
The Other First

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The flowerpot outside the cot had been shoved across to the other side of the step, a dusty trail clearly visible in the dirt. The thin curtain at the window was drawn. Lina sighed in mild irritation. Ivahla was clearly occupied again this evening. After Shahara's lecture on the subject of mating flights and the need to be prepared for same, they'd agreed the signal in the interest of not having one another barge in on the recommended "experimenting". Well, Ivahla had suggested it and Lina had agreed. So far she had not had occasion to use it herself.

Come on, she said to Tayath, We'll visit Cybris and Sapherlin, shall we?

Tayath swung her head towards the cot.

Why? she demanded. ***We have worked all day and you have eaten and I have bathed. I want to sleep in my wallow and you want to go to your cot.***

It's not polite at the minute. Anyway, you can sleep in your wallow if you want to, you're quite big enough!

Tayath's eyes whirled obstinately. ***I want to go where you go. But I want my wallow too. Minyith is there. Her rider is in the cot. Why are you not?***

Because Minyith's rider is not there alone, Lina had answered without thinking.

Why does that make you not want to go to the cot? What are they doing? I will ask Minyith to ask her. I will tell her to tell her rider to stop doing it so we can go home.

Don't you dare! Lina was torn between laughter and embarrassment at the thought. *They're not doing anything wrong. Come on, don't dither. I'm going to see Lorsenth's and Sujath's riders.*

Sujath tells me off if I try and share their wallow, Tayath said, mournfully, but she followed Lina and at least seemed to have dropped her interest in what was going on back at the cot.

Now that the subject was foremost in her mind Lina couldn't help wondering whether her friends had managed to follow the 'instructions' yet. Some of the class had clearly simply been waiting for the opportunity which the lifting of the "ban" had presented. Others seemed more hesitant -- everyone could see T'syr and S'var were close, but if S'var's furious blushes every time the topic came up were anything to go by, "close" was about it for now. The rumours about Sapherlin, and, of all people, D'rian were rather more definite but Lina wasn't sure if Cybris had found someone. It was hard to imagine the possessive young Sujath allowing

another human that much intimacy with her rider in any case. At least Tayath was only curious.

Lina supposed she ought to be making more of an effort herself, but just how did one start the kind of conversation that ended in... well... *bed*? It wasn't that she thought there was anything fundamentally *wrong* with Weyr morals, different though they were to how she'd been brought up. Nonetheless a blush appeared anyway, every time she thought about the prospect, and telling herself it was a simple duty, part of being a dragonrider, didn't help much.

Neither did reminding herself that had she stayed at home and not Impressed she'd have very probably been married by now. Somehow the prospect of a wedding night was far less embarrassing than being with a classmate and everyone knowing -- and everyone *would* know, she would bet on it. Everyone always knew everyone else's business in a Weyr. Of course everyone would know, or assume, that you were sleeping with your husband but... Lina shook her head, realising she was just getting her thoughts on the issue in more of a tangle.

In a way she envied those, like Ivahla, who came to weyringhood with at least a bit of sexual experience under their belt. Although they'd moaned about the enforced celibacy during the early months, at least they didn't have the added complication of a dragon looking over their shoulder for their first time.

What do you not want me to look at? Tayath interrupted her thoughts, sounding confused again, having obviously caught some drift. ***You are my rider, you could not upset me.***

Lina absently put her hand on the green's neck. *I hope not, she murmured.*

Tayath trailed at her heels as they crossed the complex, and greeted Lorsenth and Sujath, as they approached the cot. The evening was still warm and the door stood open, the sound of voices drifting out onto the night air.

"Hellooo!" Lina called out.

Sapherlin's head emerged around the doorframe and she smiled. "Hiya, Lina. You coming in? Good evening, Tayath."

Inside, Cybris waved. "Let me guess..." she said with a grin. "Your cotmate is *occupied*..."

Lina rolled her eyes. "Much as I hate to sound the prudish holder..." She let the sentence hang unfinished.

Sapherlin chuckled. "How's Tayath taking it? Lorsenth is starting to get rather interested in all that."

Lina smiled herself then. "She *is* starting to ask awkward questions!"

"So... anyone in mind then?"

Lina spluttered and blushed, though more from indignation than embarrassment by now -- both her friends knew perfectly well that she had still to fulfil the advice given in "The Lecture".

"Well, I've ruled a few people out!" she said, recovering herself. "I'm in no particular rush to be some tally mark on someone like K'syr's bed post! The way some of the boys are rattling through the class you'd think it was a competition!"

Cybris laughed. "Just following instructions, I'm sure they'd say..."

"Tayath likes Relth, doesn't she?" suggested Sapherlin.

Lina nodded. "H'riri's nice enough, but I'm not sure I want to jump his bones exactly!" She sighed. "Actually all of the boys in the class seem just familiar enough now to make the idea seem -- odd."

The other two girls nodded in understanding.

"Anyway," Sapherlin changed the topic. "I hear a rumour that we'll be doing our first solo *between* flights, this sevenday."

Cybris pulled a face. "Rumours! Where'd you hear that?"

"Cassia overheard the weyrlingseconds talking."

Lina winced. "I hope it *is* just a rumour. I still don't think I've really got the visualisation down. I just go blank!"

Sapherlin gave her a sympathetic smile, but it was no comfort that the other girl had no trouble whatsoever with the pictures. Lina supposed that was only to be expected from someone trained to draw pictures in the more permanent medium of ink.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Cybris said. "Sujath can't wait. She keeps demanding to know why she has to take the picture from some other dragon and not from me."

I do not know why you worry. Between is nowhere. You cannot be frightened of nowhere.

Lina had to smile at her dragon's blunt confidence.

"Tayath thinks I'm being silly to worry," she explained. "Mind you, she doesn't much like Layketh doublechecking our images. She already thinks we can do it ourselves."

Sapherlin laughed. "It must be nice to have that draconic confidence."

Minyith says Bremnoth's rider is leaving our cot. She says she is going to sleep and I shouldn't stamp loudly in the wallow when we come back. Why is Bremnoth's rider in our cot when you are not?

And so they were back to that subject. Lina sighed.

Never you mind. Let's get back.

"Well I'd better get back," she repeated aloud. "Another fun-and-drill-filled day tomorrow, no doubt."

Lina headed back to her own cot, Tayath close beside her. The green had finally grown out of most of her hatchling clumsiness, albeit a bit later than most of her clutchmates. She flew neatly and few of the drills presented more than the normal difficulty associated with any learning curve.

Lina's anxiety about going *between*, just like her anxiety over the sex issue, were all her own. Doubtless Tayath would take it in her stride. If only Lina could keep from letting her own fears influence the young dragon.



In fact it was considerably less than a sevenday before Cassia's prediction was proved true and the class found themselves lined up awaiting instructions for their first solo flights *between*. There was a certain amount of fidgeting and

Lina glanced up and down the three lines of weyrings, trying to assess the level of nervousness among her peers.

She wasn't sure whether she was relieved or worried to see the signs of nerves among her classmates. Shoaliant h scraped at the sandy soil while Aleoth fluttered and eyed the other dragons, H'riri fiddled with his riding leathers, and Duhonth nudged his rider, S'var, so hard the boy stumbled. W'den was also inspecting his straps, as Vesath fidgeted.

Lina tried to breathe slowly and keep her calm. Nervousness would be one more dangerous distraction today and she was comforted by the fact that both Cybris and Sapherlin, with their two greens, appeared calm. Ivahla too stood calmly waiting, Minyith at her side.

There was little conversation, even before Shahara stepped forward, each weyrling focussed on their own thoughts and the tasks ahead. All eyes though, snapped forward as the weyrlingsecond spoke.

"All right, everyone, today is a big step in your training. You've all been *between* enough to know what to expect; this will just build on what you've learned so far."

Lina tried not to wince a bit at that, wishing she was truly certain she *had* perfected the visualisations they'd been practising so hard. She tried to put that aside and listen to the rest of Shahara's instructions as the weyrlingsecond called out the order in which the weyrings would mount up and take their jump. Lina glanced across at her cotmate, Ivahla, up there early in the order.

Minyith goes before us? Tayath's mental tone sounded slightly peeved at this.

Lina on the other hand was happy to wait. This wasn't like the earlier "firsts". She'd been nervous enough for their first attempts at flight, and there was far worse than bruises and a ducking to be had this time!

Furiously she tried to conjure up the image of the roof of the weyrling barracks. Goodness knows they'd overflown it enough recently that it ought to be automatic by now. It wasn't and her face tightened into a frown as she wracked her brains.

A ridiculous image sprang up of the pair of them flapping about overhead as she struggled to commit it to memory. How long did you have before the observing weyrlingstaff decided you'd had long enough? Or that you weren't capable after all?

She didn't have time to ponder as Shahara looked to Yindi, the first to make the attempt. "Mount up, weyrling!"

Yindi obeyed and Lina watched Yltoth take off, and rapidly gain height and speed.

They go! Tayath's excitement was infectious, and the seconds passed so quickly, Lina didn't realise there had been too many of them, until Tayath threw her head back and let out an eerie shattering wail, along with the other dragons of the class and Weyr as a whole.

They are gone! Yltoth is gone, his rider is gone!

Lina staggered against Tayath.

"The first. The very first." She wasn't sure whether she had spoken aloud, and looked around at the faces of her classmates, almost unconsciously shifting closer to them. They were reacting to the early tragedy too. Lorsenth had her wings raised, and Sapherlin looked pale. Lina had started

to seek for some consoling comment when, without warning, Lorsenth brought her wings down and leapt into the air.

Lina let out a startled shout. But Layketh must have already censured Lorsenth because the pair returned to the ground, as Shahara shouted. Sapherlin was bright red and looking mortified. Lina was about to ask what had happened but any discussion was curtailed before she could offer any support, as Shahara addressed the class.

"Don't be distracted. Threadfall doesn't stop just because your wingmate has gone *between*." She hardly hesitated before calling out the next pair. "W'tor and Radanth!"

Lina soothed Tayath even as she inwardly cringed at the thought of the next jump, but one by one, the next jumps passed without incident. Ivahla's Minyith made it in style and Tayath again wanted to know why her sister and wallow-mate got her turn first. Lina soothed her absently while watching B'shan jump.

He did not return. Long minutes passed, and people looked apprehensive, then puzzled when the keening did not come.

Tayath? Where's Ateith? Lina eventually summoned the courage to ask.

Tayath gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. ***The wrong place. He went where his rider wanted him to go, as Lorsenth would have. It is not where Layketh wants us to go.***

Unfortunately the break in the tension didn't last long, and Ateith and B'shan were soon escorted back from their unplanned flit to what turned out to be Benden Weyr, and returned to their place in line. As if the interlude had never occurred, Shahara calmly called out, "H'riro and Relth!"

Relth flies well, Tayath remarked as the pair landed from their successful jump, causing Lina to give her a long look. Shoaliant and several of the other greens were also watching perhaps a bit more closely than the drill alone warranted and Lina's thoughts turned back to the night before and, and the prospect of what was still to be done before her young green finally rose for the first time.

All the dragons' attention soon turned, though, to the flight of gold Arohath, and there was something of a collective sigh when they made it without incident. To lose any weyrling was distressing. To lose a queen would be devastating.

"S'var and Duhonth, you're next." Quickly, Shahara moved the exercise along. Tayath followed Duhonth's movements with interest as well. Not that she had much chance to admire him, since the blue was barely dragonlengths off the ground when he jumped.

Lina fidgeted with Tayath's harness as their turn drew closer. At least there'd been no more losses, but she couldn't figure out whether the mistakes made her more or less worried. Her heart skipped a beat with every unexpected problem, but at least it proved you could *make* mistakes and live to get away with them. Some of the time, anyway.

As if to prove herself right, the next mistake was her own as she sent Tayath an image which had them popping out above the Weyrling Barracks all right – a mere

dragonlength above and Tayath flapping frantically to gain clearance.

Lina shuddered as they landed, not feeling nearly as relieved by the first jump as she'd have wished. One down. Two to go.

Layketh's rider says she is pleased we made the jump, Tayath told her, and that we will know better for next time. She is right! Tayath added, satisfaction filling her thoughts.

Lina smiled wanly, and stroked her green's neck. *You did just fine, dear. It was me that over-did it!*

Before Tayath could answer there was a ringing bugle and heads snapped round, seeking the source. *What's the matter?* Lina urgently asked Tayath.

Lirth rises. Others follow. Layketh says we must wait. Tayath eyes were whirling orange, almost red, though Lina couldn't quite tell whether it was annoyance at the interruption or shared emotion at the flight.

She rather hoped it was the former and glanced around to see how the others were faring. Several of the greens were also looking up with red-tinged excitement in their eyes.

Tayath watched the specks that were the chasing dragons until they were out of sight with no particular agitation other than that focussed, whirling stare. Lina was relieved. She didn't think she could take much more excitement today. She glanced across to gauge the others' reactions. Lorsenth was preening her wings and crooning to every male who passed. Sujath just seemed happy to be able to run off some energy instead of waiting in line. Lina moved to join Sapherlin and Cybris and Vershya wandered up to join them and talk turned to the mating flight.

Lina listened quietly, lost in thought for a few moments. Tayath had been a clumsy dragonet, slow to grow out of it. Perhaps she'd be slow to mature and mate too. Still, the prospect would come sooner or later.

She paid attention again when Vershya winked at the group. "Speaking of which," Vershya said, glancing around at all the girls, "any new bed-fellows lately? I've been meaning to compare notes with everyone."

Cybris ducked her head and gave a sheepish smile. "Not me," she said, "Sujath is overprotective. You should have seen the first time—I had her distracted—but it didn't work and she ended shoving her head into our cot when his pants were down...I imagine it may be quite awhile before he gets over that trauma. I'm sure all the boys are a bit wary now."

Lina laughed, grateful for the opportunity to cover her own embarrassment at the directness of the question.

Vershya positively bubbled over with laughter but went on to comment, "I don't mind Shoaliant knowing everything or eavesdropping. The more experiences she has the less flighty and jumpy she'll be."

Was that the case? Lina wondered. Was she doing Tayath a disservice by not making more of an effort to comply with the instruction to "experiment"?

Her thoughts on the subject were interrupted, again, by Vesath who gave an ear-shattering roar and leapt up from where he'd been basking. It wasn't immediately clear what had happened until Duhonth jumped backwards and W'den

snapped angrily, "S'var, get control of your dragon, you wherry hen!"

Sujath was by Duhonth's side immediately, always happy to join in if there was any scuffling going on. Tayath watched, half crouched in case there was any opportunity for slightly less rough play. Lorseenth just fluffed her wings twice and then went back to preening herself.

Shahara though did not appear amused and both Cybris and S'var got a dressing down before the exercise resumed and Shahara waved for W'den to lift off. The large blue leapt into the air making large sweeps with his wings to gain altitude. They dwindled into the middle distance, and disappeared.

Moments passed. Too many, and once again the dragons keened. Lina closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around Tayath's neck not sure whether she was intending to comfort the dragon or herself.

In spite of the loss Cybris was already in the saddle, strapped in and ready to fly when Shahara gave the command.

"Cybris and Sujath!"

Lina had to force herself to look as Cybris and Sujath moved front and centre, away from the other weyrings in their line. Cat-like, the athletic little green sprang into the air, her wingstroke coming several moments after she was in the air. They gained altitude rapidly and were soon at the correct position.

Lina did weaken then and closed her eyes as they jumped, opening them only where she heard Sujath bugle triumph. They'd made it and Lina sagged in relief. The pair descended slowly, and landed neatly to return to their place in line. Lina shot Cybris a grin

The next pair to fly were J'ran and Perriath and everyone was quiet as they stepped forward. J'ran had been one of W'den's closer friends and it was clear he was struggling with tears. Nevertheless they were soon in the air and pushing for height.

Lina had almost lost sight of them before they vanished *between*, but they never came out again. Lina staggered. This was too many, surely? How many more could they lose!

Aleoth's desperate keening voice rang out with the other weyrings. This time, Aleoth threw her head from side to side, howling while Byalla tried desperately to get the green under control. Lina glanced anxiously across as Byalla tried to calm her dragon, willing her to manage it before the others got worked up too.

Shahara sighed then raised her voice.

"All right class, listen up! J'ran made a grave mistake. I cannot say what went on in his head, but he fouled up. Time and again myself and the other weyringassistants have told you how important it is to concentrate when moving *between*! Line up and follow me; it's time you saw first hand what happens when you shaff up!"

Lina suppressed a curl of dread as the line of weyrings started to move. Whatever Shahara wanted them to see couldn't be good.

The class paused at the front of the barracks. Lina had never found it harder to leave Tayath standing while she

walked on. She steeled herself, wishing she had the green's steady, loving presence as reassurance beside her.

At the back of the building, the blue lay. Lina stared for a moment before realising the horrible reality, that he and his rider had reappeared from *between* half in, half out of the building. Blood puddled, where the bodies simply... ended.

Lina felt decidedly queasy and somewhere behind them Tayath called in distress. ***What is upsetting you? What has happened?***

Nothing, Lina sent, firmly. This was one image she'd far rather keep from her young dragon. If that was going to be possible.

She looked away as Shahara stepped forward, no doubt to speak once again about the importance of not being distracted. Sapherlin was already speaking loudly and angrily, her voice tight and choked.

"This is wrong, Weyrlingsecond."

In between trying to comfort and control Tayath's agitation, Lina was aware that Sapherlin, though expressing a shared thought, was probably on the verge of going too far. She caught at her arm, trying to convey support and warning in the same gesture. It was not easy to concentrate on either her friend or the weyringsecond, with Tayath still protesting, and Sapherlin pulled away.

"J'ran and Perriath are half-stuck in a wall, and you're making an example of what's left of them? Explain what's helpful about that."

Lina winced along with several others, waiting for the explosion.

Lorseenth is upset, her rider is upset, you are upset! What is upsetting you? Why must we wait? I do not want to! Tayath protested.

Lina bit her lip, and closed her eyes, trying to clear her own mind and reassure the green. Tayath was an easy-going dragon, and Lina had never had this much trouble handling her moods or behaviour.

Please, Tayath, just wait. I will be back with you soon. We are...

What were they doing? Wrong topic. Not something she wanted to think about, or wanted Tayath to think about. Lina grimaced and shook her head.

Please, Tayath, please just wait.

Lina watched as Shahara reacted surprisingly calmly to Sapherlin's anger, pointed out the dangers of distraction as if they weren't all already far too aware of that. The proof, the crumpled, cruelly broken blue and his rider lying in front of them.

She looked long at the sight, and tried to force herself not to flinch. Had this happened because the pair were thinking of their lost classmates?

No, she corrected herself. Because the *rider* was. Dragons didn't think things through that thoroughly. They mourned, then they moved on. If they died because they weren't concentrating it was always the rider's fault.

She faltered in her attempt not to look away and squeezed her eyes shut briefly, before stepping forward again and drawing Sapherlin back and wrapping her arms around her in the best comfort she could manage.

Tayath...

My rider? instantly came the concerned query. **What is the matter?**

Nothing, Lina opened her eyes as both she and Sapherlin struggled to compose themselves. *Nothing is the matter. I'm fine. We'll both be fine. We've got two more jumps to do today.*

Yes! Tayath sounded pleased to hear it. **This time I will not fly too low. We will be better and better.**

Lina ruthlessly squashed all thoughts of the failures and losses for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon. She and Tayath completed their next two flights *between* without incident, and though Lina was still not entirely confident in her visualisation she forced herself to keep her nerve, and to keep her doubts from Tayath for the duration of the flight.

Finally the ordeal was over. Everyone had flown the required number of jumps and there had been no further losses. Lina felt utterly wrung out. When Shahara dismissed them, she all but fell from Tayath's shoulder, and leaned against the green for support as they walked from the drill grounds.

Tayath's spirits were already buoyant again and Lina let the dragon's satisfaction with their success act as a balm to her own emotions. She kept walking past the cots, and on down to the beach. They had some free time before the evening meal, to bathe the dragons, and presumably to pull themselves together. Several other weyrings were also nearby in various states of relief, grief, or simply, like Lina, emotional exhaustion.

Tayath flopped down in the shallows and half rolled over to have her belly scrubbed. Lina smiled. It had been a habit of hers since she was a hatchling and having grown rather a lot she now looked mildly ridiculous in such a posture.

Lina had abandoned flying leathers back at the cot, and now shed the light undertunic to splash into the shallows beside her dragon, and instead of scrubbing, flung her arms around her muzzle. *I do love you, Tayath.*

I know it. Tayath huffed water through her nose. **But I itch and we've been standing in lines on the sand all day...** Her tone was plaintive. Her love for her rider went without saying – her itches needed to be pointed out.

Lina fished in the waves for her brush and obediently started scrubbing.

Now that the immediate pressure was off, Lina allowed her thoughts to wander back over the day.

Fright, and distraction, and grief – how many of the errors had been caused just by emotion? Fear of the unknown. Fear of getting it wrong *making* you get it wrong...

They'd been lucky the interruption of the green flight hadn't happened at an even more awkward moment – how big a distraction could you get! Maybe they'd have been mourning yet another classmate.

The green flight...

Tayath had only watched this time, but soon she would rise herself. First rising wasn't as big a killer as first solo *between* flights, but there were still stories. Riders panicking. Dragons lost *between*.

Lina shivered, although the water was not cold. She

wouldn't lose Tayath to her own fears and anxieties. Nor to her holder upbringing which told her that deliberately seeking out a sexual partner whom you had no intention of wedding was the most brazen sort of wantonness.

Radanth is a fine strong brown.

Startled from her musing by Tayath's slightly tangential remark, Lina looked around. Radanth, and his rider with him, were indeed splashing into the waves.

Lina smiled at W'tor, and realised that *some* of that holder upbringing was already starting to fade in favour of Weyr norms. She quite clearly remembered her shocked reaction the first time she'd realised how many of the riders blithely splashed in alongside their dragons stark naked!

A few sevendays of struggling with a saggy, soaked undertunic while trying to bathe Tayath had been enough to cure her of that particular modesty, and now she was able to unselfconsciously meet W'tor's eyes without mentally fussing over where she very definitely *wasn't* looking.

"Well done," she said, as Radanth picked a spot to crouch down for his scrub. "You two had some of the least eventful flights today."

W'tor grinned, though he did look a shade tired. "Nothing much flusters my lad!" He clapped Radanth on the shoulder. "Tayath flew well."

"She wonders what the fuss was about," Lina said, looking affectionately at her dragon. "*She* knew she could do it."

Tayath brought one wing out the water with a rush, throwing up a large wave which soaked Radanth, and incidentally both weyrings.

Tayath! Lina protested, but Radanth had already bounded at Tayath, moderating his playful leap slightly in deference to the smaller green. Tayath flopped backwards into the water and he overshot, landing with a splash and emerging from the waves with a puzzled look whirling in his eyes.

W'tor rolled his own eyes. "You'd think they'd be tired."

I am not tired, Tayath put in. **But I am starting to feel hungry.**

Lina rummaged once again for the scrubbing brush which had been swept away in the dragons' antics.

"Stay still just a bit longer while I finish cleaning you up then and we'll see what's on the feeding grounds," Lina answered aloud, for W'tor's benefit. They were all pretty used to the absent look riders acquired while talking to their dragons but among the other holder-ish hangups Lina was having trouble overcoming the tendency to view it as rude, a bit like turning away to talk to someone while excluding someone else.

"She's hungry?" W'tor asked. The absent look came over his face as though on cue. "Radanth too. Want to wander up to the feeding grounds? I think a lot of people went there first."

Lina looked around, the beach actually was emptier than normal. Flying *between* used up a lot of energy after all and she couldn't spot any of her more usual companions. She half wished she'd thought of going there first. Tayath would probably want another bathe after stuffing herself.

"All right," she agreed. W'tor called Radanth over for a last swipe with the scrubber, then both dragons and their riders waded out of the sea and up the beach.

Several of the weyrings were at the feeding grounds but still fewer than normal. Lina winced. Fewer as well than could be accounted for by the day's losses. Maybe some had chosen to take their grief somewhere more private once their dragons were seen to.

The sun was starting to slip lower and long shadows spread across the grounds. Lina found her own stomach rumbling and suddenly was unable to stifle a yawn.

She clapped her hand to her mouth, abashed. After the day they'd had she was thinking of nothing more than her stomach and bed?

W'tor glanced at her and smiled.

"Long day."

"Very," Lina said wryly. "Not too many more like that to come I hope."

W'tor smile faded. "By the Egg I hope not. There's still more *between* to come though... Then first Fall to make it through. So many first times where you can get it wrong..."

Lina sighed. First times. That was the problem wasn't it? The unknown. Nerves and inexperience and...

"Yes," she said after a moment.

"Course you greenriders get an extra one," W'tor added after a quiet moment. He was half grinning but let it lapse when he saw Lina's grimace.

"Don't," Lina groaned. "I could happily skip that one too."

"Not as dangerous though, surely. I know they say about making sure you're not going into it--" He paused, maybe even coloured slightly. "You know... 'cold' as it were, but..."

"People do lose it though don't they?" Lina said, almost grateful to confess her fears in that area. "I mean, that's why they have the Lecture."

W'tor definitely did colour up then. Lina almost missed it, too focussed on controlling her own red cheeks, but when she glanced at him, there it was. Had he not managed to follow that particular set of instructions yet either?

She considered the lad sitting beside her. He was pleasant enough company, reasonably attractive, insofar as Lina was any judge, and certainly talked a good game, always smiling and winking at his female classmates who as a rule found nothing to complain of in his strong features. Had he really not found someone to 'dutifully' share a bed with?

He raised his eyebrows and the blush faded to another grin as he caught Lina watching.

"Does sort of kill the charm doesn't it, that speech?" he said.

"Could make you wonder if you're anything more than a tallymark on the training calendar, yes." Lina was still blushing but in a way it was a relief to be so frank. "I mean it's silly really. If I hadn't been Searched I'd have been married by now."

W'tor chuckled. "Me too."

"I knew him, but not as well as I know anyone here, in the class." Lina was still thinking aloud.

"Yep," W'tor agreed again.

"Not sure why that should make it harder instead of easier."

W'tor shrugged. "Does it have to?"

Lina turned to look at him more directly. "You don't think it does?"

W'tor looked thoughtful. "I think we have to be more than a 'tallymark' as you put it. We're going to be depending on one another for our lives after all. I'm sure a roll in the hay to dispel the mystery is the least we can do."

Lina stared at him. "A 'roll in the hay?'" she exclaimed, suddenly indignant.

W'tor laughed and gave a self-deprecating shrug. "Farmerbred remember. Anyway, I'm kidding. Mostly." His expression grew solemn. "We're going to lose people, like we did today, through things we can't control. We can't afford to lose anyone if we can avoid it by taking care of each other."

Lina looked at him for a moment and then away to where Tayath and Radanth had finished feeding and were lying close together, watching their riders.

Radanth let me share his second wherry, Tayath put in. ***Now I am ready to sleep.***

Lina glanced at W'tor who was smiling slightly again, perhaps listening to Radanth's side of this conversation.

Slowly he stood and stretched. "Shall we take these stuffed sleepyheads back to the cots?" he asked after a moment. "Get something to eat ourselves?"

Lina hesitated, suspecting there was more to that question than spoken aloud. Then she nodded.

"Yep, I'm hungry."

On reaching the Weyrhall, they again found that they were out of step with most of the rest of their class. Presumably everyone was either down on the beach or had already fed and retreated to their cots or elsewhere.

Lina ate well, reflecting once again that it was remarkable she still had an appetite after the day's events. Her mind strayed momentarily to the more gruesome of the accidents, but she firmly put that aside.

Perhaps that was what you needed to learn to do. Perhaps the dragons were lucky that it came so naturally to them. But it still seemed... cold? Almost ruthless. Whatever lack of emotion it took to survive?

She glanced across at W'tor who was just returning with his second helping. He detoured via the next table and snagged an unopened bottle of wine and brought it across to where Lina was sitting. Curious gazes followed him, but no one commented. Naturally the whole Weyr already knew the losses their class had sustained.

A certain amount of leeway was given, and how weyrings handled their emotional upheavals was closely watched but largely left up to them to deal with unless things got demonstrably out of hand.

Lina did not doubt that there were members of the class who would handle the loss by getting lordly drunk tonight.

W'tor opened the bottle and poured two generous measures into the waiting cups.

"To happier first times!" he lifted his glass.

Lina smiled and joined him in a rather large gulp.

Whatever it took? The thought crossed her mind.

You are worrying about things which do not worry me,
Tayath commented sleepily.

What do you mean? Lina took another hasty sip before putting the glass down.

Tayath merely repeated her earlier comment. ***Radanth is a fine brown.***

Lina supposed that was intended as a vote of approval for her spending time with W'tor, even if Tayath probably didn't entirely realise the full measure of it.

W'tor didn't comment much further on the day than that one toast, finishing his meal, and snagging them both some fresh fruit as they headed back outside. The sun was down now, but there was still plenty of light as they wandered an indirect route back to the weyrling cots.

Lina's was the closer of the two and they came to paused outside.

"It's a bit early to turn in," Lina said after a moment. "I don't expect Ivahla will be back for hours."

Minyith is at Bremnoth's wallow. Tayath informed her.

Lina looked long at W'tor whose face was quite open. Not 'pressing his suit' as her father would have said, but clearly not adverse to be invited to advance it.

Tayath looked up from her wallow as Lina gathered herself and tried to fend off the impending blush that was getting closer the longer they stood here.

A rustle of wings gave her excuse to look away as Radanth settled beside Tayath, having made the short hop from his own wallow.

Tayath's eyes were calm as she regarded Lina. ***I do not mind Radanth sharing my wallow while Minyith is away.***

Lina looked back at W'tor to find him smiling slightly.

"Some state of affairs when your dragons think they can play matchmaker," Lina said, lightening the moment.

W'tor grinned, but adopted a solemn tone. "One should never presume to argue with one's dragon."

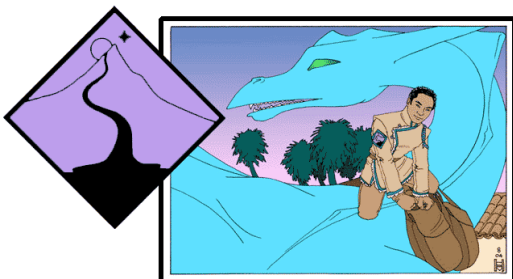
Lina glanced at the pair, then smiled herself.

"No I suppose not." She reached for the cot door. "Would you you like to come in?" Hesitation a moment longer. "I could use the company."

W'tor stepped up beside her, and his hand came to rest lightly on the small of her back as he made to usher her in to her own cot. "I would be delighted to provide it."

Lina paused a moment longer, then stepped back and toed the flowerpot from its usual position to the edge of the porch. She needed no more excuses.

END



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