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# After the Sunrise

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2860.09.20-21

Printed in FTA #25 (2008)

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It was a bad morning, tempered by a beautiful sunrise. Resla stood at the kitchen window looking out at it numbly. The sun was barely over the horizon, casting that dim, washed out light that only occurred for a few moments every day while the sky stole all the colors in the world. She'd named Sunrise for that moment right after, when the sun was the same golden color as the sky around it. She missed that moment this time, because the pot on the stove began to whistle, and she turned to take it off. When she glanced again at the window, it was all but full day and everything had its own color again.

"You ain't crying again, are you?" B'baer's gruff quip was only part in jest, and far gentler than the familiar gibe usually was. "You'll overflow the sea if you keep that up."

Resla couldn't quite make herself smile, though the effort moved her mouth a little. Varla toddled up and took ahold of his knees. "B'bub!"

"Hope?" B'baer didn't sound like he particularly wanted to ask, but had to. He patted Varla absently on the head and after a moment she released him and returned to clinging to Resla's knees.

"He's all right," Resla said, and she was grateful for the reminder of it. It was something to hold onto - she still had Hope. "He stopped having seizures last night, and he ate something, towards midnight, and kept it down all night. He's sleeping now, and seems through the worst of it."

"Keep him watered," B'baer told her unnecessarily. "Thought Gale was on the mend, too."

Gale had died a day before, and, though B'baer jested that Lynsoth was just as happy to lose the little bugger, Resla suspect the creature's death had touched beneath B'baer's crusty exterior. "I will," she promised, and held her hand out to B'baer's good one for a quick, affectionate squeeze. "Hope's good, he drinks when I tell him to. He's used to me taking care of him and does as I say. Not like -" She couldn't finish, tears welling in her eyes.

"Sunrise?"

Resla sniffed unhappily and nodded, reaching down to pick up Varla, who was not oblivious to her distress and looked close to tears herself. "She gave up just about an hour ago."

Varla let herself be distracted by one of Resla's hairsticks as the steps to the kitchen warned of an approach. Resla wiped the tears off of her face with determination and had a quavery smile to offer the Weyrlingmaster as he came to return the mug from his first cup of klah.

"Saw an empty wallow in front of your cot, this morning," B'baer said unsubtly, glancing slyly between them. "Glad to see you finally rubbed off that pretty bronzerider. Is it too much to hope that other ships will be free to dock at your port now?" He leered at her in very B'baer-fashion and Resla had to laugh a little, before remembering why there was no dragon in front of her cot that morning.

He could see that his barb had hit a little close to home and gruffly offered, "Too soon? I'll throw myself out."

"You're all right?" D'zan asked quietly after B'baer had tromped out of the kitchen. Varla reached for his lap as soon as he sat down (Resla's being unavailable), and he gladly gathered the little girl up and set her on his knees for bouncing.

Resla nodded, retrieving her hairstick from where Varla had abandoned it and stuffing it back into her hair. "Will be," she said briefly, because she could not lie and say that she already was.

At one time, he would have given her an enormous embrace, and let her cry on his shoulder, Resla thought miserably. They'd been close friends - as close as she'd been with her brothers. Now - if she'd been in reach, she would perhaps get a pat to the shoulder. Maybe. If it weren't much of a reach.

Would it be like that with V'lar now? Polite, even friendly, but slightly distant? He wouldn't want to stop seeing Varla - they'd have to interact as much as she and D'zan did, probably.

"V'lar thinks I'm still in love with you," she said before she could decide she didn't want to.

D'zan looked as if he were contemplating how best to get Varla off his knee and escape through a window.

Resla sat down in the chair across from him; all of the energy that had propelled her to the kitchen was gone. "I was afraid he might be right, but all I can think now of is how wretched he looked when he broke up with me... and how awful it felt when I knew he wouldn't come back." She buried her head in her arms on the table, all of the emotion and exhaustion crashing down on her. "I'm an idiot," she said tearfully. "I was so awful to him!"

The rest was only tears, and it must not have been *that* much of a reach, because D'zan managed to drag both Varla and his chair over to her side of the table, wrap his arms around her and let her cry herself out.

"I'm sorry," she told him, when she could catch her breath again. "I'm so *sorry*. I was awful to you, too, and you'd think I'd know better the second time, but I didn't."

"He's a fool to make you think so," D'zan told her. "And isn't his timing just like a bronzerider's?"

"That's not fair," Resla said, bristling in automatic defense. "He spent hours helping me with Sunrise and Hope. He didn't get any more sleep than I did, and if he'd been planning a messy split, he could have done it before his second-best britches had been ruined by vomit."

Her vehemence surprised her; she was used to defending D'zan, but V'lar was generally liked and rarely needed anyone in his corner.

D'zan was silent in return and Resla sighed and wiped her face with her hand.

"You'll take the day off," D'zan told her. It was statement, not question. "Catch up on your sleep, and let Ellya's girls watch Varla for the day. I'm gone – time to get the weyrings in the air and join the Wings for 'Fall."

Resla nodded, not eager to fight the idea.



Resla couldn't sleep long, though she tried. The light was bothersome, and the humming noise of the busy Weyrling Wing – even minus the oldest class, off flying Threadfall with the Queens' Wing – would not be shut out of her ears. She wished she could find V'lar – but that was impossible; his wing was flying Threadfall with the rest. She couldn't expect a chance to speak at any length or privacy with him until much later in the day, after he'd gotten back and cleaned up – and it ate at her to have to wait. With a Hatching just a couple of sevendays behind, there was plenty of work in her office, and after lying still as long as she could, Resla got up to do it.

Going to the Main hall for a lunch meal after taking Sunrise's eggs to Giselle was a mistake.

"Are you all right?" everyone asked. "Is Hope feeling well?" The less subtle came out and asked directly, "Did you and V'lar split up?" The less subtle, in this case, was Bella, who seemed to think that it was entirely her business, as headsecond to the Sky Flight complex. "I only ask because I need to know if I should be making sure that his laundry gets picked up, you know."

Since Resla herself was in charge of seeing that the candidates set on laundry duty picked up the correct bags, and it was a rider's duty to see they were left out in front of their cot on the right day, she didn't fall for Bella's fishing. She spotted a spare seat at the weyringstaff table and escaped from Bella through the crowd to take it. Bella might follow her to any other table, but the crusty characteristics of the Weyrling Wing were enough to fend her off, and she knew the rest of the staff wouldn't bother her with stupid questions she didn't feel able to answer. Ambri squeezed her elbow as she sat and Shahara glared defensively at anyone who looked like they might come bother them. Between that and B'baer's usual pirate leer, the table was well defended.

It wasn't long after that the Flights returned.

Common sense told her that she could wait until the evening to find V'lar, but she knew she wouldn't be able to settled until she talked with him, so she walked to the SkyFlight complex and blessed whatever luck kept Bella from her path. His cot was deserted, the wallow outside completely empty. Resla waited in the shadow of his porch until there was no chance that he was only a little slow coming back before walking slowly back to her office. There was a damp afternoon drizzle, but it was warm.

Jreth's huge form in front of her cot was a ray of hope in a day that had otherwise been full of frustration, and Resla only slowed her steps when she saw V'lar's shape waiting for her on the porch. He stood politely as she came up the steps, and Resla felt like her stomach was in her throat. Hope warbled a hello from her shoulder.

"I went to your cot," she said inanely. "I thought you'd be there."

"I could be, if you wanted." V'lar sounded tired and wary, and Resla felt a stab of guilt. She swallowed, and knew she had to speak; she'd spent all day trying to figure out how to start, and still had no good way to do so.

"I'm not very good at this," she started hesitantly. "Relationships, I mean. This -" she flapped her hands between the two of them - "I don't know anything about this kind of thing."

V'lar made a quiet noise of disbelief. "Everyone goes to you for advice on 'this kind of thing'."

"No," Resla denied. "They come to me because I'll listen, and tell them it will be all right in the end, and pat their shoulders. I'm good at that. I'm not very good about..." she still hadn't found a word for it. "Have you ever wanted something really badly, but then, when you got it, it wasn't really what you wanted? There was a doll I wanted once - it was for sale a gather, and we couldn't afford it. It was worth more than a herdbeast, and I told my father I'd rather have it than a dowry and begged and begged for it. And I got it." She sat, because she was too nervous to continue standing. "I woke up at Turn's End with her on my pillow. I was happy - ecstatic - for about a day, before I thought to wonder how my father had paid for it. My sisters were jealous, I was afraid to play with her, for fear of ruining her, and she made me feel horribly, horribly guilty. I wanted nothing so much as to give her back, and I wished I'd never even asked for her."

V'lar watched her face with increasing soberness, and when she'd wound down, seriously asked, "Are you trying to break things off with me?"

"No!" Resla exclaimed in horror. She gave a dry laugh. "I told you I wasn't good at this. I've just... been trying to figure things out in my head."

"Things about the Weyrlingmaster?" V'lar's voice was perfectly neutral.

"No." It was less immediate than her previous no. "Well, a little of that, too." She took a deep breath, and willed the nervous energy out of her. It didn't comply, but it subsided.

V'lar didn't say anything, but he turned away from her. When Resla cautiously took his arm, he didn't shake it off, but he didn't cover her hand with his the way he usually would have. "D'zan and I should never have been together - it was a mistake on a dozen levels, and I should have known better. I loved him, but I worked for him - it made things complicated. And with Tanara dying so soon after..."

"You deserved better than him anyway," V'lar told her sharply.

Resla had never been able to hear criticism of D'zan without wanting to leap to his defense. "That's not true! He was good to me!"

It occurred to Resla that defending an ex-lover was not how this conversation should be going. "I do love him," she tried to explain. "But, I'm not *in* love with him, and I'm not *with* him anymore. I'm... oh, I'm not very *good* at this," she repeated plaintively.

"You keep saying that," V'lar said quietly. There were crunchy footsteps in the gravel of the path. Resla kept her hand on his arm, because she didn't want to possibly draw the interloper's attention, not because it was a comfortable, natural position, and it grew more awkward with time.

They were silent until Ambri had passed out of a pool of glowlamp light back towards her own cot and her footsteps receded.

"I don't know what this *is*," Resla confessed rawly, reclaiming her hand and twisting them both together in her apron – a new one from the stores to replace the hopelessly stained one. "I don't know if I should correct people who call us weyrmates, or if I have any right to be jealous when pretty girls flirt with you. I thought I would be all right if I was just a convenience, if you were only here because of Varla, and only stayed because it was easier than going home at night. I thought I didn't need to know if you cared about *me*, because I thought I would be just as happy either way, that I didn't need you. And then we argued, and I thought you might not come back and it tore me up inside, and I realized it *did* matter, and that I still don't know, and I need to, because if you aren't really serious about this, I want to get out before it's too late. If it's not already too late. What if some rider caught your seed, and you had another baby to adore? You could have any woman you wanted - a younger woman, someone beautiful..." She could hear the note of hysteria rising in her own voice, but couldn't seem to stop talking until V'lar gave up on trying to interrupt and took her hands to still them in his own. "I'm sorry, I just don't know why you're with me," she confessed. "I didn't know why you would be, so I keep expecting you not to be."

"Maybe I'm with *you* because you're patient and kind and funny and your heart's as big as the ocean?" V'lar used her hands to pull her close. "Because I feel like a better person with you? Because you're beautiful?"

Resla made a muffled *mmmph* of disbelief - she couldn't help herself - and V'lar insisted, "You are. In a way your ninny Candidate girls don't understand with their freckle creams and eyelid smudges. Because you're so capable and dedicated? Because I love you?" He said it simply, as if it were obvious and Resla suddenly suspected that it was, to anyone but her.

He kissed her, gently, both hands still holding her own. Relief was almost dizzying. "It's... not just Varla." It wasn't quite a question as much as a reassurance to herself. V'lar kissed her again and the insecurity and tension she'd been holding balled up in her chest relaxed and unwove a step further.

"It's not just Varla," he assured her when he came up for air again. "There's no way I would have been willing to sit around with two nasty, puking firelizards for most of two days just for Varla."

Resla smiled, and the change in her face muscles drove tears she hadn't been aware of out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "You might have just felt sorry for me," she said with a breathless chuckle.

"Would have taken more than pity for that kind of sacrifice," V'lar said dryly. "But really, I don't need to talk about firelizard vomit right now..." This kiss was more serious than the last two - deeper, and he let go of her hands to find the rest of her.

## 2860.09.21

Resla woke to daylight. She blinked at it confusion, trying to figure out the unusual brightness of the empty room. There was a babble of muffled conversation from behind the closed door out to her office, and she realized with chagrin that it must be late into the morning. In sudden blind panic, she reached for Hope - his hunger should have woken her up hours ago - and found him asleep, completely full and healthy feeling. She got dressed quickly, and twisted her hair up into sticks as she walked into the office. V'lar was sitting on the couch, Varla in his lap counting to one and pointing out things she knew the words to. Hope was curled asleep in his basket on her desk.

"Momma!" Varla said triumphantly, pointing.

"I've overslept," Resla said in still-hazy alarm. "The weyrlingstaff will be wondering where I am. There was a meeting..."

V'lar waved all of this aside. "The Weyrlingmaster's already been by for you, and I told him you lost a firelizard yesterday, and hadn't had enough sleep in days, and he could bloody well make his own klah this morning. My weyrmate needed her sleep, and he was going to have to get past me and Jreth to get her up."

"Hoe!" Varla pointed at Hope. "Knah!" She pointed at the rank knots on V'lar's shoulder. "No!" That was at the high shelves where Resla put anything pointy or fragile, out of reach.

"You should have woken me!" Resla said aloud. '*Weyrmate*,' she thought in astonishment. "What did he say?" She almost didn't want to ask, and she was surprised she'd slept through it.

"He said it was about time, and asked whether he should be planning us a party or if Skymaster would be hosting it."

"A party?" Resla was bewildered; the only events she could think of were the awful firelizard deaths over the past seven-day, and the explosion of bugs the seven-day before. That wasn't cause for a party. It didn't make sense.

"For weyrmating, wherry-brain."

"Wherrarray!" Varla pointed at Resla and clapped her hands.

"A party?" she could only repeat.

"Wherry-brain," V'lar encouraged Varla, clapping with her. "A real party," he agreed. "Madilayn can make you a red dress, if you want."

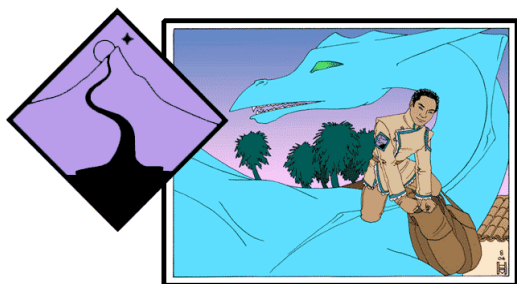
"Weren't we already together?" Resla asked tentatively. "You don't celebrate something that's over a Turn old..." Even as she said it, she realized that there was something fresh about their interaction, something new and honest in it.

"We can if we want," V'lar said merrily. "Who doesn't love an excuse for a party? Now, you and darling Varla here might be able to sleep in until lunch, but I have no such luxury, and if I'm not back to my wing by the time M'ler runs inspections, I'll be on one of your punishment details scrubbing with the weyrlings." He swung Varla up and deposited her, giggling, on her feet. She ran to Resla to be picked up and wrapped chubby arms around the headsecond's neck.



“I love you,” he said, before he kissed her goodbye, and it was so easy and natural that Resla repeated it back at him without blushing. He left without awkwardness, and Resla stood, bewildered, in the center of her office after he left, smiling foolishly and wondering why she had been so afraid for so long.

*END*



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