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# Lightning

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“And finally, Search duties...” Wingleader A’nar looked over the assembled riders, and young X’ramin was surprised when his gaze lingered on him. “With a gold on the sands, we can never have too many Candidates. X’ramin, I want you to pair up with Kadja. You’ve never ridden Search before, have you, bluerider?”

X’ramin felt that the question was rhetorical – it was unlikely that A’nar would forget such a thing – but he dutifully shook his head. Kadja’s green Nilyath was a decent Search dragon, and could boast several Impressions to her credit. He wondered if his blue Yarath would prove to have any Search talent?

“Time to get some experience under your belt, then,” said A’nar. “Your assigned list is the Smithcraft Hall, Riverbend Hold and various others in that area.” The bronzerider handed over a list to greenrider Kadja, then continued with his assignments: “V’dalin, you are with Lesein. Delta Hold and points north. Eilsa pairs with S’ban – Windsong Hold and the Weavercraft Hall...”

X’ramin sidled over to Kadja to peer at the list they’d been assigned. Search duty! He felt swelled with pride that what he might do today could end up with a new rider Impressing on the sands. And there was a gold egg waiting! Amisseth had laid gold, putting the lie to all those rumours that a mating flight that had begun with the death of another queen, could result in nothing but an ill-fated clutch.

It would certainly be something to boast about if he and Yarath were the ones to find the girl who Impressed that new gold.

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Hot winds swept west over Maori and Kadanzer Holds towards the Western Barrier Range. The wind struck this rocky barrier to its progress and was forced upwards, forming eddies and air masses that sent flocks of wherries tumbling across the sky. Warm moist air that had travelled across the continent from the sea, collided with summer thermals that sprawled over the mountain slopes. Thunderheads grew from the warm air, the moisture it carried suddenly visible as clouds first white, then dark.

The air masses battled for dominance, pushing each other into a new path. The infant storm headed north, growing in power as it moved into warmer latitudes. It pushed onwards, heading for the coast.

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“Cheer up,” Kadja said, as she looked at X’ramin’s glum face at the end of their day on Search. “Not all dragons can be Search dragons.”

Her companion gave a sigh. “I know. I was just hoping...”

She laughed, not unkindly, as she climbed back up onto Nilyath’s back. “You were just hoping that Yarath would pick out some girl who would be forever grateful to you when she Impressed gold.”

The young bluerider blushed furiously and Kadja laughed again. “Don’t fret about it,” she said. “We can report back to the Weyrwoman that there are two Smith apprentices as potential candidates for the other colours. That’s a good day’s work, whatever way you look at it. Besides—” Kadja pulled on her flying helmet. “—At least you had Yarath look at *all* the girls. There are some that would only have told their dragon to look at the pretty ones!”

X’ramin looked shocked. “But—that’s...”

“Oh, I can tell you a tale or two about a High Reaches bronzerider I know from my time there...” Kadja grinned and jerked her thumb skywards. They could continue the conversation via their dragons as they made their way back to the Weyr - safely out of earshot of any easily outraged holders. Nilyath sprang upwards, Yarath a heartbeat or two behind her.

They climbed steadily, then jumped *between*.

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Lightning zig-zagged across the sky. The bolt was a thing of the here and now – instant by instant it sought the easiest path to expend its vast energies. *That* pocket of air was cooler, *this* was more humid. Again and again choices were offered and the huge charge hurtled through the sky, jumping hither and thither on its course, but always seeking the path of least resistance.

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There was a thunderstorm raging when blue Yarath and green Nilyath emerged from between over Kadanzer Weyr, late in the afternoon. The pair of dragons were buffeted by turbulent air, and rain sleeted down over them. Thunder growled in the sky above.

As they glided towards the Weyr, X’ramin gazed up the massed black thunderheads and saw a flicker of lightning within. *I hope this is gone by tomorrow*, he commented to his dragon. *I hate waiting on deck for hours with the whole wing crammed into the Gather Barn, everyone drenched the moment they step outside. Still, better than fighting Thread in torrential rain, I suppose.* He suppressed a shudder at the memory of the last rainstorm he and Yarath had fought through.

The blue seemed unconcerned. ***The storm will move on. Storms always move on.***

*I suppose so.* X'ramin sometimes wished that storms – in fact all weather – had the regularity and predictability of Threadfall. It would make life so much easier.

But no point dwelling on that now. He and Kadja had to report to the Weyrwoman on the results of their Search at the Smithcraft Hall, and then he and Yarath could get back to their weycot – where he could check over his riding straps for tomorrow's 'Fall in the comfort and dry...



The bolt snaked downwards faster than human thought. Air around it heated and expanded outwards. The bolt skittered from instant to instant like a live entity. This way. This way. This way. The forces that controlled it were blind to anything more than a dragonlength away. The tip of the bolt could only react to the imperfections and variations of the space immediately around it. Then in the air nearby, a new possibility presented itself.



Lightning struck Yarath's wing as the blue made an upstroke. Electricity surged downwards, eschewing non-conductive air in favour of warm, wet flesh. Bone and membrane were rejected. The major blood vessel that ran along the spar of the wing offered a more conductive path. Heat seared along the chosen route, blazed through the blue's heart and raced away down the artery that led to a forelimb. Then the bolt was free of flesh, nosing its blind, voracious way through open air once more. All in a fraction of a heartbeat.

Yarath screamed, a physical and mental shriek in X'ramin's mind, and tumbled from the air, inert and lifeless. His fall seemed a slow, graceless plummet in the wake of the white heat flash of lightning that went before him.



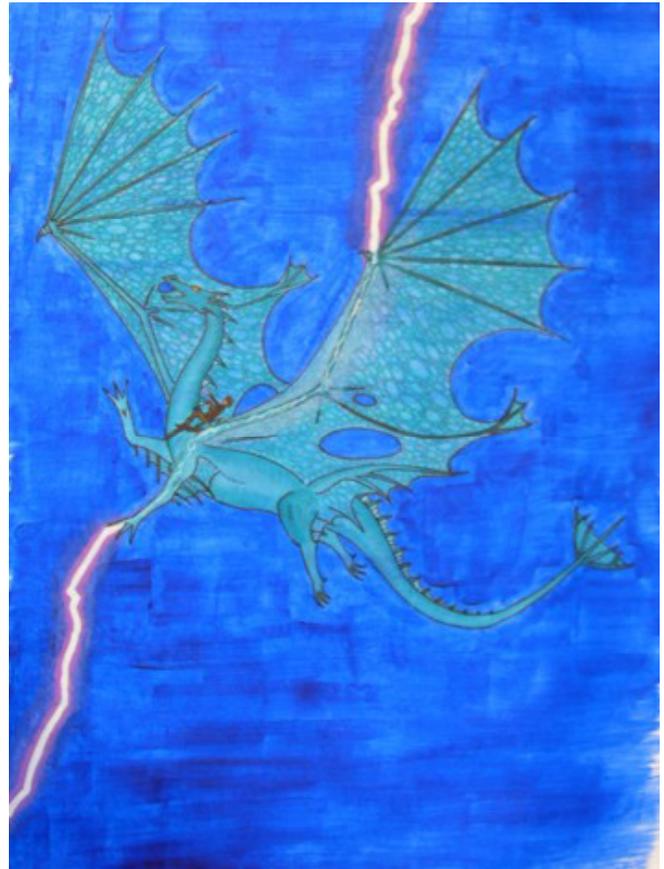
Dragons lifted their heads to keen Yarath's passing. Kadja felt her own Nilyath's cry vibrate through her body even as they emerged from *between* - in what had been an instinctive duck into the safety of cold blackness as that awful searing light had raced past them. Even with her green's quick reactions, Kadja eyes were currently capable of seeing nothing but the afterimage of the lightning.

Panic gripped her. *Nilyath, can you see? Can you see?* They were coming in to land and she was blind. Where were X'ramin and Yarath? They'd been ahead and to the left of her – where that blinding flash had erupted. She knew the answer even as she asked the next question. *Who died? Are X'ramin and Yarath all right?*

***Yarath is gone. The lightning hit him.*** Her green's usual bubbly chatter was gone, tension radiating from her to her rider. ***My eyes see only light.***

Kadja gripped tightly on to her riding straps. Yarath was dead. She and Nilyath could not see properly, and were flying low over Kadanzer in a storm. She must not panic, she

must not panic! If she panicked, then Nilyath would too. Kadja sucked huge gulps of air into her lungs. What was below them now? They had been gliding in over Stormwind's weycots towards the Weyrleaders' complex... Could the watchdragon on the Hatching Ground rim see them? Guide them in? Or would he or she have been blinded by the flash too? Images assailed her of crashing into trees, of landing on a weycot, or of veering off course and hurtling into the walls of the Hatching Ground. She must not panic!



Then the rhythm of Nilyath's flight changed, the green stroking upwards into the pouring rain. ***Ihyanith tells me to climb. It is not safe to land here because my eyes see only light. Ihyanith comes.***

Yes, climb. Height was safety for surely lightning never struck twice in the same place? Kadja blinked at the afterimages in her eyes. There were darker areas round the edges now – orange against the yellow-white of the rest of her vision. Perhaps her eyesight was not gone forever!

***Ihyanith says we must go between to the Weyrling beach.***

Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that? She didn't need eyes to go *between* - she could visualise coordinates for high above the Weyrling beach, heading out to sea with no trees or weycots to crash into. Kadja laughed with relief and sent the image to her green.

A familiar burst of intense cold and then they were being buffeted by wind and rain again. She couldn't help but flinch at a crack of thunder nearby.

***Ihyanith will guide us in,*** said Nilyath. ***We are to land in the water.***

Water, yes, good. Nice safe, soft water. Kadja felt her green bank and flex, obviously adjusting her flight according to instructions relayed by the queen. They turned to face into the wind.

***Ihyanith says we near the sea,*** Nilyath reported. ***I feel the spray!*** Her green's excited shout was followed seconds later by another: ***My tail is wet! We land, we land!***

Kadja was drenched by a sudden wave of salt water, not sure if it was a wave generated by the storm, the splash of Nilyath's landing or a combination of the two. She felt the green kick out beneath her in a swimming stroke, then lurch upwards as her foreclaws touched sand. The green plodded out of the waves onto the beach. Kadja leaned forward to stroke her bondmate's neck. *Well done, Nilyath. Well done. And please say thank you to Lybelle and Ihyanith.*

***I do. She says dragonhealers and healers are on their way.*** Nilyath shifted position beneath her. ***I cannot tell where the sea begins, but I can see a darkness on land. Ihyanith says that is the cliffs. My eyes are getting better!*** The green's optimistic note made Kadja laugh in delight. Her own vision was a patchwork of incoherent dark and light blobs – perhaps it too was getting better?



“Shards and shells! What a waste!” A'nar looked at the wreck of what had been Yarath and X'ramin, as Weyrwoman Lybelle and goldrider Dunia stood with him in the rain. It was the sheer fluke of the accident that left him with fists clenched and wanting to snarl blame at someone. So young... “What a waste,” he repeated.

The dragonpair had fallen within a dragonlength of his cot, and the lightning itself had seared a tree within spitting distance of the Flight's gather barn. In the torrential rain, the tree was not doing much more than smouldering, but he'd set a couple of riders to keeping an eye on it, just in case.

That just left the problem of the deceased. They'd have to be moved – taken *between* – and hope that the rain dealt with the blood and ichor that stained the ground around them.

Better get to it, then. He sent a mental command to Garath and set about instructing him on how to lift the shattered and seared corpse that had once been a blue dragon.

A lightning strike, right in the heart of Stormwind, and the deaths of one of his dragonpairs. It was hard not to take it personally.



She was in one of the Weyrlingsecond's cots, a light bandage over her eyes at the insistence of the healers. Nilyath was outside in the wallow that belonged to this cot.

It had been deemed that it would be easier for the dragonhealers to come here than to attempt to walk the semi-blind green across the Weyr to the dragon infirmary. Both healers and dragonhealers had been making encouraging noises about them making a full recovery if they rested their eyes and kept away from bright lights for a day or so. Kadja had no problems with that – she never intended to go near another bright light again!

Relief that Nilyath and she would recover was tempered however, with the onset of reaction to X'ramin and Yarath's deaths. It was one thing to lose a comrade in the heat of Threadfall – it was entirely another to have them snatched away in the safety of the Weyr's airspace. Kadja flinched every time there was another crash of thunder, and couldn't stop her hands trembling. She wanted to pace about, and shout and scream and kick something, but with bandaged eyes, she'd only end up tripping up and making a fool of herself. So instead she sat very still in the bed and tried very hard not to cry.

She almost missed the soft knock at the door.

“Who's...? Is someone there?” Kadja had to stop herself from asking Nilyath who was outside the cot, forgetting for a moment that her green also had her eyes bandaged.

“Kadja? It's V'dalin and Lesein.” V'dalin's voice had a worried tinge to it. “Can we come in? Are you up to visitors?”

Yes, oh yes! The healers might have said to rest, but she couldn't – not with the storm still growling and the loss of X'ramin gnawing at her. Friends were just what she needed. “Yes,” she replied. “Yes, please. I'd love some company.”

She got out of the bed as she heard them come into the cot. “We brought some klah,” she heard Lesein say, and felt a comforting squeeze on her shoulder. Kadja reached up and grabbed the hand, then flung herself in what she hoped was the direction of the owner. She collided with V'dalin's tall frame and wrapped her arms around him, the sobs finally breaking free.

Nilyath was in her mind, broadcasting anxiety and affection. V'dalin enfolded her in his arms, and Lesein stroked her hair, murmuring soothing sounds. “There, there. It's all right, it's all right.”

It wasn't all right. It might never be all right again.

