
Caught

by Sass Collard

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A hand brushed over her bare hip, and Olissia blinked drowsily, awake before she was fully aware. Reflexively she groped for her dragon; Taebareth was a silent lump in her head, sleeping soundly. More movement nearby, and fabric tickled against her leg as someone pulled the linen sheet away. She stirred enough to focus on the figure that stood beside the cot. The girl's brown hair was boyishly short and tousled, and she was gathering the cot linen around her nude body, searching around with her eyes. With a small tut, she bent and plucked up a faded blue tunic from the floor – it gaped with a ragged tear. She began gathering up other articles of clothing from the scatter, walking softly on her toes as she moved.

“Don't worry,” Olissia murmured, voice still husky with sleep, “I'm awake.”

The girl started a little at the first sound of her voice, glancing over and blushing hotly across her freckled cheeks despite her sheepish smile. Olissia shifted on the pillow, sorting out her hair with her fingers and offering a sleepy smile in return.

“I could fix that for you,” she added, eyes going to the torn tunic.

“No worries,” the girl answered, waving one hand. “I'm a fair hand at sewing myself.” Her expression turned mischievous as she guessed the source of the offer. “I forgive you for being the one to rip it in the first place. I didn't expect a mating flight would get so rough or I'd have held my own better – makes me glad it wasn't a gold flight.”

Olissia chuckled, pulling herself up a little and propping on one elbow. “I'm sorry, I'm not usually...”

“Ah, ah, I said no worries,” the girl countered good-naturedly. She continued to gather her clothing and, having found it all, began to dress. The brief view between when sheet came off and clothes went on made Olissia regret the necessity of her leaving at all, but the pace of clothes being pulled on suggested that an offer to linger would likely be turned down.

“So you've never gone poaching before?” she asked to fill the silence.

The girl shook her head, chuckling a little herself at the euphemism while she pulled her ripped shirt over her head. “Never. Considered it while I was a candidate, but never really found the backbone.” She pulled on her boots and bent to lace them – her shirt gaped inappropriately, but she ignored it.

Olissia relaxed back on the pillow, pushing away the cot's thin blanket – without the linen in the way, it scratched against her skin. She curled into a more modest position, noticing the other girl's eyes flicker over for a brief second; ha, at least she wasn't the only one guilty of ogling.

But it was something else that made her pause before speaking – something seemed odd about this encounter, and she studied the girl more objectively, trying to identify what was nagging her.

Maybe a name would help. “So do I at least get to know who jumped me?”

The girl glanced over and smiled. “Name's Sarafina.” She bent her head back to her work, nimbly threading lace through eyeholes with the ease of long practice.

“I'm Olissia, Taebareth's rider.”

The sensation of oddness increased. This girl was obviously a dragonrider – her boots, her comment about being a candidate, and the slightly distant look in her eyes gave her away. Being bonded to a dragon was not easy to hide from eyes that knew what to look for. But she hadn't introduced her dragon, not even mentioned its name yet...and that was just odd. Most dragonriders couldn't say ten words without mentioning their beast, let alone introduce themselves and not, point in case. Sarafina's behaviour took on a hasty quality to Olissia, and curious suspicion trickled into her mind.

Reaching out mentally, she roused her blue, soothing his mild annoyance with feelings of gentle apology. *Sorry, Tae, but something weird is going on here and I want your help...I need you to tell me who this girl's dragon is.*

There was a second of silence, then the blue answered, *That is green Kawalth's rider.*

Olissia's brow creased slightly; the dragon's name was far more familiar than the rider's. New graduates? *What Wing are they in?*

Another heartbeat passed. Then the girl's head came up sharply, wide eyes locking on Olissia's, and the bluerider cursed her suddenly-realized error.

She shouldn't have asked for their Wing. Taebareth had obviously asked Kawalth directly, and the green had then queried her rider as to why the blue cared; not that Olissia needed the answer now. The greenrider had given herself away with her earlier comment, had the bluerider thought of it in time. She hadn't expected the roughness of a mating flight, she'd said. If she'd ridden a male, there would have been a small chance her dragon simply hadn't participated in a mating flight yet...but she rode green. Which meant that her green hadn't had a mating flight yet.

Sarafina's face betrayed her guilt. She knew she'd been caught.

Taebareth's words were merely confirmation. *The Weyrling Wing.*

They stared at one another for a long moment, neither moving, before Sarafina asked with a slow, sheepish curve to her lips, “What gave me away?”

“You did.” Olissia tipped her head, half-suppressing a smile as she gestured vaguely. “A couple of things about you, things you said and did.”

She could almost hear the mild curse dancing on the tip of Sarafina's tongue. After a second the weyrling spoke, a note of appeal in her voice. "Please don't turn me in for this."

Olissia wasn't sure how to react. There was no way she'd get off punishment-free for this...not with her record. She'd broken this very rule herself. While it didn't put her at fault, it did tarnish her claim of innocence. But Sarafina didn't know that. And it was mildly entertaining to watch her squirm thinking she'd be turned in for this affair. So she quirked a brow at the greenrider, amused. "You want me to be an accomplice in this little crime?"

Sarafina bit her lip, a guilty smile showing through regardless. "Please. I'm almost graduated anyway, and trust me, I did what I could not to get caught."

"Trust you?" Olissia feigned disbelief. "You break rules at my expense and you expect me to trust you?"

Sarafina held her hands palm up in helpless submission, with a blush and a shamefaced grin. Olissia let things hang for a moment before her piqued curiosity prompted her to ask, "Why are you so sure you won't be caught?" The implication was clear in her tone: *I caught you easily enough.*

A look of mild pride crept across Sarafina's face. "I waited until a Gather on a restday, when a bunch of riders are out of the Weyr. Including my classmates – I said flying auxiliary in Fall yesterday killed me and stayed behind. Only a few kitchen girls showed up to poach. I didn't wear my knots, and cut my hair right before I did it, from shoulder length to this. Waited until nearly the end of the flight, too. I'm glad you didn't win."

Curiosity got the better of her again. "Why?"

Sarafina affected a look of innocence, dodging the real question with purposeful misunderstanding. "Because you're much prettier than the others who were left?"

The flattery made Olissia smile, though she held the greenrider's eyes to emphasize that her query wasn't so easily avoided. "Not why me...why at all? Why the trouble, if you're so close to graduating? Hardly seems worth it to me, and trust *me*, I know."

The greenrider was a long moment considering her answer, as though debating whether or not to lie. Finally she coloured a little and admitted, "Kawalth is getting close to her first flight, and I still feel as nervous as before the weyrling Lecture. I'm horrible for first timer's anxiety, especially when making mistakes isn't an option."

"Couldn't you just hop in with one of your classmates instead of risking getting us both in trouble?"

"Oh, it's not the virginity thing, I'm over that...I think it's the being out of control that makes me a little shaky. This is the closest I can get to a mating flight and still have my wits about me...I thought it might help."

Olissia tilted her head, doubtful. "Did it?"

"No." Sarafina smiled, a little ruefully. "Still nervous. But I am looking forward to it now more than I was before."

"I suppose that's something," Olissia conceded, adding a note of teasing to her voice.

"I know, I know, not as smart an idea as it seemed at the time." Sarafina continued to wear a self-deprecating grin,

and Olissia gave in and laughed softly. Distantly they heard the weyrling bell chiming noon. The greenrider set the last knot on her right boot, and moved towards the door. "I better go before anyone comes back from Barrier who might look for me."

"Wait." Sarafina paused with her hand on the door, and Olissia pulled herself up and began gathering her own clothing off the floor. "Let me give you a ride."

Sarafina raised both eyebrows in surprise. "I thought you didn't want to get caught?"

Olissia mimicked the expression. "I thought you were the one who liked fancy schemes? I figure people are less likely to recognise you mounting Taebareth than if you walked yourself from here towards South, Wind, and Main Complexes to get back to the Weyrling Complex, looking like that. That was just the lunch bell, so the weyrling beach is almost guaranteed to be empty. I don't know about you, but I'm in the mood for a swim. I'll fly you."

Sarafina's surprise brightened into gratitude. "Thanks."

"We'll be flying strapless," Olissia cautioned. "I know I can get away with it, but you weyrings are under tighter wraps."

"I think that'll be the least of my crimes today," Sarafina replied sardonically.

Do you mind, Tae?

Yes, the blue answered grouchyly – he was always cranky after losing a mating flight.

Olissia wasn't fazed in the slightest, but rather amused. *Move it, blue boy. It was just a green flight, you're not dead.*

"If you don't mind my saying," she said aloud once she sensed her dragon up and flying, "you don't really look like the type who'd do what you're doing."

"I know," Sarafina said dryly, watching Olissia dress with as much interest as she'd been watched. "I shock myself lately. My mother would have a fit to see me now."

Olissia snorted softly – that comment hit close to home. "I know what you mean."

"Why, are you the type to do what I've done?" Sarafina's voice betrayed curiosity – she must have caught the earlier reference to Olissia's own indiscretions.

"Not exactly." Olissia paused; she didn't usually talk about what had happened with Tayron. Not because it had caused her lingering trauma or anything of that sort, but the memory was still draped in humiliation, albeit dulled with time.

But Sarafina was still looking at her candidly, and Olissia felt that offering more details was worth it in this case. "I got caught up during a gold flight about three Turns ago and ended up with a journyeman smith, Tayron. Technically I did worse than you – Tae was only about half a Turn at the time, and didn't take things well at all. He clawed up Tayron before I even knew what was going on, which is how I got caught." She didn't expect the smith had any fond memories of the encounter.

"Ouch." Sarafina winced sympathetically.

"Exactly."

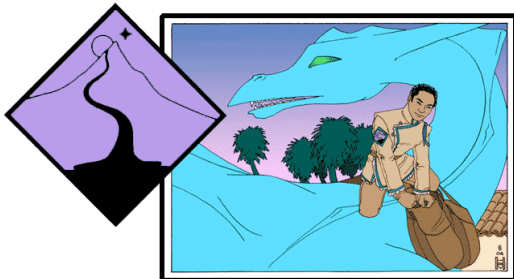
There was a rush of air, a sound like snapping canvas, and the thud of a heavy body coming to land outside. Olissia

glanced around to make sure nothing had been forgotten, then at Sarafina for confirmation. “Ready to go?”

The greenrider nodded, and after Olissia had poked her head out of the cot to check that the coast was clear, they hurried out to Taebareth’s side. As she slid into the ridge between Tae’s neck and shoulders, Sarafina gazed down the blue’s high shoulder at Olissia, a teasing smile on her face. “Maybe we could do this again some time?”

Olissia laughed aloud, mounting up. “We’ll celebrate your graduation together, how’s that?”

Sarafina’s voice betrayed her grin. “Deal.”



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