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# Professional Detachment,

## Pt. 2

by Marie Burcham  
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Tallah didn't need to check her flight leathers again. She knew that each piece lay, smooth and unblemished, on Solanth's oiled hide. Even so, she found herself going over the straps again, her fingers probing each stitch in the semi-darkness for weaknesses. The call would come soon for the dragonriders to rise and meet Thread. Tallah could feel the twang of his anticipation close to her heart and she leaned up against him, sheltering in the bulk of his body against the cold wind.

The weather was not promising. The sweepriders' most recent report—further into Windsong, where Thread would soon be falling—was of strong winds and mixed rain. It had been drizzling over Kadanzer Weyr all night. The rain alone would not have been too bothersome, especially considering that it would contribute to the destruction of Thread, but the rain would make for a chilly flight even in the Queens' Wing, where flying closer to the ground buffered the dragonriders somewhat. And tonight the Queens' Wing would hardly be at an advantage—the sweepriders were also reporting that the winds were worst around those heights. It was going to be a cold night, and Tallah predicted that flight would be difficult and tiresome, especially for the smaller colors.

The healer in Tallah looked critically over the group she would be going up with. There was the collection of greenriders with child who did not want to make frequent trips *between*—they would have to be especially careful about not letting their smaller dragons be whipped around by the wind. She considered the common injuries dragons would receive in such weather: muscle pulls, sprains, and a higher chance of Thread being blown into flanks. Tallah was not concerned about Solanth. He was large and strong, with excellent stamina.

Solanth was excited and expectant, as always. Tallah loved the feeling of her brown underneath her—he was all muscle and power, as a healthy brown fighting dragon should be. She got to see the injured and the sick dragons so often in her work that she couldn't help comparing. Before she Impressed, dragons had been something to heal and admire from a distance, nothing more. Solanth had changed that from the moment she had met his eyes on the Sands.

***We prepare ourselves!*** Solanth said, Tallah guessing that the shouted order had been lost in the wind. That didn't

matter—the dragons had a much more reliable means of communication. Solanth was taking huge breaths of the humid air, his eyes whirling in excitement. They weren't veterans of Threadfighting by any means, but Tallah had to laugh at the routine of anticipation her normally laid-back dragon went through every time they fought Thread. She likened his enthusiasm to her own when she was able to assist Dragonhealer Giselle in some extensive surgery. For Tallah the enjoyment in Threadfighting was from working with her well-matched partner. She swung up readily, using Solanth's offered foreleg as a stepstool. His hide and the leather of his harness were slick with the rain, but it was the wind that cut through her and made her glad for the protection of her fighting jacket and heavy gloves.

*How are you feeling, Solanth?* she asked her brown. It was a typical pre-flight ritual she had, no matter where they were flying.

***The wind comes in gusts, but it will not be able to move me. I am strong and well-oiled—the queens know I will support them.***

Tallah smiled, feeling an immense swell of pride for Solanth. It was true—the past few 'Falls had gone well for the pair. They had survived their first Turn of fighting with no more than a few minor injuries—a sprain and a wing-tip Threadscore being the worst. Tallah hoped that they would eventually be given greater responsibility in the Wing, as much responsibility as could be given to a brown flying among queens. Solanth, having spent so much time in the Dragon Infirmary with his rider, had picked up her discerning eye for injuries and inconsistencies in dragon flight. Those eyes for sprains and health problems were valuable in the Queens' Wing, where many of the fighting force were dragonpairs returning from injury. If her healer's eye could help even when she was outside the infirmary, all the better. 'Not that I'll be able to see *anything* tonight', thought Tallah as she pulled on her goggles.

They had been praised for their sharp eyes during Threadfall, and also remaining calm and rational under stress. 'Like ice,' Tallah thought, remembering a comment her fellow dragonhealer apprentice Lyra had made about her. 'Of course I'm like ice—it's the only way to be in tense situations if you want to come out intact.' Of course, Solanth always made a huge show about anything the golds said in their favor. And Tallah agreed with him—while dragonhealing was her calling, it didn't hurt to excel in other areas as well.

*We are ready, Solanth.*

***The order is given! I fly to the point of between.***

Tallah leaned into Solanth's powerful strokes as he rose with the rest of the Queens' Wing to their rallying point. Though she could not see them in the rain-speckled darkness, she knew WindFlight was doing the same near them. The order was quickly given to go *between*, the image of Windsong's eastern coast firmly planted in Solanth's mind. Tallah closed her eyes and counted out the seconds as always. It was another ritual of hers that she performed every time they disappeared—a comfort for her. Not that it mattered much. Solanth had never failed to make his jumps and she had absolute confidence in him.

They appeared into a different kind of cold. The weather down the coast was much worse than at the Weyr—Solanth immediately had to adjust his flight as a gust of biting wind hit his side. It was dark, of course, but the clouds and rain made the darkness seem even more complete. Not even a hint of Belior, who would be full tonight, showed through the clouds. She would have to rely almost entirely on Solanth's more advanced vision.

The Wing above them met the leading edge of Thread just as the wind picked up again. Tallah saw the burst of flame from Lybelle's flamethrower to her right, and through the rain on her goggles Tallah saw a large half-charred clump of Thread twisting its way down towards them.

*I see it, and call it*, Solanth informed her, tipping his wings to meet the clump. She felt the gasses rumbling in his second stomach underneath her thighs and he belched flame, consuming the clump entirely. Solanth bugled in triumph and ducked towards another stray strand. The hot ashes blew back into Tallah's face and stuck to the wet surface of her goggles. She slapped Solanth's shoulder and he swung his head around to delicately take the firestone she had for him.

*Ihyanith tells us to spread out and move higher. The wind is very strong and Thread is getting through the upper levels.*

*Watch the wind as we rise and—clump ahead!* Solanth saw where she was directing him, towards a half-charred bunch blown sideways from above. He surged upwards, the wind rattling his wing-sails as he back-winged and charred the clump to ash.

*Good!* Tallah responded, the taste of firestone ash in her mouth as she grinned. Solanth cupped his wings again and rolled over, against the wind, to attack another patch. More Thread was getting through the upper ranks than she had seen in a long time. Tallah had never seen the Queens' Wing so busy. She could feel the edge of her own fatigue beginning to creep up on her, but she ignored it. There was no hesitation in Solanth's wing strokes, and she felt the weight of her responsibility. If Solanth could go on, so could she. Tallah was almost completely blind now and she resisted the urge to rip off her goggles completely and free her eyes. She got a few seconds of sight every time a dragon near her flamed, and she tried to make the most of it, but otherwise she had to rely on Solanth's senses and make decisions based on what he saw. Around her the smaller colors were being buffeted around and had to struggle to keep their positions. Even Solanth, who was large for a brown, had to adjust his flight path or else be blown off course. She found that he needed more firestone to maintain a full flame in the wind and had to return to resupply more often than usual.

Again and again Solanth reported dragons being injured and safely returning to the Weyr. There had been no deaths, but minor casualties—a wingtip score here, Thread blown into a tail there—were mounting rapidly. The weather was wearing the smaller dragons down and blowing Thread in unpredictable ways. But WindFlight was holding steady above the Queen's Wing. With each report Tallah's ears strained to hear the screams through her helmet, feeling disoriented as the dragonhealer in her urged her to return to

Giselle and help. But she was brought back to the job at hand by Solanth's steady stream of information and orders from Ihyanith. They were over Riverdance now.

Tallah squinted. Above them, something had caught her attention. It wasn't Thread this time, but she had definitely seen the dragon next to her in formation *wobble* in its flight. She doubted herself for a moment—the wind was buffeting everyone about and visibility was poor—but then she caught it again as the dragon rose to meet a half-charred clump of Thread falling from the upper levels. One of the dragon's wings didn't seem to be able to sweep the air as cleanly as the other.

*It's Mulujath*, Solanth said.

Tallah recognized the pair, remembering the solid, experienced—and somewhat intimidating—presence of N'larion next to her as they had lined up in preparation for flight. Mulujath had been in the Dragon Infirmary with the other dragons from the Ninth Pass, and she knew he had a past shoulder injury that restricted his flight. Normally he would have been fine, with just a slight list in his flight, but even barely halfway into the 'Fall, navigating the winds was straining him. What was N'larion thinking? But maybe he hadn't noticed—it was only just noticeable to her trained eye. But she was *sure* that the unclean sweep of his wings was worse than usual, and it made the healer in her nervous. 'He's faltering,' Tallah thought. Her nervousness twanged in her stomach—should she relay something to N'larion? Or Ihyanith? Then again, N'larion was much more experienced than she, and would certainly pull Mulujath out if he got much worse. As it was, if Mulujath was anything like Solanth, Tallah knew that the huge brown would push himself if his Weyr needed him. But Tallah had to be safe. It was her responsibility.

As she was about to ask Solanth to tell one of the queens that Mulujath seemed off, a scream carried by the wind interrupted her thoughts. Tallah's heart skipped a beat when a blue spiraled out of the sky, trying to stay aloft on one healthy wing, the other sail scored and his rider injured. He wasn't falling quickly, but his control was minimal. Solanth dipped down to cover the airspace above the blue, power-stroking against the wind with the intent to flame any tendrils of Thread that blew down above the hurt pair that they would be unable to dodge. Tallah's heart leapt into her throat, thinking of how the wing sail could tear on the ragged edges if the blue had to fly on it. Then the blue flicked *between*, the coordinates forced into his head by a queen.

Solanth blasted the Thread that fell in the blue's wake, clearing the gap fall had created. *He returns to the Weyr*, Solanth informed Tallah after a moment. *His rider is alive.*

*Good, Solanth*, Tallah thumped his neck appreciatively. *Back up to fighting height again. How are you doing?*

*This wind is difficult*, Solanth said, banking and buffeted sideways as though to prove his point. *But I am big—greens and blues are being blown around more.*

*Yes, well—* Tallah stopped and scrubbed at her goggles with a glove before offering Solanth another chunk of firestone, *Do tell me if you start to get tired. I have a feeling we will be losing more dragons to exhaustion than Thread in*

*this weather*, Tallah mused, wondering when the second flight would be sent in to help out. She hunkered close to his warm neck, feeling at the sacks of firestone to see how much she had remaining.

***It is raining heavier in the upper levels now***, Solanth said.

*That should drown a good amount.*

***It is. But the reports are that the rain is patchy but the wind is strong everywhere.*** Tallah grinned behind her scarf at Solanth's measured annoyance. She wondered if he was begrudging his placement in the Queen's Wing right now and jealous of the fighting dragons in the upper levels. Sometimes Tallah felt the appeal of flying with a fighting Wing, but it wasn't worth giving up infirmary duties.

'And after just getting a taste of what the upper levels experience because of this storm, I think I can lay any jealousy to rest,' Tallah thought.

Solanth turned sharply, and Tallah ducked with him as he belched flame at a stray tangle of Thread. In the light of the fire, Tallah found her eye drawn to Mulujath again. He was slightly above and to the right of them now, still within position in the formation and pushing upwards to pursue his own clump.

*Solanth*, Tallah said, ***Tell Ihyanith at once that Mulujath is straining. And tell Mulujath he should return the Weyr.*** Tallah could see how with each downstroke Mulujath seemed to be fighting to keep his injured wing straight and not crumpled against his body. ***And swing underneath them—can you catch that clump as it comes down in case he misses?***

***Yes***, Solanth said, banking to come around and char the clump Mulujath was facing if he missed it or chose to go *between* just then. ***I've told Mulujath that we will cover it if—***

And then the wind hit them with a blast greater than they had yet experienced. With Solanth facing into the wind, the gust buffeted them upwards before Solanth had time to properly adjust. For Mulujath, the wind pushed his weight onto his bad wing. The strain was too much, and the wing crumpled to his body just as Mulujath belched flame at the Thread. The pair tumbled sideways with a screech of pain, and Solanth and Tallah were blown into their path.

Tallah saw it coming, but even that didn't give her time to react. As her mind reached for coordinates *between*, Solanth jerked upwards, stretching his wings up and out in preparation for the powerful down stroke that would bring them to safety. For one moment it seemed as though they were going to be fine, that Solanth's instinctive reaction had saved them from a collision. Then the force of Mulujath's errant flame hit Solanth full on his right foreleg and chest, blinding Tallah. They were so close that the flame splashed off Solanth and bit at her exposed cheeks. She could hear the hiss of sparks as they hit her sodden jacket just as Solanth's all-consuming pain flooded into her mind. That final wing stroke never came.

***Between!*** Tallah screamed with all the force she knew, and felt Solanth flick into the emptiness that would put an end to his suffering. They had disappeared together before Tallah was able to wrap her mind around the coordinates.

She had never made a mistake when going *between* before, but now Tallah's head was filled with that last image—Mulujath's flame splashing off Solanth, his scream reverberating inside of her. The healer in her knew that he was badly hurt, maybe fatally so. 'But he will fly again,' her brain ground out to her—another old dragonhealer blessing. The flame hadn't hit his raised wing, had it? 'Maybe this is kinder', Tallah thought, as the nothingness stretched longer than it took to cough three times. They were lost.

And then they came out of *between*—somehow Solanth had gotten the coordinates, probably from one of the queens—lower to the ground than expected. They stalled out, Tallah clinging to his back, trying to guide him directly to the infirmary as he fought to slow them down. Tallah was vaguely aware of the people scrambling below them as Solanth tried to control their descent. The flight muscles on Solanth's charred side wouldn't work properly and, though he tried, he couldn't catch himself properly with only one wing. They hit the ground hard and Tallah was pitched forward into his neck ridge, her flight leathers suddenly loose around her thighs—Mulujath's flame had burnt a huge section of them away. She felt a sharp pain in her shoulder as she clung to Solanth's heaving back.

"Help, someone help us!"

There was a jumble of incoherent voices around her that Tallah couldn't focus on. Solanth was still screaming. While going *between* froze away Thread, it didn't have the same effect on dragon flame. Even after being doused by *between*, the heat hadn't completely dissipated. Solanth lashed out, trying to prevent himself from falling on his injured side, stumbling and only half-aware of the healers running to meet him. His right foreleg was useless—he wasn't able to even to tuck it up against his body and support himself on three legs. Tallah clung to his back, fighting against the wave of nausea that passed over her. She had seen many riders sick with the shock and the pain of their dragons, but had never thought much of it until now. It had never been the riders that mattered—just the injured dragons and the ensuing healing. She couldn't seem to separate herself from Solanth's agony, but she had to if she was going to help him. She had to detach. But the horror of his injury and the spillover she was getting from his pain was too much to fight.

And then a huge gold presence enveloped them both. Tallah couldn't hear the gold, she couldn't even identify who it was—but the feeling of warmth and power enveloped Solanth and quieted his thrashing. He moaned softly.

Hands found Tallah and someone was cutting away the useless straps that tangled with her legs. Then she was being stripped of her goggles and jacket, and the hands were lying her down and straightening her out. A kind, bearded face swam over Tallah's—her vision was still disoriented from the char and flame.

"You have a badly dislocated shoulder and some burns. I'm going to fix the shoulder now. Any later and it may not heal properly," healer Peregán said.

"Yes," Tallah gasped. They certainly had to fix her. She had to help Solanth.

"Distilled water, and lots of it! And numbweed!" Tallah

heard a familiar voice yell out, and she tried to twist around and see Giselle.

“Solanth,” she said, wanting to express, somehow, that she needed to stay with him. “I need to go to Solanth.” She could see the bulk of his left side in the corner of her black-spotted vision. But that couldn’t be him—his hide was a rich well-oiled light brown, and this dragon’s skin was ashy-grey and pale.

“Don’t worry, brownrider,” the healer said, “We aren’t going to separate you. Lay still—this is going to hurt.”

It *did* hurt. Tallah fainted as the healer’s strong hands pushed her shoulder back into place. When she came to, not long after, feeling sick, Peregan was binding her useless arm to her side.

“Drink this,” Peregan commanded, pressing a cup to her lips. She could smell fellis in the drink and bent automatically to sip. Then she saw Lyra hurrying forward, jar of numbweed and surgical tools in her hands. Fear surged up inside her. She could feel Solanth, still alive but in terrible pain, fighting to stay present. The queen—was it Nioranth? —was holding him there, keeping him from slipping away in shock. ‘But Lyra’s going to slow everything down,’ Tallah thought wildly, ‘She doesn’t like me—that won’t help Solanth. Only Giselle can save him now. Only Giselle should touch him!’

She pushed the cup away, struggling against the firm hands of the healer who held her back. “Easy there, girl! You’re hurt and you need to be still. Your brown is in the best of hands.”

“No, he’s not,” Tallah gasped, her voice rattling in her throat. She wasn’t a large woman, but agile when she needed to be, and when she twisted in his arms, the healer let her go. Tallah suspected that he thought letting her struggle could cause more harm than good. And besides, her pain was nothing compared to what was spilling over from Solanth. She was back at Solanth’s side in a heartbeat, her good hand pressed against his un-burned side between him and the approaching Lyra.

“I don’t want you touching him! Stay away—you’ll kill him!” Tallah’s voice cracked, but her yell penetrated the other noises in the infirmary anyway.

Lyra stared at her, eyes wide with surprise, and then hurt.

“Tallah,” Giselle barked—that alone was enough of a reprimand for Tallah to turn to her mentor. “What do you think you’re doing?” She beckoned Lyra forward and took the fresh needlethorn from her.

“I don’t want her,” Tallah said, fighting another wave of nausea, “I don’t want her assisting with him. He needs the best.”

Giselle’s eyebrows knitted, considering her apprentice with hard eyes. She passed off the needlethorn to Dawn, who had arrived at a run, her hands still dripping with redwort.

That alone made Tallah feel frantic—time was being wasted! “I should be doing it,” Tallah said, “I should be assisting you.”

“You, my dear,” Giselle said, “are not a healer this moment. You are a dragonrider whose dragon is seriously

injured. We will do our best with him—all of us will do our best.”

“Lyra—” Tallah said, shooting a dark glance towards the other apprentice hovering near Dawn.

“Is a perfectly capable apprentice,” Giselle snapped, though her expression had softened “Lyra, come forward at once to assist,” Giselle commanded. “We need to get him braced comfortably so that his weight is on his left side.”

Tallah saw then that it was indeed Nioranth holding Solanth, and that Giselle’s last request was directed at the queen and Dunia, who was standing nearby. Solanth had assisted in holding blues and greens so often that Tallah knew what must be going on between the queen and Solanth. Nioranth herself sat outside, drizzle falling on her back. The gold’s head was thrust halfway through the canvas pulled down to serve as temporary walls for the Dragon Infirmary so that she could see Solanth and direct him if need be. Solanth had obviously been moved—probably when she lost consciousness—with Nioranth’s help.

The fight died on Tallah’s lips—she could help here, even if she didn’t have the strength to assist in surgery. *Solanth, my beautiful brave boy. We need you to shift your weight onto your left side.*

Slowly, guided by Nioranth and his rider, Solanth was able to roll halfway onto his left side. Bronze Rhynt, who was already in the infirmary helping as much as he could, lay down next to Solanth so that the brown could lean on him. Worktables were being pushed forwards, stools were being brought at a run, all so that the healers could access the burns. “Water isn’t going to be enough to cool these—I need ice!” Giselle was roaring. “Get the free weyrings, anybody, to gather some from the snowcaps—run water over it gently until then; we need to cool these burns *now!*” They swarmed over him—elevating his ravaged leg, pouring distilled sterile water over the worst of the burns until people in flight leathers arrived at a run carrying ice in oilskin bags. Numbweed was applied liberally over the minor burns on his flank and shoulder.

Tallah stumbled around to his head, wishing she could cradle him as she had done when he was a hatchling. His color was awful and his eyes were grey and whirling slowly, but his deep moans quieted somewhat as she stroked his eye ridge with her good hand.

Then Tallah turned to look at the extent of the damage. She had seen terrible burns before. She had helped treat them with professional detachment. But she couldn’t see Solanth without feeling him. He was her *heart*. She also couldn’t let the healer in her go, no matter what Giselle said, and she saw the injuries for what they were. It made her feel like passing out again.

The outside of Solanth’s right foreleg had suffered the most damage and had clearly felt the full force of the blast. He had no skin *left* in places. His flesh was charred so that even ichor wasn’t flowing. Tallah could see, through the smears of char and ichor, that bare bone showed in his hand. Giselle was there, perched with surgical tools in hand, assistants elevating his wrist for her. Bile rose in Tallah’s throat. She knew well enough that his hand had to come off, but seeing Giselle cutting into the connective tissue at

Solanth's wrist joint was too much to bear. She made herself look elsewhere, trying to bolster herself with the thought that Giselle's decision not to amputate the entire leg immediately meant she thought that it could be saved. A prosthetic might even be possible. And Solanth's burns weren't nearly so bad along his chest and underside. The skin over his bulging flight muscles was also burnt, though mercifully his wing, having been at the peak of its sweep, was undamaged.

Tallah shuddered, mechanically stroking Solanth's eye ridge with one good hand. He was beyond even her mindspeech now, practically comatose, being so tightly held by Nioranth so that he would not move as they removed his hand and placed well-insulated ice packs around his limb. But he was still there inside of her, Tallah could feel, and she clung to that presence, wishing that she hadn't taken it for granted in the past. Mulujath had cut his flame off the instant Solanth screamed, but at such close quarters there was nothing anyone could have done. 'Were we too close?' Tallah was tortured by the thought that she had caused this somehow. They had seemed so far away at the time, well underneath and to the left of Mulujath—a distance the wind had closed between them in moments.

Tallah felt her vision whirl and she staggered away from Solanth's head. The steady hands of the healer Peregan caught her up again—he must have been next to her the whole time. "Here," Peregan offered her the cup laced with fellis again. "It isn't enough to send you to sleep, but enough to dull the pain a little. We can sit close here while I look at your burns."

Tallah nodded, which sent the world whirling again, forcing her to close her eyes and swallow hard.

"Ah," Tallah felt firm but gentle fingers lifting her chin, "open those eyes now, brownrider." When she did he examined her pupils and then gently began to probe her head. When she flinched he grunted and leaned forward to examine her more closely.

"You have a concussion—not a bad one from the looks of it, but enough that I think it's better you don't go to sleep now anyway. Do you remember hitting your head?"

"No," Tallah croaked. "I remember falling forward though. I think I dislocated my shoulder then."

Healer Peregan nodded and went about spreading cooling numbweed on her burned face. To Tallah it felt like a bad sunburn—negligible in the face of Solanth's devastating injury. But the drink Peregan had given her, and the distraction his ministrations offered, allowed her panic to fade.

The anxiety did not ease, though. She could see how Lyra, standing with Giselle—whose back blocked Tallah's view of the surgery taking place—looked horrified at the damage in front of her. If it had been Tallah in her place, and Solanth had not been the patient, Tallah's face would not have broken with emotion. Her hand would be steady. Lyra wasn't the most experienced of the apprentices. It didn't matter that Giselle was treating him. All she could see was Lyra, a weak link in saving Solanth's life. Worse than that by far was the fact that she couldn't help. Even *if* Giselle would allow her, she was dizzy and had only one hand. The logical side of Tallah—normally the forefront of all her

actions—told her that Giselle was right to keep her to one side.

To Tallah, all of the dragonhealers seemed more serious than usual. Perhaps because they all knew Solanth fairly well, as often as he was hanging about in the infirmary, helping out however he could? Or perhaps she just noticed more because it was Solanth on the infirmary floor.

The greatest problem with an injury like this was the pain involved, and the shock related to the pain. Nioranth was holding him steady, with Tallah focusing him as best she could, but his pain was still incredible. Tallah knew that while normally they would just send him to sleep, the shock he was feeling would kill him and it was better he stayed conscious until they could at least assess the damage. Tallah winced, trying and failing to separate the burns she saw from association with her dragon. Once they were able to manage his shock and pain, Giselle would have to take a knife to Solanth's leg and carve away any dead and useless skin that remained, but at this point it was impossible to tell what lived and died. Where Solanth bled, there was hope that his flesh would be saved. Tallah knew whatever the outcome, her beautiful Solanth would be scarred.

"It's important that you stay warm, brownrider," Healer Peregan said, reappearing to lay a blanket across her thin shoulders. "And I'm going to drag a cot over here for you to sit on and be close to him. No need to sit on the floor."

Tallah's lip trembled, "T-thank you." She must be experiencing her own measure of shock, she realized, because she was cold and hadn't even realized it. She also hadn't been aware that it was raining hard outside the flapping canvas walls of the infirmary. Threadfall hadn't even ended.



### **2860.13.18**

Tallah awoke as though from a thick fog, and felt annoyed. Someone must have slipped her a heavier draught of fellis at some point. The day had been a blur of quiet moments where she recalled watching the rise and fall of Solanth's ribs, and frenzied activity that made her head spin, and her brother beside her squeezing her hand. Her shoulder ached—more painful now than when Solanth's shock had distracted her from her own injuries. The burns on her face had been tended while she slept—she could feel the cooling coat of numbweed on her cheeks. 'My concussion is healing, too,' Tallah thought, moving her head experimentally. Everything else seemed to be working, and she felt more awake. From the light outside it seemed to be late morning.

"Tallah! How are you feeling?" Lyra's smile looked wary and unsure. The dragonhealer apprentice looked haggard.

"What's going on?" croaked Tallah, "How long has it been?"

"Nearly two days," said Lyra, "but don't worry, he's sleeping."

Tallah lay back in the cot, her heart hammering with an

unexpected surge of adrenaline. But everything was fine. She could see the loose bulk of Solanth next to her cot, and could feel his drugged and sleeping presence in the back of her mind. He was alive. They were *both* alive.

"T'vellen left not too long ago," Lyra continued, looking uneasy. "He told me that he and Trith had drills..."

Tallah pushed herself up again, forcing her muscles to work as she swung her legs off the cot. Someone had removed all but the inner layer of her clothing, but her normal modesty was non-existent. "I need to examine him," Tallah said.

"Yes, of course. Giselle said to allow you if you felt up to it," Lyra said.

Why Giselle had chosen Lyra to deliver this message was beyond Tallah, but she felt too battered to question anything. The fact that Solanth still felt so drugged was not a good sign—if they had been able to manage his pain he should have been able to sleep naturally by this point. Carefully she slid out of the cot they had laid next to Solanth.

Lyra offered an arm, which Tallah thought of refusing before her dizziness caused her to falter. Instead she balanced herself on Lyra, feeling awkward. She remembered yelling about Lyra, worried her incompetence would harm Solanth, but Giselle had been right of course. Lyra was capable. Tallah had always just found her coddling of patients and sensitivity annoying because it distracted the healer from the healing. Now, as Tallah examined her dragon, she found herself appreciating the solid grip of the girl on her good side.

"He's drugged—how much?" Tallah asked, lifting Solanth's eyelid and examining his coloring. He looked bad, despite the even rise and fall of his chest. It looked as though all the color had been washed from his hide.

"Quite a bit," Lyra said. "He was twitching in light sleep—not something the golds could control. We had to send him into a deeper sleep."

Tallah looked around, wondering if there was a gold dragon nearby now.

"Savukath is assigned to the infirmary today, and she knows about Solanth and is keeping track of him in case he wakes," Lyra said, correctly interpreting Tallah's unasked question.

Tallah moved to examine the bandaging around the stump where his hand had been. Something wasn't right, but she couldn't place it. Her head felt fogged—they must have drugged her too.

"The bandaging," Tallah asked, "How often is it being

changed?"

"Twice a day right now. We've been bathing the burns in a redwort dilution, too. Just light waxed bandaging for part of the day and icing as well."

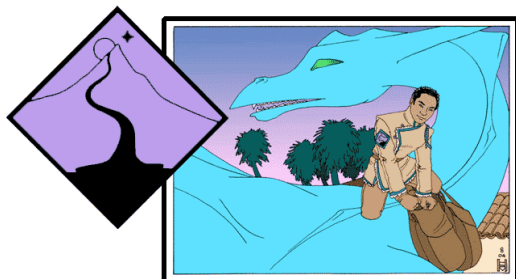
Tallah shuddered, a dizzy spell catching her off guard. Lyra's grip on her arm tightened, holding her up.

"I'm all right," Tallah gasped. "I still have a small headache from the concussion. Nothing serious." It *wasn't* serious, and Tallah hated the part of her that wanted to crawl into bed and nurse her own wounds while her love lay as though dead. Instead she moved forward to caress Solanth's neckridge. His skin felt hot—hotter than it should be even given their normally high blood temperatures.

"No," Tallah gasped, looking at the bandaging and wishing she could rip them off and reveal the filth that must be brewing inside of Solanth's ravaged flesh. The burns had looked wrong—swollen with more than just normal inflammation. He had a fever. But after two days the shock of the injury should be gone. That could mean only one thing—the very worst thing when it came to serious burns that were more than a day old.

"I'm sorry, Tallah," Lyra's voice cracked. Tallah focused on the other girl's face and saw that Lyra was near tears. That *still* baffled her. Why was Lyra so upset? Solanth was *her* dragon, her partner, her *love*. "Giselle did everything she could. It's not that bad right now, but that's why we are keeping it covered and doing such frequent redwort baths..."

Tallah had never considered what she would do if Solanth died before she did. She had always been a healer first and never considered what it truly meant to be a dragonrider. Now it felt as though she had been delivered a death sentence. "I see," Tallah said. "He's got an infection."



# Kadanzer Weyr

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