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# Requital

by Juniper  
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She'd been driving the horse and cart flat out for at least a mile before the roaring panic in her head receded enough to allow a sliver of rational thought to creep in. "The horse. Mustn't lame her."

"Easy, girl. Easy." The mare slackened her pace. Brenada let her walk, noting with dismay her heaving ribs. Driving her at that speed, even with the cart unladen, had been cruel. She glanced over her shoulder. There was no sign of pursuit yet, and she must have a good lead on her husband, if he were even following. He'd be on foot: she had the cothold's mare, and the cart that was still harnessed to her. He'd have to go to the next cothold, to Brenada's own parents, if he wanted to borrow another horse, and that was in the other direction. Even if they agreed to lend their beast, which they might not, he'd then have to retrace his steps. If he were on foot, she could outdistance him easily as long as she kept moving faster than he could walk. She could ease up for now, take it steadily.

The path was familiar and Brenada scarcely needed to guide the mare. The less frantic pace gave her time to think, and brought the realization that she didn't know where she was going. She'd already passed the fork in the path where the track to Bent Peak cothold joined that from High Trail where her parents lived. Another few miles and she would be away from the area where she'd spent her entire life, apart from a few rare visits to Kadanzer Hold. Should she turn back, go to her parents for help? She reined back, considering it. No. If she went back, she might meet Torkin. She had to continue. Besides, would her parents even help her? They'd married her to Torkin, though he was more than three times her age. They'd refused to hear what sort of a man he was. They wouldn't help her now. Not now that a dragonrider was dead, and it was her fault. Not now that she was an adulteress.



The mountain air was fresh, but the sun was still hot, and the clear sky was bright enough to dazzle. Syrenni spotted some of her friends at a table under a deep canvas awning. She dropped into a seat between Bh'ruk and Jantha, which put her opposite V'dalin. "You found a good spot."

V'dalin smiled. "It seems to me that if you're going to enjoy a gather, you need somewhere to – well, gather."

She raised the chilled fruit juice to her lips. Moisture was beading on the outside of the glass: they must have used ice to get the juice so cold. Kadanzer Hold certainly treated its dragonrider guests well. "Have you tried this? I can't work out what's in the blend."

"Beer's more to my taste – this is good stuff! Put hairs on your chest, this will!" V'dalin raised his half-full mug in a mock toast.

"V'dalin, why would I want hairs on my chest?" Syrenni protested, with a grin to show she was teasing. She set her glass on the table and held out her hand. "Besides, you're on deck tomorrow: you shouldn't be drinking. You'd better let me try that!"

V'dalin passed the mug over and she took a sip. The ale was dark and malty. "Mmm. All right, I suppose. A bit... thick. I prefer something a little lighter." She pushed the mug back across the table.

"Thick?" Bh'ruk laughed. "You mean it's got body." He was drinking the same brew. "You've not improved your taste in beer since we graduated, Syrenni. But now you've tried this stuff – well, I don't know. Maybe we ought to check."

"Check what?" Even as she spoke, Syrenni had the feeling that she'd fallen into a trap. Jantha's long-suffering shake of the head only reinforced the suspicion.

"Your chest? I could offer a private inspection..."

Syrenni flapped a hand. "Honestly, Bh'ruk, do you never stop trying?" She knew her former classmate well enough not to be offended. "That isn't even original."

Jantha snorted. "You walked right into that one." She eyed V'dalin, her wingmate in StormWind. "And you set her up for it." With a grin, she added, "Didn't know you had it in you."

Bh'ruk raised a finger and told Jantha, "Hey, I don't need help setting 'em up," then cheerfully assured Syrenni, "Course I'm never going to stop trying. I have a reputation to live down to."

The other three laughed, and V'dalin raised his hands. "I deny everything! He-."

He broke off. The others were only an instant behind him in falling quiet as the keening of dragons echoed from the fireheights, cutting through the hubbub of gather conversation and making a plangent discord with the harpers' music.

They looked at each other in a long moment of silence.

Syrenni asked V'dalin, "Toraith? That's Ineshra, isn't it? Weren't they in your Wing?"

"They were, yes," the tall bluerider answered. "She didn't come to the gather – said she had something else she wanted to do, and we've 'Fall tomorrow, anyway. He turned to Jantha. "We should be getting back."

"Off to see her little cotholder, I expect," Jantha said. "The one she's been so mysterious about. I wonder what happened. Lost between, do you think? What a waste."



Brenada guided the cart through the narrow space between two rocks, forcing herself to concentrate on driving, despite the scene that played out over and over again in her head. Torkin had returned early from the gather at Kadanzer Hold, only to discover Brenada with Ineshra, the dragonrider who had become her closest friend. Her lover. Her mind filled with the image of Torkin thrusting a pitchfork through Ineshra's heart, and she felt faint as the shock of what had happened finally gripped her. The horse trudged on, oblivious to Brenada's confusion. The poor beast had already pulled the cart up from the Hold today.

Kadanzer Hold. Could she take refuge there? She could ask for work, in the kitchens or the fields. The Lord Holder would be there, Lord Dracir himself. She'd seen him once, when he'd walked the gather at the winter solstice with Lady Khmarra. Torkin held from Lord Dracir: the Lord Holder would know him, though it was the Steward who came to the cothold. But a Lord or Lady wouldn't be concerned with someone like her, would they? There must be other people she could talk to: a steward or a head cook. But they'd be bound to ask who she was. What if Torkin came for her? What if they made her go back? She'd wronged him: he might kill her, like he'd killed Ineshra! Fear gripped her, like a hand grasping her windpipe.

She twitched the whip to stop the horse from slowing to a halt, then again to command a brisker pace. Not her parents. Not the Hold. Where else was there? She must travel right away, find some place where she wouldn't be looked for, where a woman alone might be taken in for work, or... Another picture flashed into her head and she forced it out again, not wishing to consider what lengths a woman alone might have to go to in order to keep food in her stomach. And she was alone now: more alone than she'd ever been in her life.

She had to pay attention to the path now: it was fairly steep at this point. Soon they'd be in the flat valley bottom, and then this track would join the wider road that led through the foothills towards Kadanzer Hold. That had been good land until a few Turns ago, but ash from the eruption of Kadanzer Mountain had covered so many fields, burning the planted crops and smothering the land. They said one day the ash would make the soil fertile and productive, but not yet. Now, many of the cotholds in that area were abandoned, their land unworkable. There would be no sanctuary there. They'd been lucky at Stone Path and Bent Peak: the winds had brought less ash in their direction, and the sheep could find every scrap of edible grass. Ineshra had told her how the old Weyr had been destroyed in that eruption. The new Kadanzer Weyr was far away, on the coast: farther than Brenada had ever been, though she'd dreamed of being able to live there with Ineshra.

As hot tears pricked her eyelids, she forced herself not to think of the greenrider. If she broke down now, she was lost. But the Weyr! That was the one place where someone like her would be safe, where nobody was forced into marriage, where nobody was forced to lie with a man if her heart and body longed for a woman. If only she could go to the Weyr! But it was impossible: even if they would accept her, it was far too far. She would have to drive the length of

Kadanzer Hold's territory, and through other holds that were no more than names to her; and she had no idea when Thread would fall outside her home area. Ineshra's dragon had been able to bring her here in a few heartbeats, but Toraith was gone. Ineshra had said that dragons whose riders died would take themselves between, following their riders into death, and the other dragons would mourn their passing.

Her fingers tightened round the reins and she shivered with a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature as it occurred to her that there might still be a way to get to the Weyr.



Syrenni had danced until her head was whirling and her best shirt looked like a limp rag. It was time to go home. The journeyman Healer who had been her last partner had been enthusiastic, to say the least, and it took her a little while to disentangle herself from his attentions, but at last she was out of the gather square, and making her way towards the field where the dragons had landed.

There was a sound of hoofbeats on grass as a cart approached. It wasn't moving fast, but seemed to be heading right into the gather square.

From behind her came a deep male voice. "You can't take that in there." Curious, Syrenni turned to watch as the speaker, a large, heavysset man in the uniform of a guard, lumbered out of the watch tent at the entrance to the square and stood in the opening, forcing the driver to rein in the horse and bring the cart to a halt. Even in the late evening shadows, Syrenni could see that the beast was very tired: it was breathing heavily, and its head drooped once it stopped. Had the driver not seen the paddock where beasts had been turned out during the gather?

"Tell me where I have to go. I've got to talk to the dragonrider. The watchrider." The driver was a young woman, with thick, dark wavy hair that was starting to break free of its single braid, and she was looking down from the cart with straight back and head held high, as if from dragonback.

"Now, what would you be wanting with a dragonrider," the guard sneered.

The driver sat up even straighter on the bench seat of the cart. "I have a message for the Weyr. An important message." Her posture was proud, but her voice held a hint of desperation.

'She knows he'd tower over her,' Syrenni thought, 'She's staying up there where she's got the advantage.' And she wanted the watchrider? This could be interesting.

"And I'm the Lord Holder's grand-dam!" He moved towards the horse's head. "Besides, the watchrider'll be enjoying the gather with his friends. Don't know as I could find him."

"Please! I have to talk to a dragonrider! There must be someone – they come to the gathers!"

"Well, maybe you should just come into the light, and we'll take a look at you." He stepped right up to the cart,

and though Syrenni couldn't see his face, she could see the girl's frightened reaction as he continued, "You can't go bothering dragonriders. You got a message, you can give it to me, and the watchsecond'll decide if anyone gets told it. Procedure, see."

Syrenni growled, "I don't think so!" and strode up to the cart, saying loudly and clearly, "If this is Weyr business, I can deal with it." That sounded satisfactorily decisive! "I'm Syrenni, blue Trianth's rider, of Kadanzer Weyr."

The girl's eyes widened: she couldn't have noticed that someone else was there. She looked about Syrenni's age, and sturdily built, but she stared transfixed like prey before a slasher.

The guard turned. "Ma'am... I didn't mean nothing. If you want to talk to her, go right ahead."

Syrenni ignored him and looked up at the other woman as she asked kindly, "You have a message for the Weyr?"

"Yes, lady. You had a dragon died today. I can tell you – I can tell your Weyrwoman what became of her."

Movement beside her told Syrenni that the guard was retreating into the shadows. She looked back at the girl, and smiled. "I'm sure she'll want to know that. Do you want to get down for a bit and tell me what all this is about?"

"I can't stay here! If they make me go back, he'll kill me like he did her. Please, lady, will you take me with you?"

Syrenni was beginning to feel more than a little out of her depth – but it was quite true that the Weyr would want to know what had happened to Toraith and her rider.

"Killed? Who was killed? And who did the killing?"

"The dragon was, lady. Toraith. And Ineshra. She's dead. I... I saw it."

Syrenni closed her eyes and tried to think. The woman knew Toraith's name, and Ineshra's – this could well be true. And she'd seen what happened to them. For all she'd waded into the situation, this was completely beyond her. She wished she'd had a glass or two less of that good Paradise River red.

"Please, lady!" The girl was almost weeping. "Her and me, we were friends, and he killed her for it!"

"He?" Syrenni opened her eyes sharply as things started to make sense. 'Oh shells! This is Ineshra's little cotholder!' A grim suspicion was starting to emerge. No wonder the girl looked to be at the end of her rope. She tried to sound relaxed and encouraging.

"Please, I'm no lady, just a trader girl with a dragon. Call me Syrenni. And hold on a moment. I'm going to get a message to my wingleader. What's your name? And who's 'he?'" Trianth, I need you to talk to Phanth: is he awake? Or Chobith? Please, love, try to wake up.

"Not here," the girl insisted. "I can't tell you here. They'll make me go back..."



Trianth landed in some sort of huge courtyard, with buildings around it. It was much larger than the Hold courtyard, though: large enough to be a gather ground. It

was late at night and Brenada was still shivering from the awful cold and nothingness of between, but the air of this place was warm and moist, like the steam from a stewpot. Even in the darkness, and despite everything that had happened, she'd felt the thrill of flying. She, Brenada of Bent Peak, had flown on a dragon! Syrenni helped her to climb down from the blue's side and offered a steadying hand, but then she straightened attentively. Brenada saw that someone was approaching.

The woman coming towards them was dark-skinned, and it was night. Brenada couldn't read her expression beyond the fact that she wasn't smiling, but from Syrenni's reaction, she could tell that this was someone of importance. Elaborate rank cords were on her shoulder. Could this be...? Syrenni's next words confirmed it.

"This is Brenada, ma'am. Brenada, this is Weyrwoman Lybelle."

She knew the name, from Ineshra if not from the travelling harpers and their name-songs. This was the most important person in the Weyr, as important as a Lord Holder. More important, right now. What if she held Brenada responsible? If they'd not been together, Ineshra would still be alive. Brenada's resolve crumbled and her mental pictures of herself eloquently persuading the dragonriders to let her stay faded into nothing.

"Welcome to Kadanzer Weyr, Brenada." The Weyrwoman's voice was rich and confident. "I wish it could be under happier circumstances, but if you have information on Greenrider Ineshra's fate then it is important that we hear it."

"M'lady. Ineshra, she... was a friend of mine. I wanted you to know what happened."

"And for that, the Weyr is grateful," Lybelle told her. "Come with me – there are refreshments on their way and the sooner you tell your story, the sooner we can get this matter resolved. Thank you, Syrenni."

The last words sounded like a dismissal, but Brenada turned towards the bluerider, who now seemed the only thing in the world with any trace of familiarity. "Please..." She broke off. She'd put herself into these people's hands when she told Syrenni the bare bones of her story: she could ask nothing here.

Syrenni seemed to pick up her distress, and smiled encouragingly. "You'll be fine. Maybe I can come back for Brenada when you've finished talking, Weyrwoman?"

"I'll have word passed to Trianth when we're done. This way, Brenada." Lybelle led her in silence between a pair of large buildings, then through shadowed trees to a long wooden cottage. Inside, glowbaskets were already opened, revealing a corridor and then a room filled with good furniture and richly coloured drapes. Brenada marvelled at the deep lustre of the woodwork and the carving on the backs of the chairs. There was no bed in the room, and no cooking-range. 'This must be her office. I've never been in a room that was just an office.'

The Weyrwoman gestured towards one of the chairs. "Take a seat." She took her own place behind the large desk. Brenada sat down gingerly, wondering whether her none-too-clean homespun skirt would mark the fine polish

on the woodwork. She had never felt more out of place in her life.

By the glowlight, it was clear that the Weyrwoman was both imposing and beautiful. Perhaps she had picked up on Brenada's nerves, because her voice was kinder when she spoke again. "When did you last eat?"

"Lunchtime, my lady." She'd had bread and pease pudding. It seemed a lifetime ago.

"I thought as much." There was a tap at the door, and Lybelle called, "Come!" The dark-haired woman who entered was carrying a large tray. She began to spread its contents on the desk: a klah pot, sweetener, mugs and plates, bread that looked wonderfully soft, butter and slices of meat and cheese.

"Thank you, Mari." As the woman left, Lybelle picked up the klah pot. Brenada accepted a mug of hot sweetened klah and a slice of bread and meat, but her insides were knotted and she wasn't sure that she'd be able to eat. She sipped at the klah. It was strong and sweet, full of flavour, and should have settled her stomach, but Lybelle's watchful silence was unnerving.

"So, your name is Brenada, and you come from Kadanzer Hold?"

"Bent Peak cothold, m'lady. It's getting on for half a day's ride from the main Hold."

"What do you do there?"

"My husband is the cotholder, m'lady. I run the house and do the garden."

Lybelle nodded, seeming to understand that. "And how did you know Ineshra?"

That was more difficult, but the truth was going to have to come out. Brenada's resolution was reasserting itself. She needed to tell this on her terms, and wondered how to shift the conversation in the way she wanted it to go. Still, she had to answer. "Met her at a gather in the winter, m'lady. We got to talking. She was nice. It was like we had a lot in common, even though we didn't, really, with her being a dragonrider."

"And how—" Lybelle was interrupted by the noise of rapid heavy footsteps. A knock at the door was followed immediately by the entry of a tall, dark-haired man with a glowering expression.

"Weyrwoman. Garath said someone's arrived who knows what happened to my wingrider." His tone was demanding and his flushed face and over-careful speech quite clearly revealed to Brenada that he had had a fair amount to drink. Perhaps he'd been at the gather.

"Wingleader." Lybelle arched one finely-contoured eyebrow. "I was about to ascertain whether or not that is the case. Our guest," she indicated Brenada with the wave of a hand, "has come a long way. I'm sure she doesn't need everyone questioning her at once before she's had time to catch her breath."

This must be the man in charge of Ineshra's Wing, then. Brenada looked at him curiously. Ineshra liked him. Had liked him.

"I apologise," the wingleader said stiffly, then turned to Brenada with a small bow. "A'nar, ma'am. Bronze Garath's rider."

Brenada's eyes widened. A bronzerider, a wingleader, was calling her 'ma'am?' A'nar continued. "Ineshra flew in my Wing. I understand that you know what happened to her and Toraith?"

"We're coming to that, Wingleader," Lybelle interrupted before Brenada could respond. "Please, if you must be here, take a seat and hold your tongue."

The bronzerider settled himself into a chair in silence.

'So now I have two of them watching me.' Brenada wound her fingers together as she looked nervously from bronzerider to goldrider. This was too much. In a burst of panic, she begged, "Please, m'lady, don't make me go back there! He'll kill me if he finds out!"

Lybelle shook her head. "Nobody will be killing anybody in my Weyr, Brenada," she said firmly. "And we won't be sending you anywhere you don't want to go. Now please, go on with your story. You met Ineshra at a gather and became friends. Where was she today?"

Brenada swallowed hard. This was it. "She – she was visiting me, m'lady. At the cothold. Bent Peak." Her eyes were fixed on Lybelle, but it was the wingleader who interrupted.

"We know that Toraith went between. Is Ineshra dead?"

Brenada nodded mutely.

The man muttered, "Shaffit!" but then fell silent. Brenada was surprised to see that he looked genuinely distressed. Lybelle continued calmly,

"There'll be time for grief later, A'nar," the Weyrwoman said, not unkindly. "Brenada, take your time, and tell us exactly what happened."

Brenada took a deep breath. "She came over. Torkin – my husband – he was at the gather. We went into the barn. That's where he found us – he must have come back early. He'll kill me if he finds me! Like he did her!"

"So, your husband killed Ineshra?" Lybelle's tone was steely. "Why would he do that?"

Wishing she were a thousand miles away, Brenada flushed deep red and whispered, "He found us. Together."

"You were lovers?"

"Yes." Brenada's mouth was so dry that the word was scarcely even a whisper.

"So, you were making love, and he caught you? She accepted a challenge and he killed her in a duel?"

Brenada didn't understand, but shook her head uncertainly. "He – it wasn't a fight. He just came in and saw us, and pulled her off me, and – he had a pitchfork, and –" She screwed her eyes tight shut, but she couldn't block out the image of bare breasts and staring eyes. She whispered again, "He'll kill me."

"He won't be killing again – you have my word on that," Lybelle told her, and there was an edge to her tone that made Brenada grateful that she wasn't the subject of the Weyrwoman's ire. "He murdered a dragonrider. And he'll pay for it: you have my word on that, also."

In the silence that followed, Brenada raised her head and opened her eyes. The two imposing people were both watching her, the anger clear on both their faces. She blurted, "It's my fault!"

Lybelle shook her head. “No. Whatever you did, and however wronged your husband felt, he killed a rider and her dragon. The Weyr cannot and will not allow that to go unpunished.” She leaned back in her chair and steepled her long fingers. “I think it would be best if you stayed here until the matter is resolved. I’ll contact Lord Dracir.” As Brenada stared at her with hope beginning to dawn, the woman’s eyes seemed to lose focus for a few moments. “Bluerider Syrenni will be here shortly to take you to one of the headseconds; they’ll find you somewhere to sleep and a proper meal. Tell them if there’s anything else you need.”

That “until” put a limit on her welcome here, but for now, she was safe: safe from Torkin, and safe from Thread. ‘But Ineshra’s not safe.’ Her relief allowed the reality of her friend’s death finally to strike home. ‘And I’ll never see her again.’ Tears threatened to flow, and it was all that she could do to hold them back until she was out of the Weyrwoman’s office and in the reassuring company of Syrenni.



#### 2859.11.16

Syrenni dropped into a chair beside Brenada. “So, what do you think of the Weyr, now you’ve been here a day or two?”

Brenada looked up from her lunch, smiling broadly. “It’s amazing! So many people – it’s like Kadanzer Hold. But the Weyrwoman runs it all. And I saw a woman with a big brown dragon – I thought women only rode greens, like Torraith. And I saw two lads kissing, as open as you like, as if they didn’t care who saw them. Ineshra told me nobody minded that here, but it’s just amazing to see it. And when you took me to see the healer, she was a woman! And the weaver – she’s a woman, too!”

Syrenni laughed, and held up a hand to stop the outpouring that her simple enquiry had brought on. “Several of the healers and dragonhealers are, and some of the harpers, and the Weyrpotter, to say nothing of dragonriders and half the other people who live here. You got something for those bruises, then?” She’d been horrified, when she’d helped Brenada to find a change of clothes, to discover the marks of recent blows. “And did you find something to keep you busy?”

“I got some arnica to draw them out, better than what my Ma used to give me. And the headwoman said she can give me some sewing, if I want, or cleaning, but when we got talking – she’s really nice, no ‘side’ to her at all – she asked me if that was what I really wanted to do, and she fixed up for me to see the WeyrFarmer. I like growing things. I spent the morning weeding. I’ve never been so hot in my life – the air’s like a hot bath! But at least I can do it without thinking. And the food!”

Brenada’s plate was half empty, but had obviously started off heaped with meat and vegetables. Syrenni realised that the Weyr must eat far better than a relatively poor cothold family. She smiled. “You like it here, then?”

“Yes! It’s marvellous. I just wish -.” The enthusiasm seemed to drain from her like water from a burst skin. “I just wish Ineshra was here.”

Syrenni didn’t know what to say to that. She had a strong suspicion, from what she knew of the greenrider, that the attachment had been largely on Brenada’s side. Ineshra wasn’t known to be choosy about her partners. But her bereaved lover didn’t need to know that.

“I know, Bren. You could have been together, worked out whether it was going to work out...”

Brenada frowned at that, but apparently it wasn’t caused by thoughts of the relationship. “And there’s going to be a trial. I’ve got to go to the Hold. They’re going to have Torkin up before the Lord Holder. The Weyrwoman says I’ve got to say what happened, in front of her and him and Torkin and all those people!”

Syrenni decoded that. “The Lord Holder, and your husband, and the Weyrwoman? It won’t be so bad. You’ll just have to tell your story again, like you did to Lybelle.”

“What if I can’t talk? What if I say it wrong? What if they make me go back? He’ll kill me!”

“He won’t. And I doubt they’ll make you go back, if you don’t want to.” Privately, Syrenni hoped that her confidence wasn’t misplaced on the second point – but she very much doubted that Torkin would be figuring in his wife’s life for much longer, one way or another. “Now, we should get some dessert. Do they have mangoes up in those mountains of yours?”

Brenada looked at her blankly. “Mangoes?”



#### 2859.11.19

Brenada was dressed in the best clothes she’d ever worn in her life, given to her from the Weyr stores. The skirt was a deep russet, and the blouse was white linen, with frills. She had a thick jacket of felted wool, a little paler than the skirt and embroidered with woollen flowers on the yoke. She’d insisted on the skirt, even though Syrenni had said it would be easier to wear trousers for flying and change once she got there. Even though women at the Weyr wore them, she couldn’t, simply couldn’t, let herself be seen at the Hold in trousers, and the idea of taking a garment that she’d have so little use for was bewildering.

The dragon that she’d come on was a blue, but a duller shade than Syrenni’s, and his rider was the largest man that Brenada had ever seen. The bluerider’s name was B’nyu. His head was covered in tight braids of black hair, and he had the largest tattoos that Brenada had ever seen. At first sight, he’d looked rather intimidating, but while they waited to leave, he’d told her in his deep, quiet voice that he was a cotholder’s son and that he liked growing things, and listed a large family, chattering on in a way that distracted her from what was to come. He was coming along to give her a ride and “stop anyone being a nuisance to you.” She found his presence rather reassuring.

Now, though, they'd arrived, and she was sitting at one side of a large chamber in Kadanzer Hold with B'nyu beside her. Lybelle was seated at a table on a raised dais at the far end of the room, next to a man whose balding head and round, bespectacled face identified him as Lord Dracir. She didn't recognise the man on the other side of the Lord Holder, but he was wearing harper-blue rank cords. There were a few other people sitting on chairs at the edge of the room. Brenada realised that one was her father. He was looking towards her but she couldn't fathom his expression. Torkin was nowhere to be seen.

Brenada saw Lord Dracir signal to an attendant, who left the room. She wondered if that meant they were going to start. The party at the table were still engrossed in conversation, though they were keeping their voices low. Brenada could hear only snatches of what they were saying, but it looked as if there was an argument going on.

Lybelle's voice drifted over, her tone unmistakably firm. "Absolutely not acceptable. We cannot give the message that... utmost seriousness ... expect your support in this matter." Brenada concluded that the Weyrwoman wanted something and wasn't going to give in until she got it.

"Slut!" The word was bellowed from the doorway. Brenada recoiled from the familiar voice. Torkin was there, standing between two guards who were holding him by the arms to prevent him from rushing towards her.

Torkin was restrained but not silenced, and his voice was full of righteous indignation as he shouted again.

"Lightskirt! You played me false!"

Brenada drew breath to call a retort, but felt B'nyu's hand on her arm and held her peace. Lord Dracir called for silence, and the guards hustled Torkin to a seat on the opposite side of the room. Lord Dracir spoke again, projecting his voice so that it carried clearly across the large room.

"Weyrwoman, I do regret that. Let us resolve the matter before there is any more unpleasantness. Is your witness here?"

"She is," Lybelle replied. "Brenada, come and stand in front of the table."

B'nyu gave her arm a squeeze, then released her. Brenada stood up. The distance from her seat to the dais was only a few yards, but it felt like a mile. She knew that she'd have to tell her story again, and the Weyrwoman had warned her not to cover anything up. Her cheeks were burning already. Despite Syrenni's reassurances, she didn't think she'd be able to talk about being with Ineshra in front of all those people, but she started in a low voice that gradually gained strength as nobody interrupted. When she'd finished, Lord Dracir asked her to clarify the things that she didn't say well the first time. Brenada couldn't tell what he thought of it all: he seemed as calm as if he'd been asking whether the ewes had been tugged.

"So, you and greenrider Ineshra were lovers?"

Hearing it spoken out loud by the Lord Holder, Brenada flushed an even deeper red. "Yes, m'Lord." There was a snicker from one of the guards. In turning towards the sound, she caught Torkin's eye. He was silent now – he'd

be telling his side of it soon – and glaring at her with pure hate in his expression. She'd made him look ridiculous by going with a woman. Well, she didn't care.

Lord Dracir's voice pulled her back to the questions. "And how exactly did Torkin kill her, as you saw it?"

Brenada steeled herself to revisit the details, but then a sudden burst of defiance gave her strength. Ineshra was the best thing that had ever happened to her: she wouldn't be ashamed of loving her! She could take whatever was coming to her. Her voice sounded loud and strong and proud in her own ears. "I was lying on my back on a bale, and she was on top of me. We were kissing. He pulled her off and threw her on the floor on her back, and then he put the pitchfork into her, up into her chest – like that!" As she spoke, she mimed the motion of the fork. "She died right there."

"Thank you. That seems very clear. You may sit down."

Brenada returned to her seat at the side of the room and sank into the chair with a great sense of relief. B'nyu murmured, "Well done."

Lord Dracir turned to order the guards, "Bring him forward. Torkin, they will release you to state your case, but only as long as there are no more threats and insults. Do you understand?"

Brenada wondered what the threats had been.

"Yes, my Lord." Torkin's voice was sullen but it sounded as if he was going to co-operate. The guards escorted him to where Brenada had stood a moment before, then stepped back, remaining within arm's reach.

Lord Dracir instructed, "Tell us what happened, then."

"I was at the gather. My cousin told me that when we were down here at the Solstice, he'd seen my wife going off with a man, into one of your big barns. Said it looked like they was up to something."

Brenada gasped. The "man" must have been Ineshra with her collar-length hair. That had been the day that they had first met, the first time that she'd realised that there were other women like herself, who liked women more than men. She'd had no idea that they'd been seen. Torkin was continuing.

"I was riled, so I went back early to see what she had to say for herself. She weren't in the house, so I went out to the barn, and there they were. At it on a haybale, just like she said. He had his shirt off, an' I just saw his back."

'He thought she was a man? Even with no shirt on?' That was quite bewildering: Ineshra had been small and slim, with a feminine figure. 'But then,' Brenada realised, 'how often do you hear of women loving women? He'd expect it to be a man.'

"And I just saw red and let him have it, the wife-stealing –." At Lord Dracir's quelling look, Torkin bit back the insult. "Wasn't until I'd put the fork through his chest that I saw he was a she." He hesitated for a moment, then add, "An' I swear, I didn't know she was a dragonrider. There weren't no dragon there."

Lord Dracir looked towards Lybelle. "Well, that seems clear so far. Do you have any questions, Weyrwoman?"

"Yes." Lybelle sat forward in her seat and fixed a steady gaze on Torkin. "Cotholder, did you make any attempt to speak to the person that you thought was a man, or challenge him over his affair with your wife?"

Torkin drew himself up. "No, I did not. Challenges is for when you got to prove your rights. I was the wronged one here, and nobody can deny it. It don't matter that he was a dragonrider, or that he was a she. I know some of these weyrfolk have peculiar habits, but they ain't got no call to be corrupting my wife!"

"I see." Lybelle sat back again. "I have no further questions."

Lord Dracir nodded, then asked Torkin, "Do you have anything else to say?"

"Lord Holder, you're a just man. You're not going to turn a man out for protecting what's his. She's never given me children, and now she's done this. I need you to agree to a divorce so that I can marry again and carry on my line."

That made perfect sense to Brenada, but nobody was asking her. After all, Torkin was her husband, and whilst she hoped he'd get some sort of punishment for killing Ineshra, she wasn't at all certain that the Lord Holder wouldn't just think it natural that a husband would react in that way, even if the Weyrwoman was angry about it.

She heard a murmur of, "Shards!" from B'nyu, and glanced sideways, wondering why he sounded surprised by what Torkin had said. The bluerider murmured, "He hasn't seen it coming."

"That is very much a secondary issue," Lord Dracir replied. "You know that you are on trial here, yet you seem unaware of the seriousness of your situation. You would have done well to heed the advice that you were offered by our good harper. You may sit down."

Brenada wondered what that meant: it sounded as if there had been some discussions before she got there. As the guards escorted Torkin back to his seat, she whispered to B'nyu, "Now what?"

"Now they'll talk about it, and your Lord Holder has to make his mind up. But, he's asked Lybelle to be up there with him, so the odds are that he won't go against her. The harper's just there to advise and to keep the record of the decision, I suppose."

The group on the dais were indeed deep in discussion, Brenada could see. Lord Dracir was listening to Lybelle, who was speaking in a low voice. Brenada couldn't make out the words, but the Weyrwoman's expression was implacable.

Brenada was wondering how long the decision would take when Lord Dracir gave a pronounced nod, said, "Agreed," loudly enough to be audible, and called for Torkin to stand in front of him again. The guards brought him forward and remained at his side.

Lord Dracir stood to face the accused man. "Torkin. You have murdered a dragonrider and caused the death of her dragon. Although you felt aggrieved that the greenrider was in a compromising situation with your wife, you are well aware that such things are settled by challenge, whether you think you are in the right or not. Yet, you took it upon yourself to act in haste, and killed her with no opportunity to

defend herself. That cannot be tolerated, and the Weyrwoman has requested the most extreme penalty, as befitting one who attacks the protection that the Weyr provides. I concur."

Brenada held her breath, though there was a spark of triumph somewhere deep down. They weren't going to take his side against her. What was 'the most extreme penalty?' The worst thing she could think of was to be without shelter in Threadfall: was Torkin to be made holdless? Exiled, even? He looked very pale as he stood between the two guards. She'd never have to look at him again, or put up with his demands and too-frequent blows. The harper picked up his pen and started to write. Lord Dracir continued, speaking slowly and very clearly.

"It is my decision that you are to be taken to the mountain barrens where Thread is allowed to fall unchecked, and staked out in the next Threadfall, there to meet whatever fate awaits you."

It took a few moments for Brenada to realise what that meant. Then, the room seemed to be frozen in vivid contrast, and all she was aware of was the sick feeling in her stomach, B'nyu's hand squeezing her arm, and Torkin shouting somewhere in the distance as the guards took him away.



#### **2859.12.02**

The sea was lapping against the rocks a few feet away. Further down the beach, a Wing of riders was bathing their dragons after 'Fall. They'd been fighting Thread, but now they'd stopped. Brenada gazed at the water. So much water.

From behind, a voice called, "Bren? I thought it looked like you."

Brenada swivelled. Syrenni's light trousers and tunic were plastered to damp skin and her hair was soaked: she'd obviously been in the sea. "You're wet. Did it... go all right?"

"Yes, just one slight score in our Wing. It wasn't a long 'Fall."

"I know. You came back when it reached the high mountains, and it's still falling there. And when it stops, I'll be a widow. Unless it doesn't get him. Then he just stays tied down there until he dies of thirst and cold." She knew the bitterness showed in her voice, but it was directed against herself.

Syrenni touched her shoulder. "Bren. It's not your fault. You didn't make him kill anyone."

"No, but it's still because of me. He wouldn't have done it if I hadn't done what I did. I hated him. I hated him, but I don't want him to die like that. Nobody should have to die like that."

Syrenni shook her head. "No." She didn't argue the point, to Brenada's relief. "I'm just glad you're staying."

Brenada smiled sadly up at her new friend. "The Weyrwoman asked if I wanted to go back home with my

father, but Lord Dracir said I'd be more suited to life at the Weyr, and Da agreed. I think they both wanted rid of me, because of Ineshra. And the Weyrwoman said I could stay. I suppose she'd got what she wanted, and what's one more person with the hundreds you've got here?"

Syrenni dropped onto the rock beside Brenada. "So, do you know what you're going to be doing yet? How did you get on with the people you were talking to?"

"I'm going to carry on working on the farm. I talked to the Weyrfarmer again this morning, and I had to see the Weyrtailor, too, because I can spin and weave. But I can't do fancy stuff like people wear here, and I think I'd rather work in the fields than be inside. The Weyrfarmer asked me about my garden, and the vegetables I used to grow, and he said he could use me." She smiled, still rather incredulous. "He said if I did all right, and if I had lessons with the harpers to learn to read and write properly, he might even take me on as an apprentice. Can you imagine it?"

"Yes, why not? Lots of girls are apprentices, you know. You could even Stand, if you want."

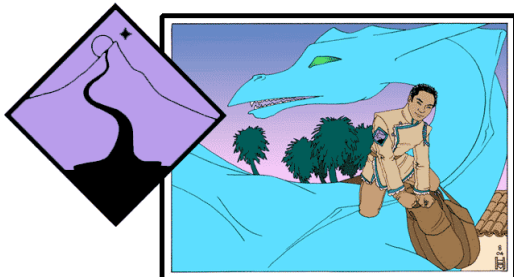
"I'm a cotwife. People like me don't become crafters and dragonriders."

"No, you're not." Syrenni caught her gaze, and her voice was almost harsh. "You used to be a cotwife. Now, you're one of the support staff of Kadanzer Weyr, which is a very fine thing to be, and what you do next is up to you."

Brenada gave that some thought while her eyes tracked a circling wherry, the sort they called 'whitewings' here. Her future seemed totally empty, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. It was a blank page to write on, like the ones she'd use once she'd learned her letters.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is."

END



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