
Fatal Distractions

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It was a clear midwinter morning, and wherries were calling to each other as they flew over the drill grounds, where once again – for it seemed they never left – Weyrling Class 37 stood in formation in three straight rows. Vershya scratched her nose and brushed away some buzzing creatures before standing firm again. To her right, Shoaliant was less patient, kneading her claws restlessly into the drill-ground soil. Vershya gave the jittery green a stern look. Stop that now, Shoaliant. The drill grounds are not there for you to dig in!

I want to go flying, Shoaliant moaned. ***My wings ache and I want to fly. We stand for too long.***

We'll be moving soon enough, Vershya said, hoping to turn the dragon's attention to something new. *Today is a big day! We're going to go between all on our own!*

Do days change their size? Why do you say 'big'? The green stretched out her head and shook it, sighing. ***We have gone between before. I can go between any time, why is today different?***

Ah, but I can't go between at any time, because before now we've received the picture-place from Weyrlingsecond Shahara's or the Weyrlingmaster's dragons. Today you will only get the picture-place from me. Which is what worried her, but Vershya kept that thought to herself. Instead, she added, *After today, we'll both get to go between any time we want. With permission, of course.*

At the front of the class, Weyrlingsecond Shahara stepped forward, and before her green could speak again, Vershya said, *Quiet now, love, I have to listen.*

"All right, everyone," the weyrlingsecond said. "Today is a big step in your training. You've all been *between* enough to know what to expect; this will just build on what you've learned so far.

"I will give you the flight order. On your turn, you will take off from here, take a visualization from above the roof of the Weyrling Hall, then fly high over the Feeding Grounds and jump *between* back to the point you visualized. Each of you will do this three times in the flight order you're given. Neither I nor Layketh will be double-checking your image for you, so you'd better get it right. You've all heard enough about the consequences for you and your dragon if you get it wrong."

Vershya swallowed, tasting fear. Shoaliant's head came up, looking around sharply. ***What makes you afraid? I will not allow it!*** the green hissed.

Sssh, nothing, Shoali. Calm yourself. I'm only nervous. Vershya laid a soothing hand on her green's shoulder. Now was not the time for her dragon to become upset and restless.

Shahara began to call out the order in which the weyrlings would mount up and take their jumps *between*. Her voice was measured and steady. "Yindi and blue Yltoth, Sapherlin and green Lorsenth, W'tor and brown Radanth, Ivahla and green Minyith..."

Layketh tells me to be calm, too, Shoaliant said, her mind-voice overriding Shahara's words. ***She says that we are all capable, and have no reason to fear.***

Vershya smiled a little at that. *Well, if Shahara and Layketh think so, who are we to argue?*

I would not argue with Layketh, Shoaliant agreed. ***Lorsenth is not scared, and neither are Yengarth and Relth. Duhonth is ready, but says his rider is very scared. Tayath, Senhaeth, Dimilluth, and Aleoth agree, but Sujath and Cerauth and their riders are ready.*** Vershya let her dragon babble on about her classmates, turning her attention back to their weyrlingsecond.

When the flight order was complete, Shahara nodded towards Yindi. "Mount up, weyrling!"

Shush now, Vershya said to her dragon. *Yindi's turn is coming.*

She would not allow Shoaliant to distract her friend's blue from the dangerous job ahead. She watched the tall, lithe form of Yindi salute smartly to the weyrlingsecond and mount Yltoth. The bluerider strapped on to Yltoth's long neck and settled her goggles in place.

Yltoth says he will see me soon and we can go bathe in the large water. He is a fine blue! Shoaliant's green hide rippled as she preened and Vershya smiled. Only Yindi could know just when she needed some extra help with Shoaliant's impatient nature. The former harper apprentice waved at her friend as the blue took flight and swooped towards the Weyrling Hall.



Yindi thumped the rich sky-blue neck underneath her and grinned. *We're going to be fine, aren't we big boy?* Yltoth's body vibrated as he rumbled his agreement. Yindi tucked a stray black hair away from her face and back into her cap. Today was the beginning of their freedom. After this she and her blue could go to Gathers, visit family and begin preparations to fight Thread.

She loved the feel of the wind on her face as Yltoth gained altitude. His strong wing arms pumped and his neck bobbed up and down as he fought his way free of the ground. Suddenly, his mind-voice bellowed, ***I AM fast! I will fly faster.*** Yltoth hissed, his eyes swirling rapidly, and the blue gave a burst of speed.

He had already strained himself once during their flight training, months ago now. Yindi struggled to regain control, her hands gripping the forward straps tightly. *What is wrong, Yltoth? You don't need to go fast, this isn't about speed.* Clouds sped by above and weyrcots blurred below as her blue cut across the sky.

Sujath thinks I am weak, that I am slow! I am not slow, I am faster than she is! He leveled out for only a

moment before he swooped toward the Feeding Grounds, diving to gain more speed.

You WILL slow down! I cannot concentrate if you are trying to impress a green. Yindi shoved Yltoth with her mind, pulling on the leather strap she was twisting into knots in front of her. *Now level out, go back to the proper height and be ready for my directions.* Yindi gritted her teeth. This was the one thing that she had trouble with, Yltoth's sense of challenge. She liked a good challenge and contests too, but this was *not* the time.

I will slow down. I will show Sujath I am fast when I go between. Going between is even faster. The sky-blue form of Yltoth leveled out once more, the panicked Feeding Grounds' beasts far below settling after their scare.

Layketh says her rider is unhappy. We are to stay high above the Feeding Grounds. I say we are flying high. Layketh says I must stay at soaring height. Yltoth rumbled as he relayed the weyrlingsecond's message.

Our orders were to fly high above the Feeding Grounds so we wouldn't scare the beasts, Yltoth. That is why you must listen to me. We don't need punishment duty. Once Yindi regained control she took two deep breaths. 'All right, now the Weyrling Hall. I must picture the hall *just so*.' The garish pattern that made up the roof of the Weyrling Complex Hall stood out in anyone's mind and was built for that purpose. Yindi focused on the image. Glazed tiles set in a pattern that started with a stripe of golden yellow across the roof's midpoint, giving way on either side to bands of bronze, brown, blue and green, then finally to the violet of Kadanzer's badge at the far ends.

Yindi set that into her mind. Once she had the picture as clear as she could form it, she sent it to Yltoth. *Do you have it, Yltoth? You must have a detailed picture of the area.*

I do. Colors, many of them, the blue responded, an image very close to the one she had in her mind returning from him, his tone still irritated by Sujath's comment.

Steady now. Let's go! Yindi gave out a whoop, squeezed her eyes tight and kept feeding the image of the Weyrling Hall roof to Yltoth.

Now I AM faster than a green! Yltoth bugled and went *between*.



Vershya watched as Yindi and her blue moved *between* from far above the Feeding Grounds. Her best friend was the first to take the jump and her heart seemed to stop. She held her breath and counted. '1..2..3..' Vershya scanned the bright blue sky for Yltoth. She and Yindi both had a taste for dragon poker; after today they would probably need a good game of cards to unwind with. When she got to the count of six Vershya let out her breath and clung to Shoaliant. Where were they?

Yindi and Yltoth did not return, and the dragons began to keen.



Sapherlin was glad she was already on her dragon's back, or she would have fallen to the ground. She could not

feel her legs, or her arms; they had gone weak with shock. Her head felt heavy as the first pair, the very first pair from their weyrling class, did not return from the cold of *between*. She looked first to her dragon, who had begun to keen loudly, and then across the line to her classmates. Lina had sagged against her green's side, as had Vershya, and D'ghal looked like he couldn't breathe, his tears visible even from here. Cybris had gone very pale. Sapherlin wanted to run to her friends and wrap her arms around them, mourning their loss.

Yltoth is gone, Lorsenth said sorrowfully.

"Why did they have to go?" Sapherlin asked her voice barely more than a whisper. Knowing her dragon wouldn't understand the question, she asked a simpler one. "What went wrong?"

He just did not come back, the green answered.

Sapherlin started to get scared, though she was still trying to hold to the now-thin thread of confidence that told her she was a harper, an illustrating one at that, and would be able to draw a perfect picture in her mind.

To comfort herself, she started to do so. She started with their own weyrlingcot, the way it looked from the top, the exact positions of the trees around it, the pattern that just that morning Lorsenth had walked into the ground in her pacing, waiting for them to come here to this class. Slowly, Sapherlin wove the picture until she could even see the soft waving of the trees that surrounded their cot, with others close around it. It wasn't the image they would use when they took their jump...but it was home, and that was comforting.

I want to be home now, Lorsenth said, and with that, she lifted herself from the ground, nearly knocking the dragons next to her with her wings. Her rider wanted to take them home. The picture was so clear...that must be where they were supposed to go.

Layketh bellowed her most commanding roar and her eyes stormed orange. The green's body flared into an authoritative stance as the younger green began to take to the air. ***You will return to the ground NOW!***

Weyrlingsecond Shahara ran forward, "What do you think you're doing, weyrling? Land right now!"

Sapherlin jolted upright on her dragon, stunned. "LORSENTH! I didn't tell you to go *between*! Land right now!"

You gave me the picture, the green answered steadily.

You gave me a very nice picture, and wanted to go there very badly. Lorsenth landed as quickly as she rose and lowered her head under the watch of Layketh.

Sapherlin wanted to hide. Shahara was going to kill them.

She will not kill us, Lorsenth said, sounding amused.

You get funny ideas, my rider.

Sapherlin could only groan.



Cybris' knuckles had tightened bloodlessly against Sujath's neckridge when her dragon began to keen Yltoth's death. Guilt flooded her—had Yindi died because of Sujath's remark? Cybris had gotten adept at controlling her dragon's actions, but her thoughts and words were another matter.

Maybe Yltoth had been distracted and unable to focus on the coordinates properly. Maybe Yindi's control had been wrested by Sujath's subtle challenge. If that was true, then it was *her* fault. Her fault someone had *died*.

Then Lorseenth took to the air, angering Layketh and Weyrlingsecond Shahara. Cybris' chest went cold. Nearby, Lina cried out and more than a few other weyrlings gasped in shock. The only thing that kept Cybris from panic was the pervasive silence that stretched as the pair was forced to land.

"Weyrlings!" Shahara said, her rough voice cutting across the sudden stillness. "Bluerider Yindi was your first loss, but not your last. Don't be distracted. Threadfall doesn't stop just because your wingmate has gone *between*." She motioned in the direction of Lorseenth. "You must control your dragon, especially during times of high stress or emotions. Sapherlin and Lorseenth are very lucky they didn't end up like Yindi and Yltoth just now. They will control themselves until the second round of jumps, and will be punished for their recklessness. Now wake up and be prepared!"

Sapherlin dismounted with a bright red face, and relief detracted somewhat from Cybris' remorse at the mention of Yindi. Sapherlin had always been inclined to act spur-of-the-moment, much like Sujath in that sense. It was a relief to know Sapherlin was safe. At least Cybris wouldn't have to mourn a friend as well as a classmate, wondering all the while whether it was her fault.

"W'tor and Radanth!" Shahara's steady voice called out. The fact that her voice did not waver comforted Cybris immensely.

Sujath, do not talk to the people flying anymore. Let them be until they land and are safe.



Vershya relaxed the tight grip she had on her green's foreleg, where she still clung after Yindi had not returned. The pain of her friend's loss was immense. 'I must regain control. Shoaliant will pick up on my pain and get upset. I have to be calm. Yindi...' Tears streaked her face but even so, Vershya stood up, letting her arms slip away from Shoaliant's leg. *Be calm, you're fine. I'm fine. We'll be all right.*

Why did Lorseenth try to go between when I cannot? Shoaliant turned her long face and nosed Vershya in the chest, meat-scented breath warming her cheek.

We have to wait for Layketh to let us. See how Layketh and her rider are angry at Lorseenth for trying to fly? It's just like when you listen to the golds, we have to listen to Shahara and Layketh. We must stand firm and wait. You will be patient.

Shoaliant's eyes slowed and began to return to their normal blue hue. **Stand, wait. I will do so if that is what you want.** She sighed and nuzzled her rider before sitting back and waiting.

Good. Thank you, my love. Vershya let out a breath in relief. She was finally learning to assert herself.

Vershya watched as her next few classmates went *between* with bated breath. Counting and waiting for them to reappear. As each one made it back without a problem,

her fear subsided and she relaxed. W'tor made his jump without a hitch. Ivahla's bright green Minyith landed solidly and bugled in triumph. Mivuhoth's dark blue form landed lightly and stepped back into line; Vershya was relieved to know D'ghal had made it safely and she wasn't going to lose another friend to *between*. She'd feared for the bluerider especially... he had been even closer to Yindi than she, and she knew grief could often cloud the mind and impair judgment.

She looked forward and saw Layketh standing near Weyrlingsecond Shahara as still as stone, with only the slightest movement of her head to let others know she was real. The weyrlingsecond was watching Mivuhoth return to the line, waiting to call forth yet another rider.

The emotionless way the weyrlingsecond handled who was next and who returned disturbed Vershya. How could she be so cold when they had all worked together and lived together for so long? Did all dragonriders have to sacrifice their feelings in order to commit to fighting Thread? 'How could I possibly forget my best friend? Who will I play games with in the evening?' Vershya shook her head and wiped her tears away. 'No not now. I will mourn Yindi later, I have to focus. That is what the weyrlingsecond is teaching us.'

"Cassia and Senrhaeth!"



Oh, great. Cassia's usual energy seemed to have channeled itself into her stomach, which was doing flip-flops better suited to a pair of agitated green firelizards – twice as agile and just as unpredictable! Shahara's calling her name did nothing to improve the sensation. *Senrhaeth?*

Yes?

At least her lifemate wasn't projecting nervousness of his own, on top of what she was likely feeding him. *Between* was nothing short of natural for the dragons; the humans were the ones who had the difficult time. *It's our turn, Senrhaeth.*

The blue's only response was a feeling of acknowledgement and calm – he wasn't overly troubled by the idea of the first solo jump. Cassia, on the other hand, took a long second, then two, tightening her straps after she'd mounted. 'Please-please-please don't let me end up like—' And there she cut off her thoughts, stopped just short of Yindi's name. She'd worry about that in a moment. 'If there is a moment after this,' she thought.

Once at the designated point above the Feeding Grounds, Senrhaeth hovered in midair, and Cassia concentrated almost painfully hard on the half-dozen shades of tile they were aiming to come out above. *You have it?*

Senrhaeth's response was a flash of momentary confidence and a simple, **Yes, I have it.**

All right... go.

And then Cassia was freezing. Trips *between* before had been fine preparation, but when it was your own visualization, your own ability on the line, the blackness of the place between places seemed far colder than usual. Three, four, five – and they burst back out, directly over the Weyrling Hall's roof.

"Oh, thank Faranth!"

Senhraeth's contribution was an entirely smug croon. *I told you we could do it.*



Once Cassia and Senhraeth were firmly on the ground weyrlingsecond Sharhara barked, "Arlynnna and Cerauth!"

Let's go, Cerauth, Arlynnna said, bracing herself for the launch.

Finally, Cerauth replied.

The green leaped into the air, and Arlynnna marveled again at the feeling of flight. She hoped the sensation never got old. But there was no time to enjoy it now; she had a drill to do. *Over the Weyrling Hall, please,* she ordered, and fixed the familiar tile pattern in her mind. *Now away.*

Wordless confidence was the only answer from Cerauth as the green made her way towards the feeding grounds. Arlynnna tried to send confidence back, too, though she didn't want to risk losing the visualization. Shortly they were above the feeding grounds the wide fences and herdbeasts appearing all too soon. Arlynnna's heart pounded, but she focused on the image. *Go!*



How was it that she had Impressed? What made her Dimilluth decide to choose her? It was times like today that made Harmina wonder if she would ever feel like a real dragonrider.

The sun is warm. Good for sleeping. Why can I not wallow here? Dimilluth asked suddenly, breaking through Harmina's somber thoughts like a much-needed glowbasket in the night.

We are in training, Dimilluth. We cannot sleep while training. Watch the others, learn what they do right and wrong. That is what we need to do. So we don't end up like Yltoth and Yindi.

Yltoth? the green asked, plucking the image of the recently deceased dragon from Harmina's mind. *He's gone. We are not gone.*

That is right, we are not gone. She smiled wanly at that simple statement. *We are alive.*

She let out a sigh of relief as Cerauth appeared over the Weyrling Hall. The shock from the death of Yindi was ebbing and she only hoped the rest of this test would go smoothly. However, she couldn't help but think that from here on out their training was only going to get worse. 'Flame comes next, then live Thread. I don't want to fight Thread. I'm not courageous or reckless...'

You are mine. I love you, I chose you, Dimilluth said simply.

Yes, you did and I love you too, Harmina replied. *I don't know what I would do without you. I'm just scared.* She wrapped dark, tanned fingers around her wavy, dark brown hair, twining it nervously.

Why? I am here. I will flame and burn Thread! I will protect you! the green said vehemently.

Harmina smiled and rested her hand against her green's hide. *Yes, you will. I'm glad you chose me. I just have to get used to what comes with that choice.*

Dimilluth rumbled and so much love was sent to Harmina that it washed away her fear. Then her name was being called, and for the first time since the lesson began she felt a touch of confidence. *We can do this, can't we Dimilluth?*

Yes. It is our turn now. Then I can sleep.

Harmina laughed and mounted up.



Once Harmina returned successfully, Shahara called forth the next pair in a clear calm voice. "B'shan and Ateith!"

B'shan quickly mounted up, his palms sweating. Ateith's green-tinged bronze hide glowed in the sunlight. As he settled onto his bronze's broad neck, he sent a few winks to his nearby female classmates. Strapping in, he lowered his goggles and took a deep breath. He hadn't let show how nervous he was about this test. During the past training he had had trouble creating and sending pictures to Layketh or any of the other weyrlingstaff dragons. He had to complete extra training and time practicing visualizations to be able to participate in today's exercise.

Now, it was do or die, and B'shan really didn't want to end his life *between*. At least, not without it being due to some courageous act that would make for a good ballad! Soon he and Ateith would be able to go home and visit his friends and family there. But mostly, B'shan couldn't wait to show off Ateith to his fellow Bendenites.

Layketh says we are taking too long. She says we should be in the sky by now, Ateith rumbled and scuffed the ground.

Oh yes, go ahead Ateith, take off. B'shan thumped the bronze ridge in front of him. Then the powerful strokes from Ateith's wings sent him back into his seat and grabbing hold of his straps. Takeoff always made him nervous, that and landing. Flight itself wasn't so bad, but the jolts from takeoff and landing tended to unsettle his stomach.

As they gained height, B'shan looked at the odd rainbow-like roof top. 'So I need to picture this, the roof of the Weyrling Hall.' The multi-colored pattern was garish and easily recognizable. B'shan added to his mental picture the way the trees were spaced around the building. 'Trees which I didn't get to see much of when I was home at Benden Weyr. There we have a deep caldera and a lake, with those bright white flowers where I used to help my father to wash his brown.'

Ateith soared high over the class and then turned to make his way to the Feeding Grounds. Once there he circled the grounds, watching the herdbeasts running far below. *I must go between now. We are going too slow. Why are you waiting? I am a bronze and you are my rider, we are ready!*

Of course, Ateith, of course. B'shan straightened up in his seat between the bronze's ridges. He pictured the large multicolored roof, the hues much like the different colored dragons who wallowed at Benden Weyr.

I see, I go now! Ateith suddenly spoke, and then deep, black cold set in around him.

B'shan froze. He hadn't given the word to go yet, where were they going? He tried to grip Ateith's ridge tightly, but

it felt like there was nothing there. He could only keep calm and hope they would return from this blackness.



Sapherlin held her breath each time a dragon-pair jumped into the coldness of *between* and survived to come back. Each time was a relief, and each time Lorsenth bugled her pleasure in seeing her clutchmates return.

After a while, Lorsenth thought it was more a game than a drill. Soon it would be their turn again. Then all her clutchmates would see how amazing she was, even if she was just a green, and not gold like Arohath.

Sapherlin, following her dragon's train of thought, agreed that they could prove to be just as good as any goldrider. Then she snapped her head back to its forward position and waited once again with breath held for B'shan to return. Surely it had been long enough; where was the pair?



B'shan held his breath as the cold of *between* went on and on. 'Is this how I'll live the rest of my life, in this blackness?' he thought for a moment, but then pushed it aside. It was so cold, and he was beginning to wonder if he was truly gone when Ateith brought them out of the darkness into warm sunshine. As he blinked his eyes to adjust to the brightness he saw the comforting ridges of home.

Home?

Below him was Benden Weyr's lake, shining in the mid-day sun. A few dragons were bathing and others were calling out to Ateith.

They ask my name. I tell them. They do not know me. Why do they not know me? His bronze circled high above the lake B'shan had pictured so clearly moments before. More clearly than the Weyriling Hall he now knew.

We are not at Kadanzer, B'shan replied with a calm he didn't quite feel. *We are at Benden Weyr. We went to the wrong place. Tell the watchrider that we come from Kadanzer Weyr and did so by mistake.*

'Now what should I do?' the bronzerider asked himself as he gripped his forward straps tightly.



Sujath had grown tense underneath Cybris' hand when B'shan and Ateith failed to return immediately. Cybris, holding her breath, waited for the dragons to start keening. They didn't. Instead, Shahara waved for their attention, her face clearing of the concern she had worn a moment before.

"Everyone," she called out. "B'shan has made a bit of a... miscalculation... and is at Benden Weyr. I'm going to get him. All of you stay put, and don't move out of place until I return. Let this be a lesson to you! You must focus on your destination and not be distracted by other thoughts! If you are, well... this isn't the worst that can happen!"

Cybris knew B'shan was in trouble, but the wash of relief that hit her made her knees feel loose. She *liked* B'shan. If Sujath didn't despise bronzes so—

Inside her head Sujath was crooning her delight at Ateith's failure, but thankfully, she was only sharing it with Cybris.

You know, Cybris' responded, sharper than she'd intended, *Ateith made a perfectly fine jump—they just went to the wrong place.*

They made an error. They are confused. I am never confused.

Off to fetch the errant pair, Shahara blinked out of sight far above them all. Sujath spread her wings and bugled as soon as she was gone, her eyes whirling—mischievous. "Shush!" Cybris groaned, slapping the green's shoulder, "it's not as though we are alone here!"

This bronze Ateith, Sujath said to her clutchmates, ***is very slow. Or it is his rider. I will show him how to do this!***

Sujath! Cybris snapped, her words the equivalent of a mental backhand.

When it is my turn. Sujath said, somewhat more meekly, folding her wings.

Next to her, standing beside Tayath, Lina nervously giggled.



Layketh has given me coordinates, Ateith said.

All right. Let them know we are ready. B'shan felt his face flush. How stupid and dimglowed could he be? They were lucky enough that they came out instead of being lost.

We are not lost, we are at Benden Weyr, the bronze said matter-of-factly.

Yes, of course. Do you still have those coordinates? B'shan asked, getting both of them focused on the task at hand.

Yes. We go now, the bronze bugled a farewell to the dragons below and then both Layketh and Ateith went *between*.

The pair appeared over the Weyriling Hall moments later and B'shan had Ateith wheel in for a landing. As the bronze's feet touched the ground, he commented, ***Aleoth says her rider is jealous that we got to see Benden Weyr.*** He sounded smug, though B'shan knew it had more to do with having gotten something others hadn't than because he cared about having seen Benden himself.

The bronzerider grinned. *Tell her to tell Byalla that it wasn't worth the extra drills I'm probably going to get for the screw-up.* It had been worth it, actually...but it wouldn't do to go telling his fellow Bendenites that.

Layketh landed and took back her place standing in front of the class. Once B'shan and his bronze moved back in line with the rest, Shahara called out, "H'riro and Relth!"



H'riro and his dragon made their jump flawlessly, and the blue flashed his wings cockily as he came down for a landing.

Relth shows off, Shoaliant said, her mind-voice sounding both admiring and somewhat envious. **Sujath tells him he made a good jump, but Yengarth says he is a silly blue.**

Vershya managed a smile – Cybris was more likely responsible for the compliment than Sujath. *We need a little silliness today.*

Her thoughts turned back to Yindi, and she felt her eyes prickle once more with tears. She breathed deeply and willed them away. So, this is what it was like to lose a wingmate. She didn't like the feeling, but the lesson wasn't over yet...and who knew. She might have to feel it again before the day was done.



Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

The air tasted like dust, but S'var chanted the litany anyway. Breathe in, breathe out, and remember to visualize – lines of colored tile, like an emblem on a map. It stopped him from visualizing other things...like what would happen if...if...

A nudge from Duhonth staggered him, and the blue filled his mind with eager impatience. **Stop it, rider. These are not good thoughts, and it hurts your stomach when you are afraid.**

S'var gave a weak smile, righting himself and patting the dragon's side. *Sorry. I just don't want to lose us.*

We will not get lost. I will take us from here to there to here. Images of cloud and landscape and tiles flashed through their bond like shuffled cards, moments lived vicariously through Duhonth's wingmates. The blue crooned at him. **It will be BORING. Can we go now?**

A strangled whisper of a laugh passed S'var's lips, and he glanced around self-consciously, hoping no one had heard. Luckily, everyone was focused on B'shan and his miraculous not-dead status as Layketh and Ateith backwinged for a landing and returned to their appointed positions, riders dismounting.

H'riro and Relth, then Mulleith and K'senal took their turns and completed their first jumps perfectly. Arohath announced when HER turn came – at least, so Duhonth relayed – and S'var swallowed dryness, mounting his blue's high shoulder as Dwayana and her gold did their jump. Duhonth's attention was rapt on the sky, and only when Arohath reappeared did he turn his head back to watch his rider's shaky progress.

A little more than a third of the class had now jumped with only one loss. Shahara's expression was one of guarded pride, and she gestured at them. "S'var and Duhonth, you're next."

They pushed for the sky, and S'var gripped the flight straps hard. *Let's get this over with...*



Duhonth took to the air in one eager leap, and T'syr watched as the blue clawed for altitude. He was glad for his dragon's stable presence towering over him. Without it, he knew he'd be trembling. He had been dreading this stage of his training for many weeks; especially with Weyrlingsecond

Shahara's warnings and frequent reminders of the expected casualties. *Expected casualties.*

Only a couple of dragonlengths above the ground, Duhonth vanished. T'syr's breath caught in his throat. He grabbed Yengarth's harness in panic, but three heartbeats later, S'var and his blue reappeared high above the class. T'syr sighed in relief... and breathed deep, trying to still his pounding heart. *Ask them what happened*, he said to Yengarth.

I do not need to ask. Duhonth went between and then came back. But he did not do it how Layketh said we should. Yengarth's tone was severe.

Ask him anyway, T'syr demanded. *And ask Duhonth if S'var is all right.*

Duhonth, my rider asks what happened, and how your rider is. But I can see that you are fine. A moment of silence. **I am right, they are fine. Duhonth says his rider will explain later, because Layketh tells them to land, and to do it right when their turn comes around again.**

T'syr watched Duhonth wheel in the air and descend, getting only a brief glimpse of his companion before they moved back into line – S'var looked shaken but unhurt, and he breathed out another sigh of relief.

Shahara firmly called the next pair forward for their flight, and Yengarth distracted him with reports of their classmates as S'gall, J'lan, and K'syr took their turns. T'syr let himself be surprised at Bremnoth's impeccable jump – though normally he would have restrained the judgemental thought, for the moment it gave him something else to think about.

D'rian was next, and both dragon and rider looked insufferably haughty at their success when Hassanth returned. T'syr tried to keep dislike from showing on his face – his cotmate could be disgustingly arrogant sometimes...

Their turn had finally come, and Yengarth felt close to bursting with the desire to prove that he, too, could complete the exercise perfectly. Settling into his straps, T'syr had only to sit back and let him. His bronze didn't let him down.



Lina felt no relief at seeing T'syr and Yengarth land. She hardly heard Shahara call out her own name. She felt oddly disconnected, and chilly in spite of the Kadanzer heat. Numbly, almost automatically she asked Tayath to take off.

She wondered distantly what would happen if she simply asked Tayath to keep on flying, past the feeding grounds, past the rest of the Weyr. Somewhere away.

We do not need to fly anywhere else. My clutchmates are here. Others went between and came back here. So will we.

Lina stroked Tayath's neck without answering and silently tried to collect her thoughts. She lingered, for long moments, trying to fix the correct image in her mind. Dragon-colored tiles, bright in the sun.

I see them, Tayath assured her.

"Go..." Lina breathed, before fear could change her mind.

We go!

Icy cold enveloped them and Lina squeezed her eyes tighter shut still, clinging to the image of those tiles. Concentrating until they were practically swimming before her eyes.

The blast of warm air startled her almost as much as their entry into *between*. Her eyes flew open. They'd done it!

But the tiles were still filling her vision and she realized with alarm that they were far too low over them, and getting closer still.

"Tayath!" She yelled aloud, before switching back to mental instruction *We're too low, we need to be higher!*

Tayath hesitated a fraction of a second before bringing her wings down, and Lina caught her half-formed intention just in time. *Not between! Don't jump. Just fly. Just land!*

She was aware her instructions were garbled but before she could correct them they'd cleared the building and Tayath seemed to conclude that following the last instruction first was the best plan.

She hit the ground all four feet together, spraying dust and dirt into the air.

Lina slipped from Tayath's neck to stand on shaking legs. They had to do this twice more?

Layketh's rider says she is pleased we made the jump, Tayath told her, and that we will know better for next time.

The girl managed a shaky smile in the direction of their weyringassistant – trust Shahara to give compliment and criticism in equal parts. The greenrider offered a warm expression before calling forth the next pair.



Two more blueriders took their turns. Once R'lander and Gruth were back on the ground, W'den mounted up and secured his riding straps, wincing a little at their condition. He'd been lazy the last time he'd oiled them, servicing all of the visible parts but skipping wherever it wouldn't show, mostly parts that would be hidden against his dragon's body. He was lucky not to have been caught, but he'd been tired that day and figured he'd catch up on it later. However, in the busy life of a weyring, he'd soon forgotten.

Until now.

The straps itch. They chafe along my ridge, Vesath moaned.

Shush! If Layketh hears you or Shahara finds out, we'll have punishment duty. Now, it's our turn! W'den frowned, hoping they could get this done quickly so he could handle the problem before it got worse.

Suddenly, Vesath let out a thunderous roar. ***Lirth rises! Tordith, Nuarth and Kayanth follow!*** There was an answering bellow from their weyringsecond's green. ***Layketh tells us to stay on the ground and wait for the flight to finish.***

W'den's arms shook and he slipped the last couple of feet to the ground. A small cloud of dust rose up around him as his butt hit the turf. "What if we had been about to go *between* when she rose? We could have been lost!" The boy dusted off his backside.

I itch. The straps are rough, W'den. Can you take them off? Vesath's whirling blue and green eyes followed him.

Not yet, but soon. W'den sighed. He wouldn't ever put off his chores when it came to his dragon again. It caused too much trouble.



Cybris felt a prick of annoyance when the break for the mating flight was called. It had almost been their turn!

At least she could let Sujath move around a bit — that would certainly help her nerves. *We are taking a break, love. Why don't you move around and stretch a bit? Just stay on the ground.*

With a squeak of delight, Sujath leapt away and dashed off to run around the group of milling weyrings.

Cybris sighed and moved over to the group of weyring girls that was forming nearby. "How annoying is this? Now I have to wait longer to get up and into the air." She pulled off her flight jacket—which she had put on not long ago in preparation for her flight—and sighed at the relief from the heat.

Lina flopped to sit down nearby. "Can't say I mind putting off my second go – I think I'm going to have dreams about that roof for the rest of my life!"

Cybris put a hand on the girl's shoulder, smiling sympathetically. "Hey, at least you were just a little low—not as bad as skipping off to Benden or... not coming out... right? I'm sure you'll do it perfectly next time." Her eyes followed Sujath's wanderings for a moment before she looked at the group as a whole again. "Better to make mistakes now in training than during a Fall where other people could get hurt."

"And mistakes like Lina's and B'shan's are definitely better than what happened to Yindi," agreed Vershya with a wan smile. "Cybris is right, we've got to learn to concentrate *now*, or we'll be wherry food or worse later." She ran a nervous hand through her short brown hair.

Lina grimaced. "I suppose so. Tayath thinks I'm being silly worrying about it at all – are all dragons this sure of themselves?"

"Dragons think differently than we do," was Vershya's answer. "I don't think they consider danger the same way. If they're confident they can do something, the idea of something going wrong just doesn't enter into their minds."

Sapherlin, plunking down next to Lina, added, "Lorsenth even tried to take coordinates to our cot like it was no problem at all, just because I was thinking about it." Nearby, Lorsenth crooned at the attention and preened prettily for a passing bronze clutchmate. Cybris had to swallow a laugh when she realized it was Hassanth.

Vershya glanced at Sapherlin, expression teasing. "You're lucky she didn't jump to follow Lirth's example with no problem at all, too."

Sapherlin laughed and threw a handful of grass at her, which fluttered harmlessly a foot short of the mark. "Honestly, Vershya. She'll be one of the first to do it, I'd almost bet on it, but not *that* early. Still, I don't even want to think about what she'll be like when first flights come around."

"A big flirt, no doubt." Cybris smiled at her friend's big green. "Sujath already grumbles about her liking those big stupid bronzes."

"Speaking of which," Vershya said, glancing around at all the girls, "any new bed-fellows lately?" She winked. "I've been meaning to compare notes with everyone."

Cybris ducked her head so that her bangs fell over her eyes, but she couldn't help but give a sheepish smile. "Not me," she said, "Sujath is overprotective. You should have seen the first time—I had her distracted—but it didn't work and she ended shoving her head into our cot when his pants were down...I imagine it may be quite a while before he gets over that trauma. I'm sure all the boys are a bit wary now."

Sapherlin put a hand over her mouth to stifle giggles, Lina chuckled with a bright blush, and Vershya bubbled over with laughter.

"That paints a pretty picture there, Cybris." Vershya had to catch her breath and wipe tears of laughter from her eyes before speaking again. "Shoalanth is curious as well but usually just watches through me. She doesn't like having her head enclosed in a window. I don't mind...the more experiences she has the less flighty and jumpy she'll be, I'm betting."

"Excuses, excuses," Cybris drawled with a sly smile, and the group of girls broke out into laughter again. Abruptly, she realized she hadn't checked on Sujath in a while, and her head spun in both directions looking for the nimble green – the last thing they needed right now was trouble...



Duhonth, like most of their classmates, took the order to stand easy as an invitation to socialize. He bounced off in a rattle of buckles and straps, likely to make a nuisance of himself with one of his siblings...though perhaps S'var should be grateful the blue was more interested in the greens on the grounds than the one currently in the sky.

Will you ever reach the point where laying in the sun is good enough for you? he asked. *It suits every other dragon in this Weyr.*

I will lay in the sun later, when it is hotter and I have not been standing still for so long, Duhonth replied.

Trust the dragon to have an answer for everything. S'var wandered over to T'syr. "I will never," he said by way of greeting, "understand dragons."

"Never understand them?" T'syr eyed Yengarth, whose eyes were already half-lidded, then glanced at the happily bouncing Duhonth and smiled. "I guess when your blue is so chatty... but then, some of your classmates are chatty enough, and you probably don't understand them either." S'var saw his smile falter a little. "I'm just glad you made it through your jump all right. Don't worry me like that. What happened up there? Yengarth wasn't exactly forthcoming about it."

S'var also watched his blue, arms folded and fingers curled 'round his bony elbows. Though the question didn't wipe away his smile, a furrow appeared between his dark brows. "Duhonth took me too seriously. I told him I wanted to get it over with, so he got it over with, as fast as he was able." The smile won over, excitement and relief from

having survived still tingling through him. "He meant well, I'm sure, but I thought my heart was going to stop cold in my chest. I've never wanted to come back to a place so badly in my entire life..."

Duhonth had lowered himself into a stalking stance and disappeared behind one of the browns, distracting S'var with the reminder of how small he was compared to some of his clutchmates. It was easy to forget when mounted or standing beside him. Next to Yengarth, S'var felt positively tiny.

He gestured to the basking bronze. "So how proud is he about his big moment?"

Before T'syr could answer, there was an ear-shattering roar, and S'var winced, not wanting to look. But he had no choice. Duhonth was backing away playfully from an orange-eyed blue, lashing his long tail in delight at the stir. ***I told you I could catch it, Sujath,*** the blue reasoned to the green that had suspiciously appeared at his side. ***And I did NOT use my claws, Vesath. You pulled your tail away too fast and scraped on them.*** To S'var's bemusement, Duhonth actually sounded reproachful, as though the other blue had spoiled the game by getting hurt.

"Sujath..." Cybris growled from nearby.

"S'var, get control of your dragon, you wherry-hen!" W'den sounded as angry as his dragon.

Duhonth!

Yes? Duhonth asked innocently.

Get over here. S'var shot an anxious glance at Weyrlingsecond Shahara -- they'd already bungled their first *between* flight today, and he wasn't about to go looking for more reason to attract her disapproval. *No more playing, you're going to get us into trouble. Shahara and Layketh don't like games, you know they'll make Arohath settle you – or worse, one of the bronzes.*

Duhonth, though, seemed swayed by Sujath's attention, and arched his neck to eye her impishly. ***How fast can you go?*** he asked, tone and posture hinting at a playful challenge.

S'var didn't know how Sujath answered, but he saw the green launch herself at Duhonth with wings spread, eyes whirling green and blue. Duhonth squealed delightedly and mantled his wings, awaiting her attack. The two scuffled, raising dust, until something arrested his blue mid-pounce. The bluerider noticed a bemused look on T'syr's face, and wondered if Yengarth had anything to do with the halt, until he saw Layketh's attention on the scene and paled.

"Line up!" Shahara's voice suddenly cut across the ranks. "Cybris and S'var, come forward."

Duhonth returned to his place with an air of reluctance – although he couldn't remember any reprimands of the past, the anxiety that spiked in S'var was enough to make him wary of what was coming.

S'var pinched the crooked bridge of his nose, trailing a resigned look at T'syr as he obeyed. He came up alongside Cybris, who looked about as thrilled as he felt, and he offered her a wry smile before the Weyrlingsecond stepped up to dress them down.

"The flight will be over soon, and we are going to continue our lesson," Shahara said with a serious frown. "The last thing we need is our hatchlings injuring each other in mischief, no matter how well-intentioned. I want to see both of you bright and early tomorrow on glow duty." She

looked at each of them in turn. "Half a day for you, Cybris, but you, S'var, will spend the day. And hopefully at the end of it, you'll figure out how to better keep your dragon in hand. You should know this already. Now back in line, you two."

S'var took the punishment with a nod and downcast eyes. Duhonth was waiting at their place in line, his head held close to the ground, and he pushed his nose into S'var's hands as soon as they were within reach. **Did I make Layketh's rider angry at you?**

A little, yes... S'var stroked his blue's soft muzzle, patting it once reassuringly before he took his proper place by the dragon's shoulder. *Sujath's rider and I have to spend tomorrow changing the glowbaskets.*

Scolding words stuck in his throat. He hated how *bad* Duhonth felt whenever this happened, and the blue's short memory meant constantly repeating the same firm lessons. 'Slow down.' 'Calm down.' 'Put it down!' He bit his cheek...he wasn't doing them any favors by dodging the duty. *Duhonth...you have to stop playing games when we're on the drill grounds. And when I give orders, you need to listen. I'm not Layketh or a gold, I can't force you – but when I tell you to do something, I promise, I'm not doing it for no reason. Like this time, I was afraid you and Sujath might snap your riding straps. Then we wouldn't be able to get the drill right, and Cybris wouldn't be able to go even once. Did you think of that?*

No, Duhonth answered, subdued. S'var's heart squeezed and he put a hand on the dragon's side.

Just...trust me when I give orders.

I trust you.

I know. S'var sighed. Duhonth trusted him. Now if only he trusted himself...

There was a distant din of dragon roars, and Shahara's voice rang out over the ranks once more. "The flight is over! W'den and Vesath, you can take your turn now."

W'den strapped in for the second time. He tucked his long brown ponytail up inside his helmet and belted the chin strap. *Vesath, all good? You're sure your tail doesn't hurt too much?* W'den almost hoped it did; he could fix the straps before taking the first jump *between*. At least then he would have a reason to ask to have his time delayed.

I am fine. It no longer hurts. The blue turned and sniffed his tail where the scratch took place.

Right then...it's our turn to go between. W'den pressed his heels against Vesath's deep blue hide. *Let's go!*

The large blue leapt into the air, making wide sweeps with his wings to gain altitude. Now it was their turn to make the wide circle around the Weyrling Hall, and W'den solidified the image of the multi-colored roof in his head. *Do you have that picture, Vesath?*

I do.

Fly to the feeding grounds then. W'den let himself smile. Finally they were about to be free to go places. Once they were given permission to go to other places, W'den would go home to his hold in Thornblaze territory and visit his family. He missed the vineyard and would love to

sample the newest wine. His family was always allowed a few bottles for their hard work.

In no time, the feeding grounds were below, small dots like trundle bugs moving to and fro across them. W'den refocused on the image in his head and gave it to Vesath once more. *Ready?*

I know where to go. We just flew from there, why don't we just fly back? Vesath asked, annoyed.

Because we're practicing moving between. The slender rider thumped his blue's forward ridge and chuckled. *Let's get this done so we can show the others we're as good as they are.*

Yes, we can do this! Vesath flew upwards in a showy move, causing the saddle to slide back an inch. The roughened texture of the leather chafed at Vesath's back, rubbing hard against the tender spot. The blue groaned but had already begun the move *between*. The pair disappeared.

Black, blacker, blackest...

Duhonth's head tipped back in a haunting wail, and abruptly S'var's face went from sallow to deathly pale. The guilt that had been nibbling on the edge of his mind now bit deep into his guts.

Duhonth... For a moment words wouldn't come. The blue would answer without hesitation...he was a coward for not wanting to know for sure...

What happened?

Vesath did not go where he was supposed to, Duhonth answered mournfully.

S'var closed his eyes. *I know...but why?*

I do not know. Duhonth's narrow nose came up again. **Sujath goes now - Layketh's rider is pleased that they do not slow down because of the loss.**

S'var watched Cybris and her green take to the skies with a sour pit in his stomach. If they were lost, too...shards. Duhonth was well attached to his favorite partner in crime, and somehow S'var knew it was a lack he'd notice, even if his blue eventually forgot.

Now Sujath, you will follow my every instruction perfectly. Shahara must not find fault in this flight!

Yes! Sujath exclaimed, her body tense with anticipation and her eyes whirling.

Cybris gave Sujath permission to launch. Cat-like, the athletic little green sprang into the air. They gained altitude rapidly, with Cybris doing her best to not hinder Sujath in any way. The air was Sujath's element, and in some respects, Cybris would always be along for the ride.

Not too quickly, Cybris cautioned as they looped the Weyrling Hall. *Can you see the picture I have in my mind?*

It is very clear, Sujath said, as they flew off towards the Feeding Grounds. Where Sujath would normally have flirted with the wind and dipped her wings in playful defiance, Cybris made her fly straight and true. Sujath grumbled but then quieted.

Cybris waited two breaths, making sure her green had the image — when she relaxed, Sujath went *between*.

She didn't let herself worry or be frightened, staying focused on the colors in her mind. As the cold of *between* enveloped her she relaxed, knowing her life was now in Sujath's ability to trust and listen to her. And despite her flaws, Cybris trusted her dragon.

And then, almost as quickly as they had gone, they were back again, soaring over the Weyrling Hall. Sujath bugled in triumph and Cybris punched the air in fierce pride. They *had* shown they were worth something!



Sujath and her rider returned without a scratch, but J'ran didn't even see them, his thoughts tied up in the loss of W'den. They'd been friends since they were candidates, finding a lot in common as holdbred boys. He'd liked the slender weyrling, and they were both excited to have impressed at the same time, both to blues!

He remembered how Vesath and Perriath had fought over a piece of meat during one feeding and J'ran felt horrible because he had not stopped Perriath in time. Vesath's nose had a small scar from the bite Perriath had given him. They hadn't been cotmates, but had spent many evenings sharing stories in the Weyrling Hall.

The two had fought over how W'den tended to get lazy with his work, and J'ran had slapped him. He felt awful and now he would never be able to apologize.

Still, it was his turn to go *between*, and being a dragonrider meant putting unhappy thoughts like this behind him to focus on his job.

J'ran's strong arms flexed as he did one last check on his straps, straps that were in top shape, unlike W'den's. 'Why didn't I say anything? I knew the straps W'den had were dried out, Vesath had complained to Perriath about the itching.' Tears rolled down J'ran's dark cheeks but he wiped them away and sat up tall.

Ready Perriath, lift off!

The strong blue, a lighter periwinkle hue, leapt high into the air and began pushing for height. ***We will do fine. I am strong and your picture is clear!*** The blue winged over the Weyrling Hall, seeing the thoughts in J'ran's mind. They rarely needed to wait for J'ran to voice his commands; their link was so well formed.

The clear sky and Weyrhall roof blurred in his vision from the pain of loss. J'ran and W'den had planned on spending their free time this evening playing a few hands of poker and plotting their trip to "Search" Jessmyra, a girl J'ran had been betrothed to before he was Searched. J'ran clenched his fist tight around the forward straps.

I have the picture, it is clear. I am ready. Perriath's steady, calm voice gave him some strength he currently lacked. J'ran nodded and gave the cue to go.

The pair flew by the Weyrling Barracks on their way to the feeding grounds. The barracks had been the place where he and W'den had spent their evenings up until recently. They talked about each other's experiences at their home Holds, lying in their bunks at night; how beast herding and wine making had similarities. They would arm wrestle and tease the female weyrlings. They had bunked right next to each other, in the far southeastern corner of the barracks.

Perriath was past Windflight now, and J'ran was jolted back to the here-and-now by his blue's mental nudge, ***We are here. I have your picture. Can we go now?***

Take me there, Perriath, J'ran said.

I go! The winter-blue dragon dipped *between*.



Three heartbeats of silence after Perriath disappeared; Aleoth's desperate keening voice rang out with the other weyrlings. The green threw her head from side to side, howling while Byalla tried desperately to get the green under control.

Aleoth! Calm down, love!

No! Perriath returned, but he is gone, his rider is gone! Others are gone too! I want us here, not there!

Aleoth! Stop! Byalla used the firmest mind-voice she had.

Aleoth stopped, but was still shaken. She had tucked her tail in close to her body and whimpered. Byalla could feel her own body shaking as she looked towards the Weyrlingsecond.

"All right class, listen up!" Shahara's rich alto reached her class easily. "J'ran made a grave mistake and has been found by Weyrlingsecond B'baer. I cannot say what went on in his head, but he fouled up. Time and again myself and the other weyrlingassistants have told you how important it is to concentrate when moving *between*! Line up and follow me, it's time you see firsthand what happens when you shaff up!"

She began walking towards the Weyrling Barracks, and Byalla heard her say clearly over her shoulder, "When we reach the Weyrling Barracks, leave your dragons at the front, there won't be enough room for them to stand with you."

Byalla was still holding Aleoth's head, stroking and calming the green as best she could. As the weyrlings began to move out, it took all of her will power to coax the upset dragon to take slow steps towards the Barracks. Byalla gave half-hearted smiles to those who could see the kind of distress Aleoth was in, but it was heartbreaking to see her own dragon so distraught.

Byalla....Sujath says we will be fine. She says that her rider and she are always right. Are they?

Byalla looked over at Cybris to see her offering support from afar with a smile.

Well, they're right about that. We shouldn't worry.

There was a quiet, almost thoughtful pause from Aleoth. Then she asked, ***Everyone is saying Perriath came out from between wrong. What does that mean?***

That's what we are going to find out. We will see when we get there. Byalla knew good and well what it meant to come out wrong. There were plenty of horror stories...the results could be gruesome to look at. But she wasn't going to tell her green that.

I do not want to know. Aleoth spoke in a pitiful voice with her head hung low as she and Byalla walked close to the back of the group. ***I do not want to see...***

Byalla's heart wrenched to leave her dragon behind, but she followed her classmates into the Weyrling Barracks as Shahara led them in a silent group to the back wall. At first glance, she could only describe the scene as something that

looked not-quite-right. The large blue form of Perriath lay as if in slumber, his wings lay limply at his sides. When first seen it would look as though the blue had fallen asleep nestled up against the back corner of the Weyrling Barracks.

Until you noticed the pool of ichor under his shoulder.

The trail of ichor lead up to the area where, when alive, Perriath's neck and forelegs would have joined his chest and shoulders. Part of his saddle and straps hung detached, the rest disappearing inside the building. And when you looked closer, the bottom half of J'ran could be seen. The rest of the pair melded with the Barrack wall, where timbers split to accommodate their mass, and one large crack leaked sunlight that pooled with the fluids on the floor.



Vershya had to stare a moment before full comprehension gripped her and the disorienting position of bodies, blood and ichor clicked in her mind. Abruptly she felt her stomach roil, and she closed her eyes briefly, carefully shutting the door on the voice in her mind that had started to jibber with hysterical fear. She swallowed the nausea back and opened her eyes resolutely. Best look, and look hard, and remember the consequences of making mistakes.

From outside, she heard a number of dragons begin to stir and rumble in distress. Shahara stepped forward to speak, but before she uttered a word, another angry voice cut across the cold and sickened silence.

"This is wrong, Weyrlingsecond." Sapherlin's words were choked but her eyes were hot, and Vershya had never seen such anger on the normally cheerful face. Beside her, Lina bit her lip and put a restraining hand on her friend's arm, but Sapherlin pulled away. "J'ran and Perriath are half-stuck in a wall, and you're making an example of what's left of them? Explain what's helpful about that."

Shahara regarded Sapherlin coolly. "I shouldn't need to explain it to you," she said after a long pause. "Does the sight disturb you? It should. This could have been any one of you. No matter how many warnings we give, there is always someone in a weyrling class who doesn't take the warnings seriously enough. In this class, there have been three, so far. By showing you the consequences, I hope to avoid any more."

"Great." Sapherlin's tone snapped with grief and sarcasm. "So having the image of a dead classmate stuck in my head is supposed to *help* me avoid losing my concentration when I take my next jump. Sharding brilliant."

For once, Vershya was at a loss for words. All eyes turned to the weyrlingsecond, and a few weyrlings winced in anticipation.

Shahara squared her shoulders and clasped her hands behind her back, visibly schooling her own anger. She met Sapherlin's eyes unerringly with her own, brown and stormy. "The first thing you will take away from this lesson, weyrling, will be a day in the middens. Insubordination is not something that will be tolerated in the Weyrling Wing, or any other Wing in this Weyr." Sapherlin seemed to gather herself to argue, but Shahara overrode her before she could speak. "And I warn you,

Sapherlin, that if you take that tone with me again, or any senior rider, you will find yourself becoming exceptionally well acquainted with those pits."

There was a moment of terse silence as Sapherlin's face flushed, but she wisely held in anything else she'd wanted to say. Shahara continued.

"If there is anything you should *learn* from today's lessons, it should be these two things. First, when you are not careful with your visualizations, you endanger both yourself and your dragon. Second, you cannot afford to be distracted by a wingmate's death. In the heat of Threadfall, you need to be focused no matter what happens, and you can't let your best friend's death distract you, or you will be close to follow."

Vershya's respect for Shahara went up a notch; not all the Weyrlingassistants were so composed. The older woman continued.

"If I sound callous, believe me when I say it's for your own good. It will happen to all of you who live to graduate into the fighting Wings. Sometimes you will lose someone dear to you in the heat of Threadfall. The lessons you learn here will determine whether or not you live. I don't want to be accused of negligence in your education."

Shahara closed her speech with a grave look at each weyrling. Only one squirmed under her gaze.

S'var's face was haunted, and Vershya abruptly felt sorry for him. The deaths must seem like a chain reaction – Duhonth's play-fight with Vesath could have caused the bronze's fatal jump, and everyone knew how good of friends W'den and J'ran had been. Though no one would blame him, the bluerider clearly blamed himself.

"A face-full of flame or Thread won't look much prettier than this," he said to Sapherlin, slouching self-consciously under the stares of his classmates. "The more times you see it, the less rattled you'll be each time." His eyes flickered uncertainly to Shahara.

She nodded approvingly. "S'var has raised another good point. Fighting Thread will expose you to such ghastly sights as you could only imagine, and you cannot let shock or disgust divert you from the task at hand."

Sapherlin wasn't convinced. She waved a hand at what remained of J'ran and Perriath, her voice catching. "We shouldn't have to see them that way."

Shahara's expression didn't soften, but there was understanding in her eyes. "They shouldn't have failed."

Lina pulled on Sapherlin's arm again, and finally the girl gave in, allowing herself to be drawn into an embrace. T'syr put a hand on S'var's shoulder, but the bluerider stared miserably at the ground.

"We've had enough distractions for one day." Shahara's voice was quiet, but unrelenting. "Back to the drill grounds. You're all due for another round, and I have faith that you'll all do it right this time."



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