
Finding Home

by Ria Calamita

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Mato squinted against the setting sun as he guided some herdbeasts into their pens for the night. He kept a close eye on their gaits and scanned the small herd for any injuries that could have happened during daily turn-out. Hakel, another candidate his own age, was leaned up against the fence looking bored with the work as usual. Mato knew Hakel wasn't really interested in becoming a herder; he had just needed a craft to occupy him until he Impressed a dragon. Relieved to see that every animal appeared sound and was now safely in for the night, Mato locked the gate and began walking with Hakel along the fence.

"Ready to go up to the Weyrhall and get some food?" Hakel asked.

"No, I think I'll go ask Marshall if he needs anything else done."

"You sure? If we get there now, we can find some good seats next to some pretty girls? What do you say?"

Mato only smiled and shook his head. Just then, the dinner bell rang announcing to the whole Weyr it was time for the evening meal to be served.

"All right then. Well, I'm going to head up there, see you tomorrow." With that Hakel began to jog off towards the Main Complex.

"Hakel, what am I suppose to tell Marshall if he asks where you are?"

"Dinner bell has sounded - he should know where I am," Hakel called back over his shoulder. "If he asks, just tell him I'll see him tomorrow!" He waved to Mato and was soon out of sight.

Mato turned and continued looking for Marshall to ask for any last chores for the day. It wasn't long before Mato found Marshall. The man was bent over examining the leg of a herdbeast who seemed quite uncomfortable.

"Sir, I was just wondering if there's anything to be done before I leave," Mato asked shyly. He had known Marshall for over a Turn, yet he still felt intimidated when talking to the Weyrherder.

"Think you can tell me what's wrong with this leg?" Marshall asked, almost like he had ignored Mato's question all together.

A little confused, Mato agreed to take a look. The lower part near the foot was swollen and felt hot under Mato's hand. He couldn't find anything wrong with that part of the leg itself, so he began looking up the leg for any cuts and

found one just above the knee joint. It was swollen and had a nasty colored liquid oozing out from it.

"It's this, sir. The cut is infected and it's spreading down into the lower part of the leg. It does that because of the blood flow." Mato gave his diagnosis confidently, because he couldn't count the times he'd seen this happen to sheep.

"Good. Can you clean it up?"

Mato nodded while standing up.

"Then that's your last chore. When you're done, come and see me. I'll be back at the barns."

With that, Marshall walked off to leave Mato to his work. It wasn't a hard job for him. He had done it so many times before and there were plenty of supplies around. Injuries on the herdbeasts were part of the daily routine since there were so many animals. Hardly a day went by that a beast didn't come in for the night with cuts and scratches. After cleaning and wrapping the injury, Mato walked the animal up and down along the fence. It was evident that the herdbeast was already walking with a better stride and that the dab of numbweed Mato had placed on the leg was doing its job. Mato found a pen that wasn't as crowded as the others and placed the herdbeast there.

Leaving the pens behind him, Mato walked towards the barns to find Marshall again. He was sitting down in front of one of the larger barns having some water. The Weyrherder was watching the closest herd of young herdbeast who still had the energy to run and play in their pens. A twinge of homesickness hit Mato as he was instantly reminded of his father, and how they would sit and do the same thing with their herds of sheep back home.

"Water?" Marshall asked, holding out his flask.

"No, sir. I'm heading off to dinner and there'll be plenty there."

Marshall smiled slightly at hearing Mato's manners, but then his face turned serious as he stood up and looked directly into the young man's eyes.

"Mato, I have to ask you something. Now, I don't normally get involved in other people's affairs because I know it's none of my business. However, you've been put under my charge so I feel I at least have the right to know something of what's going on with you. Why are you still here?"

Mato looked up at the Weyrherder confused. Still here? Then it dawned on him what Marshall was getting at. He wanted to know why Mato had been at the Weyr for almost two Turns and was still rejecting the offer of apprenticeship.

"Sir, I'm here to be a candidate."

"Well, I know that, Mato, but why won't you become an apprentice of mine? I'd be more than happy to take on a skilled young man like you. You've got a way with animals and I know it's from all that experience you got back home. So why?"

Mato's face darkened as he lowered his gaze. He had never told anyone why he was so hesitant about becoming permanent at the Weyr. He had never told anyone that he had actually been engaged to marry before being Searched and everything had to be put on hold when he left. Her name was Laydia. Both his family and hers had been very excited

about the engagement, but both had also been equally supportive when the chance to Impress a dragon came up.

"Sir, it's kind of a personal matter, but to put it simply I have things going on back home. Things that I don't know I can work out if I stay here at the Weyr. So, I'm just here to see if I can Impress. If not, I'll go back to my cothold."

"So you're going to sit around here until you age out, then go back and solve this issue back home? Seems to me that whatever the issue is would be long gone by that time, and then you would've just wasted time here when you could've gone back and solved it by now. Have you heard from your home at all, or written to them?"

"No, my family can't read or write and the circuit harpers hardly ever come through. The last time I saw my family was at a Hatching."

"You can write, can't you?"

"Fair enough, sir. I'm still learning."

"Then this is what you will do. Tonight at dinner I'll find you and give you some paper and ink. You write a letter home and give it to me tomorrow. I'll make sure it gets to the right people to make sure it gets there and you get a response in a timely fashion. I know a few riders that owe me a favor. You want to be a dragonrider, right?"

Mato's insides flickered with the same excitement he felt when he watched the many dragons flying around the Weyr. Every time he stood on the Sands he yearned for one of the beautiful creatures to choose him and make the troublesome decision of staying or leaving for him, but every time he walked away alone.

"Well, no one knows what makes those babies choose, but how can you expect a dragon to choose you, Mato, if you can't decide yet where your place is? Not that you wouldn't make a fine dragonrider, lad, but those new hatchlings need to know that they're going to have all of you once they make that bond. Not just the half of you that wants to be here."

Mato sat in silence absorbing Marshall's advice. After it sunk in, he looked up and nodded. Marshall was right, and now Mato would take care of this issue once and for all. Mato turned to walk away, but as he did, Marshall spoke again.

"Mato, where's Hakel?"



The blank paper seemed to stare back at Mato as much as Mato was staring at it. He had found an empty teaching room in the Weyrcraft Hall so that he could think. The only distractions were a person walking down the hallway from time to time, or the occasional conversation floating through halls. However, despite the good environment, it was like a wall had been built suddenly in his mind blocking any concentrated thought flow. He just didn't know a good way to start the letter. It also wasn't helping that this task was bringing all the worries he had about the issue to the surface and forefront of his mind.

Mato could remember being so excited about getting married, and how he used to snatch up any task or chore that

would take him over to Laydia's cothold just so he could see her. They never had really been allowed time *alone* together, but being around her and her family had been enough for him to fall in love with the girl. Once Mato's family had met her, they loved her just as much and it seemed as if life was going to be set. Now, Mato was here at the Weyr totally unsure of what he really wanted life to be like.

"What are you doing?"

Mato's head jerked up, startled by the bright voice asking the question. He looked up to see Tymania, one of the other candidates sitting next to him at the table. She had befriended him early on and had helped him a lot in learning how to read and write. Her love of reading was notorious amongst their age group, but Tymania had a bit of an odd personality, so her number of friends was few like Mato. She was usually by herself or had her face in a book, but the girl was undeniably sweet and friendly. Her curly black hair had been let loose and it created a black cloud around her face. He realized that it had grown out some and the length weighed it down a little bit, but not enough to tame it. The wild hair made her skinny frame and petite face even more exaggerated. The only reason Mato thought he was able to talk to her sometimes was because she wasn't exactly what he thought to be pretty, although he'd never say that to her or anyone. He knew she was just going through the awkward phase between being a girl and becoming a woman.

"Oh, uh, nothing, Ty. Just, um-" Mato tried to hide what he was doing but it was too late. She caught a glimpse of the pen and paper, and excitement exploded in her green eyes as she tried to look at the few words already written.

"Are you writing on your own, Mato? What are you writing? A poem? Your thoughts? Oh, tell me and let me read it! I can help you! When did you get inspired?"

Mato stared in wide-eyed fear at the sound of the girl's excited voice getting faster and faster with every question. He was friendly with her, but he had also never told her about this situation either and the thought of her, the only person he could call "friend", finding out, was humiliating. Finally she just sat there with big eyes begging for him to tell.

"It's kind of personal, Ty. I don't know..."

Tymania's face fell, her feelings taking a big blow. He knew she didn't have any really close friends either, and for all he knew she considered him her best. She was right though, her help would be great for this.

"It's a letter."

Tymania looked back up, eyes bright again. "Really? To whom?"

"Well, that's the hard part. Tell you what, you can read as I write, and help me if I need it. I promise you that by the end of it you'll know the full story. Deal?"

"Ooh! This sounds so intriguing! Of course."

With that, the two set to work. Tymania kept her word and didn't ask any questions and only helped Mato write out the words he needed to use. When they were done, Mato looked down at a full-page letter for his parents. He was quite proud of the document, only wishing the content could've been a more cheerful subject. Then, Mato looked up

to see Tymania's reaction. The girl had a sad, understanding look in her eyes.

"Oh, Mato, I had no idea. You've been wondering about this all this time?"

Mato nodded, looking at the letter as if to find the answer to his question already written back. He began folding it up hoping Tymania wouldn't drag this topic out, but of course he was wrong.

"Do you love her?" she asked, which Mato thought was a personal question, but the sound in Tymania's voice was of genuine concern.

"I did. Now, I don't think it matters as much as whether or not she's still there waiting for me. She said she would, but it looks bad for girls to wait too long to get married where I come from..." Mato's last words faded into a small silence. Thinking he could get up and leave for his barracks at that moment he stood up to leave, but Tymania's voice came to his ears again as he turned to go.

"It's so romantic you know, like the old love ballads in my book."

"Oh, this girl never stops!" Mato thought. He was tired, ready for sleep, but when he turned around again to see her, he couldn't get mad at the quirky girl.

"What do you mean?"

"You fell in love, got engaged, then you were Searched! It's almost like I can see the tears in her eyes when she received the news, and feel the tearing of your heart to have two beautiful directions of life placed in front of you, and then having to choose one before it's too late for either dream to become real. Oh what a story that would make, Mato!"

Mato half smiled at her. She spoke like a poet, and it was a wonder to him why she decided to become a Healer apprentice and not a Harper.

"Ty, when you're involved in the story, it's not quite as beautiful as it sounds. That's why I'm sending this letter, to make my decision."

"Oh, well, how will you choose?"

"If she's there I leave, if she's not I'll stay here."

Tymania nodded, then remained silent with a very thoughtful look to her face as she stared intently at the ground. After a few moments silence, Mato decided this was his chance.

"Well, it's been dark for some time now, so I think it's best to go to bed now. I'll see you tomorrow. By the way, Ty, don't get any ideas about writing all this. I don't want everyone to know."

"And why not?" Tymania asked sounding offended. Mato sighed, knowing she must have already planned out at least the first chapter in what she considered an epic love story.

"Oh all right, just change the names and the places and anything else in there that could possibly lead this story back to me. Promise?"

"Only if you promise me something. You have to tell me the response you get as soon as you get it."

"And why is that?"

Tymania smiled as if the answer should be obvious to him. "So I know how to write the ending, silly."

"Fair enough. It's a deal."

"Good, I'll see you tomorrow!"

And with that, Tymania bounded off, her curls making dramatic bounces with every step she took. Mato smiled at her delight in taking this issue that had plagued him for nearly two Turns and turning it into something creative, but he was finally relieved to have some quiet while he headed to the barracks. He did admit to himself on the walk there though, it did feel good to share some of his burden with someone, regardless of the fact that she didn't seem to understand or take the issue as seriously as he did.



"Do you have the letter?"

Mato was standing with Marshall getting ready in the early morning light for the day's work. Mato pulled the folded parchment out of his pocket, hesitating when he handed it to Marshall who took it and without a glance to it put it in his own pocket. A worried look crossed Mato's face at the thought of anyone reading into his personal problems, but Marshall saw the look and quickly put Mato's mind to ease.

"Don't you worry. I respect privacy, and I'll make sure the rider who delivers this does too. You just keep up the good work like you always do, but as soon as you get a letter back, I want you to make a decision. You're almost a full-grown man and that can be expected of you."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, with that settled, I'm going to drop this letter where it needs to go. Now, there's a fence that needs to be repaired on the pen where we keep the yearlings. Gavrill's gone to go get the tools, so you go meet up with him. I'll meet up with you later."

Mato watched Marshall walk away and felt an unease build up inside of him. He began to wonder how long the response would take. A dragonrider could go *between* and be there instantly, but the rider would have to have some free time to deliver the letter first. And so much depended on that response. He wasn't even quite sure how he would react to either response he could receive. Doing his best, he tried to shake the worry from his mind and began walking towards the barns to find Gavrill, because he knew the best thing to do to make the time pass was to get to work.



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