
Fresh Meat

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"Ah, fresh meat," Zaras said, his voice rich with glee.

Lodrun looked up from the vegetables being dished onto his plate by the buffet server, and saw Headsecond Resla with a pair of dark-haired youths in tow. They both wore well-worn homespun, and had similarly long-jawed, long-nosed faces that suggested close kin. The elder of the pair was tall and broad-shouldered, the younger more slender and wiry.

"They're so fresh off the farm, I can almost taste the dirt behind their ears," Zaras continued, his dark eyes narrowing as he grinned.

"Stick that tongue back in your mouth," Lodrun countered. "You'll start drooling at any moment, and you know how much that embarrasses me, to be seen with you sporting a big wet patch down the front of your tunic."

Zaras snorted, but his attention did go back to the lunch line, long enough at least for both apprentices to get their plates filled and for them to find their familiar seats at the candidates' table. "We've got more raw recruits on the way," Zaras announced as he dropped onto a bench with a clear view of the buffet line. "At least two more of them. Nice, handsome and husky farmboys."

"Those two with Resla?" Solea said, leaning for a better view. "I only see one who's husky. The other looks a little stringy for my tastes. I'll leave him for you."

"Sorry, girl, you can wait your turn for the big one. I saw him first."

There was laughter from the other candidates. There had been Searchriders combing the small cots and craftholds since Nioranth's surprising return from the Ninth Pass with a bellyful of eggs; as a result, new candidates had been trickling into the Weyr for the last two sevendays. Solea and Zaras always traded barbs over the bigger and more handsome of the new male candidates. Lodrun had little doubt but that there would be an honest competition over which of the pair could be first to bed each new male arrival, if more of the male holderbreds were safe for Zaras to approach.

"That fellow looks big enough to put up a blister of a fight," Lodrun said, giving his foster-brother a wry smile.

Zaras grinned and flexed his arms. "He would, wouldn't he? Bet he'd sweat up real nice if we wrestled."

"You're spoiling my lunch," groaned Aria, who sat alongside Solea. "Forget the new boys, Zaras. You know Resla told you the new boys are off limits. She and the

Weyrlingmaster don't want you scaring the poor dears half to death."

"Scare them?" Zaras rolled his eyes and stabbed after a sliced carrot on his plate. "Me? Never. Just breaking them in to Weyr ways is all. Shame, though. The big farmboy there is more my type, but it's the scrawny one who'd enjoy the breaking in."

Lodrun, Solea and Aria looked at one another blankly for a moment, then all three craned their heads for another look toward the two holder boys Headsecond Resla was shepherding through the buffet line. "The younger one? He's bent?" Aria said.

"Too wispy for me. I like to have a little more meat in my hands," Zaras sighed.

"Don't we all?" Solea sighed.

"I don't see how you think you can tell," Lodrun said.

Zaras smirked. "It's like Searchriding," he said. "Sometimes the dragon just knows."



Their first hour at the Weyr overwhelmed Tasyr and Tanyer with names and faces and the sheer immensity of the Weyr and awe of being among dragons. Now, Headsecond Resla guided them through the lunch crowd in the Weyrhall to the buffet line. Tasyr's mouth watered.

"Can you believe it, Tasyr?" his older brother Tanyer said. "Look at all that *food!*"

Headsecond Resla chuckled. "We have a lot of hungry mouths to feed here," she said, "and they eat a *lot*. Don't be shy; have as much as you like!"

Soon the two filled their plates with more food than they usually saw in a day. Most of it was exotic stuff – tropical fruits, sauces and meats they'd never seen before, and white fish so very unlike the pink, flaky stuff they caught in the streams around Twin Hills Cothold. Resla then guided them to a table crowded with other boys and girls in a range of ages around their own. They found themselves facing several pairs of curious eyes.

"Candidates," Resla said, "Tanyer and Tasyr just came in on Search this morning. Introduce yourselves, and help them feel at home." She smiled at Tanyer and Tasyr, and gave their shoulders a gentle push towards the table.

Tanyer gave a broad smile and wave. Tasyr followed his brother's lead, and the two of them sat near the end of the table.

A girl with dark, chin-length hair slid onto the bench next to Tanyer. "I'm Solea," she said. "So, where are you from?"

"Twin Hills Cothold," Tanyer replied. "It's probably two days' journey north of Drake Hold."

"Twin Hills?" piped up another candidate, a girl with long, brown hair. "I'm from the Drake territory too. Name's Lytora. It's a pleasure!"

Solea leaned towards Tanyer. "So you're farmers?"

"Yeah," Tanyer said.

"You look like you could wrestle a slasher," Solea said, putting a hand on Tanyer's arm.

"Thanks," Tanyer said, flexing the arm under Solea's hand. "I'd rather not, though.... One of my uncles nearly lost an arm to one."

"Oh dear," Solea said, putting a hand over her mouth.

"But," Tanyer said with a smile, "he gave me a token to remember it." He pulled out of his tunic the slasher claw he'd kept on a leather strap around his neck since their father and uncles had tracked and killed it years ago after it had taken several of their best sheep.

"Oooh," Solea said in a breathy voice. "Can I touch it?" Tanyer nodded. Solea let her hand rest on Tanyer's chest briefly as she reached for the claw. "You have quite the chest, too. They make you men strong in the country, don't they?"

Tanyer was all smug smiles when he glanced at Tasyr. Tasyr smiled back, trying hard not to roll his eyes. She was such a flirt, and Tanyer was falling for it. Hard!

"Name's Zaras," said a new voice. A dark-haired, dark-skinned youth with apprentice cords and a crafting badge with a purple dragon on it took a seat across the table from the brothers.

'Dragonhealer?' Tasyr thought; he'd never seen the device before, but what else could it be?

The new arrival leaned towards them. "You two ready to sample some of the Weyr's excitement?" he said. "There's plenty of it, no matter what your taste."

"We'd love some good excitement," Tasyr said; excitement at the Weyr had to be more fun than the things that counted as excitement at home. Groundcrews, slasher hunts, rain at harvest time, drought...

"Excellent," Zaras said, with a smile. "Well, then, we'll see you farmboys at the Candidate lecture. I have duty now, but... maybe we can play later?" Zaras put a slight emphasis on "play", and Tasyr looked again at the older candidate. The way Zaras looked at Tanyer reminded Tasyr of their father eyeing a stallion he wanted to hire for stud. Tasyr glanced at Solea, and saw pretty much the same look on *her* face, too. Tasyr guessed it was just as well Tanyer was too distracted by Solea to notice Zaras...

"All right, then," Tasyr said. Zaras glanced at him and winked. Tasyr felt his face go hot. Before he could recover, Zaras left.

"See you two big boys later," Solea said, following Zaras.



When they were out of earshot, Zaras snorted in disgusted amusement. "Can I touch it?" Subtle as a punch in the face, that. What's next, 'oops, sorry, I seem to have lost my hand down your trousers'?"

The girl was far too pleased with herself to be ruffled. "Pfft, you're just jealous that I got a handful before you."

Zaras pointed at his own chest. "Jealous? Please. Come back when you've got the notch to show for it. Besides, Scrawny back there's got 'repressed' painted all over him. I could get him to crack in no time."

"So it's a contest now is it?" Solea asked, flicking a stray bang from her eyes.

"When is it not?" Zaras's grin was broad and challenging, and Solea arched an insolent brow.

"Hm. You're on. Terms?"

"The first one of us to get one of *them* in the sack, and the loser has to--"

"Wear a scarf like R'mal's for a sevenday," Solea said with a smirk.

"I have a better idea," Zaras said. "You tailor my best Gather tunic, or I'll cover your next turn at glow duty."

Solea thought for a moment. "I don't see how this has a down side." Then she paused. "Wait, I thought it was just Scrawny that was bent."

Zaras shrugged. "I might get the big one to bend; you never know!"

Solea pursed her lips. "All right, then. If the big one doesn't kill you first, that is."



Tasyr sat through the Candidate lecture in a daze, overwhelmed by more than just the Weyr. He wasn't sure what he thought of everything yet, but one thing was for certain... he'd never had *boys* flirt with him before, and he liked it. A lot. But with Tanyer there, he didn't feel he could do anything about it.

The lecture ended, and Tasyr followed Tanyer to the door, still trying to take everything in. Zaras overtook them as they left, putting a casual hand on Tanyer's shoulder.

"So, do you farmboys have your assignments yet?"

"Assignments?" Tanyer said.

"Yeah. As in..." Zaras put a hand on his chest, and in a passable but deep imitation of Headsecond Resla's voice, said, "'You're assigned to work in the laundries today, the middens tomorrow...'"

"She said we were likely to be assigned to the Weyrfarm," Tasyr said, "but she still had to talk to the man in charge."

"Ah," Zaras said. "Well, Weyrfarmer Raidun's nice enough... but far more interested in his plants than anything else that goes on at the Weyr. You farm boys might like 'im, though. Say..." He glanced at Tasyr. "We have a little free time before dinner. You boys want to see the Weyrling Beach? It's great this time of day, when the weyrlings bathe their dragons."

At that moment, Solea ran up behind them and linked her arm with Tanyer's. "I'll come, too," she said. Tanyer smiled at her.

Tasyr caught an annoyed look passing over Zaras's face, but the older candidate hid it quickly and smiled at Solea too. "Sure, why not?"

The four of them took off, Zaras in the lead, for what Zaras promised to be the "most spectacular view in the Weyr".

They arrived at the weyrling beach to a mix of commotion and order. The surf was full of young dragons and their riders. It took Tasyr several moments to realize that most of the weyrlings wore nothing at all. Male and female alike. And... many of the young men were pretty good-looking. He flushed to his roots and glanced away.

"Great, isn't it?" Zaras said. "The sun going down, the light gleaming on wet bodies..."

"Zaras! You're embarrassing..." Solea said.

"What, don't tell me you don't enjoy the view."

"No, *them*," and she nodded her head at Tasyr's brother. Tanyer's jaw was slack with shock, but his eager expression

said that rather than shame, he was soaking in the view, and clearly enjoying it.

"Don't tell me you're embarrassed," Zaras said.

"Embarrassed?" Tanyer retorted. "Of course not! I mean... Wow, just look at... They do this *every night*?"

"Sure!" Zaras said. He laid a hand on Tanyer's shoulder again. "I hope you Impress soon; I wouldn't mind seeing *you* down there, with those shoulders... a real treat for the eyes!"

Tasyr looked up soon enough to catch the steely look Tanyer gave Zaras. "What do you mean by *that*?" Tanyer said.

"What, I'm not your type?" Zaras said innocently. "Well, maybe your brother wouldn't mind..."

Tasyr's face went hot. He was grateful he was not fair-skinned.

"Look here, pervert," Tanyer snapped, his hands clenched into fists, and he cocked up one arm. "You keep your Weyr ways to yourself or I'll --"

"Or you'll what?" Zaras said, his eyes suddenly hard. "You that eager to go home?"

At once, Solea and Tasyr grabbed Tanyer's arms. "Hey, it's not worth it," Tasyr said. "What do you think Father would say if they dumped us back home? You want to be a dragonrider, right?"

Tanyer lowered his fist. Tasyr and Solea relaxed their grips, and Zaras watched the bulky farmboy with an amused smirk. Tanyer scowled at Zaras, but finally turned. He grabbed Tasyr's shoulder. "Let's go," he said, and they headed back towards the Candidate barracks. Tasyr glanced back over his shoulder and caught Zaras's eye again. The older candidate winked again. Tasyr looked away quickly, and followed his brother.



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Zaras felt like wiping Solea's insolent smirk off her face, but instead he took the basket of glows she offered.

"Don't feel too bad," Solea said with a smirk. "We get new candidates all the time; I'm sure you'll get another chance. And you'll enjoy it, too."

Zaras snorted. "Like you enjoyed yourself, eh? Think you could have been any *louder*?" When she'd finally seduced the big farmboy on the beach, they'd used the nearest clump of brush for their tryst... and they'd still been at it when a group of dragonhealer apprentices -- Zaras among them -- had chanced by on their way to help a Thread-scored dragon take a sea bath. The peculiar shade of red Lyra's face had turned when she'd realized what was

going on had taken away some of the sting of losing the wager.

Solea gave him a cheeky smile. "I had an enthusiastic partner," she said. "What else can I say? Too bad you didn't have any luck this time."

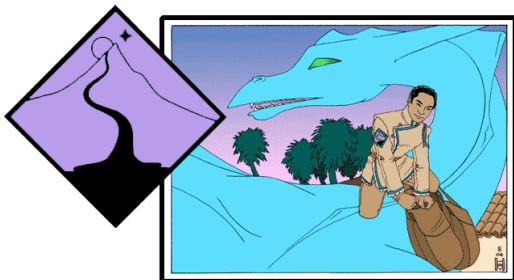
"Yeah, well... it's not like it was much of a contest. I couldn't make much of a play for the scrawny one anyway. Bragging rights are one thing, but getting on Weyrlingmaster D'zan's bad side? Or Dragonhealer Giselle's? Not worth the trouble."

"You sure Tasyr's bent?"

Zaras grunted.

"Maybe he just doesn't like your face," she said with a smirk.

"Har, har," Zaras said with a scowl. "I told you, he wasn't my type. Who wants to break in a new kid, anyway? Besides, he has that hulking brother watching over him all the time. He'll come around eventually... and we'll just see what his big brother has to say about it then."



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