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THRESHING DAY

REBECCA YARROS



PIATKUS

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Trial by Fire :

THRESHING ADVICE FOR DRAGONKIND PROFESSORS

by Colonel Thadeus Palme

Come the first of October, no matter the weather, day of the week, or physical condition of the cadets, so long as they have reached the age of twenty, the first-years of Basgiath War College's Riders Quadrant walk into the forest in hopes of being chosen as a bonded rider by a dragon of the Emyrean. We call this monumental event *Threshing*. We quadrant professors must encourage the aim for success but also brace our cadets for the unpalatable realization that many will not survive this endeavor.

Threshing is a test for which there is no equal to be found on the Continent, but you are tasked with readying your students. Do not take your duty to adequately prepare your cadets for the selection process lightly; your instructions are as crucial as any weapon they could wield.

While every assignment in the Riders Quadrant holds its share of difficulty, we professors of Dragonkind, those the Emyrean call the dragon-watchers, carry a unique burden when it comes to first-year cadets. At all times, our loyalty remains with the Emyrean, but we must also maintain a vested interest in the success of our first-years for this essential partnership of riders and dragons to continue.

I cannot overstate the enormity of our responsibility. Although boasting a projection signet—the ability to conjure images from memory—qualifies us to hold this vital position in the quadrant, only those with a true passion to study the Empyrean while protecting the riders who serve it should accept the assignment.

It is with that in mind that I offer the following advice:

Always remember that the relationship between rider and dragon is symbiotic. Without dragons, humankind has no access to magic with which to weave the wards that protect Navarre. Without riders, the dragons have no wards to safeguard their hatching grounds. While this arrangement benefits both species, never forget that dragons find humans rather...expendable.

Trust other professors to excel in their areas of expertise as you would like to be trusted in yours. Do not meddle in the affairs of Battle Brief, history, physics, or other academics. If you seek the counsel of another professor regarding a first-year, I recommend making the acquaintance of the combat master. Between the physical sparring of challenges and the deadly obstacle course of the Gauntlet prior to Presentation, they are the only other professor who truly understands the weight of sending first-years to their possible deaths.

It is your duty within the first two months of classes to project an accurate depiction of every dragon willing to bond that year so the cadets can study before Threshing. You will have two reference points for this knowledge during your apprenticeship year under the retiring professor. The first is *The Compendium of Dragonkind*—our only visual reference guide to the active dragons of the Empyrean—which you

will be responsible for updating during your tenure. Be warned: I have found that no artist has flawlessly depicted every distinguishing mark of a dragon, which makes telling descendants apart woefully difficult. The second reference point are the dragons themselves, whom you may have had the privilege of observing during past flight maneuvers with their previous riders, as well as the night of Threshing. When in doubt, it is prudent to ask a cadet for the name of their dragon, as speaking to any dragon to whom you are not bonded will end your tenure early due to death by fire. Never, under any circumstances, enter the hatching grounds of the Vale.

Previous professors of Dragonkind have encouraged rote memorization via identification cards for cadets prior to Presentation, but in my experience, Presentation is more about dragons seeing and evaluating cadets in anticipation of Threshing than it is about cadets recognizing dragons. In fact, any cadet caught examining a dragon during Presentation is far more likely to be incinerated than bonded. The cards have proven invaluable for Threshing, though. If the cadets cannot memorize all dragons willing to bond, it is imperative they understand the differences between the temperaments of breeds and the safest methodology for surviving an encounter with each. An uneducated cadet is a dead one.

Instruct each cadet to listen deeply to their instincts when they enter the valley on Threshing Day. Those who a dragon has already taken interest in may feel a tugging sensation, which they should be encouraged to follow. In some cases, a chosen cadet may actually hear their dragon calling to them if they made a sufficient impression during Presentation. Cadets should also obey their

instincts regarding retreating from dragons who aren't theirs to increase their lifespan.

Stress the importance of cadets entering the Threshing Valley on their own. Though squad loyalty can be comforting at this stage of education, statistics show that dragons prefer the courage of those willing to walk alone. They have substantiated this repeatedly by reducing most cadet groupings to ashes. It's unfortunate that those who do not survive cannot recount their experience, leaving us with only the ability to ponder the reasons behind their demise.

Prepare yourself to lose some of your favorite students or—better yet—don't get too attached. What we know about dragonkind and why they choose their riders is vastly overpowered by the magnitude of what we don't know. Those we're sure will emerge from the valley as bonded riders often perish among the trees—whether by dragon fire or cadet grievance—or are retrieved at nightfall and set back to repeat in hopes they will be selected the following year.

At all times, remember that while thousands of scribes record our history, we are the only riders charged with documenting what little we learn about dragonkind. Should you find yourself in the awkward position of taking sides between a cadet and a dragon, it is imperative you prove your loyalty to the Empyrean or we will lose the privilege of observing it. It is on our words, our knowledge, our observations that the next generation of dragon riders will fly or expire.

In my retirement years, I have thought back fondly on my own Threshing. As my memory has become less reliable in the last decade, I find myself wishing I had ignored the customary secrecy that shrouds

the event and recorded my own experience while it was still fresh in my mind. How can we learn to improve our chances at bonding if we don't record successful methods? If I could offer one last piece of advice, it would be to gather the tales of those who survive and are willing to tell it.

Threshing is the most dangerous day of any Basgiath cadet's life. I implore you to prepare your students to the best of your ability, but always remember that once they enter the Threshing Valley, only the opinions of the dragons matter.

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624 AU

Marbh—Orange Daggertail

(Male) Descended from the Fhaicorain Line

Estimated Age: 76

Recorded Riders: 3

—THE COMPENDIUM OF DRAGONKIND,
LAST UPDATED BY COLONEL VALIN KAORI



BRENNAN

Today is the day I make my parents proud, the day I become a rider like my mother and her parents before me.

Or I could die and become the greatest disappointment in the Sorrengail line.

Damn, I really hope not.

Somehow, dying is preferable to Mom feeling like she needs to change my last name on my headstone because I didn't live up to it. Her familial line is so legendary among riders that Dad took her last name when they married, even though his was equally powerful among scribes.

"You sure you don't want to come with us?" Flynn Ennis asks as first-years scatter into Threshing Valley. The muscular brunet clutches the pommel of his short sword as if the weapon has a chance of

protecting him from a dragon.

Unlike Ennis, I grew up close enough to Aimsir—Mom’s dragon—to know that if a dragon wants to kill you, you’re already dead. They couldn’t care less about any weapon smaller than a crossbolt, and raising a sword will just piss them off.

“I’m sure.” I give him a curt nod and a quick half smile to assuage the fear shining in his eyes. We spent a night together a few weeks ago, but I can’t let anything I feel for him sway me from my years of preparation for this moment. Especially when he’s making a stupid choice. “See you on the flight field, Ennis.”

“See you on the flight field, Sorrengail,” he replies, a barely noticeable tremble to his mouth. He turns back to a handful of my squadmates, and the group takes off together into the forest of enormous trees.

Gods, they’re foolish.

I watch as they disappear, and my heart clenches. It’s likely the last time I’ll see some—if not all—of them. They’re making a mistake, choosing the perceived safety of numbers and ignoring Professor Kaori’s advice to conquer this challenge on our own, but nothing I’ve said in the past few days has swayed them. Trying to convince them now would only be an exercise in futility, and today is not the day to expend needless energy or waste time.

The only decisions I can impact are my own. I need to find the highest, most central tree in the valley, then keep watch as dragons move below until I feel the one who’s meant for me. It’s a simple and, hopefully, effective plan. I should be landing on the flight field in the next hour.

A shape moves in my peripheral vision, and my stomach dips as I pivot toward the threat, my head whipping to the right as a figure in the cream uniform of the scribes steps out from behind a wide tree



trunk a dozen feet away.

“Dragons loathe crowds. Good choice to handle this on your own,” Dad says with a nod of approval, the dappled sunlight catching the gold threads of the major rank stitched onto the shoulder of his tunic as he walks my way, opening his arms.

“Dad?” There’s barely time to pick my jaw up off the ground before he pulls me into a hug, his hand thumping my back. I grasp on to him, breathing in the soothing scent of parchment that clings to his uniform, and something rights deep within me, steadies me. Mom may be the rigid spine of our family, but Dad is the heart. “What are you doing here?”

“Here as in Basgiath?” He pulls back, gifting me with a wide grin my mother has always sworn we share. We also have the same reddish hue to our hair, though his is slowly turning silver in streaks and mine is given to curl, and identically straight noses. The older I get, the more I look like him, which doesn’t bother me in the least. “Or here as in the valley?”

“Both.” Very few scribes are authorized to enter the Riders Quadrant, but *none* are given permission to witness Threshing. “I thought you were on assignment somewhere classified.” He’s been gone since May, which isn’t uncommon given that he’s one of the scribe academics more dedicated to historical analysis than recording current events. He’s known to disappear for months at a time, first to research, then to write, but he always brings the best gifts back with him.

“I returned in August.” His brow knits. “I’m sorry I missed Conscription Day, but there was no way I was letting you walk into Threshing without seeing you.”

My gaze darts to the forest around us, and I breathe a little easier when I can’t spot any other riders. “I’m relieved you’re here, but the



rules are pretty merciless if you get caught—”

“If I obeyed the rules, my rank would be higher. Don’t worry about me. I’ll take my chances with the new commander of the Riders Quadrant.” His grin deepens. “That newly pinned colonel has a soft spot for me.”

I snort. “‘Soft’ isn’t a word I’d ever apply to Mom. At least not to her face.” My expression falls, a freedom I haven’t given myself since crossing the parapet in July, but I don’t have to be on guard with my father. “She only blunts her edges for two people on the Continent, and if I fail today, that number falls to one.”

“You’re her favorite, but she’s her own kind of soft when it comes to your sisters, whether or not the three of you realize it.” Dad clasps my shoulder, his hazel eyes softening. “And you won’t fail.”

“I don’t want to let her down,” I admit in a whisper. “Either of you.” There hasn’t been a moment in my life where I haven’t been acutely aware of my father’s accomplishments or the respect my mother commands from every rider I’ve ever encountered. I don’t mind the weight of their legacies, but I don’t want to be defined by them, either, which is really fucking hard given that I chose to wear rider black. “Are you angry I didn’t enter the Healer Quadrant after you spent so much time teaching me about herbs?”

Mom focused on teaching me tactics, as though she always knew I’d cross the parapet.

“Never. Listen to me.” Dad leans in. “You could never disappoint me, Brennan.” He shakes his head, his eyes searching mine. “Your integrity, compassion, and wit make you a man of exceptional character, the kind any parent would be proud of. Your mother will be thrilled to see you land on the flight field no matter what dragon is wise enough to claim you. Her only expectation is that you live, and I think you’ll



find that has far more to do with being your mother than being your commander. Our hearts couldn't take it if anything happened to you."

I nod, swallowing the knot of emotion trying its hardest to block my throat. "How are Mira and Violet?"

Mom doesn't give me any special treatment in the quadrant, which means I've been cut off from letters and news from the rest of my family just like the other first-years. Never thought I'd see a day where I'd miss my little sisters annoying the shit out of me every minute, but I do. Constantly. I miss Mira's footsteps trailing behind me and the way Violet smiles when she learns something new.

"Headstrong and precariously curious. In that order." Another grin flashes across his face as he drops his hand. "Mira nearly thrashed Dain Aetos last week when Violet fell out of a tree the two of them had been climbing."

"She's a little overprotective." A smile curves my mouth, then quickly falters. "Was Violet hurt?" She's always been frailer than Mira or me, prone to joint dislocations and broken bones, but the strength of her mind is unparalleled.

A scream sounds from the south, and my head snaps toward the forest, but Dad barely glances. My heart rate skyrockets, and smoke rises above the trees a moment later, scenting the air with a warning of imminent danger. People are dying out there, and I'm about to chance the same fate.

"Violet's fine. Nothing that couldn't be mended," Dad assures me, jarring me from my thoughts.

"Good." Thank the gods for menders. The gift is rare, but the riders with the signet for putting broken things back together, like Nolon, are a blessing to my sister. We need more of them.

A tree ignites in the distance, and my mouth goes dry.

