
Learning Curve

by Leia Fee

2859.07.13-1

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2859.07.13

N'vai watched with satisfaction as the flame sizzled up the ropevine, then threw a glance towards the rest of the Wing and frowned. He was out of place after chasing down that particular clump; creeping forward in the formation.

Fall back a little further from Kventh please, Zalyth, he directed, glad to have spotted it before getting picked up on it by one of the bronzes or Weyrlingsecond Ambri.

Kventh says her rider wonders if we were going to race her, Zalyth said, as she complied. We were not that far ahead!

N'vai sent reassurance to Zalyth without really thinking about it, already scanning the sky for the next tumble of ropevine.

Zalyth turned her gaze downwards, scanning where he was not, between them covering the whole sky.

Below them, flashes of flame indicated that their fellow class was doing its bit in catching what they missed -- as, hopefully, the lower wing would in Fall.

There? Zalyth asked, already starting to move towards a lower clump.

No, N'vai mentally checked her. Too late for that piece, let someone else get it.

Zalyth returned her attention to seeking for the next piece, though not without a flicker of dissatisfaction at letting any of the stuff go without a chase. In truth N'vai shared it but he'd been scolded too often already for chasing one piece to the exclusion of all else. He'd been shown the paint marks on the dragon he'd left exposed as a result, had been forced to reflect on the kind of damage that would have done had it really been Thread.

Tahaeth says we are finished and to get ready to land now. He is pleased. The Wing missed little rope today. The weyrlingsecond is pleased too, we did well.

N'vai grinned and slapped Zalyth's neck. *You always fly well, dearest.*

I flame well too, Zalyth added with unabashed pride.

N'vai smiled, letting his dragon's unshakeable self confidence bolster his own.

We did do well today, they're right, you know.

I do know. Zalyth landed lightly, still neatly in position with the rest of the class. And now I will sleep well in the sun while you eat.

N'vai realised that his stomach was indeed rumbling. The morning had raced by again. In fact the past few weeks and month had raced by, seeming to accelerate as Zalyth had

recovered and the weyrling drills resumed. At times it seemed hard to recall that this was an entirely different time and Weyr to his own, and then he would look around for someone who was no longer there, or Weyrharper Andrian would comment on some change or other and it would all flood back and he'd be as lost and confused as the first day they'd arrived.

Already the other weyrlings were talking about which Wing they'd like to be assigned to once they graduated. N'vai on the other hand, privately found himself wondering whether he'd graduate this time at all. He hadn't admitted this to anyone, and had even managed to keep it from Zalyth.

Still, drills like today were steps forward. He'd not been yelled at for being out of formation, hadn't missed any vital instruction and had kept to his own level and cleared his own patch of sky well. The occasions when he managed all of those at once were slowly getting more frequent and perhaps it was time he allowed himself to believe Zalyth's constant certainty that they'd be fine, that they were doing well.

He ate with the rest of his weyrling class, acceding after a moment's reluctance to V'shel's determined beckon. Everyone was in good spirits, knowing the morning drill had gone well. N'vai let his attention wander as the conversation turned from training to gossip and discussion of how people planned to spend their next rest day and speculation as to whether they'd be allowed to visit the Kadanzer Hold gather.

"We're back to chucking rocks at each other next bell," V'shel commented when the conversation flagged.

There were mixed groans and grins at this news.

"Anything that doesn't involve being bellowed at for being a wingleth out of formation will suit me fine," B'ral commented.

N'vai shared that particular sentiment but felt his heart sink anyway, as the cautious confidence gained that morning ebbed slowly away. The throwing and catching practice for the replenishment of firestone sacks was one of his weaknesses. He'd worked hard to build up at least the muscle to throw the distance, but improving his accuracy had proved far harder. He missed altogether or came close to bowling his classmates right off their dragons as often as he was on target with his throw.

Being on the receiving end was no better and he always had to fight off unpleasant recollections of childhood games and cries of "slippyfingers!" as he dropped some ball or missed some catch again.

We flew well this morning, Zalyth put in firmly. We will fly well this afternoon as well.

N'vai restrained himself from pointing out that it wasn't the flying that was the problem, but Zalyth obviously picked up his doubts anyway.

Is catching sacks hard? We need the sacks. We need lots of sacks, to carry the stone, to chew, to flame! Her tone became more emphatic. We will flame the Thread. You must catch so I can flame.

Would that it were as simple as draconic logic made it, N'vai thought ruefully. He sent reassuring thoughts to Zalyth and she subsided, confident in the simple fact that they would do what they must do.

Outside, Weyrlingsecond Ambri easily commanded their attention and the chattering about lunch and restdays melted away quickly.

Together the class rose into the air and jumped *between* to the practice area. Today they were using one of the actual staging areas that would be used as a replenishment point in 'Fall, and N'vai found himself wondering how close they were to doing this for real.

They landed and Ambri divided the group into two. Half would practise as the throwers and half as the catchers, swapping later on.

N'vai found himself in the throwing group and suppressed a sigh, determined to make the best of it. Zalyth took herself off to lie in the sun nearby.

N'vai tried to take Zalyth's advice about not worrying, paced slowly to the edge of the drop-off and hefted his first sack. He didn't have to wait long before a dragon swooped by, a length away and slightly below him, his rider reaching out, both hands off his straps.

N'vai swung the sack and flung it towards the brown, too focussed to note who it was. Too focussed to moderate his throw either as it turned out. The rider, B'ral, N'vai now realised, reeled against his straps, but managed to hang on as Dhanath swerved beneath him.

N'vai winced, tried to wave an apology but they were already gone and one of the blues was close on his tail. To N'vai's relief someone else was already stepping forward to make that throw, and he returned to the pile of sacks close at hand for another.

His second and third throws both missed entirely, one landing squarely on Eyrth's hind-quarters, out of reach of his rider to tumble away down the mountain, and the other making brown Revath duck away to avoid being struck across the head. His rider swore audibly and N'vai flushed.

"Come on now," Ambri said sharply, suddenly at his shoulder. "Concentrate."

N'vai bit back the urge to protest that he was concentrating and instead glared fiercely at the next approaching pair. B'ral and Dhanath again, and Nvai couldn't help noticing that B'ral had more cautiously kept one hand on his straps this time.

That particular throw went without a hitch and Ambri nodded before moving on.

The practice eventually became a sort of blur. V'shel giving him a thumbs up as he caught the sack thrown to him. A'dek throwing his arms up in exasperation as he missed. More sacks, more throws. N'vai's arms were aching even before he swapped to catching, by which time his erratic throws -- although they were improving -- were still landing off target almost as often as on. His catches were marginally better, which he dully suspected had more to do with the accuracy of his classmates than his own skill. Even he was hard pressed to drop a sack which had just struck him squarely in the chest!

Eventually Ambri called a halt. Sighing in relief, N'vai instructed Zalyth to land and slid to the ground to lean against her.

He straightened up as Ambri passed, striding along the line of weyrlings waiting for her verdict.

"Not bad," she allowed after a few moments surveying them. "Definite improvements. Plenty more that could be

made though." Did she look at him with that remark? N'vai avoided looking up to find out for certain, but she was already continuing. "But on the whole not bad at all."

Another pause.

"Which is just as well."

Several weyrlings did look up to try and meet her eyes at that point. A definite feeling of excitement or nerves or anticipation was suddenly in the air.

"Just as well," Ambri went on, "since you'll be carrying out your first active replenishment duty during the Windsong Tip Threadfall in three days time."

N'vai felt his heart flip flop. Chatter had broken out among the weyrlings, but was hastily quashed as Ambri stared at them.

"There will be no more drill today as we'll be preparing for Threadfall this evening. You will be supplying firestone sacks to the staging area then returning to the Weyr to help as required."

She looked around. "Any questions?"

Shaken heads answered her.

"Very well."

The group remounted their dragons and at a signal from Ambri launched into the air.

Getting into formation before going *between* was almost second nature now and Zalyth lined up on Kventh without being asked. N'vai turned his attention to Ambri, who signalled them *between*.

The preparations for 'Fall kept everyone too busy that afternoon for N'vai to find time to worry and by the time the Wings returned he was more than ready to fall into bed and forget all about it.

Unfortunately the moment his head hit the pillow he found that was the last thing he could do. His mind ran over and over the day's practice, trying to figure out why he'd missed the throws he had, trying to picture the correct position to aim at, the right heft and force to put into his throw.

He couldn't visualise it, that was the problem. He'd stood with the other weyrlings watching other people's attempts and heard them mutter before the sack had even landed, "That's going to miss," or "good shot," before the rider had even caught it. N'vai wondered how they knew. He'd watched and stared and tried to see what they were basing their timing on and he couldn't do it. He knew he was missing something, some element of judgement that the others seemed to either have naturally or had managed to learn, but he just couldn't do it.

It was embarrassing enough, even among his peers, to be the one constantly missing the throws. To delay a wingrider looking for their next firestone sack would be even worse, and he found himself moving from merely being nervous about the upcoming 'Fall to downright dreading it.

You don't miss as often, Zalyth put in sleepily, obvious disturbed herself by his anxiety. *You will get better still as we practise.*

I suppose so, N'vai returned. *But there's no more time for practice. It's next 'Fall!*

A thought struck him then, and he voiced it to Zalyth. *But tomorrow is a rest day.*

Zalyth's mental tone grew more alert. *Are we going to the beach?* she asked eagerly.

If you want to, N'vai allowed. *But later. I think we*

should go somewhere quiet and practise the throws.

Zalyth didn't protest, though N'vai could sense that she didn't understand his eagerness or his worry.

He turned his thoughts to where he could go that would be out of the way. V'shel would no doubt assume he was sloping off somewhere alone to feel sorry for himself again, but that couldn't be helped.

Getting a sack should be easy enough and Zalyth could catch.

N'vai frowned then in the dark. It wouldn't be quite the same as throwing to a mounted rider, but it would have to do.



2859.07.14

When morning dawned, he left the cot early, the better to evade V'shel's enquiries as to his plans for the day and not-too-subtle nudging towards spending it with the rest of them.

N'vai headed across the weyr, to the firestone store, and was unchallenged as he snagged one of the sacks lying ready for filling. He could fill it with any old pebbles when he arrived, there was no point using firestone just for practice.

Zalyth was undisturbed by the early start and N'vai decided to fly to his chosen practice site without jumping *between*. He hoped the calming rhythm of Zalyth's wings beating through the morning air and the peace and quiet away from the chattering crowd that accompanied every class would help him concentrate and focus a bit better.

They landed at the base of a cliff not far distant from the Weyr, but out of easy sight and a spot few people had cause to visit. N'vai quickly filled the sack with pebbles and stones from the beach, choosing pieces broadly similar to firestone chunks in size and weight.

Zalyth watched him, occasionally turning a wistful glance towards the water's edge.

Afterwards, N'vai promised her when he noticed.

Zalyth perked up and willingly leapt back into the air to carry him to the top of the cliff with the full sack.

You know what I want to do? N'vai checked.

Yes. You will throw the sacks. I will catch.

Right.

N'vai stepped towards the cliff edge and looked down while Zalyth returned to the air. The cliff fell steeply away for the first few dragonlengths then spread out to a shallower incline down to the beach. It wasn't a mountaintop but there was room to Zalyth to fly at the right sort of distance.

N'vai looked up to where Zalyth circled round. After a moment she swooped back, flying along the edge of the cliff, her head turned slightly to watch him.

N'vai waited until what he judged was the right moment and lobbed the sack towards her. It sailed wide although Zalyth turned neatly in the air to make a spirited grab at it.

I missed! She sounded indignant and N'vai hastened to correct her.

Not you, dear. It was a bad throw.

Oh. Zalyth's tone was slightly puzzled and N'vai wondered if the dragon only now understood why he had been so worried.

Zalyth dived to snatch up the sack and return to the air,

almost without touching the ground. N'vai couldn't help admiring her neat flying, even as he worried about his own performance.

Zalyth dropped the sack beside him and circled around again.

This time she caught the thrown sack, but only with a wild dodge which N'vai knew a dragonpair would not have attempted in the more crowded airspace of the replenishment point, with other dragons coming and going.

He didn't bother to try and subdue her enthusiasm though, instead focussing on his next attempt.

The morning wore away and N'vai tried to critically analyse his successes, trying not to let himself get too overconfident as they steadily became more frequent. Zalyth catching was different from a rider on a larger, less manoeuvrable dragon, and he made himself discount the times she had swerved to cleverly snag a sack which by all rights should have been a wild miss.

As if these doubts were the trigger he fumbled the next one and Zalyth had to tuck her left wing in and duck sharply to avoid getting clouted full across the outstretched sail. N'vai winced at the manoeuvres, then turned abruptly pale and cold at a pained and startled yell from below.

"What the--" He dropped to his knees to peer over the cliff, anxiety and confusion fluttering together and making him nauseous. He'd picked the spot so carefully. No one should be out here. What had he done?

Zalyth!

For a split second he was torn between which was more urgent -- to send the dragon down to see what had happened or call her to him to carry him down.

Before he'd chosen though Zalyth was already beside him, his distress turning her eyes an anxious whirling yellow.

N'vai scrambled onto her back.

"Down to the beach," he ordered, in his haste reverting to verbal communication.

Zalyth glided down quickly and N'vai was off her back and running almost before she touched the sand. At the base of the cliff a crumpled figure was stirring.

The movement gave N'vai hope that he hadn't actually killed anyone at least, but how badly hurt were they? How would he get them back? He'd never flown with anyone else on Zalyth before, what if whoever it was was badly hurt? Could he carry them?

Thoughts chased each other through his mind as he crouched down.

A girl, he realised on closer inspection. One not much older than him, and vaguely familiar. Not a weyrling, though. Not a dragonrider. There was no angry and distressed dragon rushing to her side. He felt a guilty relief at that and instantly berated himself. Whoever he'd flattened he'd made a horrible mistake.

"Hello?" he asked tentatively. "Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

The girl opened rather dazed-looking blue eyes.

"Can you hear me?" N'vai repeated. "Can you tell me your name?" He had heard the healers trying to talk round dazed or injured riders with such questions and would have asked again but was cut off by the girl's answer

"Sapherlin. What happened?"

N'vai turned red. "Um."

I was chucking a sack of rocks at my dragon, missed and hit you' didn't seem likely to be an answer which would go down well.

"You, um, fell," he finally said, weakly, deciding the full story could wait.

The girl pushed herself to a sitting position and examined her scraped and bleeding arms.

"No? Really?"

She put her hand to her head and winced as she found a darkening lump there.

"That bit I've figured out." She looked up at the cliff. "Did you see what happened? Something fell..."

N'vai was unable to prevent his gaze sliding towards the sack of firestone laying nearby.

Sapherlin followed his gaze and N'vai had to suppress a ridiculous urge to step in front of the sack to hide it. He swallowed. There really was nothing for it but the truth.

"Well actually, I dropped that," he pointed. I was practising throwing sacks and sort of missed."

"Only sort of?" Sapherlin asked wryly, but didn't look too furious at least.

Zalyth moved to stand beside N'vai and stretch out her neck to peer more closely at the girl. Sapherlin's eyes widened but she didn't step back.

"You're a weyrling?"

"Yes," N'vai said. "N'vai. This is Zalyth. And I'm really really sorry. I didn't think anyone would be out here."

"Yes, I thought that too." Sapherlin's mouth twitched slightly at the corners as though she was suppressing laughter. The expression turned to a grimace however when she tried to stand.

N'vai caught her as she stumbled. "What the matter, what's hurt?"

"Ankle. Just twisted I think, but shards, how I am going to explain this when I turn up for chores limping?"

"It's my fault," N'vai said, straightening his back. "I'll tell them what happened. I'll take you to infirmary."

Can you carry two, Zalyth, dear?

Of course.

"Zalyth says she can carry us both," N'vai said. "Let me help you."

"It's fine." Sapherlin half hopped, half limped over to the dragon. "I can manage. Thank you, Zalyth," she added as the green turn her head to regard her.

N'vai helped her up nonetheless and climbed up behind her, not certain of the best way to manage this. He put his own straps on her and gripped tightly with his legs while twining a loose end of strap around his hands and hanging on.

Go carefully, Zalyth, he pleaded.

Zalyth gave a snort as she leapt into the air.

I would not let you fall!

Wanting to get back as quickly as possible and the moment of confession over with, N'vai directed Zalyth *between* and they appeared over the Weyr moments later.

To her credit Sapherlin didn't squeal at the transfer and N'vai remembered where he'd seen her before. She was a candidate. His mind started racing again. How badly was her ankle injured? When was the next Hatching? If he'd damaged her chances of Standing...

Land by the infirmary please, Zalyth.

When the green touched down, N'vai slid off first to help Sapherlin down.

"Thanks," she said. "Look, I hope you don't get into too much trouble over this. Really I probably shouldn't have been in the way, I have this knack for being underfoot, climbing somewhere I shouldn't be..."

N'vai gave a quick, small smile in gratitude but somehow doubted that was going to help him. He went ahead of Sapherlin into the infirmary calling out for some help.

The first person he saw was journeywoman Carran and he felt some small relief. At least she wasn't likely to yell at him in addition to the rollicking he knew he had coming from Ambri.

The healer followed as N'vai explained that Sapherlin had had a fall and injured her ankle. Carran nodded understanding and quickly appraised Sapherlin's injuries, gave a few reassuring words and took her inside.

N'vai decided the moment was opportune to make himself scarce and headed back to his cot feeling distinctly foolish.

You threw well to me. I caught lots of sacks, Zalyth said, consolingly, though she sounded doubtful. The girl was not badly hurt. She will Stand on the Sands and her dragon will find her. Like I found you.

N'vai moved to lean heavily against Zalyth and caress her. She *had* found him after all. She had chosen him.

I would not choose someone who could not be a dragonrider. I am a dragon. she pointed out as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. *You are my rider. So you will learn to do everything a dragonrider does. I will learn to do everything a fighting dragon does. We will learn together.*

This was a longest speech N'vai could remember Zalyth making in some while and he out his arms around as much of her as he could reach, in gratitude for her unwavering support and loyalty and affection.



"Explain yourself." Weyrleadersecond Ambri's voice was flat as she stared at N'vai across the small room which served as office. Her anger was more forbidding for the lack of visible display. "Give me an explanation to take to the Weyrleaders when I go and try to explain how one of my weyrings came to nearly kill a candidate."

N'vai blanched. The Weyrleaders?

"I--" He faltered. Swallowed. Tried again. "I was practising."

"Practising." Ambri repeated. "And you think you know better than I do, what it is you need to practise, do you?"

"Uh..." N'vai stalled again. 'No' would be in flat contradiction of his actions. 'Yes' a sure ticket to the middens for cheek.

"I just thought--"

"No you didn't." Ambri contradicted him before he finished. "Lack of 'thought' was exactly your mistake. You didn't think. You panicked, and you overreacted."

She surveyed him for a long silent moment, as the flush

deepened on his face.

"I'm not going to point out the obvious," she finally continued. "I'm not going to tell you that you could have seriously hurt someone, even killed them. Or that you could have injured yourself. Or hurt Zalyth."

N'vai cringed at the last, he *hadn't* thought of that.

You would not have hurt me! Zalyth put in indignantly, but N'vai shushed her. Ambri wasn't finished.

"But I want you to think about something -- do you think I'd have kept quiet about it if I thought you weren't good enough in yesterday's drills?"

"Well, no, I suppose not," N'vai managed to meet her eyes at last.

"Do you think for one second I'd endanger the success of a 'Fall by sending a weyrling on duty who wasn't up to it? In however small a capacity?"

"No," N'vai mumbled again.

"Good. That's one thing you've got right then." She crossed the room a N'vai refrained from flinching as she slapped him hard on the shoulder. "Now buck up."

She strode past him and opened the door. "Out, and next time I see you in here it better not be for anything so sharding stupid."

N'vai fled.

Outside, V'shel was first in line to meet him, thought doubtless the other weyrings were just as curious and not far away.

"Well?" he asked. "What's she got you doing this time?"

"Nothing," N'vai said, only belatedly realising it himself. "She just told me not to be 'so sharding stupid'."

V'shel grinned and slapped him on the back, almost as hard as Ambri had done. "Well done! So -- some of us are going to see if we can get permission to go to the gather, are you going to come?"

N'vai muttered something non-committal and let his mind wander back to the upcoming Threadfall. Was Ambri right? Was he making too much of a drama of his perceived shortcomings?

N'vai went through the following day in a sort of distracted daze, finding things to keep busy with and then catching himself unconsciously replaying the throwing and catching practice in his mind, trying to visualise it again.

Sometimes Zalyth commented on it and brought him back to himself, and he tried determinedly to follow Ambri's advice and let it go for once.



2859.07.16

N'vai woke with mixed nerves and gratitude that the day of the 'Fall had arrived, and doubly so that it was an early one and he didn't have the morning to kill in worrying.

Ambri gathered the group together in one corner of the drill grounds. All over the Weyr, noise and bustle reigned as people prepared for the 'Fall.

"The site that's been chosen to be the staging area this time is as follows," she began without preamble. They all knew what they were doing. Amaedanth reinforced the image in the young dragons' minds and Zalyth passed it on

to N'vai.

"Keep calm," Ambri warned them. "The whole point of using the staging areas is that it's not a disaster if someone misses. Try again, and don't let the fact you made one mistake fluster you into making more."

She didn't look at N'vai as she spoke but he had a suspicion her words were aimed particularly at him. Or maybe he was just making too much of it again.

"Any questions?" Ambri looked up and down the line, to silence. "Good."

The group mounted and took off together and were soon landing on the designated mountaintop. A damp morning breeze swirled around them, a trace of mist left in the air.

"It won't last," Ambri assured them before anyone had commented. "Soon as the sun's properly up this'll burn off."

Curtly she marshalled them into position. "Hard to tell how long it'll be before we're needed. All depends on how the 'Fall pans out, but stay alert."

N'vai fidgeted as he waited but the nerves and ceaseless turning over the potential problems in his mind seemed to have stopped of its own accord. Perhaps it was because it was simply too late to do anything more about it.

He was feeling oddly tranquil as the day warmed, until Zalyth raised her head.

They come, she informed him. N'vai glanced around but he was in the best position as the first of the dragonriders popped from *between* and flew towards them.

A green, her rider scanning about alertly. Zalyth supplied a name which N'vai instantly forgot as he stepped forward and heaved the sack towards the pair. The rider snagged it neatly, spared a fleeting nod and disappeared.

It had taken seconds, but N'vai let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding for hours.

"Good," Ambri said from behind him. "Everyone stay sharp -- the other greens will have similar endurance, you can expect it to get busy soon now."

She was right. Soon the assembled weyrings were working flat out, tossing sacks, then doubling back for more as someone else took over the throwing.

After a while, N'vai realised he'd stopped counting how many of his throws had landed on target. He thought it had been more than not, but in any case none of the riders had batted an eyelid at having to circle around for another attempt. One or two had outright muffed the catch themselves and waved an apology of sorts across the gap.

N'vai's arms were starting to ache but by the time the frequency of the replenishments diminished, but there was more time to rest between throws now. The dragons appearing from *between* became limited to the occasional brown or bronze as the end of 'Fall neared.

The Wings return home, Zalyth told him eventually, just as Ambri called out. "All right, relax. The 'Fall is over. The Wings are flying home. Well done everyone."

Elation leapt in N'vai as he all but ran to Zalyth's side.

You are content? she asked, needlessly. *You threw well?*

Yes! His pleasure spilled over into the contact and Zalyth's eyes whirled happily as, at Ambri's command, the group took to the air for the homeward jump.

The Weyr was in its usual state of post-Fall ordered

chaos when they returned but it had been an unusually good 'Fall, with few injuries, and the mood was cheerful. N'vai threw himself into the tasks that remained for the weyrlings to do, feeling a part of the whole as he hadn't done in a long time.

I was right, Zalyth commented as he scrubbed between her wings that afternoon.

"Hmm?" N'vai swooshed water over her to rinse off the suds and let himself fall backwards to float in the warm water salt water and ease aching shoulders

I said you could do it, her tone was smug, whether with being correct, or at having remembered her earlier comment it was hard to tell.

N'vai laughed. *You and Weyrlingsecond Ambri. I suppose I'm outnumbered, then.*

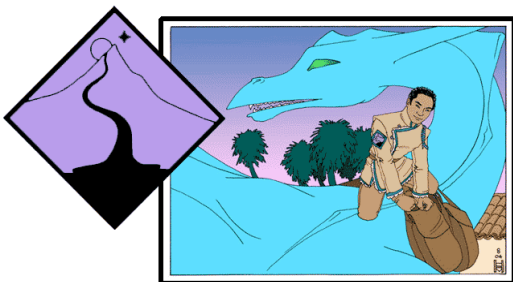
Zalyth's only answer was to roll over in the water, almost swamping N'vai and making him grab at her for support.

We will learn more things together and we will fly with the Wings and flame Thread! she said with gusto.

Yes. N'vai agreed. *We will.*

And for once there was no doubt in his mind as he said it.

END



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