

ended. Getting S'var in the same mood, though, would be a trick.

Finally they stopped, letting the surf wash around their ankles. T'syr glanced at S'var. The other boy was gazing out at the ocean, but his head turned and their eyes met. T'syr felt that familiar rush of affection for his friend. He reached out one hand to cradle S'var's face. The other boy's face flushed, and his smile faltered; his eyes clouded with something like uncertainty.

T'syr pulled his hand away. "Sorry... I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"No," S'var said, and he took T'syr's hand in both of his. "No, it's not that."

"What is it, then?"

S'var pursed his lips and looked back at the sea without saying anything.

T'syr knew better than to press his friend when he didn't want to talk. Instead, he smiled tentatively, and gently squeezed S'var's fingers. "C'mon," he said. "Let's sit for awhile."

He led S'var up past the line where the surf had dampened the sand, and they sat together, watching the clouds in the eastern sky turn brilliant in the face of the sun's setting rays. The bright color was brief – just long enough for the sun to set fully behind them and for twilight to start in earnest.

T'syr still held S'var's hand, his own knuckles digging into the sand as he rubbed a thumb along S'var's knuckles. S'var's face still looked thoughtful, but he did not pull his hand away. Encouraged, T'syr moved his hand, trailing his fingers up the inside of S'var's arm.

S'var tensed and pulled his arm away. "That tickles," he said, after a hesitation.

"Sorry," T'syr said, pulling his hand back.

S'var drew his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around them. T'syr paused, and then leaned back on his hands. The silence felt companionable... though from S'var's expression, T'syr figured his friend had as much on his mind as he did.

Finally, he said, "I can't believe Yengarth and Duhonth are a Turn old now."

The mention of his lifemate softened S'var's face. "I know," he said. "I can't believe we've survived this long."

T'syr gave a wry chuckle. "I also can't believe we've been... well... together for this long, either."

S'var still smiled, but his face grew thoughtful again.

"Love you," T'syr said softly.

S'var looked at him, then down again. "Love you too," he said.

"You mean a lot to me," T'syr said, edging closer. He wrapped an arm around S'var's shoulders, and was gratified when S'var leaned into him. "And I sure would like to show you how much. Could we... tonight...?" and saying this he put his other hand on S'var's knee and began a slow caress up his thigh.

Because he was watching S'var's face through the corner of his eye, he saw the immediate flush that swept across his friend's face. S'var took T'syr's hand from his thigh in both of his. "Please," he said hoarsely. "I'm just not ready yet."

The strength of T'syr's disappointment surprised him. He forced himself not to show it. "All right," he said,

squeezing S'var's hands with his own. "I can understand you being nervous. I am too." And he was. "I've never... done it before, either. But we still have some time."

"Time?" S'var said.

"Well... since the lecture we got, six months ago... We have to do something before our weyrlinghood ends. We have orders. And I'd like it to be with you."

"I know we have orders," S'var said, almost sullen. "Is it all about orders to you?" He pulled his hands away from T'syr's and stood, then folded his arms, looking at the sea.

T'syr stood too, embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he said. "No, it's not about orders... I didn't really mean it that way. It's just that... just about everyone in our weyrling class is experimenting. With each other. And then there's us... I mean, we actually have a relationship, but we don't *do* anything." He stepped toward S'var and brushed his fingers across his friend's neck. S'var pulled away from the gesture. T'syr paused with his arm still outstretched, and then let his arm drop. "It needs to happen sometime, sooner or later."

"It can happen later, then," S'var said. Then he looked up at T'syr, his eyes pleading. "Please. Don't press me on this." Then he walked away.

T'syr just watched him leave, hurt. Surely S'var wasn't rejecting *him*. They'd been friends too long... T'syr knew, from oblique references S'var had mentioned in passing, that there was something in S'var's past that made something about their relationship a... problem. T'syr had his guesses, but S'var had not talked about it, and T'syr had not felt he should pursue it. Sometimes there were things in a person's past that they had to keep to themselves. T'syr understood that. But S'var's reluctance, when lovemaking should be the natural result of their mutual affection, upset T'syr in a way he couldn't quite articulate.

Duhonth says his rider wants me to leave, Yengarth stated. Did you and Duhonth's rider fight? You should not fight.

That surprised T'syr, and stung even more. He hadn't thought he'd upset S'var *that* much.

Go on, T'syr finally answered. Go see if Hassanth has moved.

Yengarth reached their cot in heartbeats. ***Hassanth is in his own wallow, now, he reported. I lie in mine. It is a nice evening. The moons are pretty tonight.***

It seemed pointless to stay on the beach alone, but T'syr took his time walking back. The last weyrling bell had yet to ring, and there was no need to be in bed -- yet. Plus he had plenty to think about, and it was hard to think at the cot, with D'rian hanging around. Whether he talked much or not.

When he arrived at the cot, T'syr stopped at Yengarth's wallow. He gave his dragon's nose a fond pat and rubbed the spot on his eyeridges that he loved to have rubbed just so. Yengarth welcomed the attention. In the the other wallow, Hassanth was sitting up as though alert, but his eyes were whirling colors of pleasure underneath the first lid.

Hassanth says that his rider has female company, and they are not yet finished, Yengarth informed him.

"So... Hassanth's enjoying his rider's pleasure, is he?" T'syr thought bitterly. The regular sounds coming from the cot finally registered in T'syr's ears. He blushed -- and not just in embarrassment. Part of his mind thought that, had

S'var been willing, it might have been D'rian sitting outside the cot tonight, instead of T'syr, for once.



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T'syr could barely sleep that night and was awake with the dawn. He rose early before D'rian was even stirring, tended to Yengarth, and reported to the Weyrhall for breakfast. He managed to get there before S'var did. He filled his plate and found a place at the table for Weyrling Class 37, just down from Cybris, Lina and Cassia, who were chatting in stark cheerful contrast to his own mood. Then he waited. He'd filled his plate to bursting, but found that he wasn't very hungry. The few bites he took tasted like dust.

He wanted to apologize. Not that he'd done anything wrong... Well, the whole "following orders" thing had been a bit insensitive. Following orders was only part of his reasoning, and certainly not the most important part. He wanted to make S'var happy. Give him pleasure. Show him how much he loved him. But lovemaking wasn't the only way he could do that. It would come sometime, but trying to push S'var into it would only push him away.

In the middle of his thoughts, T'syr looked up just in time to see S'var entering the Hall. The other boy looked as though he also had not rested well, and something about his face said he was upset. T'syr hoped he could make amends, and half stood to try to get S'var's attention. S'var glanced his way, but looked away immediately. T'syr sank back into his seat. He watched S'var's progress through the serving line. After filling his own plate, S'var seated himself at the other end of the table without looking in T'syr's direction again.

T'syr stared at his own plate, troubled. This was the first time in... well, months, really... that they had not sat together at breakfast, save for the very few times one or the other of them had punishment duties. Surely what he had said last night hadn't been that bad.

You are upset, Yengarth said. ***Duhonth's rider has upset you?***

No... well, yes, but no, T'syr replied. He forced himself to take another bite and chewed slowly. *Yengarth, will you ask Duhonth what the matter is with S'var?*

There was a pause. ***Duhonth says his rider is upset about something he remembers,*** Yengarth finally said. ***And it has to do with you, but not. You would never do something bad to Duhonth's rider. I tell him so.***

T'syr frowned. Of *course* he would never do anything bad to S'var. Not on purpose, anyway.

"Is everything all right?"

He looked up and found that Dwayana had taken the seat across from him at the table. He blushed at receiving attention from the goldrider. She was nice enough to him, but he guessed that she considered him a lost cause when it came to romance, so she didn't go out of her way to catch his attention.

"Lovers' spat?" she said, arching an eyebrow and nodding in S'var's direction.

T'syr shrugged. "I'm not really sure what I did, or what's wrong. I just know he's upset... and it has something to do with me. But not."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dwayana asked, and then took a larger bite of her tubers than was ladylike.

"Dunno," T'syr answered. "That's just what Duhonth told Yengarth."

"What's this?" said a new voice, and V'les sat on T'syr's other side, away from S'var. "A quarrel?"

"No!" T'syr protested. "well... I don't know. I'm not sure I want to talk about it until I find out."

V'les got a familiar vague expression on his face.

Cinanth says his rider wants to know what is going on between you and Duhonth's rider, Yengarth said.

"Yengarth's not going to talk, either," T'syr said firmly, mentally enforcing the implied order to his dragon.

"Too late," V'les said, and smiled apologetically.

I told Cinanth before you said anything, Yengarth said, his mindvoice contrite.

"Spurning your affections, is he?" V'les asked. He sounded well-meaning, but the question was still mortifying.

"No!" T'syr said, but his face went hot and he hoped his dark complexion would not betray him.

"Don't worry about it, T'syr," Dwayana said in an encouraging tone. "He'll come around eventually. After all, we're under orders." And she laughed wickedly.

T'syr couldn't laugh with her. "I think that's part of the problem," he said. And he found he really did not want to discuss it anymore. "If you'll excuse me," he said as he stood. He picked up his mostly-full plate and walked away.



The heavy slap of rope against hide jarred T'syr out of his thoughts.

I'm hit! Yengarth said, roaring in surprise.

Automatically, T'syr gave the order to go *between* to the reference point above the Weyrling Grounds, which was standing in for the Dragon Infirmary for the rope drill. Yengarth circled once and then landed, and T'syr craned his head around to see if he could see where the ropes had hit Yengarth's flank. A mass of red streaks criss-crossed the bronze's rump and the top of his left thigh. T'syr couldn't see more than that without dismounting.

Layketh orders me to stay put until the drill is over and it is time to regroup, Yengarth said in a humble tone.

T'syr swore under his breath. The whole point of rope drills was to simulate a real Threadfall... and if a dragon was "injured", the rest of the Wing would have to fill the gap. It was just another part of training. But in all their drills, this was the first time Yengarth had been taken out.

Hassanth and his rider are angry at us, Yengarth relayed. ***Hassanth tried to warn us, but you were thinking too hard about something else.***

And what were you doing? T'syr retorted.

Listening to you, Yengarth stated simply, though his voice held a trace of petulance. ***I did not notice the ropes, and I heard Hassanth's warning too late.***

That sobered T'syr. He unbuckled his riding straps and slid down Yengarth's shoulder to get a better look at the

“damage”. He held back a gasp when he saw the extent of the red dye trailing down Yengarth's leg.

Layketh says her rider expects an explanation when the drill is over, Yengarth said.

T'syr just stared at Yengarth's leg, imagining a huge patch of ichor-gushing Threadscore. This distraction had to stop.



After drills, the weyrling class took their dragons to the Weyrling Beach to bathe the firestone stink and traces of red from their dragons' hide. T'syr took Yengarth into the deep water, where the bronze bobbed, happily paddling around beyond the breakers.

T'syr welcomed the mindless scrubbing with the long-handled brush, and put all the effort into it that he could. Straddling Yengarth's flanks backwards, but taking care not to put pressure on Yengarth's sensitive wing sails where they attached to the young dragon's torso, he worked away at the red dye streaked across Yengarth's left thigh.

He mentally cursed himself again. D'rian and Weyrlingassistant Shahara both had dressed him down, once they'd reached the ground, but his own chagrin at what might have happened to Yengarth had this been live Thread was more punishment than anything they could say to him.

S'var had taken Duhonth to the opposite end of the beach, clearly still not wanting to talk. Cinanth and his rider, however, edged closer.

“T'syr!” V'les called. “Do you have a spare clean rag with you? I dropped mine.”

“Sure,” T'syr said. He prompted Yengarth to swim closer to Cinanth, and he tossed a rag over. V'les snagged it out of midair.

“How are you doing?” V'les said.

T'syr shrugged, and leaned into his scrubbing again.

After a couple moments of silence, T'syr was distracted from his work by a rumble from Yengarth; Cinanth had edged even closer, and Yengarth carefully folded his wings to allow his clutchmate's proximity, taking care not to foul his wingsails or disrupt T'syr's balance. The movement was enough to get T'syr's attention, and he balanced the brush across Yengarth's spine, waiting for the dragon's buoyant movement to stop.

V'les gave him a crooked smile, and gestured at the traces of red still criss-crossing Yengarth's haunch. “I know you and S'var are close, but this distraction is going to get you killed. You need to get over it.”

“I don't know what I'm trying to get over,” T'syr replied testily. “S'var won't talk to me. Something is really bothering him, and I wish I knew what it was.”

“You'll find out. Give him time.”

“I just wish... I wish he'd let me...”

“What, jump his bones?”

T'syr blushed furiously.

“Both of you're taking sex too seriously, you know,” V'les said casually. “Sure, it's a great expression of love. But if that's the end-all and be-all of it, you're making too much of a fuss.”

“Yeah, you can talk,” T'syr replied, “you'll offer a warm bed to any guy you can convince.”

“Of course,” V'les said, opening his arms wide. “But I'm weyrbred, and that's how things are here. No hang-ups, see?”

“Yeah, well, between the two of us, we've got plenty.”

“You've never done it, have you?”

T'syr glanced at V'les's face. The brownrider meant the question in earnest, and was not trying to make fun.

“No, I haven't,” he finally answered. “Neither has he.”

“Sounds like a case of Typical Holdbred Attitude,” V'les said.

“Hey!” T'syr clenched his fists around the brush handle.

V'les raised his hands and waved them defensively. “No offense meant, of course! It's normal to be nervous. You are, aren't you?”

“Of course I am,” T'syr said. “But at least I'm willing. With S'var it's... something more than that. But he won't talk to me about it.”

“Shouldn't he trust you well enough to talk about it by now?”

“You'd think so, but...” and T'syr let out a long sigh. “This is S'var we're talking about. He's tight-lipped about a lot of things.”

“You're right.” V'les paused, and glanced around them as though making sure no one was listening. He turned back to T'syr. “Look, I know you and S'var are 'together', but... have you ever considered trying it out with someone else?”

“What?” T'syr felt a sharp irritation. He was *with* S'var. Why would V'les offer something like that?

His expression must have betrayed his feelings. V'les put his hands up again. “Hear me out. I mean, I would never want to step between you and S'var, if you want to be weyrmates or anything. But from the looks of things, you're having trouble getting to that point thanks to S'var's hangups.”

T'syr tried to keep his face smooth, but he couldn't help but wince, hearing it from someone else.

“I thought so,” V'les said. “You know as well as I do that we're not supposed to be virgins when our dragons mature. It's for our own good. We also might as well get used to having more than one partner, too. We'll be getting plenty of that, once our dragons start taking turns in their share of mating flights.”

“I want to offer you a couple hours... with me. No strings attached.”

T'syr sputtered. “What?” he finally spat out. He knew he was blushing furiously. V'les's offer made him... well, he felt several different things. Fury rose to the top. But fury at whom? V'les? Or S'var?

He couldn't say that he didn't want what V'les offered. He had been so pent up over the past six months, while watching all the other weyrlings pair up right and left – mostly for a night, and then moving on. But... would S'var be hurt if T'syr did it with someone else first? He'd have to tell S'var in the end. And it might not matter that there were no strings attached.

“No,” he finally said. “No, I can't do that to S'var.”

V'les shrugged. “It's not like I don't have ulterior motives... You're pretty. But I meant what I said before. If you don't do something, you're going to die. We'll be assisting during Threadfall in a couple days. You want to risk yourself -- or Yengarth -- because you're frustrated?”

"It's S'var that's distracting me, not my frustration."

"Are you sure?"

T'syr didn't know quite what to say with that. Right now, S'var and frustration kind of came together. V'les caught his eye again.

"I've had a lot of experience. I can show you some techniques that can help you give S'var a lot of pleasure." And he smiled. Winningly.

T'syr slowly shook his head.

"As you like," V'les said with a shrug. "The offer's open, though... Think about it. I'll be at my cot after dinner. J'lan has... other plans." and V'les grinned. "I'm done here... Thanks for the rag!" And V'les tossed the rag back to T'syr, who caught it automatically. When he caught V'les's eye again, the other boy gave him a bold wink. Then he and Cinanth moved away.

Inside, T'syr felt a tangle of fierce emotions. Loyalty to his friend was foremost. But something else responded to V'les's bald flirting. And part of T'syr's ever-reasoning mind reviewed the offer over and over again, finding few flaws. V'les made a good case... and logically... Logically...

Was there any logic in love?

T'syr exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The brush was slack in his hand, and he let his shoulders slump. He glanced to the far side of the Weyrling Beach. S'var was just leading Duhonth out of the water. From this distance, he couldn't see S'var's face -- but T'syr imagined that S'var looked T'syr's direction briefly before leading Duhonth away.

'From the looks of things...' T'syr thought.

I think Cinanth's rider likes you, Yengarth provided.

V'les is friends with everyone, T'syr replied.

Of course, Yengarth answered.



After dinner, S'var was nowhere to be seen. T'syr hoped he was all right, but his friend had carefully avoided him all day. T'syr knew, if he looked for him, that S'var wouldn't talk. When it came to S'var, he had to wait for S'var to come to him.

The frustration that welled up at that thought decided for him. The memory of Yengarth's red-streaked haunch, the horrifying realization that in a few days' time they would be facing live Thread... He could not put himself or Yengarth in danger. If he waited for S'var, he could be waiting for a lifetime. Whatever it was in S'var's past S'var would have to deal with in his own time, but T'syr could wait no longer.

T'syr asked Yengarth to join him at V'les's cot. 'Better to have some moral support,' he thought. The night was warm and humid, and it seemed to be threatening rain. He kept a slow but determined pace. Part of him wished to find S'var along the path -- an excuse to turn V'les's offer down. But S'var was nowhere to be found.

Cinanth was in one wallow in front of the cot, but the other was empty. Yengarth landed in the vacant wallow, but rather than settling down there, he found himself a spot nearer Cinanth. T'syr figured they'd gossip away like two old uncles... and Yengarth could do what he liked, while T'syr...

His insides tied themselves in knots as he walked up to the door, but the anticipation wasn't all unpleasant. He hesitated, then tapped lightly on the doorframe. He heard a muffled "come in" from inside, and he entered.

V'les greeted him with a smile. "So," he said, "is this your answer?"

T'syr gave a curt nod.

"I'll make it worth your while," the other boy said, taking T'syr's arm gently and leading him over to his own bed. He sat on the side of it, and with a wave of a hand invited T'syr to do the same. "We could take as long or as short as you want," he said, "though long is better. Trust me. I want to help you. This is for your -- and S'var's -- own good in the end."

"I know," T'syr said. "And I'm sure it would help... all around. I just worry about what S'var will think."

V'les moved in closer. "When you show him what I show you, I'm sure he won't mind one bit."

Then there was touching. And more touching. And through it all, T'syr thought of his friend, and hoped he could give him the same pleasure V'les was giving him.



When it was all over, T'syr lay gasping. "Wow," he said.

"Good enough for you?" V'les said, equally breathless.

"Yeah..."

Duhonth's rider is looking for you, Yengarth said. ***I have told him where you are.***

T'syr sat bolt upright and cursed loudly. Couldn't he have thought to tell Yengarth...?

"What is it?" V'les asked.

"S'var's coming." T'syr jumped out of the bed and searched the pile of discarded clothing for his underthings. He pulled them on quickly, hardly noticing V'les, who was calmly rifling through the clothes as well. Then he grasped for his trousers, and was pulling one leg up when there came a tap on the door, followed by the door itself opening, and S'var poked his head in.

"T'syr? Could we talk...?"

What S'var saw when he looked in -- since nothing blocked the view from the door -- was V'les and T'syr, both half-clad, and T'syr hopping on one leg with the other half-way in his trousers. Some distant part of T'syr's mind knew that, under different circumstances, this would be really funny. But the look of shock and betrayal that crossed S'var's face before he turned and ran was far from humorous.

"I'm sorry," V'les said softly. "I'm sure I've caused you all sorts of problems."

"No," T'syr said. His voice sounded wooden and distant in his ears. "No, it's no one's fault but my own."



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