
A Convenient Lesson

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Lyra jolted out of sleep to an unearthly racket outside – dragons bawling, young and adult alike. Her brown firelizard Twink had uncurled himself from his usual lump at the small of her back and circled her bunk, shrieking to high heaven. Other firelizards in the barracks were doing the same.

Several frightened voices called out at once.

"What the--"

"Sweet Faranth--"

"What is this...?"

Deza started to cry.

Then the racket turned to a mourning keen. In its wake came the unmistakable broadcast lust of a queen rising to mate. The candidates went silent, the only sound in the room Deza's choking sobs. Everyone else looked at each other. This was not going to be a good day.

Lyra finally coaxed Twink down from the rafters, and he settled on her shoulders, rubbing his face into her neck for comfort. When she tried to ask him what was wrong, he peeped in fright and sent her confused images. Queens fighting? That just didn't happen! Unless...

Ellya opened the barracks door. She was still in her night shift, with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Immediately the girls spilled out of their beds, talking over each other to ask what was happening.

"Quiet, quiet everyone! Back to your bunks, please!"

Everyone settled down, but with a definite air of anxiety.

"We don't know what's happened yet," Ellya said, "but we'll find out soon enough. You are all to wait here until we get further word."

"Lio says queens were fighting!" Aliana said, inciting a wave of gasps and whispers.

"We don't know what's happening," Ellya repeated, raising her voice to quiet the murmur. She paused until there was silence again. "And until we do, let's not spread any flitter rumors. Get dressed, everyone, and hold tight."

While the girls were changing out of their shifts and into their clothes, Ellya answered a quiet knock at the door. Lyra quickly pulled her tunic over her head and stood on her toes to see who was there... and was surprised to see wingrider and senior dragonhealer apprentice Tallah. She couldn't hear what was said over the chatter, but soon enough Ellya turned and clapped her hands for attention.

"Dragonhealer apprentices," she said, "Master Giselle has summoned you all to the Infirmary. Quickly now."

Lyra hurriedly laced her shoes. She gave Twink a firm command to stay put in her cot, glanced to her sister Nori (who gave her a quick smile of support), and followed Aliana, Meiriel and Deza to the door. Deza was still crying.

"Hurry up," Tallah said, terse as usual, and led the group to the Dragon Infirmary.

"What happened?" Aliana asked as they walked.

"You'll find out soon enough," Tallah said, not breaking stride.

Deza sniffed and rubbed her eyes. Lyra was sure that Deza, the only person at the Weyr who could hear all dragons, had heard what happened. She reached for the deaf girl's slate and, as best she could while they were walking, wrote "What happened". Deza took it back, rubbed it out, and wrote "queens fought. Yttrith died."

"Yttrith!" Lyra exclaimed. "Faydra!" Aliana gasped.

"She's sharding stupid," Tallah said.

"What!" Lyra rounded on Tallah. "How can you say that?"

"She should have known better," Tallah said tersely. "Should have seen the signs, should have known to take her dragon away. Only a dimglow would kill their own dragon like that."

Lyra couldn't stop the tears. She would have retorted angrily, but they arrived at the Dragon Infirmary. There was already a large group assembled. At the head of the group, Master Giselle watched until everyone arrived.

"All right, everyone," she said. "It seems we have work to do. Aretei, Corsan, have Zaras, Rilam, and Meiriel assemble some dissection sets and lances; Mavary, have Lyra, Aliana and Bastian gather some hide and styluses for drawings and notes... it looks like we have an autopsy on our hands."

Next to Lyra, Aliana sniffed and rubbed tears from her eyes. Nearby, Zaras shook his head. "Looks like we get another convenient lesson," he said. "Trust Master Giselle to turn tragedy into an opportunity to learn something."

It was too true. If Lyra hadn't been crying already, she might have laughed.



The subdued group of dragonhealers -- craftmasters, journeymen and apprentices -- wended their way to the Feeding Grounds. On any other day, the trek would have been full of chattering, jokes and laughter, but today, only the occasional murmur of whispers could be heard among the apprentices.

When they finally arrived at the scene of carnage, the Feeding Grounds staff had just dragged off the last of the blooded carcasses the rutting bronzes had left behind. Weyrherder Marshall, Drayvin and Gavrill stood around Yttrith's broken form, scratching their heads as if wondering what to do with her. Master Giselle had some short words with the Weyrherder, who nodded and gave some orders to the others. They headed for the stables.

At the sight of Yttrith's mangled corpse, Lyra found herself crying again. The twisted body and the ichor-splashed, death-pale gold hide horrified her. Was Faydra all right? What could have happened? How could she have been so careless? Lyra was only a candidate, and even she knew...

Wherever she was, Faydra would be paying for Yttrith's death. Lyra had seen it often enough in the Infirmary; she'd watched over bereft riders, waiting for them to regain consciousness, or simply to choose whether they wanted life without their partner, or a forgiving death. Standing before Faydra's own dragon, Lyra struggled for composure.

'Calm,' she told herself, trying to remember all her lessons on professionalism -- especially about detaching yourself when you have to treat a patient you care about. Though this wasn't exactly *treating*...

"Now, gather close, everyone," said Master Giselle. "It's time for a good look at what a queen in heat will do. You'll notice the torn wing sails, puncture wounds..." Giselle went on, detailing all the damage that Amisseth had wrought on the young queen -- broken bones, abrasions, lacerations, strangulation. Lyra tried to push Faydra out of her mind and pay attention.

Master Giselle continued her examination. She hardly even paused to acknowledge the Feeding Ground staff when they returned with harnessed draft horses and stout rope -- to help move Yttrith's huge body, Lyra assumed.

"Amisseth must have blooded her, rather than go for the herdbeasts," Master Giselle noted. Lyra suppressed a shudder as the craftmaster continued. "It will be interesting to observe the clutch that results from this flight, to see whether or not bleeding on another dragon makes a difference in clutch or hatchling size."

Master Giselle the Cold-blooded -- the nickname the apprentices sometimes used for her. Lyra was surprised that the craftmaster could say all this without emotion.

"... Our next task here is to see whether or not Yttrith was sexually mature," Master Giselle continued.

This was one of those things the senior apprentices and journeymen debated from time to time. Lyra had heard them discuss it before, where the line of maturity was for a mating queen to see a sexually immature queen as a rival. The Weyr usually erred on the side of caution... and Yttrith's death gave the policy added weight.

Master Giselle then summoned the Feeding Ground staff, and they helped the dragonhealers prepare Yttrith's body for examination. Gavril and Drayvin positioned the draft horses, and Mato, Hakel and Morres helped cinch the team to Yttrith's body with stout rope. With a "heyup!" they spurred the team to pull the dead queen into the best position for everyone to see.

Apprentices folded the shattered and torn wings next to the gold body, and the dragonhealer staff helped the Feeding Ground staff secure the gold into position with rope. Master Corsan then climbed onto Yttrith's abdomen, carrying a long lance. Lyra winced when he stabbed it into Yttrith's chest, just below her ribcage. He gestured for a couple senior apprentices to help him leverage as he made the I-shaped incision, and then summoned several apprentices to pull the I-shaped incision open and hold it.

By the time Yttrith's body was ready, the sun had risen several degrees in the sky, and Lyra was beginning to feel the day's heat. She fanned herself with the parchment she held, and realized with some detachment how far she'd come since the beginning of her apprenticeship, that looking at the now-exposed organs didn't leave her running for nearest chamber pot to puke.

Master Giselle had Zaras and Rilam strip to the waist and climb into the body cavity to pull out organs as she commented on each. She pointed with the blunt end of a dissection lance to emphasize several points. The rest of the dragonhealer staff took notes.

Lyra did her best to sketch the body, the organs, and the rest. She mentally compared what she saw to the diagrams of a fully mature queen's anatomy that she'd studied on record hides. Giselle covered each point in detail. By the end, Lyra had started shifting her weight from foot to foot; standing for so long was taking its toll on her.

"We can see..." Giselle said, and then paused, when the leathery flap of dragon wings overhead distracted her audience. Lyra glanced up with everyone else to see Weyrwoman Lybelle's Ihyanith incoming. Amisseth must be caught, she thought. Trust the Weyrwoman to come back as soon as she could.

With no little apprehension, the whole group watched Ihyanith circle to land in the main Weyr complex. Then Master Giselle cleared her throat to get their attention again.

"As I was saying... We can see here that Yttrith is well developed, but the development of the ovaries shows she is not quite sexually mature," Master Giselle said. "But as you see, it did not save her. I'm sure," and she punctuated this with a gesture of the lance, "that weyrlings and those of you still standing candidate will be hearing more about this. Whatever lessons you have, let this underscore it. You can never be too careful, when it comes to your dragon. If you get careless, this --" and she poked Yttrith's corpse with the lance, "-- will be the result."

Lyra glanced at Tallah, who stood near with folded arms, nodding at Giselle's words. The senior apprentice glanced at Lyra, expressionless. Lyra felt tears rising again, and wiped at her eyes. She couldn't help thinking of Faydra -- seemingly innocent, earnest, but always looking for shortcuts, always looking for others to do the *real* work. Faydra, with a willful queen.

After more inspections, poking and prodding the dead queen, Giselle dismissed the group at last. Other dragons would come to deliver Yttrith's body *between*.

Before she left the grounds, Lyra looked for the last time on Yttrith's lifeless form. She was reminded of the gold's fierce entrance into the world, and Incane lying on the Hatching Sands, just as lifeless as Yttrith was now. It was rather poetic, Lyra thought, detached. If she had any talent for harpering, it would be worth a song... one to warn future queenriders.

Either way, Faydra and Yttrith would certainly be remembered, even if it was surely not the way Faydra had quite intended.

