
How the Other Half Live

by Leia Fee
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Brenada hummed as she peeled vegetables. Torkin was off moving the flock to new pastures after the rain, and had taken all of the cothold's few herdsmen with him. She was enjoying a quiet day to herself without his badgering and bullying. She could take her own time over the day's work and find a bit of time for herself.

She reached for another tuber, frowning as she had to cut away a rotten section. There must be a leak in the storage area. Damp was getting in. Upkeep of the buildings was not her duty though, so at least she couldn't be blamed for that. If Torkin noticed the small portions or the amount of discarded material, she could always imply -- carefully of course, not outright -- that it was his management that was at fault. He could hardly blame her for that.

She dumped the rotten section in a basket, to be taken out to the composting piles later. On reflection it might be better to comment herself on the damp problem, maybe lay it on one of the odd-jobbers that had come through a month or so ago. Torkin might take offence if he thought she blamed him, and she had been too lucky with managing his temper lately to want to antagonise him again.

She'd mash the root vegetables, she decided. The odd hacked-about sections wouldn't matter then. She crossed to the kitchen pump and filled a pot so she could toss the chopped tubers and carrots straight into the water once she'd finished. It would be ready to be set on the boil later, saving time that evening.

She glanced around. The cold wherry, left over from yesterday, which she planned to use in the stew, was already chopped and ready to be added. What else was there to do today? Nothing indoors -- she'd been round and opened all the windows. Thread had fallen during the night and it was stuffy by morning with all the shutters barred.

She thought about the laundry -- it was a good drying day, but it had been done recently and there wasn't really enough to justify the labour. Anyway, she planned to enjoy her Torkin-free day, not spend it up to her arms in suds.

She headed out into the garden. There was always something to do there, weeding or thinning out the growth. She could get some herbs to flavour the stew as well.

As she crossed the garden to the herb patch, a shadow flickered across and Brenada looked to the sky quickly, her heart leaping up at the sight of a dragon in the air. A green, too, and she allowed herself to hope, although telling herself firmly there was no reason it had to be Ineshra, goodness knew there were plenty of green dragons in the world.

But this green was indeed circling down to land, and Brenada had to resist the urge to rush to meet her. Anyone might be watching. She schooled her step and expression as though she were merely doing her duty as the wife of the cotholder in greeting a respected visitor.

Once close enough and shielded by Torraith's bulk from any watching eye from the cot, she embraced Ineshra and broke into a broad grin.

"What are you doing here? How did you know he's away?" She didn't bother to name Torkin --what other 'he' was there in her life?

Ineshra grinned back. "Well I didn't, did I? But I thought I'd swing by -- I flew over and saw the flock was gone from the close pasture and you said wherever they were, he was, so I thought it a safe bet he'd be away." She shrugged carelessly. "Anyway I could always have said I was doing a sweep or on my way to hunt Torraith or..." She waved a hand vaguely. "I'd have come up with something."

She gave a wicked grin. "Course he might have suspected I was having it away with one of those fine young farmhands that come and go." She drew closer to Brenada, who felt a still new and thrilling tingle of anticipation at her closeness. "Since he hasn't the wit to appreciate a far finer young lady..."

Any indignation Brenada might have felt at the mention of the herder boys was washed away in an almighty blush at Ineshra's follow-up comment and she snorted in derision to cover her confusion.

"Come and go" is right! Those 'fine young men' have only been here a seven-day and they're already right ticked off at him. They'll shove off soon as they can, just like the others."

Ineshra shrugged, uninterested in the details of the holding, for which Brenada could hardly blame her. She smiled instead and changed the subject.

"Well since this is just a routine visit then, would the greenrider care for some klah to take off the chill of *between*?" Brenada cocked her head sideways, a teasing smile on her lips.

Ineshra inclined her head, solemnly, though not entirely hiding a flirtatious smile.

"The greenrider would love some klah. To start with..."



Later, breathless partly from the exertion of their lovemaking and partly from the sheer fact of it, Brenada lay beside Ineshra on the hillside.

"I didn't know it could be like that," she murmured. She hesitated but rushed on, "between women, I mean."

Ineshra chuckled, "Well, once, neither did I."

"Really?" Brenada propped herself up on her elbow. "But you're a dragonrider..."

Ineshra shrugged, "Wasn't born one, was I! I wasn't even weyrbred, and I heard all the usual stories down at the hold about the immoral things those dragonriders got up to. Even--" and she gave a mock gasp of horror, "--riders of the same sex! Took Torraith's mating flight to teach me that I really didn't mind that 'immorality'," she gave the word a mocking spin, "one little bit!" She waved her hand. "But if I hadn't been Searched... If I'd been married off, then

maybe--" She stopped, maybe realising how dismissive of Brenda's situation "married off" sounded. After a moment she went on. "--well I might never had realised."

Apparently oblivious to their discussions, Toraith herself lay at ease on the grass, though she was alert and her head was raised, following the flight of a distant wherry.

Ineshra looked over at her dragon.

"She's thinking about her dinner."

She smiled and Brenada returned it but the unabashed affection in the simple comment sparked a twinge of something that wasn't quite jealousy. Or was it? Harper songs had it that the dragon-rider bond was something like love. How could a cotwife ever complete with that? The mention of mating flights also caused her a pang as she was reminded that of course she was not, and could never be, Ineshra's only bed companion.

But Ineshra was no longer looking at Toraith, and with her lover's full attention on her again, Brenada's doubts vanished. She hardly even noticed that they were right out in the open on the hillside. Only afterwards did she realise how easily they could have been disturbed.

She pulled herself reluctantly to her feet.

"Torkin will be back soon."

Ineshra grimaced. "Spoilsport."

Brenda hardly noticed the provocation. "He *is* my husband." She looked across to the green dragon who'd come to her feet as well. "And Toraith is hungry."

Ineshra got to her feet and drew Brenada closer. "So am I," she murmured, the double meaning clear. She didn't persist, though, and soon released Brenada and stood back.

"So how's the farming schedule looking for the next few sevendays?" she asked, with a teasing grin.

Brenada worried her lip, still thinking of their exposure on the hillside. "I don't know. Torkin may drive off workers pretty sharding quick, but a dragon in the sky always makes people talk -- someone will spot a green dragon flying over too often."

Ineshra looked thoughtful, then glanced down at her firelizard, Jerda, who was picking for insects in the grass. "What about a green firelizard?"

Brenda was still doubtful. "There's not usually many up of them up here either."

"Less conspicuous than a dragon though." Ineshra raised her hand and Jerda fluttered up to land on her wrist, chirping curiously.

"She might be able to pop in and just picture for me whether there was anyone else here. We could try it anyway."

"I suppose so," Brenada agreed, though she wasn't entirely convinced. "An extra pair of eyes can't hurt."

"Well that's a plan, then." Ineshra grinned, as though

that was the last word on the matter, and Brenada allowed herself to be drawn into an embrace. Jerda squawked at her dismissal and flew off to join Toraith.

"Don't worry so much, Brenada." Ineshra released the embrace, but held onto Brenada's hand. "We'll be fine."

Brenada put her doubts aside and smiled, not wanting to spoil their last moments of the visit together.

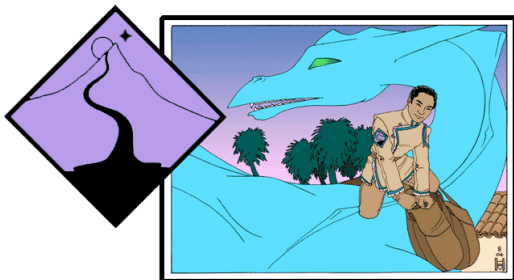
"I'll see you soon then?"

Ineshra smiled. "Count on it." She turned to her dragon. "Come on Toraith, stir yourself. Time to go home."

Brenada had to force herself to let go of Ineshra's hand, her arm falling slowly to her side. She watched as Ineshra mounted Toraith, gave a final wave and launched into the air to vanish *between*.

Slowly she returned to the cot and moved the cooking pot to hang over the fire. Torkin would have his dinner on time when he returned, and need never know she'd spent the day being anything but the dutiful wife.

Silently, in the empty kitchen, Brenada smiled to herself.



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