that would have made him feel good about getting out of there?”

 “Why… why couldn’t we have brought him with us?” she asked, a sob breaking through her chest.”

 Cassings eyebrow raised. “Aside from that being extremely illegal? How do you think that would have saved his situation? It would have made it worse. We wouldn’t have a single bit of ground to stand on. Use your head, Alvincia.”

 She swallowed. “I can’t. My heart hurts too much.”

 He sighed. “As bad as Adrian.”

 She gasped. “Tsaul!”

 “Just fine and flying several feet above us right now. Everything’s fine now, Alvincia. We are currently transporting you back towards a hospital near the Battle School. You’re going to do some more healing there and then you’ll be able to start your classes again once you’ve been cleared.”

 She sighed. “Well, at least it’s all over.”

 “Indeed. Now, lay back and get you some sleep. I have no idea how you’re awake as it is.”

 She nodded. “Yes sir,” she answered. She closed her eyes and fell almost immediately back into blissful darkness.

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 “What the heck are you doing?” a shout rang out.

 Lydia jolted awake. She blinked staring up now at a white ceiling.

 “Oh crap!” an all-too-familiar voice rang out into the room.

 “Oh damn. Oh, gods, Hugh… what have you done?”

 “W-wait! What did *I* do? You’re part of this, too, Erica.”

 “The group of you stay there,” Cassings’s voice growled. “You boy. Come with me.”

 She reached up and knuckled her eyes. “Hugh?” she asked. She sat up in bed, looking around and blinked in confusion. Hugh was standing tall and stiff at attention, the blood drained from his face. Behind him was an open window and in front of him stood General Cassings.

 “H-hey, babe,” Hugh said with a smirk, giving her a quick look. He swallowed, staring at Cassings with horror-filled eyes. “S-seems I messed up big this time.”

 “Lydia!” there was a chorus of shouts outside from the window.

 She groaned. “You tried breaking into my room, again, didn’t you?”

 “W-well… um… the receptionist said no visitors.”

 “Because she isn’t accepting visitors,” Cassings growled. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in right now, boy?”

 Hugh swallowed. “A-a lot, sir?”

 “You’ve no idea,” Cassings growled. “Out. All of you stay there!” he shouted out the window.

 Lydia struggled into a sitting position.

 “Alvincia!” Cassings shouted. “Don’t move,” he barked.

 She licked her lips and swallowed. “Y-yes sir, but… they’re my friends. They were just excited to see me.”

 He turned and glared at her. “After what we just went through, he’s lucky I didn’t attack him the moment that he came through the window.” He turned back to Hugh. “Now. I said *out*,” he growled, his voice dangerously low.

 Ducking his head low, Hugh slowly marched out of the room. Before he left he turned and grinned wide at her – his smile amazingly large and his eyes twinkling. Her breath caught in her throat. “It’s great to see you, Lyz. You’ve no idea how worried I was – we *all* were.”

 She choked. “G-General Cassings,” she cried, her voice thick with emotion.

 He glared across at her. “What Alvincia?” he snapped, his voice still filled with anger.

 “C-can he please hug me before he leaves? Just one?”

 Cassings glared across at her, his eyes hard with anger. But he turned finally and sighed. “Make it quick, boy,” he snapped.

 Hugh cleared the distance in two steps. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, burying his face in her neck and hair. She reached up and pulled him even tighter to her. Tears slipped out of her eyes at the familiar feel and smell of him. Somehow being in Hugh’s arms, the world seemed bright again. She felt filled with life. Her heart grew three sizes larger. It wasn’t fair that he could do this to her.

 He pulled away and grinned. He reached up with his hands and wiped her tears away with this thumbs. “No tears, Lyz. I don’t think Commanders are supposed to cry after returning back from a mission.”

 She swallowed hard. “T-then it’s a good thing I’m not a Commander, yet. Oh gods, Hugh, I missed you so much.”

 He reached down and kissed her forehead. “You lay here and get well. We’ll talk later. Now… I guess I better go and get my ass chewed out.”

 She swallowed. “You deserve it. You’ve got a nasty habit of breaking into things. John hasn’t broken you out of doing that, yet? He’s not a very good partner for you, is he?”

 Hugh winced. “W-well… we’re working on some things. Take care, babe.”

 He grabbed her hand and walked backwards slowly, holding onto it until the last possible second before his fingers finally slipped free. He turned and ducked out the door, avoiding eye contact with Cassings. The General rolled his eyes before closing the door, leaving her absolutely alone.

#

 It was another week and a half before she was finally discharged. She walked out into the sunlight drawing in a deep breath of fresh air.

 She gasped at the sight of Tsaul standing outside waiting for her. With a shout of delight, she crossed the yard and ran up to him, hugging her dragon around the neck.

 “How about you go easy with that side of yours still,” Cassings said, coming around Arkrithian. “You still have a lot of healing to do.”

 She grinned at him. “Yes, sir.”

 Jacobson smirked. “If nothing else can be said for her, she heals quick.”

 “Don’t encourage her. Well, Alvincia. You ready to get back to Battle School.”

 She drew in a deep breath. “In the worst way,” she answered. “Back to where things make sense and I can go back to training properly.” She lifted her leg up into the stirrup and stepped up. She swung her leg out over Tsaul’s back and hissed in pain at the familiar action.

 Cassings’s head snapped around. “Dammit, Alvincia,” he growled. “I said take it easy.”

 “Sorry, sir,” she said, swallowing and forcing the pain back. “Ok, Tsaul. How about a nice easy take off.”

 The dragon snorted. “As if I would try anything harsh with you right now. You have no idea how frightening that was for me, I’ll have you know. Gods I felt like it was Adrian all over again. That boy had better be glad I wasn’t there. I’d have ripped him to shreds.”

 “Tsaul. There’s only one place I want to think about right now. And it’s not that place.”

 Tsaul chuckled. “Not the right boy, either.”

 She felt herself go bright red. “Tsaul!” she shouted at him. “You have two seconds to shut up and get in the sky *now*, you stupid dragon!”

 Across from her Jacobson chuckled. Both her and Cassings turned and glared at him. He flinched and stared up into the sky, swallowing back his laugh.

 She stared across at Cassings who looked back at her and nodded. He leaned forward touching Arkrithian’s neck. The dragon reared back on his hind legs and leaped up into the air, following by Jacobson. Tsaul, however, jumped lightly, opening his wings and flapping frantically. It was a shaky take off – but it was definitely easier on her body. Once up in the air, Tsaul did not have any problems catching up.

 Lydia could not help herself. Up in the sky she felt so *different*. The wind rushed by her at an incredible rate. She felt excitement flood through her. More than anything else in the world she wanted to let Tsaul have free reign and push him to his maximum speed. She had hardly realized until then how little she had flown him recently.

 She reached out into the back of her mind and did something else that she had been wanting to do desperately for a while. Licking her lips and bracing herself, she severed her link with Ayvra. Pain ripped through her body instantly, but just as soon as it started, it was gone. Relief flooded through her mind. She had no realized how much stress Ayvra’s link really had been placing on her mind.

 *“Good riddance,”* Tsaul growled.

 She grinned, *“Just me and you again, Tsaul. Sorry, buddy, for forcing you to have to endure that so much recently.”*

 Tsual sighed. “*I knew when I took you as my Rider that it was a risk. That is why I tried so hard to hide it. I’m just going to have to learn to deal with it. If it’s one more thing you can do to keep yourself alive I would rather that you use it.”*

 The ride to Battle School was both too long and too short all at the same time. The three of them landed softly on the ground. Lydia choked at the sight that awaited her as she landed.

 Hugh was there. And so was Tanis. Landon and Felix. And Erica, the twins, and Tanya. And behind Tanis, Constance, John, and Ori.

 Her eyes fell on Tanis and she winced. Oh Gods… Tanis… and Hugh…

 She suddenly felt like she had replaced one set of complications with another. She slid off of Tsaul and stepped towards her group of friends. Tanis was the first to grab her in his arms, giving her a warm hug. “Oh gods, Lydie,” he breathed in her ear.

 She felt hollow inside. She tried desperately to focus. She loved Tanis. She did. … Didn’t she? Hadn’t this been enough two months ago? So why, with her in Tanis’s arms, could she not stop starting at Hugh? Worse, Hugh met her eyes every second of her hug with Tanis.

 Did he sense her feelings?

 Hugh, I’m *Tanis*’s girlfriend.

 But his eyes answered back knowingly. *No. No you’re not.*

 Tanis pulled away from her and thankfully it was Erica and the twins who came next, wrapping their arms around her tightly. And then Tanya, Constance, and Ori.

 John came up and grabbed her hand and put a single arm around her shoulder. Landon stood back and gave her his warmest smile and nod and Felix came forward with his clouded eyes and gave her a ridiculous mock-bow, grinning the entire time.

 All of them were talking a slew of words, desperate for information and catching up with her and asking how she was feeling. All of the words and actions were dizzying, but so *so* enjoyable.

 She looked back over her shoulder after a minute and remember Cassings and Jacobson. She turned back to her friends and told them to give her a moment. She spun around and walked up to Cassings bowing deeply.

 “Sir, thank you so much for everything, this past month.”

 Cassings shook his head. “No, Alvincia. I apologize that you had to be thrown into that. I am glad that we finally managed to return you back safe and sound. There were too many close calls for my taste. Hopefully in the future we will not be sending you into so nearly as dire a situation again.”

 She smiled at him. “I’m not holding out much hope for that. My luck isn’t the most favorable.” She swallowed and looked downwards. “Y-you… you won’t just forget about Eldrich will you?” she asked softly. “Or any of those other Meldlings?”

 “Alvincia, I can promise little, but I can promise that they are not forgotten. I will not just sit by and know that there are people being treated in that way without raising a voice up against it. I don’t care what has to be done, but I’m going to show that asshole Diederich that that book no longer applies to us. We are above him and we will never treat people like that any longer.”

 He turned back towards Arkrithian and jumped up onto the dragon, wincing in pain as he threw his braced leg over the side of the dragon. “Take care of yourself, Alvincia. We will be in touch. In the meantime, if you ever have any concerns remember you *can* ask them and we will attempt to address them.”

 She swallowed hard and bowed deeply as the General took off into the air on the back of his dragon. She turned to Jacobson who grinned and bowed to her. “Take care of yourself, Death Slayer,” he shouted out, before he too turned and climbed up onto his dragon. “It was a pleasure and I hope that one day I can look forward to fighting by your side. Oh and… hope you enjoy the present that we prepared for you on your bunk. All of us, even Generals Cassings and Sanders, assisted with it.”

 She grinned and bowed. “I’m sure I’ll love it. Whatever it is. I promise I will treasure it.”

 “Of that I have no doubt. Farewell, Alvincia!”

 And he too leaped up into the air on the back of his dragon, taking off after General Cassings.

 She turned around and walked back towards her friends. Landon was the first to shake his head. “Gods, that was nerve-wracking. That guy scares the hell out of me. I almost died of fright the day that he caught us trying to break in.”

 She grinned. “What did he do to you?”

 Erica sighed. “He reported the whole lot of us to the school. Ten… *ten* demerits and a seventy five point reduction.”

 Tanya shook her head. “I told you all that it was a bad idea. Tanis and I were the only ones *not* there.”

 Tanis smirked back at Hugh. “You got everything that you deserved.”

 So… all of her friends had tried to break in to see her but Tanis had refrained. Yeah. Following rules was always the most important to Tanis. Had it been her with the whole group to see anyone of them she would have happily gotten in trouble right along with the rest of them.

 She pushed her feelings aside and refocused on them. She forced a grin to her face. “Well… what you guys did was very stupid, but after everything that I’ve been through you really *are* lucky that Cassings didn’t just outright attack you when you broke in.” She swallowed and knuckled her forehead. “The other man that was with him… he almost lost his life the last time I was in a hospital. Say what you want about Cassings but he saved my life that night.”

 The whole group froze. Hugh was the first one to step forward after a moment. He reached out to her and grabbed her hand. “Sounds like you have a story to tell us. Lydia… you weren’t just in the hospital for your breathing condition, were you?”

 Her eyes rose and it was her turn to be shocked. “Oh…” She looked around at all of them. “Y-you don’t even know what I was in the hospital for?”

 “No one’s told us a damn thing,” Landon answered.

 She reached down to her still-wounded side. “I… I got stabbed. I still have stitches but it’s healing well enough. I’m still going to have to be careful for a while.”

 Erica swallowed hard. Anger rose into her eyes. “Y-you were stabbed? Lydia, who the *hell* stabbed you?” she gasped. “I thought you were going there as a Meldling so the other countries could try to convince you to come over to their sides. What the hell were you doing *in danger*?”

 “Those asshole Generals,” Hugh growled. “I knew it was too good to be true. I *begged* you not to go. Them and their damn agreement.”

 Lydia closed her eyes. “No, Hugh. This was not their fault this time. They did not have to but they stayed and protected me. After everything that I just went through I will *never* speak out against them ever again. That *‘damn agreement’* was the only thing protecting me.” She reached up to her forehead again. “Believe me,” she breathed. “There are worse fates. I met the Generals of both the Western and the Southern countries. No. There are definitely far worse fates for me.” She choked. Tears were welling up in her eyes, though she fought them. She reached up and attempted to brush them out of her eyes desperately. “L-look,” she gasped. “I-I know you guys want the story in full but… more than anything I really want to *not* focus on it for a while.”

 Hugh placed a hand on her head and brushed it through her hair. “Alright, Lyz. You don’t have to tell us anything until you are good and ready to. Come on. We’ll help you with your bags and unpacking.”

 She grinned as Hugh left her and went up to Tsaul and began untying her bags and items from off the dragon. She started at the feel of arms wrapping around her from behind. “Are you alright, Lydie?” Tanis’s voice asked softly in her ear.

 “I will be, Tanis,” she said gently, reaching up to touch his arms.

 “Of course she will be!” Tanya squeaked. “She just needs a dose of –“

 “Spirit Power!” the twins scream in unison with Tanya, drowning out her voice.

 Lydia turned to them and grinned wide. “That sounds *exactly* like the thing that I need. Oh gods, you have no idea how much I’ve missed all of you!”

 The guys gathered together and pulled her bags off of Tsaul while her and the other girls lost themselves in conversation. They followed them as they headed towards the school and Lydia followed happily, the girls forming a line behind the twins who started singing a loud and catchy song of battle triumph as they marched along. It hardly touched her aching heart, but it was still something.

 She entered the room and looked around. It was midday so no one else was in there – they would be out on the fields right now. Where her friends were supposed to be. She gasped as Hugh sat down her bag of clothes and opened it to start filling her drawers. “Hugh!” she shouted at him, rushing over to close it quickly.

 He blinked and looked up confused. “What’s wrong?”

 “Don’t just go through my clothes!” she shouted at him angrily. “I have personals in there.”

 Hugh sighed. “Lyz, I’ve seen your undergarments on multiple occasions.”

 She felt herself go red as Erica and the twins giggled while the boys rolled their eyes or, in Tanis’s case, went bright red with fury.

 Hugh blinked and went red himself. “N-not while you were wearing them, of course. I mean – I’ve been through your drawers before.” He gave her an evil grin. “It would be nice to see them while you’re still wearing them.”

 Tanis shouted a string of curses and swear words and other things besides. Hugh turned to him and gave him a wide grin. “Like you wouldn’t want to see Lyz in her undergarments.”

 “I’m going to kill you in two seconds, Hugh, if you don’t shut up!” she screamed at him. She stared across at Tanis who had went completely silent and red faced.

 Her eyes fell on Constance for just a moment who was watching Tanis. She frowned. Constance had a strange sad expression on her face that she couldn’t quite figure out. Shaking her head she turned back to Hugh who had went back to unpacking her clothes, a wicked grin on his face.

 She sighed and gave up. Landon and the others attacked the rest of her items, helping her to unpack everything. She looked up at her bunk bed and winced. “Oh gods…” she muttered. “How the heck am I going to get up there.” She pressed a hand to her side, flinching at the feeling of pain, just thinking about it.

 Landon stared up at it. “I can fetch a small stepping ladder from an equipment closet,” he answered.

 Hugh stood up, grinning at her. “If you weren’t so small you wouldn’t have these problems,” he said with a laugh. “Hey – there’s something up here.”

 A jolt went up her body. “Oh! I forgot. Jacobson said that him, the men, and the Generals had prepared something for me.”

 “Men?” Hugh asked as he reached up for it.

 “Yeah. The General’s unit was there. I spent time with them. It was actually really exciting. Some of the stories they told me were really exciting. I even got to go up against them in a knife fight. Those parts were fun.”

 “What the heck is this thing?” Hugh muttered as he pulled it down. “It feels like two items in this.”

 Hugh finally managed to pull the item down and he said them gently on the floor. It was a bulky thing wrapped up in a brown cloth. Frowning, Lydia reached down and began pulling the cloth off. Only to reveal another item wrapped in another similar cloth – but the other item made her catch her breath.

 “That’s a quiver,” Erica exclaimed.

 “There’s a note,” Landon said, picking it up off the quiver and reaching it out to her.

 *The Death Slayer needs a proper weapon to do battle with the Grim Reaper. May your aim always stay true.*

 Lydia began shaking, tears welling up into her eyes. “Oh my gods… they didn’t…”

 Hugh was already undoing the leather straps on the quiver. “Damn… look at these arrows!” he gasped as he reached in and pulled one out. They were a dark red. The fletching was black except for the cock feather which was white. But despite the different coloring she recognized those arrows easily.

 Giving a shrill scream of delight, she grabbed for the other clothed item and practically ripped it off. Sitting there, colored the same dark red as the arrows, was her very own recurve bow. “Oh gods!” she exclaimed. “They didn’t! But… they did! Oh gods! They got me one! They got me my own!”

 She picked it up and looked it over, analyzing every part of it, admiring it. On the front side of the bow were gold letterings that flowed and were almost indistinguishable as letters due to their styling. *The Battle with Death ends Here.* That was what she slowly deciphered.

 “What the hell kind of bow is that?” Hugh asked, staring at it as she examined it closely herself.

 She held it out excitedly. “A recurve bow! It’s the weapon that General Cassings uses. His is solid black. Oh gods, I absolutely fell in love with it. He let me practice with his for a while. I think he doubted at first that I could even shot it at all.”

 Hugh gaped at it as he took it from her. “I can see why. Holy shit. Can you actually pull this thing back?”

 She gave him an evil grin. “It’s difficult, but I don’t give up very easily.”

 She watched as Hugh stood up and gave the string an experimental tug before finally pulling back to full draw. “And this is the weapon that General uses?”

 “Isn’t it incredible?”

 He loosened his grip and stared down at her, giving her a wide grin. “You couldn’t just fall in love with a normal weapon, it had to be a special one, huh?” He handed it down to her. He looked at his fingers. “Damn that thing has a bite.”

 She stared down at her fingers and then held them up. Her fingers had long since healed but there were still some soft scars. “You’ve no idea. If it’s not the draw it’s the release. I was starting to get the handle on my stance, though, to stop the hit on my arm.”

 “Well I know one thing – I would not want to be on the other side of that bow when you’re aiming. And just think – you’ve also just extended your reach in the skies so you’ll be able to take better advantage of being in the back position.”

 Tanis sighed. “I don’t get it at all. It’s just a weapon.”

 Landon smirked as he laid a hand on Tanis’s shoulder. “Unless you’re a fighter, you’re just never going to understand. The connection one of us feels with our weapons.”

 “Aw, the first time that I saw it.” She smirked. “I suppose any other normal person would have been more focused on the person saving them, not the weapon. Cassings just walked out and shot the men trying to kidnap me and I swear his bow was the most incredible thing to watch.”

 Everyone tensed and looked down at her. “Kidnap?” Hugh asked, his voice tense.

 Lydia looked down at the floor. “Yeah,” she murmured her answer.

 “Sounds like you were put through an experience from hell,” Landon said.

 She swallowed and closed her eyes. “It’s over now. Dear Gods it’s over now.

 “You wanna tell us the story, yet?” he asked gently.

 She stood up and looked around at them and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s… let’s go down to the mess hall and I’ll tell you the whole story.”

#

 Working the pitchfork was an experience in hell at the moment for her. She struggled with it, but it placed a lot of strain on the stitches at her side. She was in the middle of giving up when a hand reached out and took the pitchfork from her. She blinked and looked up to find Hugh grinning down at her. “Looks like you’re having some trouble there, Lyz.”

 She sighed and released it. “In the worst way. I might have to go to Janus and explain my problem as see if I can’t get one of the staff to do it for me until I’m a little better healed.”

 “Nah. Don’t bother those guys. They got a lot of extra stuff on their plate as it is. I’ll be happy to do this for you.”

 She bit her lip and stared away as he attacked the hay. “Hugh…” she protest. “It’s not fair for you to have to do two stalls.”

 “Seriously, it’s not an issue, Lyz.”

 She sighed and went to stand over to the side to lean on the wall, wincing in pain and holding her side. She watched him as he worked. Gods he looked so amazingly handsome this morning. She swallowed. She should be mad at him. Furious. Where was the anger that she had felt towards him before she left?

 “You’re awfully quiet,” Hugh muttered after a moment of silence.

 “So are you,” she pointed out.

 And more silence.

 Finally she asked. “Hugh, how have you been lately? I mean, seriously?”

 “John put me in the advanced classes,” he answered.

 “Did he? H-he was pretty reluctant to do that as I recall.”

 He turned back to her. “Yeah. Cuz of my crappy attitude again. I… I apologized and seriously reapplied myself. There’s a lot that I had to cut out of my life and a lot that I had to put back into perspective.” He grinned. “I’ve started helping out with this place after classes, for example. I’m getting very good at using hammers and nails,” he said with a light laugh. “You would have freaked the other day if you had seen me. They had me get up on the roof of one of the stables to patch up a leak. They told me I did a really great job. I also apologized to those upperclassmen for attacking them. I… I feel *better* lately, honestly.”

 She smiled, not meeting his eyes. “See what happens when you actually listen.”

 Her heart quickened pace when suddenly Hugh was there in front of her, placing a hand on the wall behind her on either side of her. “You’re right. Gods, you’re right. Lydia, I could live for an eternity and I could never stop feeling awful about how I treated you. You tried to teach me something and all I did was get pissed off.”

 She swallowed and closed her eyes. “It was my fault, too. I should have never treated you like that.”

 “No. You did nothing wrong.” He pulled back with one arm and caressed her cheek gently. “If it had been done in any other way I would never have listened. My foolish pranks are irresponsible. There’s no place for it when we have to form a perfect team. They’re only good if *everyone* gets to share in it.” He grinned. “Those are a lot more fun, too. Coming up and with and perfecting the right sort of prank that everyone enjoys.”

 She closed her eyes. She could feel her tears starting to well up. “T-that’s wonderful, Hugh. So at least you learned the lesson.”

 “Too late, though, and I ruined the best thing that I ever had in my life. Lydia… please be my girlfriend again.”

 The tears fell out of her eyes. Her heart felt heavy and full all at the same time. How she had long to hear those words. “Tanis,” was what she said, though. “What am I supposed to do about Tanis, Hugh? Damn you. No. This is messed up,” she growled. Suddenly she found her anger. She reached up and wiped away her tears aggressively. “No. Your break up was far too good, Hugh. What am I supposed to do about *that*?”

 Pain flashed through his eyes. “Lydia, I’m sorry.”

 “Sorry? You *asshole!*” she screamed at him. “You think sorry is going to cut it? You smashed *our* necklace. You choked me and you threw a tray of food on me.”

 “Thanks for the recap,” he growled. “I *know* what I did.”

 “And I’m supposed to just take you back after that like it never even happened? I’m supposed to break up with Tanis who’s done nothing wrong to try to give *you* another chance?”

 “So *what*, Lydia? You’re going to stay with him? You’re going to stay with Tanis when you don’t even love him?”

 “And what makes you think that I don’t love him?”

 “How about that warm and endearing hug yesterday. He hugged you but the only thing you were paying attention to was *me* yesterday. Yeah, you really seemed like you were absolutely in love with him. That’s really being true and kind to Tanis. Do him a favor, Lydia. Don’t string him along. Don’t fuck with people’s hearts like that. It’s not fair to you and it’s not fair to him.”

            “And definitely not fair to you, right?” she snapped angrily.

            “This isn’t just about me, Lyz. It’s about you, too. I won’t lie. I want a second chance with you more than anything in the world. Breaking up with you was the worst mistake of my life. I’ve not been the same since. I’m still desperately in love with you, Lyz.” He reached down and grabbed her hands, pulling them to his chest. “I’m such a damn moron. You asked me to keep you but I threw you away. I get that. I want a chance to fix what I did. I have no delusions. I deserve your anger. I broke your heart. But, Lydia…”

            Her breathe caught as he bent down and pressed his lips to hers. Her heart leapt in her chest. A warm feeling started from her lips and swept through her body, swelling her heart to three times its size.

            Hugh pulled away, just a paper’s width. She could still feel his breath on her lips. “If you don’t like this. If you aren’t still in love with me, then push me away.” He pushed his lips back into hers, this time deepening the kiss.

            Push him away? Oh gods… no, she could never do that. Damn him. Why couldn’t she do that? She was angry with him. She could still remember the hurt and the pain. She still felt the hurt. Remembered their necklace shattering into millions of pieces. But with his lips pressed up to her like this it almost did not matter. She wanted this. More than anything else in the world she wanted Hugh back in her life.

            Damn him!

            He pulled away even as her lungs started to burn. She gasped while he pressed his body closer to hers. “You haven’t pushed me away, yet, Lyz,” he breathed.

            “You’re such an ass, Hugh,” she muttered.

            “I’ll work on that,” he answered before pressing his lips back up against hers.

            This time instead of pulling away, he trailed the kiss downwards, working his lips down her cheek and slowly, seductively towards her neck. His fingers reached up and pulled down her zipper so he could get at her neck. A shiver went up her body at the feel of him at his favorite spot. She almost cried tears of joy to have him there again.

            She swallowed. “I just don’t want to hurt Tanis,” she said while he worked. “Oh, Hugh… don’t leave a mark. Not one that he can see.”

            Hugh sighed and pulled away reluctantly. “Alright, Lyz. You’re right. Damn but you’re right. This *isn’t* fair to him.” He backed up, running his hand through his hair. She blinked as she watched the familiar gesture and smiled. He had cut it shorter? Why hadn’t she noticed that little detail before?

            “How the heck am I going to break up with him?” she groaned.

            He smirked. “Oh, I don’t think you would need to worry about Tanis suffering from a broken heart for all that long.”

            She frowned and looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

            “Constance,” he answered simply.

            She shook her head. “A little more details than that, Hugh.”

            He grinned wider. “Your *boyfriend* has a secret admirer. I think Constance has recently become quite taken with him.”

            She gasped, suddenly remembering the look that Constance had given Tanis the previous day. “Oh gods… b-but what about him? Has she told him?”

            “Nope. I keep trying to tell her to, but she’s afraid of being completely rejected without you being here. She doesn’t want to risk Tanis feeling guilty about being devoted to you when you aren’t even here to try to fight for him. She came to me about a month after you left, crying saying that she made a mistake getting him together with you.”

            “B-but how does Tanis feel about her?”

            “Not a clue. I don’t think Tanis dislikes her. At all. I mean, I remember how clumsy he use to look with her, but he’s really started warming up to people in general.” He chuckled. “I think if you broke up with Tanis, Constance wouldn’t be the only one out after him.”

            She grinned. “Seriously?”

            Hugh smirked. “Constance isn’t the only girl, though, having some issues with the whole relationship thing.”

            “Erica again?”

            Hugh broke out into a full on smile. “You are so far off it’s not even funny. Try Sam.”

            Lydia swallowed, wanting so badly to laugh. “O-oh my gods! Sam likes someone? Neither of them have ever acted like they were interested in boys. Who? Who’s the guy? Someone I know?”

            “You know him very well. Take a guess.”

            “Hugh, there are a *lot* of guys that I know. You’re going to have to narrow that list down a bit.”

            He shrugged. “The guy is available. How’s that?”

            She titled her head. “John?”

            “Younger.”

            She blinked. “Wait – it’s not one of my charges, is it?”

            “It is.”

            She shook her head. “That’s still a long list of guys. I think I have like 10 boys to 6 girls.” She froze. “Oh my gods… it’s not… Felix?!”

            Hugh burst out laughing. “I knew you’d enjoy it.”

            She palmed her face. “Oh my gods… how bad?”

            “Pretty bad. The worst part of it is, everything she does only seems to annoy the crap out of him. You know how she is when she’s dealing with any of us. At least Kylie has always had some sort of additional sense when it comes to being serious. Sam has always missed that mark a bit and it’s throwing everything into disaster.”

            “How long ago did all of this start?”

            “Just two weeks ago. I figured that I’d just wait and let you deal with it since you’ve always had a knack with dealing with the twins.”

            She smirked. “Technically they’re *your* friends.”

            He grinned large and wide. “We met over radishes,” he said cryptically, continuing the normal joke that no one could ever decipher to figure out how the three of them met. It was always food related, though, and Lydia was beginning to suspect that it had to do with him maybe breaking into the pantries at school. Not that she would ever let on that she had a suspicion. Some jokes should just remain that: jokes.

            She shook her head. “I’m barely good at my own relationships. How the heck am I going to handle someone else’s?” she asked, exasperated.

            “Because you’re smart like that and you know how to deal with people.”

            She sighed. “I think you seriously overestimate me.”

            “Lyz, you talked *easily* with two Generals. And the most hardass one you somehow convinced to allow you to try out his bow.”

            “After I freaked him out by staring at him all day,” she said with a sigh.

            He chuckled. “Gods I love you, Lyz.”

            Her heart leaped in her chest again as he leaned forward and kissed her again. His fingers raised into the collar of her uniform and caressed her neck gently where it had still been left open. She pushed him away gently. “Dammit, Hugh. Please stop. I really *do not* want to hurt Tanis.”

            “Too late,” a voice growled.

            Lydia froze, her eyes widening in horror. Hugh swore and pulled away, whirling around to the voice. Tanis was standing there, a look of cold fury on his face. Lydia stepped away from the wall, staring at him, her mind racing to try to figure out what to say – what to do.

            He stared between the two of them before whirling around on his heels. Lydia swallowed hard and went running after him. “Tanis!” she shouted. He did not stop. She caught his hand and he whirled around, tears and hot anger in his eyes.

            “What?!” he shouted at her. “What could you possibly have to say to me, Lydia? You tell me how much you love me and then you leave for two months and immediately want to crawl back into bed with *him* as soon as you get back? That damn asshole?! Did you forget what he did to you?”

            She swallowed. “Tanis… I know. I haven’t forgotten. And I am mad, but… I also know this. I love Hugh. I always have. What I did to him was cruel and… dammit, Tanis. I’m sorry. I care for you, I do, but… it’s never going to be as much as I love Hugh. I want to give him one more chance. Tanis… I’m sorry.”

            He wrenched his arm away from her. “Fine,” he growled. “Go crawl back to him and let him treat you like shit. I was such a goddamn fool to think that you could ever actually love me. *Don’t* ever come back to me. I’m done. I’m done trying to chase after you.”

            “Oh, Tanis…”

            “Stay the hell away from me!” he shouted, ripping his arm out of her hands. He glared past her. “And you,” he growled. Lydia turned around and found Hugh standing there, shamefaced, staring down at the ground. “I swear to Gods, if you do anything to hurt her again I will kill you. What the hell she sees in you I have no goddamn idea. You’re nothing but an asshole. You don’t even deserve her.”

            Hugh swallowed and looked away. “After what I did… you’re right… but I swear I’m going to work hard until I do again.”

            “You’re stupid, Lydie. You’ve always been so fucking stupid wherever Hugh is concerned. But… fine. Do whatever the hell makes you happy.”

            He spun around and ran off. She sighed and stepped back. A sob racked her body, threatening to shake her apart. She reached her hands up to her face and buried herself in them, wishing she could make the whole world disappear. Hugh’s arms reached around her and he pulled her up to his body. “I keep doing things that hurt you,” he breathed in her ear.

            She turned in his arms and pulled her hands down. “Hugh. Please. Please don’t hurt me again. There won’t be a next time after this. You had better not make me have gone through that for nothing.”

            He bent low to her, wiping the tears away on one side of her face with his thumb. “Lydia, I swear I will never do that again. No matter what you do to me. I can’t bear losing you again. I broke up with you but I think I’m the one that hurt most. I told you that you had ruined me. I don’t think I even fully comprehended how badly you had until you were no longer there in my life. You had moved on, but every girl that I tried to be with was so… she was just not you.”

            She swallowed hard. “Y-you told me that you were going to keep me. You told me that you wanted to see what I could have to teach you. You didn’t even listen! You didn’t even let me defend myself or explain! What’s going to happen, Hugh? What will happen? If I ever outrank you in the future, what would you do the first time I yell at you for something? The first time I give you an order that you do not like?”

            “I will listen. I *will*. Lydia, please give me that chance again. I don’t know how I have to say I’m sorry or how many times that I have to say it, but just give me the chance to prove myself. Lydia – *please*. I’m begging you.”

            She nodded. “Fine. Fine. Because maybe Tanis is right and I’m an idiot, but I am in love with you still. I tried so hard to not be after everything that you did to me, but… I couldn’t stop. Damn  you. I love you, Hugh.”

            She looked up and Hugh was giving her the large smile that she loved so much. His blue eyes twinkling like sparkling gems. “So… are we a couple again?”

            She took a deep breath and grinned wide. “Yes. I’m Hugh’s girlfriend. But I swear to the gods, Hugh, you hurt me again and I *will* cut out your heart.”

            He reached down and kissed her on the lips. “You won’t have to. It will already have stopped beating.” After speaking he pressed his lips back to hers again and deepened the kiss. His right hand rose up and rubbed at her neck. She realized with a start that her uniform was still partially unzipped. Hugh pulled away with a devilish grin on his face. “How about we continue this conversation in Tsaul’s stall before everyone else begins waking up.”

            Before she could respond, he reached down and lifted her up into his arms. She gasped in alarm which caused him to laugh. He carried her back into the stall and clicked his tongue. “I still have to finish this,” he mumbled.

            He sat her back down and picked up the pitchfork. She grinned watching him as he worked with feverish speed. Tsaul woke up just as he was finishing and turned to them blinking bleary eyes. “Oh, Hugh boy,” he greeted. He looked between both of them. Lydia could feel him in her mind, reaching into her emotions. He snorted indignantly. “That did not last long.” He sighed, resting his head back down.

            Hugh grinned at him. “And have you got something to say about it?”

            The dragon rolled his eyes and turned away. “Nothing other than you are both silly humans.

            Hugh nodded. “Sounds about right.” He hung the pitchfork back up and walked back over to her. “Now… where were we?” he asked.

            She grinned and raised her arms, standing on tiptoe and wrapping them around his neck. “We were at the part where you kiss me passionately and promise me again that you’re going to keep me – and apologize again.”

            “Haven’t I already apologized enough?” he asked as he bent down to her.

            “Not even nearly close enough. You’re just getting started.”

            “I think I can tolerate that.” He grabbed her up gently and laid her back down in the hay, laying on top of her as he pressed his lips to her own. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of being back in Hugh’s arms once again.

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            Constance was staring between her and Tanis, clearly torn between wanting to sit with everyone else and wanting to sit with Tanis who had isolated himself from the group and was sitting three tables down. She swallowed, nodded at them, before quickly spinning around and taking off over towards Tanis.

            Landon glared at her before rolling his eyes. “Whatever. It’s your life, Lydia. Personally, even I think that you could do better than this asshole,” he said, pointing his fork at Hugh.

            Hugh was sitting in a crowd of enemies, she realized. She stared down throughout the whole table. Even Erica was giving him hard glares. All except John who was staring at him with a smirk.

            Lydia swallowed. She wasn’t sure which felt worse. That she was sitting beside him or that he was being isolated like this. How bad had things gotten for him?! She stared down at the table. She stood up. Hugh jolted, looking up at her. “Where you going?”

            She glared at everyone around the table. “Somewhere else to sit. I’ve been through sheer hell these past two months. The last thing I want to deal with is everyone attacking me over my boyfriend choice. I love Hugh. I’m not pretending that everything is perfect between us. Maybe *you* might think I can do better, *Landon*, but personally I’m beginning to think that it’s Tanya that could do a whole lot better.”

            Hugh reached up and grabbed her hand to pull her back down to her seat. “Lyz, it’s alright. This is my punishment. I deserve this.”

            “No. No one deserves to feel like they are an outcast. *I* don’t even appreciate this.”

            Landon sighed. “Alright. Alright. Fair enough. Whatever.”

            Tanya stood up and glared across first at Hugh and then at her. “I agree with you, Lydia,” she said. “It’s your choice, but I just remember how bad that you were hurting. So here’s my warning, Hugh Oliver. If you do anything to hurt my friend again you will know my wrath.”

            Landon stared across at her with some mild surprise before a wide grin spread across his face. “Your wrath?” he asked.

            Lydia smirked. Tanya turned to him and glared down at him. “Yes. My wrath. And what, Mr. Daiton, is humorous about that?”

            “Nothing except that I’ve never seen you angry and then I’m also wondering what exactly it is that you would do if you did get angry.”

            “Oh gods, Landon,” Lydia said shaking her head. “I never want to hear you call me stupid ever again.”

            He stared up at her and blinked. “What?” He turned back to Tanya and was stunned to see that she was glaring at him with pursed lips, her hands in front of her with her fingertips touching.

            “Mr. Daiton, do you doubt my power as both a member of Team Spirit and the Itty Bitty Witty Committee?” she asked, her voice hard – which was interesting to hear in her tiny squeak.

            Hugh smirked. “Be very careful how you answer that one, Lance. Take my advice. I’ve learned to bow down to little people and your girlfriend is even smaller than you. Yeah. She terrifies me more than anyone at this table.”

            She stared at him giving him a small grin. “He’s not a stupid as he looks, Lydia.”

            She rolled her eyes and sat back down. The conversation drifted away at that point. Lydia pulled her books out after a while and got down to studying, losing herself in the texts. It was fun… this chatting, but… a deep part of her seriously missed the men sitting around the fire talking. She missed their war stories and their teasing.

            She wondered idly how Eldrich was holding up… wherever he was.

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            “Damn that thing has a bite,” Hugh growled. He stared down at his arm. “Even with a bloody armguard.”

            She grinned taking her bow back. “I know. Isn’t it amazing?” she practically purred, rubbing her cheek on the frame of it.

            Felix smirked. “Figuring out how to avoid the arm slap yourself, Commander?”

            She sighed. “It still gets me now and again. My arm muscles still need to do a great deal of strengthening. General Cassings’s bow must have been quite a bit used. Mine is a little bit harder. I struggle with it and occasionally lose my battle with it.

            Landon walked across. “How’s your fingers?”

            “Starting to form callouses,” she answered, “but I’m still using my protective glove.”

            “You’re not thinking about trying to shoot that without the glove?” Hugh asked her incredulously.

            She grinned. “Eventually. Maybe. I’ve been tossing the idea around. I think either way, though, I need a lot more practice and muscle strength before I get up to that point. A month of training is definitely not enough.”

            “Anyone feel like practicing with spears?” Felix asked suddenly.

            “Getting bored with archery already?” Hugh asked with a smirk.

            “Not really. Just that archery I have little difficulty with – especially after Lydia’s instructions. It’s being attacked that is always the issue for me.”

            Hugh smirked. “I’m always up for a good spear fight. I need to go grab mine, though.”

            Felix shook his head. “Nah. I got some over in my stall just a little ways. It will be closer for me. Just give me a minute and I’ll go grab them for the both of us.”

 Hugh shrugged. “Yeah. Sounds alright to me. We’re going to lose daylight in about an hour so we might want to make it quick.”

 Felix nodded, grinning wide, before he spun around and took off across the grounds towards his stables.

 Lydia watched him disappear before she turned back to her target and raised her bow. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the string back and took aim, exhaling. Concentrating and dialing the arrow in.

 She released it and it went sailing through the air, hitting the target with a hard resounding thud. The familiar feel of exhilaration swept up her body. She smirked. “I think shooting this thing is about as thrilling as kissing you, Hugh.”

 Hugh burst out laughing at the comment while Landon gave her a very disturbed look. Finally bringing himself under control, Hugh looked at her with a wide grin. “I really hope that doesn’t mean I’m doing something wrong lately. I mean, I know I’m out of practice with my kissing. Oh Gods, Lyz. That’s a pretty hot thought, actually. You making out to your bow. Is there enough room for me in that action?”

 “You’re sick,” Landon hissed.

 Hugh smirked at him. “Hey, she’s the one who said it this time, not me.”

 Lydia grinned at them before reaching down for another arrow. She clicked her tongue. Empty. She sighed. “Hold your shots so I can go gather. I’m all out.”

 She pulled the bow over her shoulders, waiting for Hugh and Landon to ease their own strings. She walked over to the lever system and turned off the moving targets so she could gather all of her arrows.

 There was a sharp slice in the back of her mind. She gasped, grasping at her heart. Oh gods… Her meld link had just been severed.

 “Lydia!” Landon shouted. “What the hell are you doing?”

 She spun around. Landon was also grabbing at his heart. Hugh had a wide eyed expression of near-terror. “Lyz?” he asked her, his eyes meeting hers.

 She swallowed. “T-that wasn’t me.”

 Suddenly an arm grabbed her from behind and a cloth was forced to her mouth. She desperately tried to tackle the hand and the cloth, feeling her lungs seizing up, but her efforts were in vain. She felt her thoughts leave her – slowly… receding into blackness.

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 Hugh raised his bow, pulling the string back to full draw. Beside him he felt Landon step around, doing the same. “Let her go, asshole!”

 There was a young boy with dark black hair and blue eyes behind Lyz, holding her up in his arms after she had collapsed. He dropped the cloth and pulled out a knife, putting it to her side. “I stabbed her here once,” he growled. “I will do it again. Drop your weapons *now*,” he snarled.

 It was no good. Lydia could have probably the shot without even a second’s hesitation, but he was nowhere near as good a shot as her. “Landon,” he growled softly. “How’s your aim?”

 “Not good enough,” he snarled.

 “I said drop your weapons!” the boy screamed.

 From behind the stalls five men stepped out. Hugh swore as they trained their own bows on them. “Who the fuck are you?!” he screamed.

 “Hugh… they’re wearing Western uniforms.”

 Hugh wasn’t sure why he had not noticed it before, but Landon was right. The whole group of them were wearing browns, and the men looked much older and much more experienced than the boy with the knife to Lydia’s side.

 He swallowed. Raging inside, he eased his bow and dropped the arrow and the bow on the ground. Landon did the same two minutes later. Hugh looked around quickly, searching the grounds desperately for sight of anyone to come help them. No one. There was no one else out here. They were all in for dinner at this hour.

 The boy turned to the men and nodded. Two of them lowered their bows and raised across the yard towards him and Landon. Hugh felt his heart pounding hard in his chest as he was forced to his knees and his arms were wrenched hard behind his back and bound up tightly with ropes.

 The boy sheathed his blade in his belt and reached down, ripping Lydia’s bow off her back, throwing it hard on the ground with contempt. “Bring them,” he ordered. “Two of them should be more than enough to keep her compliant.”

 Hugh swallowed hard. He looked up in time to see the soldier standing above him lift his fist back and drove it forward into his skull.

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 There were several times that Hugh woke up. It was always only for brief moments at a time. He could feel himself up in the clouds on the back of a dragon with a rider sitting behind him, supporting him. He would have enough time to register that it was night – or now it was day – and then it as much earlier in the day the next time he woke up. He would have just enough time to realize the progression of time before he felt a needle prick his skin and he would be out again.

 And then he heard a voice. Someone calling his name and hitting his cheek. Hugh somehow managed to pull himself out of his restless reverie. He opened his eyes slowly and the first thing that he saw was Landon. Ew. Not a pleasant sight first thing in the morning, he thought. Now if it had been Lyz…

 Lyz! He gasped and tried to sit up – too fast, he realized. His head swam instantly, and for just a moment he battled the blackness in his thoughts. He swallowed hard and forced himself together. He felt sick to his stomach.

 “Not so fast, Hugh,” Landon snapped, his voice lowered. “I’ve no idea what they shot us up with but it was a pretty nasty drug.”

 “W-where are we?” he gasped.

 “Not a bloody clue. Looks like a cave of some sort.”

 “Where’s Lyz?”

 “That asshole has her bound and gagged in the middle of the room. They’re keeping her drugged. I just watched them give her another shot barely a minute ago.”

 “How long have you been awake?”

 “About that long,” he answered. “I’m still trying to catch my bearings myself.

 Winching, Hugh took his own first look around. They were in a cage. He groaned at the familiar design. It was the same sort of cage he had been forced into three years ago back during the Death Rider episode. Westerners.

 He expanded his view. They were indeed in a cave. There was brown soil everywhere and even the walls were of a brown texture. It was as large as the mess hall back at the battle school. There was also not a single sign of a single dragon, but he could see the five Western soldiers sitting by a fire. The young boy was nowhere to be found. He also could find no exit to the cave. It must be hidden from view farther away somewhere. The cave was lit up by torches ensconced on the walls.

 “Who are you?” a voice hissed not far away.

 Both him and Landon jolted. Landon spun around towards the voice which had come from the far side of the cage. Hugh blinked instantly confused. Sitting on the floor was a boy no more than maybe sixteen. He, too, had black hair and light blue eyes and a facial structure that reminded him of a Westerner. Even his accent – what little he had heard in the three soft spoken words – was Western, but the boy was wearing a gray Southern dress uniform.

 The boy had a black eye and upon closer inspection Hugh caught the sight of the back of the boy’s uniform possibly being ripped open. It was only the collar holding it onto the boy’s body. The boy’s eyes flitted from one to the other. “Names?” he asked again.

 Hugh looked across at Landon who shrugged. “Landon,” he said, answering first. The boy’s eyes turned next to Hugh. He swallowed. “Hugh,” he answered.

 The boy’s eyes widened. He said something incomprehensible in another language. “Lydia’s friends,” he said finally in his thick accent that almost made Lydia’s name next to unrecognizable, making it come out closer to “lit-ya”. If the circumstances were not so dire, he might have actually made a joke out of it.

 “You know Lydia?” Landon asked.

 The boy nodded. “Of course I do. She’s a Meldling like me.”

 Hugh’s brain connected with Lyz’s story. “Eldrich?” he asked.

 A wide delighted grin spread across the boy’s face. “She mentioned me?”

 “Which makes that one bastard ‘Sean’,” Landon muttered, looking around the cave.

 Eldrich nodded. “Yeah. Damn. I didn’t think they would try anything like this in your country. It’s so hard to get across your borders.”

 “What the hell is going on?” Hugh growled.

 Eldrich shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? They’re kidnapping us.”

 “Got that. Thanks for stating the incredibly obvious.”

 “You asked,” the boy pointed out. He shrugged. “I guess my superiors have revoked my decision. Not that I give a damn. I’m more concerned about Lydia. Once General Diederich gets his hands on her I doubt there’s anything her Generals are going to be able to do to save her.” He blinked and stared at them. “Oh… I guess you’re here as hostages for her, huh? Wow. That sucks. That must be Sean’s idea. Diederich might not be too happy with that. That’s involving others. Not just Meldlings. I think Sean stepped over the line with this one.”

 “You’re very calm about this whole thing,” Landon pointed out.

 The boy shrugged. “Here… there… don’t really care much anymore. I only went over to the Southerners ‘cause I thought it might be easier for Lydia’s Generals to see if they could pull me out.”

 Hugh stared across at Lydia. He swallowed. “When was the last time she coughed? It’s not like her to be this quiet.”

 “They probably gave her a muscle relaxant. She might not be able to.”

 A chill went up Hugh’s body. “T-they’re going to kill her. She’ll die if she doesn’t cough.”

 “Might be a better fate for her at this point.”

 Rage flooded through him. He jumped up and rushed across the cage, grabbing the boy by the collar of his shirt and pulling him off the ground, snarling in his face. “Say that again, you fucking asshole, and I swear I’ll punch your lights out.”

 “Hugh!” Landon shouted. A hand fell on his shoulder. “Put him down. This isn’t his fault. Taking the situation out on him isn’t going to make it any better.”

 He stared back down at the kid before hurling him down to the floor. Eldrich gasped in pain, rolling over quickly.

 “Oh fuck,” Landon gasped.

 Hugh stared down in horror at the boy’s back. Now he understood why the boy’s uniform was tattered. The boy had been flogged, his back ripped open. Old blood encrusted the marks and trailed down his back in tiny to large dried rivulets.

 “Do me a favor,” Eldrich growled, still face down on the ground. “I’m trying really *really* hard to not move and to maintain my temper. I *know* how pissed off you want to feel at the moment, but the cold matter of the truth is Lydia’s death right now is far more preferable than the possibility of the life she would have under General Diederich.”

 Hugh watched as the boy slowly got his knees under him and rotated his body slowly. He almost wanted to cringe himself watching the boy. The boy swallowed as he rested back up against the bars again, groaning painfully. Sweat was pouring down the kid’s face now. “W-what’s your Wills?” he asked in a drained voice.

 “Why do you want to know?” Hugh asked with a harsh snap.

 He shrugged. “Lydia told me it was a quick way to get to know you people. If we are going to cellmates for a while seems like a good idea to me.”

 Hugh shrugged. “Vivaciousness,” he answered.

 He watched the boy frown and tilt his head but then shook it. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I know that word. I’m pretty fluent in your language but I’ve got a few holes.”

 “It means high spirited and having a tenacity for life,” Hugh explained.

 “It means he’s high strung and likes to overdue things,” Landon growled.

 “Got a second or third will?” he asked.

 Hugh shook his head. “Nope. Just the one Will which happens to be so strong that a *lot* of dragons try to attack me over it quite frequently.”

 Eldrich looked across at Landon next. Landon sighed. “Cunning. Second is Duty. No third. What about you? Aren’t you supposed to be a Battle Rider?”

 “Was until I got a Will Dragon of my own,” he answered with a large grin on his face. “I’m Tenacity. Second is Defiance. My third if Passion.”

 Hugh smirked. “Defiance?”

 The boy grinned. “You don’t think I got beaten for being lovable and sweet? Well… I guess they wouldn’t be above that. “ He turned to Landon. “Cunning, huh? Got any ideas for this situation?”

 “Working on it, but I’m going to need some more information. How about you start with where are we exactly?”

 “A cave system just a little north of your dragon valley. Before the border got closed up, my countrymen used this as a small temporary base of operations. It goes even further back. Over there,” he pointed in a direction, “is the exit, but getting through it is a little difficult. There’s a narrow land bridge that you only want to cross single file. You can hear water rushing down below but it sounds like a decent fall – not that you can see the bottom. Not very dragon friendly even if they wanted to keep dragons in here, but there’s an exit much much deeper in. They are able to get dragons in through that, but it’s several days travel through the darkness and you have to know the way. It’s a bit complicated. I’ve seen my superiors use this cave to pass through the border occasionally, but it’s not an easy trek.”

 “I don’t suppose you’re melded?” Hugh asked.

 “Nah. Sean cut my link before getting me here. I’ve no idea if my dragon is even nearby.”

 “Same,” Hugh growled. “Probably did the same for Lyz, too.” He clicked his tongue. “Too bad Lyz isn’t in here. She could do the same thing that she did last time,” he said with a smirk. “She managed to slip through the bars back then.”

 Landon looked at him. “Same sort of cage, huh?”

 Hugh nodded. “Wanna give it a try, ittybitty one?”

 Landon rolled his eyes. “I doubt even Lydia could do this now. She’s not exactly as frail as she used to be.”

 Hugh watched as Landon walked up to the cave bars and made a valiant attempt at getting through – but it was a no go. Despite being small, his frame was still filled out too much to allow him to slip through. He stepped back inside and shook his head. He swore and walked over to the cage door. “I don’t suppose either one of you are skilled in picking locks?”

 “Yep. I just like sitting in a cage for days on end out of sheer fun,” Eldrich snapped sarcastically.

 “Knock the attitude,” Landon ordered. “It’s not going to help and you’re only get pissed off at each other. We need to stay calm here and work together.”

 Hugh sighed, staring at the lock. “Damn. I use to be good at breaking into shit, but I only did that by breaking. I think when I get out of here I’m going to add lock-picking to my skillset.”

 “At least our situation hasn’t killed your optimism for the future,” Landon said with a sigh. He stared down at the ground. Hugh watched as he ran a foot across the dirt and then walked up to the edge of the cage. “It’s bottomless,” he muttered. He looked up and around at the other two. “Give me a hand. Maybe we can lift this thing up enough to sneak under it?”

 Eldrich stood up and walked over to the side. “Not holding out much hope. They assemble these things in pieces on sight. Still –“

 Hugh walked over and they each took a bar and heaved upwards on it at the same time. Hugh threw every bit of his strength into it, pray that it would lift. Just a little bit.

 They only got an inch out of it before their collective strength ran out. Hugh clicked his tongue and glared at it. “Well… it wouldn’t be much of a cage if people could just crawl out from under it.” He walked to the corner and examined it. He could see the huge thick screws that held the cage together. As Eldrich had explained, it did look like the thing was constructed on sight – with a lot of effort. He wagered that even if he did have the right tool for the job they probably would be lacking in the man power of the the thing.

 Next he walked over to the door and examined it. He looked closely at the hinges. He could see the pins that held the hinge in place. They were thick pins and he had his serious doubts but he reached out and made a grab at one of them to try to pull it out. His fingers slid uselessly off of the pin, unable to gain a decent purchase on the pin to even try to think about pulling it out.

 He stood up and swore and kicked out at the bar.

 Landon sighed. He sat down and closed his eyes, reaching an index finger and a thumb up to his hair, twisting a single lock in between the digits. He reached down and patted his legs. “I’ve also been disarmed,” he growled.

 “Well, that goes without saying,” Hugh replied sarcastically.

 Eldrich grinned, an emotion that Landon failed to catch at his position. Hugh walked over to the boy. “You’ve got something, don’t you?” he said, lowering his voice.

 Landon’s head snapped in the boy’s direction. “You’ve got a weapon?”

 He shrugged. “It’s not much, but I do have two knives. Inside my boots. I’ve got false bottoms in them. Had to get them special ordered like that, but I think it was worth it. You guys are probably better fighters than I am, so I’ll give them to you. Make sure no one’s watching.

 Hugh and Landon both looked across at the men in the back of the cave and then their eyes swept around, looking for any signs of someone watching them.

 Hugh looked down and watched as the boy pulled off one of his boots, reached in, and after some time and effort, he pulled out a section of his boot and reached in and next pulled out a small blade. It wasn’t much. Just a stiletto. More needle than knife in Hugh’s opinion – but a weapon was a weapon and he wasn’t going to knock that. Eldrich handed it off to him, fixed his boot, and repeated the same process with the other boot, handing it off to Landon this time.

 Hugh reached down and slipped the knife into the side of his boot. A little dangerous and he hoped the knife wouldn’t bit into his foot, but without an ankle sheathe this was going to be the best he could do.

 Landon did the same. “Well, I feel slightly better, but it doesn’t improve our fortunes by much.” He turned to Hugh. “How’d the two of you escape the last time you were captured.”

 “Pure luck,” Hugh replied honestly. “The Death Rider left only ten men behind and moved all of the dragons out of the area since he was concerned when a random dragon attacked him. The dragons were chained up and the men left into the back. I was stuck on a post and Lyz was in the cage. She slipped through the bars and used a key to free me. She picked up a bow that was stashed to the side, I grabbed a spear, and we took out the men when they rushed us. We grabbed the keys off of one of them and high tailed it out of there.”

 Landon shook his head. “Not a damn part of that helps this situation now. There’s no dragons, she’s the one outside this time, and there’s no weapons laying around randomly.” Landon stared down at Eldrich. “You have any ideas?”

 “Absolutely. I’m just keeping them in my back pocket for a rainy day,” Eldrich replied sarcastically.

 Hugh glared at him. “I’m seriously going to fucking punch you in a second, boy. Knock the attitude.”

 “Stop asking stupid questions.” He shook his head. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m just in a bit of pain right now.”

 Hugh stared out the bars at Lydia. She was his pressing concern right now, more than himself. Gods… please let her lungs be alright. “She doesn’t have any of her medicine,” he mumbled. “Even last time it was a strain on her body, but she had Tsaul’s tank packs. Do they even know that she’s sick?”

 “Sean knows,” Eldrich answered. “We’ve seen her seriously bad off, and she once tried to group link with him.

 “Where is the bastard anyways?” Landon wondered looking around.

 “He went outside about fifteen minutes ago,” Eldrich answered. “He comes and goes. I think he felt something in the air, judging by the look on his face. He’s probably out there right now giving any dragons or riders within a five mile radius the suggestion to stay away.”

 “Anything you can do about reaching out to them for help yourself?” Hugh asked.

 Eldrich shook his head. “Not without me being melded to even a single dragon. Right now I’m no better off than you guys. Not that my thing is dragon control anyways. Sean’s always kicked my ass with that. He was the best until Lydia came along.” He smirked. “Lydia doesn’t even have to reach out to control them. Might be why they are keeping her drugged. Their dragons might be nearby.”

 “But they’re going to kill her,” Hugh growled. “She can’t stay asleep like that! Even in her sleep she needs to cough.”

 He walked over to the cage door, staring out at her. He grabbed the bars and stared around desperately at them, looking the whole cage over, trying to find *anything* to help them. He swallowed and tugged and pulled. It was foolish. He knew it, but it the knowledge did nothing for his heart. The more he yanked and pulled, the more pissed off he got. He kicked and shouted at the bars, feeling tears welling in his eyes.

 He felt a set of arms grab him from behind and realized suddenly that Landon had been shouting at him. The guy pulled him back and away – a major triumph considering the differences in their height and strength.

 Giving one final shout of anger he released the bars and allowed Landon to back him away. “That isn’t *helping*, Hugh. Dammit,” he snarled.

 Hugh pushed him away and slammed his back up against the backside of the cage and slid down it to the ground. Hot anger and frustration still raged through him. He propped his knees up and buried his face in his arms. “This is so *fucked up*!” he screamed. “She just wants to be a normal goddamn Rider! She doesn’t even give a damn about this Meldling shit!”

 “And you think *we* were given a choice,” a cold voice drolled.

 Hugh looked up. Standing outside of the cage was the boy who had kidnapped Lydia – Sean. Without hesitating he leaped at the side of the cage. “You have to let her wake up,” he shouted, pleading with the boy. “You’re going to kill her like this. She needs to cough. Whatever drug you are giving her is not letting her cough. She doesn’t even have her medicine. You have to let her go and get her to a hospital. *Please*.”

 The boy sneered down at him. He turned and looked at Lydia laying on the floor. He then turned back to him. “You think I give a damn about what happens to her? I’m following orders. That’s it. I was told to bring her here. If she dies I could care less.”

 “Except that you know General Diederich will lay into you as he did me,” Eldrich said from his corner. “You want another beating, Sean?”

 Sean smirked. “To see that bitch die would certainly be worth another beating. She should have died when I stabbed her.”

 “Why do you hate her so much?” Landon demanded hotly.

 “She disgusts me. Her and her mighty, haughty attitude. She believes nothing can defeat her. She’s above everything. If she dies I get the satisfaction of knowing that she’s nothing more than a corpse. If she lives… I wonder how long that snob attitude of hers will last?”

 “Lydia’s not a snob, Sean,” Eldrich corrected the boy. “She acts like nothing can defeat her because that’s how she *has* to feel. Just like me. Our choice is to give up and wait to die or to try to battle like hell against our fate. What you see in Lydia, what you hate so much, is hope. She manages every day to defy the odds. She wanted to teach you how to fight back. She wanted to show you how to defeat our obstacles. You’ve given up. You’ve given up and you hate yourself for it. She’s shown you what a life beyond this bullshit is like. Help us to escape, Sean. There *is* something beyond this.”

 “For *what*, Eldrich? What do you think is going to be accomplished? You think we can escape our own fates somehow? You seriously think anyone could ever give a damn about us? Are you still so ignorant as to believe that her Generals are doing anything for you? They’ve probably long forgotten you. The whole world is the same. We are nothing but tools for Dragon Riders.”

 “You’re a fucking moron,” Landon growled. “You can do things that no other Rider could ever dream of, but you’re letting other people *control* you? You want to know what I think: I think that they capture you so young so they can brain wash you into thinking you are under their control. What’s stopping you?”

 Hugh swallowed and nodded. “A dragon attacked the Death Rider out of sympathy for Lydia. It threw away its own life for *her*. You have that power, too. You could have every dragon within a five mile radius attack whoever’s attacking you. The only thing stopping you is the idea that you *can’t* because someone else owns you. That’s not true.”

 Sean grabbed the bars suddenly, surprising Hugh into jumping backwards, almost falling over. “And then what?” he screamed. “Then where do I go? You think for a moment that they won’t come after me to kill me? You assholes make it sound so easy. You’d outcast me from everyone. At least this way I can pretend that I have some sort of life.”

 “Some great life,” Hugh growled. “Fantastically admirable kidnapping innocent people.”

 Sean stepped back and shrugged. “What the hell do I care? It’s not like any of you bastards have ever done anything to protect me. At least this way I am respected in some way. As long as I do what my superiors tell me I have a title and am placed in some position of power.”

 “As long as you’re a compliant little puppy they’ll feed you,” Eldrich said softly.

 “Better than being beaten, mutt,” Sean snapped before whirling around and walking back into the cave with the other men.

 Eldrich sighed. “Well that was a fun little conversation.”

 Roaring in aggravation he sat down, slamming a fist into the dirt. Again he buried his face back into his arms. He swallowed and said a silent prayer, wishing everything would go away. Wishing that they were back at Battle School, shooting off arrows. Anywhere else but being *here*.

 He swallowed. “I… I wish I had never let her become a Rider. I wish I had done something to stop her.”

 Landon clicked his tongue. “She’d kick your ass if she heard you talking like that. In my experience, no one tells Lydia what she can and cannot do.”

 “Relax, Hugh,” Eldrich said softly. “If it’s any consolation, my superiors are not going to let her die. They’ll be here soon. She’s too valuable to them.”

 “That’s great,” Hugh muttered. “Lydia – forced to live a life she wants no part of. Yeah. At least she’ll have her life.”

#

 Felix rubbed his eyes. Damn, he really wished he had his medicine. They felt sorely dried out and things were even more cloudy to him than usual.

 “The voice gone?” he asked Tsavrina.

 The dragon snorted. “Yes. Damn Meldling,” she growled. “I’ll shred him to pieces if he tries to enter my mind again.”

 “Well, at least I’ve got a rough idea where he is. Five miles out that way somewhere,” he muttered. “Here, go ahead and land,” he said, patting the dragon’s back.

 “Would you like me to catch some more food for us?” she asked as they came in for a landing.

 Felix shook his head. “No. I need to sit back and think for a while. They’ve had them there – wherever there is – for three days,” he muttered. “I don’t like this. It’s too close to the border. I would think they would be making another attempt to jump it.”

 “Unless they are going under it?” the dragon suggested.

 “Come again?”

 Tsavrina sighed. “Could be an old cave. We’re close to the mountains. Five miles in that direction would reach them. They could have found a way through a cave to avoid the border patrol.”

 “That makes sense,” he admitted. He slid off his dragon as she landed. He wished, not for the first time, that it were Landon or someone else that were in his position. He was definitely *not* a thinker. Should he do this? Should he do that? What sense to make of this? What sense to make of that?

 Everything had happened so fast, though. He had been running back out with the spears and had watched his three friends being carried off the field towards some dragons. Reacting fast he had back for Tsavrina, jumped on her and high tailed it after them, almost losing them on several occasions – particularly after he realized that if he got too close someone would try to reach out and attack Tsavrina’s mind.

 The only thing he had managed to do that he felt was *right* was tell Tsavrina to send a thought out to one of the other dragons before they left the school to let their Rider know what had happened. But this far out in the middle of nowhere… he wasn’t really expecting anyone to come to the rescue.

 “Tsavrina, are there any dragons in the area?”

 “Not a one. That Meldling has this area pretty void of dragons. All I felt was their own when we got too close there.”

 Felix sighed. “Three days… already too long. I wonder what they are waiting for. If it goes under the border they should have just went through it. The moment they’re over the border they are safe. No. I don’t think that if they are in a cave that it does go under the border. What would keep them waiting?” he muttered.

 Tsavrina stretched her back, reaching her front claws out and arching her back like a cat. “Lava?”

 He frowned and looked up at the dragon. “You want to explain that one to me.”

 “Well, I mean, I am merely making conjectures here but naturally I am a dragon and there’s a lot that I know about caves and volcanoes. What I know of these mountains is that they are more volcano than mountain. Even listening to that old grandpa dragon’s war stories of serving in Dragon Pass.”

 “But that’s far north of us.”

 “It’s still part of the same mountains. Don’t you still call these the Valeethian Mountains? If there’s lava, it doesn’t really care how far it is from any location. And like a river it can ebb and flow. Maybe even steam shots. Lava flares. Those sorts of things. They could be waiting on something like that. Could even be why this area is not worth the trouble of guardian. If there is a way under the border, such a restriction on it would make it unviable for an army to use.”

 Felix sighed. “My own dragon is smarter than I am,” he grumbled.

 “We have always been a reverse combination,” the dragon admitted.

 “Still… that helps me like… *none.* They could be leaving at any second or still be there a week from now. Depending on whatever they are waiting for. Whether it’s your idea or something else more mundane.”

 “Indeed.”

 “Maybe it’s time I do some walking,” he considered.

 The dragon’s head snapped in his direction. “Excuse me?!”

 “I can’t get anywhere close on you. The moment a dragon comes near they detect it.”

 “And how is that going to help? They will detect you, too! You are melded. That’s what Meldlings *do*. They can feel and control meld links.”

 Felix swallowed and nodded. “Yeah,” he said softly.

 “Li! You aren’t seriously considering what I think you are considering.”

 “You can read my mind, Rina. You know exactly what I’m considering.”

 “Forget it!” she roared. “No way! Not a single way in this universe!”

 He glared at his dragon. “It will only be temporary. Dammit, Rina. What kind of fighter am I if I can’t even protect my teammates? This is what being a member of the Corps is all about. The members of my team are second priority after you. Even more, they are my friends. I don’t have a damn clue if I can help them, but I am out of ideas and I’ll be damn if I’m going to just abandon them!”

 “B-but with me to be your eyes…”

 “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve wandered into a situation while blind. Look. I’ve got my walking stick. If I don’t think I’m going to be able to do anything, I’m going to play it safe and get the hell out of there.”

 “And what am I supposed to do?” the dragon growled. “Just sit back and *wait*?!” she asked incredulously.

 “No. You’re going to go find help. A little farther south you should reach our Border Patrol. Tell them the Death Slayer has been kidnapped.”

 “B-but what if I’m not back in time and you need me to fly?”

 “Tsavrina… how on earth are you going to fly *four people*?”

 “B-but they’ll have their own dragons.”

 “Lydia is a Meldling herself. I think she got surprised. If she hadn’t things might have been more in her favor. There might be something that she can do.”

 “And if you get captured?”

 He shrugged. “It’ll be more than an honor to go down in the line of duty attempting to protect my friends. Tsavrina. We’re wasting time arguing about this. Disconnect. The sooner that you get flying out of here, the sooner you can bring back actual help – that’s not some stupid eighteen year old half-blind kid.

 He reached up and took down his bow and arrows, slinging the quiver over his shoulder.

 “You’re not taking your spear?”

 He shook his head. “I’m going to try to avoid being seen. Arrows would be better, and we both know my close combat skills are lacking. I’m better with my bow. I have my knifes if worse comes to worse. Alright, Rina, my love. Now for the hard part.” He swallowed hard and turned to the dragon. He opened his mouth to give her one final command, but it got stuck in his throat. He closed his eyes and gathered himself, forced himself to pull in his strength. “U-unm-meld…” he stuttered.

 The dragon lowered her head. “I… I don’t want to…” she breathed.

 “You have to. There’s a Meldling out there and I don’t want it to get into my mind, do you? This is the only shot we have. Do it, Rina. D-disconnect and go get us some help. I’ll go and see if there’s anything that I can do out there.”

 “W-what if you get lost?”

 He smirked. “I told you. I’m an adventurer at heart. The city was a big place and I knew every nook and cranny of it – blind. I got my tricks,” he said confidently.

 Tsavrina nodded. She knew. She could see his memories. She could read his mind. She could sense his emotions.

 Dear Gods this was going to hurt.

 He gasped as he felt his beloved dragon reach her mind out towards their meld link and severed it.

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 “What are we waiting for anyways?” Landon asked softly. The three of them had been quiet for some time. Hugh had spent every second of the silence listening and trying to catch the sound of Lydia’s breathing. Watched her chest going up and down slowly as she slept. As time passed, he rejoiced in the sound of her making small attempts to cough. It wasn’t much, but anything had to be better than nothing, and maybe it also meant that her drug was starting to wear off.

 “My guess is that we’re waiting for our superiors. As I said before, unless you know where the hell you’re going, it’s not easy to get through here. People have died making the attempt. Lots of false passages. And even then sometimes the way can get blocked off by hot steam. I’ve only been through three times but the last time it was a close call. We were almost through the tunnel when the tunnel started to heat up. It was a fun mad dash to the other side to get out of the shoot. General Diederich was not pleased by it. Said something about having miscalculated the time or something. They keep things pretty secretive. Don’t want too many people going through here.”

 “I think our Generals will definitely want to have a long talk with you if you ever do get permission to come over,” Landon said.

 Hugh heard the kid take a deep breath and go silent. After a moment he asked, “D-do you think that’s possible? Do you think your Generals are still interested in trying to get me to come over?”

 It was turn for Landon to go silent. “This is what I know,” he said after a long moment. “Lydia is on the dragon of a Captain. That Captain was close friends with the Generals. And there’s never been a single thing that Tsaul has said that has ever made me question that Captain.”

 “Captain Townsend was a good man,” Hugh said softly, breaking into the conversation. He hugged his legs closer to his body. “He remains my idol. I met him once. He was an orphan like me. He never abandoned any of his troops in battle. He was the first to enter and the last to leave. I don’t think he would have kept company with anyone that he did not feel held the same values. And then… they went out of their way to come help Lydia when they did not even know her. Maybe it was a teacher that called them – an old friend of theirs – and maybe it was just because she was on the back of a dragon that belonged to their fallen friend. But, they still came. If they did not abandon a sick sixteen year old trying to pass a rigged physical to be a Rider, I don’t think they would abandon a sixteen year old who’s being beaten. If they can’t help you it’s not going to be for lack of trying.”

 “And if something happens to us,” Landon said, “they’ll do the same. They’ll fight like hell to save us – to save Lydia. She has that contract with them if nothing else. Keep the faith, guys. That’s just all we’ve got to do. Keep faith but until then just wait for the perfect moment and pray like hell.”

 Hugh swallowed and hugged his legs even tighter. *Hang in there, Lyz. Keep breathing. Just keep breathing.*

 How much time passed, he lost track. It was hard to keep track of time when they were in a cave, and it’s not like he knew what the time was to begin with when he woke up.

 Landon had lain down on the ground. The only movement that let Hugh know the guy was awake was when he would occasionally reach up and twist a lock of hair. Eldrich, though, had totally cashed out. The kid had found a comfortable spot on his side, resting his head on his right arm. The only sign that he was feeling any pain was occasionally when he would groan in his sleep. Hugh felt for the guy. No one should have to go through that.

 Those asshole Generals had better be doing something for him.

 For his part, he spent the entire time listening to the sounds of Lydia’s breathing. Or what he thought was her breathing. Maybe it was all in his head. He couldn’t be sure. How many nights had she fallen asleep in the stall while they had been talking, laying together? How many of those nights had he contented himself with listening to the sound of her breathing. Thankful for every breath of hers that sounded normal. Wincing at every breath of hers that sounded wet and short.

 Was he really hearing her breathing or were all those memories and his worry coming together to screw around with his mind. He knew without a doubt that she was breathing. He could see the rise and fall of her chest.

 He swallowed hard when she began to cough. A normal cough. Still asleep she turned her head to the side and coughed hard. She went silent again, but minutes later her coughing returned.

 The drug must be wearing off, he thought happily.

 And then he heard voices. Several of them. He looked around trying to pinpoint their source. It was not from any of the five soldiers or Sean off to the side. No, but they were reacting to the voices.

 Landon sat up, looking over at him and then turning around and looking out towards the cave, also searching for the sound. The voices were getting louder. Finally Hugh was able to pinpoint their location. The cave extended much farther out than he had believed at first, disappearing into the shadows. But now there was a light coming down around a hall at the far back. Sean and the five soldiers had now risen to their feet and had lined themselves up, standing at attention as they waited.

 Finally the light broke out into the room and a large group entered the cave. There had to be at least fifteen men. Hugh’s eyes roved over them. They were all dressed up in the brown western uniforms of Dragon Riders, with daggers strapped to their belts. Except for the man in front. He was dressed in a much classier uniform, though it was still the same brown. It had buttons down the front of it and there were several badges and decorations on the left shoulder. Hugh wasn’t sure what all the badges and decorations meant but he really had no doubt that this was a much higher rank than the others.

 He heard Eldrich swear from his corner and both him and Landon turned around to look at the boy. The boy had a wild look of fear on his face. He crawled into a sitting position and swallowed. “G-General Diederich…” he breathed.

 So the asshole had made the trip personally to collect the two Meldlings, Hugh thought as he turned back around to stare at the guy.

 “Hugh, look,” Landon said, pointing. Hugh frowned and crawled closer to the edge of the cage to crouch beside him. He followed Landon’s finger, trying to figure out what he was pointing out. “Lydia’s tanks.”

 Hugh’s eyes widened. He felt a surge of relief. “Thanks Gods… please, just give it to her,” he begged below his breath.

 The General stopped in front of Sean and stared down at the boy. He began to speak but it was in another language. Hugh closed his eyes and concentrated on the words.

 “Can you understand them, Hugh?” Landon asked.

 “Not really,” he answered. “I only read a few books on the language. Memorized a few pages, but I’m not exactly adept. Plus they are talking too fast. I’m only able to catch a few words here and there.”

 Both of them turned to Eldrich. He shrugged. “Just basic reporting. Nothing interesting yet.”

 “I wish they would just hurry and put one of those tanks on Lydia,” Hugh growled.

 As if on cue, Lydia rolled over and began to cough harder. Hugh swallowed. He could almost feel the pain himself that she was going through. Even sleeping there was no escape for her. No release from her prison of pain.

 The coughing caught the General’s attention. He looked over at her laying on the floor and turned to one of them holding one of the tanks. He said something, flicking a hand in her direction. The soldier bowed and went walking towards her. The man fumbled with the mask for a moment before getting it over her head and then turning the valve.

 True relief swept through him. He whispered a thanks to all of the important Gods he could think of. Hugh looked back up and a jolt went through his body. The General was staring directly at him.

 While Cassings had chewed him out for attempting to break into Lyz’s room, Hugh had felt a bit like a three year old caught with his hand in a cookie jar. Cassings had given him a hard angry look, but looking back on it now, he had truly felt no ill-will from the General. The General that stood before him now made him feel like a bird facing a cat. There was nothing but pure hatred in the man’s glare.

 The General frowned at seeing him and Landon. He turned back to Sean and spoke the first English words Hugh had heard out of the guy so far. “Who are the other two?”

 Sean shrugged. “Prisoners, sir. Caught them along with the Bitch-Meldling. Thought they would be helpful in keeping her subdued.”

 A hand lashed out and struck the boy hard across the face. Sean went staggering back, but the General stepped forward and grabbed the boy by his hair and pulled him forward. He sank a fist into the boy’s stomach.

 “Damn you,” the General growled. “And where in your orders, boy, did you hear me give you approval for that? You have any idea what you have done?”

 He released Sean and the boy crumpled to the ground hard, coughing violently, trying to pull air back into his lungs after having been so violently expelled. “S-sir,” he gasped desperately, “I-I just thought with that bitch’s tendency to care about her friends, it would be necessary to keep her complaint,” he explained quickly.

 “Kidnapping the Meldling will be viewed by her country as one thing! Kidnapping two of their own that have no connection to this situation is another!” The General stepped back and then kicked out at the boy, his boot striking Sean’s face. Sean went rolling in the dirt, blood pouring out of his nose. “This could fuck up everything!”

 Hugh turned around as he watched the General bring his boot up again. He winced at the sound of Sean’s screams. He felt sick. Very very sick. He had no love for the boy, but it was disgusting watching him being treated that way.

 “How the hell do you expect me to fix this?!” the General screamed. “I can’t!” he snarled. “Your orders were simple. Take the Meldling-bitch. This could start a war. Is that what you wanted? Now they’ve seen this place. I can’t just let them go, now can I? I can’t let them go and I can’t take them with us.” He sighed, stepping away from the boy. Hugh looked up and found the guy knuckling his forehead. “Kill them? Throwing them in the lava pit? Claim we have no knowledge? No… her Generals are too smart for that. They would make a statement about this. Aw. Eldrich, of course,” he almost purred suddenly.

 Behind them, he hear Eldrich take a sharp intake of breath. Hugh turned around to see the boy getting to his feet and running to the far back corner of the cage. Hugh looked back around and found the General approaching with a large sadistic smile on his face.

 “I’ll just have you do a small memory wipe on these boys. You would do that, yes, Eldrich? You would do that and I will forget all about your treason to me, boy. You do that for me, and I’ll even keep you with your precious friend. You like Lydia, yes? You don’t want to see me hurt her or her friends?”

 The General, grinning wide, grabbed the bars, staring into the cage at Eldrich like the boy was a delicious morsel he was about to devour. Looking at the guy even closer, Hugh decided he was even uglier than he thought he was before.

 Hugh turned to Eldrich. The boy was bowing with tears in his eyes. “Y-yes, sir. Y-yes, General.”

 The General grinned even wider. “That’s a good boy,” he purred. “You’ll do that later just before we’re about to leave. Now, how about we try getting your friend awake. I have a present for her.”

 Hugh watched as the General turned around. It felt like the guy had just dumped cold water on him. He jumped up to his feet and started rushing to the edge of the cage, but Landon had jumped up as well and was now pushing him away. “Calm down, Hugh,” he hissed. “You’ll only make it worse. Whatever it is, do *not* run your mouth.”

 “No… don’t touch her…” Hugh breathed, his eyes glued to the General. He could feel his heart starting to pound hard in his chest. He could feel the start of panic as the General reached her and stood over her.

 “Dammit, Hugh!” Landon growled a little louder. He threw all his wait against him. Hugh went backwards until he was slammed up against the far side of the cage. He stared down at Landon. “Calm down,” he growled up at him. “Don’t make it worse for her. You have to keep calm for her. He’s going to let us go. Lydia will have a fighting chance that way. She won’t be able to do anything if he uses us against her. You know, Lydia. She won’t do anything if she believes for even a second that you might be in danger. Calm down. Don’t even watch. If you can’t handle it don’t watch.”

 Hugh stared down at the guy. He swallowed hard a few times before he nodded – before he forced himself to gather up his emotions. Collected them and forced them away. Landon was right. Somehow he knew that. He recognized that. Oh gods… just don’t hurt her. Please don’t hurt her.

 His legs felt like they had turned to jelly. The gave out from under him slowly. He slid his back down the cage bars until he was on the ground. He buried his hands in his hair on either side of his head and prayed like hell for it to all be over.

 General Diederich crouched over her, taking something from a small pouch he wore under his belt. Hugh recognized it as a tiny vial. It was filled with something. He watched as the General uncapped it and slid her mask down and placed the vial under her nose for barely half a second.

 Almost instantly Lydia jolted awake, swatting at whatever was under her nose. The General dodged and quickly recapped it and stood back. Almost immediately she fell into a hard coughing fit. Asshole, Hugh thought. She couldn’t take strong scents – she couldn’t even take the scent of a flower. Whatever pain she had been in before, he had just made three times worse.

            He watched anxiously as she writhed on the floor, clutching her chest and trying to force her lungs to expel the phlegm trapped inside her body. She reached up and pulled the mask over her mouth, desperately trying to breathe in her medicine. It was agony watching her. The General, however, seemed to be enjoying every second of her distress, watching and smiling the entire time. When she threw up the first time, his smile grew  even larger. The second time the guy crouched down, clicking his tongue – still smiling – and began pulling back her hair and touching her face. When Lydia tried to pull away, his grip tightened, holding her there.

            Hugh swallowed. He wanted to scream at the guy. Tell him to get his hands off of her, but he bit his lip and held his tongue. Landon’s words flooded through his mind. Nothing would be accomplished by screaming and in fact he could make the situation worse. If the guy got off on pain and humiliating people, he would definitely derive joy in knowing he was getting two for the price of one.

            Lydia began to calm down. It was slow. It had to have been a good fifteen minutes before she started to regain control. She clutched the mask to her face and glared up at the General. There was hatred in her eyes. Hatred and a hard determination. She was steeling herself, prepping herself for a fight. Gods he loved that expression. He could never get tired of seeing it. That moment that she recognized an obstacle and her mind started to work to figure out how to break through it. What the *hell* had he been thinking when he broke up with her. He hoped that this General was getting his kicks in right now, because she was about to bring a fight. There was nothing that could piss Lydia off faster than someone making her feel weak.

            Her eyes started to rove around the cave, taking everything in that she could see with her head in this position. Her eyes met his briefly, and he put on his bravest face and forced a smile just for her. She blinked once, holding it, acknowledging him, before continuing her examinations.

            Finally her chest began to fall and rise normally. She pulled her mask down. “You want to let go of me now, asshole?” she growled.

            The General tightened his grip and pulled her up, closer to his face. “You might want think about being a little nicer to me, considering your present situation,” he said with a laugh.

            “Considering my present situation,” she growled, “I think I would like to stick a knife in you.”

            “You’re a little short of those,” the General pointed out gleefully.

            “What a pity.”

            The man grinned as he stood up, wrenching her to her feet by her hair. Lydia gasped in pain, reaching up to try to fight the hand – and then she kicked out at him, connecting between his legs. The General gasped in pain, clutching at the spot and doubling over, but his hand remained steadfast in her hair, refusing to relent.

            “Oh, Lydia…” Eldrich gasped, flinching. “Please stop…” he said softly, sinking down to the floor, and hiding his eyes.

            The General stood back up and jerked her forward and down, yanking her off her feet. “I’ve had enough of you, Alvincia,” he growled. “Time for you to learn a little discipline of your own.”

            Hugh’s heart stopped in fear as she was thrown down hard to the floor and the General reached for the knife at his belt.

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            Felix blinked, looking around. Well, he had found the rock wall, but he was not seeing a cave anywhere. So… right or left… The first thing that he did was took his knife and placed his mark on the wall – so that if he came back this way, he would know where he started. He stared up at the sun. He determined that he would walk for a half hour in one direction before he turned around and tried the other. He opted to first go right. Going left would take him south closer to the border patrol. That seemed like the least likely location for a way around it. Placing his hand against the wall, he began walking.

 Fortunately there was still plenty of daylight left. He worried that maybe his technique would not work, but quickly dashed the fear. He could not afford to be indecisive. If it did not work, he would consider other options, but for now he would commit to the plan he had come up with. Mistakes occurred when a person became indecisive and veered away from an original plan.

            At least the way was clear. Apart from light brush and the occasional tress, he was able to make good time, and kept the wall in sight at all times. He had only a minor situation when he was attempting to test some moss that was growing on the wall to check for a hollow space and accidentally disturbed a snake. Thank the gods he had had the sense to poke at it with his walking stick instead of using his hand.

            He was about to turn around, having reached the allotted half hour, when his luck turned gold.

            Dragons. He heard them. A little bit off in the distance.

            Time to exercise caution, Felix. Ducking low and trying to take quiet, careful steps, he approached the place that he heard the dragons. They were laying on the ground, paying very little attention to their surroundings. They were dark green in color and on the smallish side with only two legs. These must be Battle Dragons, he thought.

            Licking his lips, he pressed himself hard to the wall. They were chained up a safe enough distance away and not a single one of them paid him any attention. He concentrated on the wall and found the cave, almost giving a shout for joy at his extreme success.

            He rounded the edge, attempting to peer in, unsure of what he might find inside – and winced. It was dark inside. He wanted to scream in frustration. His night vision was practically non-existent. He could make out *nothing*.

            But that told him two things. No one was in the immediate inside – because there would be a light that he could discern – and next that the cave was deep. But that did not discount the possibility of a guard.

            He swallowed and drew in a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he focused on his other senses. Listen, Felix. Listen and see what you can hear from inside.

            He stood there for several minutes, holding his breath… but he heard nothing.

            Time to take a chance. He crept around the corner and stepped inside, keeping close to the wall. The moment he was inside, his vision was stolen away. He stood there for a minute, waiting for his body to adjust and for his heart to settle. Despite having been blind for a  few years of his life, it was still a shock when his vision was taken away again.

            The first thing he felt was wind. There was a slight breeze blowing through the cave. He also smelled water – and could hear just the barest trickle of it echoing off the walls from a distance. He swallowed hard. Something was strange about this cave. That’s what he felt. An alarm bell was going off in the back of his mind that he could not quite pin point, but he had been in enough dangerous areas to know that it was better to pay attention to that alarm bell than to ignore it.

            He brought out his walking stick from his pocket and slowly began to step forward, taking his time. Tapping and carefully observing the terrain through his stick. He had gotten no more than maybe two feet inside when he observed the peculiarity.

            There was a drop off.

            He reached forward to tap his stick on the ground but his stick found nothing but air. That did not make sense. So this cave lead nowhere? That could not be right. He had seen the dragons outside.

            Bridge?

            That was his next guess. There had to be a bridge somewhere – if there was anywhere in here to go at all. Or maybe he was standing in front of a hole. That was another possibility. A very large hole in the ground. What an idiot he would probably look like right now if he were observed. He was probably standing in front of the smallest hole in the world, worrying about it.

            Life over humility. Clutching his walking stick even tighter, he half turned and began tapping the floor carefully, both to his left and ahead of him. He tapped the edge carefully, looking to see if there was ever land again. It was painstaking and slow – and he was constantly in fear that someone would come out and see him, but he could think of no other better plan.

            Finally he hit earth on his left side. Well, that was progress. He took a few more steps but the land remained. Standing there, he frowned. Finally he reached down and took a handful of pebbles and threw them outwards in that direction, listening to the sound of them as they scattered. He swallowed hard at the sound.

            There was land in front of him, but judging from the rocks, it was a small strip only. Maybe roughly a foot in length, but no telling if it widened further out – or worse, if it narrowed. And were there more than one land strips? How wide was the chasm? Was it a chasm?

            Calm down, Felix. Don’t lose your head now, he thought to himself. It was just so incredibly frustrating. His friends were in trouble and he couldn’t even *see* to save them. He really wished there was light. If there were light he would be able to see something. Even a little…

            Well, sitting here making impossible wishes wasn’t going to save his friends. Time to get started, Felix.

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 Hugh crawled to the edge of the cage. Beside him Landon jumped to his feet also watching in horror as the scene folded out before them.

 Lydia was now face down, lying in the dirt. Diederich unsheathed his blade and grabbed her by her collar. Hugh could only watch in sick horror as the man wrenched her up half of the ground and sunk his blade in just below the collar. Lydia gasped, but it was not filled with pain. Instead all he heard was the sound of wrenching, ripping fabric.

 A wave of fear went up his body and he looked around at Eldrich. The boy was now facing the other direction, clutching the bars, and trying to avoid the scene. This gave Hugh the view that he was looking for – a view of the boy’s back. His uniform had been sliced open in the back. Oh gods… He whirled back around.