
Eggbound

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Kadanzer Weyr

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Evath's landing was graceless. The gold landed heavily on her weyrledge, grunting with the impact. Braced though she was for landing, Darby was rocked forward, nearly smashing her face against her dragon's muscular neck. "Shaffit!" Darby exclaimed. "Evath! You hurt?"

I stink! came the gold's sour reply. ***I am heavy and the eggs press against me inside. I want a bath, I want oils to make me sleek, I want these eggs out!***

"Dearheart, I remember how that feels," Darby said with a chuckle. She dismounted, feeling as graceless as her gold had been. It had been a short 'Fall, most of it falling well out to sea, but the pattern had brushed over the tip of Cibola and the barrens of Izmir, giving the dragonriders some Thread to chase. It was near midnight now -- but Evath's demands would have to be met. "Let me dump off these tanks and grab enough gear, and we'll go to your favorite beach."

Evath rumbled, half-agreement, half-complaint, while Darby quickly stripped off the nearly-empty tank strapped to her back. She shucked aside her flight helmet, goggles, and gloves before picking up the backpack and long-handled scrub brush she'd left near the mouth of Evath's weyrledge. Darby had learned to have bathing supplies ready in advance at the end of a'Fall, as Evath hated delay. The gold had always been a temperamental creature -- and when egg-heavy, she was even worse.

"Let me strap these in, and we're ready," Darby said.

These eggs press, Evath complained. ***A bath will ease them. You must bathe me now!***



It was only an hour or so before dawn when Evath and Darby finally returned to the Weyr. The cold of *between* seemed to cling to them as Evath glided down toward her weyrledge. Darby shivered in her thick wherhide flightleathers. Coming back to the cold and the snow of a Kadanzer midwinter storm seemed unfairly cruel, after hours spent bathing and oiling Evath on a beach at Thornblaze. Evath landed with more care this time, and Darby vaulted down from her gold's neck.

Phanth is here! Evath said with delight, even as Darby

saw the tip of a bronze tail waving idly from within Evath's wallow. Evath waddled forward, eager to twine necks with her favorite bronze, leaving Darby to smirk with amusement. Any other dragon invading Evath's wallow would have earned a scorching hot enough to be firestone-fed. Any dragon save Phanth, that was.

Moments later, Phanth's rider appeared, arms spread. Darby grinned and let L'ars fold her into his powerful embrace. "Come on inside," the wingleader said, hugging her tightly. "Before you freeze out here!"

"Why not invite me into my own quarters?" Darby said with a grin. L'ars winked at her as he led the way. "I'll throw you out on your ear, Red, unless you've got klah waiting," she added.

"But of course!" L'ars laughed heartily, holding aside the heavy woolen tapestry which served as the inner door into Darby's quarters. Darby stepped past him, eager for the warm, her nose twitching already at the promised scent of klah.

"A cup, man, a cup!" she begged, stripping off her snow-dusted jacket.

By the time Darby had shrugged off her flight gear and into a heavy sweater, the bronzerider had two cups of klah poured and waiting. He was settled comfortably in one of the room's mismatched, worn leather chairs, his blue eyes catlike as he regarded her. Darby drank deeply, emptying the cup in twolong swallows. She held it out to him and dropped gracelessly into a second chair, kicking her booted feet up onto a low table as he refilled the cup from the pitcher he'd brought.

"What brings you here?" she asked as he passed the cup back to her. "You should be sound asleep at this hour."

L'ars's smiled. "Phanth has been keeping an eye on Evath. He worries about her, close as she is to clutching. He tried to get me to take him to find you both, to help you bathe her." He grinned. "B'deras assigned my Winglean-up patrols instead. We finished about an hour ago, just enough time for me to see my 'riders home and a pitcher of fresh klah brewed. There's sweet rolls in the basket there, on the table, if you're hungry."

The klah was enough. Darby sipped at her second cup, her eyes feeling leaden in her head. Evath's wallow was crowded -- she was a very large gold, and Phanth himself one of the larger bronzes in the Weyr. But Evath found herself a comfortable position with Phanth curled up possessively around her. She was slipping into a doze, contentment washing from her mind touch like run-off.

"Virankath was glowing like the dawn," she said, watching L'ars over the rim of her cup. "She's bound to rise for her virgin flight, today or tomorrow. I'd think Phanth would be a little more interested in that action than Evath's waddle toward the Hatching Grounds."

"He might change his mind when Virankath bloods her kill.." There was a rumbling draconic complaint at that -- Phanth's opinion on that matter. L'ars simply smiled and rubbed at his bearded chin. "But I don't think hewill. He's sweet on Evath." Darby gazed at her companion. She

studied him in the warm glowlight. She had no choice in what bronze flew her gold, but she certainly had no complaints with L'ars. And as reluctant as she was to admit it to anyone, she hoped Evath continued to favor Phanth. Because she was getting sweet on the bronze's rider herself. Certainly L'ars was nice on the eye -- he was tall and broad-shouldered, vigorously handsome. Better yet, he had an easy, undemanding way about him. He was easy to talk to, and while he was never slow to admire the women around him, he certainly didn't make a point to count his conquests. And in bed--

--shells and shards, she was tired to the bone, almost too tired to think of such things. Almost. But she thought about it, and thought about how cold her bed was going to be if she fell into it alone.

"It's still late," Darby murmured. "I'm about to drop. Are you here to tuck me into bed, or join me there?"

L'ars drained his cup dry, then rose to his feet. Smiling, he reached out a hand to her to draw her to him.



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Across the Weyr, the Weyrling Bells were ringing. Darby woke enough to reach after a pillow and drag it over her head. Then she snuggled in close to the naked body beside her, suddenly aware that one leg and flank were freezing. They'd lost a quilt off the bed at some point during their love making. To recover it was too much work. Instead, she rolled over and pressed closer to L'ars, seeking out the heat of his body.

L'ars rolled over and tucked her against him despite the chill of her bare skin. "Brrrr--" he murmured, stirring awake.

"You put out heat like hearthstones," Darby said gratefully. "Kind of you, not to jerk away from frozen me."

"And miss warming you up?" L'ars chuckled in her ear, the bushy red hair of his beard tickling her.



Evath woke her again, some hours later. *The eggs press*, the gold complained fiercely. *I must get them out!*

Darby clawed for the edge of the bed, recognizing that insistent, impatient demand from Evath's last clutching. "Sorry," she groaned as she inadvertently jammed a foot into L'ars' hip. He moaned and dragged the blankets around him against the cold draft Darby left in her wake.

Darby dressed quickly, throwing on clean breeches, a long-sleeved shirt, and the heavy sweater she'd worn hours before. There was nothing anyone could truly do in the deep midwinter to keep a weyr warm -- one only dressed fast, wore layers upon layers of wool, and tried not to cuss too hard when their bare feet freeze-burned in the steps between throw rugs and the icy stone floor. There wasn't time to bathe, not with Evath's desire to go. Darby delayed long enough to take up a brush and run it through her long brown hair, chasing out the tangles.

"Evath?" L'ars asked from the bed.

"She's ready to start laying," Darby said, turning to look at him. The bronzerider had rolled onto his side to watch her dress. Darby had never thought she'd take a man willingly to her bed. Now that she had this man init, she regretted ever letting him out of it. Darby grinned and leaned down to claim a kiss. L'ars responded with enthusiasm.

Now! Evath punctuated the demand with a bass snarl.

Darby broke away with a laugh. "It'll be warmer down on the Hatching Sands tonight," she grinned, reaching after her flight jacket. "Unless you've got greenriders to tempt you?"

"Not in this Pass or the next," L'ars replied with a grin.

Darby grinned back at the wingleader, knowing she was behaving like a love-struck girl and unable to resist it.

Now! Evath commanded.

Darby winked and ducked out the door.



By nightfall, Evath had laid just over half dozen eggs, and more were clearly on the way.

"Look at the size of that one!" said Darby with no little triumph as Weyrwoman Tanara joined her on the Hatching Sands.

Tanara was stripping off her flight gloves as she arrived, her face reddened from the cold. Virankath had risen to mate, and all of the other golds had left the Weyr, including Dunia and young Nioranth. Evath, already busy pushing out her third egg, was too absorbed in the necessity of clutching to be disturbed by another gold's rising. Darby had been too busy with her own gold to know if L'ars and Phanth had participated in the Flight. She could only imagine that they had. And she knew they hadn't won. Valorith and S'tel had won Virankath's first flight.

"That egg is enormous," Tanara agreed, her amber eyes keen. "A bronze, most certainly. Evath produces a good clutch, does she not?"

"She most certainly does," Darby agreed proudly. Evath hissed her own comment at that, irritable with the process.

I want them out, the gold complained to her rider.

Tanara didn't overhear the gold's comment, but her amused smile was knowing. "Not enjoying motherhood, much?"

"Looking at the size of those things, I certainly can't blame her," Darby said. "And the hard part has only just begun," she added. The two goldriders traded sympathetic glances. Evath had proven herself to be a lukewarm mother to her last clutch. Once her eggs were on the sand, Evath's interest in her brood had come and gone like the tide. If anyone else approached the Hatching Sands she was fiercely protective, but Evath had to be encouraged and practically browbeaten into tending to her eggs otherwise. Darby had fancied that maybe her gold would be more nurturing the second time around, but that remained to be seen. "Not all

heifers are good mothers, first calf," Darby said. "Takes a little time sometimes for them to learn what they're supposed to do."

Evath hissed balefully at the comparison, but was too busy pushing out another egg to respond with more force.

"Not all queens are attentive to their eggs," Tanara agreed. "Ganyith, the gold of Weyrwoman Charayn's Weyrwomansecond, was a lot like Evath. Not as interested in tending to her eggs as she was in Threadfall. Just as not all women make particularly good mothers -- or men, fathers." Tanara shrugged and smiled wearily at Darby. "It's late. I'm going to visit the Weyrhall for some dinner. Shall I send a weyrbrat along to you with a dinner tray? The draft from kitchens smells like whitebulb."

"Please do!" Darby said. "I'm just about settled in otherwise," she added with a gesture toward the steps which led up to the tiny, private bedroom cavern which served as a temporary weyr for a goldrider who's queen was clutching. "Raecliffe sent along a couple of ladies to dust and put clean linens on the bed. As if I'd notice."

"I'll pass along your appreciation," Tanara said. "Have Renorath send for me if you need anything tonight," Tanara added, before she turned to leave. Darby waved her off, moving to sit on the lowest step. She leaned back, elbows braced on the steps behind her, and watched with confident good cheer as Evath produced another egg.

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Evath slept restlessly between contractions. She had laid more than a dozen eggs now, and the width of her sides promised many more to come.

"Two bronze eggs at least," L'ars observed, looking nearly as proud as his Phanth, who had taken up residence on a ledge within the Hatching Caverns. Evath would allow her consort's presence enthusiastically for several hour sat a time, before driving him out again in a fickle temper. Asleep as she was now, the bronze was safe.

Bleary-eyed with sleep herself, Darby came down the steps onto the sands to greet the wingleader. "How did the 'Fall go?" she asked. Threadfall had begun to fall at midnight, sweeping across Rubicon and Cathay holds. It was now only a few hours before dawn, Kadanzer time.

"It fell." L'ars opened his arms for an embrace and got it. "Crossover with Eastern Weyr was worse than the Threadfall. Shanelle and her Furloth nearly flamed an Eastern rider's tailtip. R'ket's going to give his riders double drills to solve it. Kalyn's Kelrath got some wing lacing; Jandae and Vedith had some light scoring as well, her arm and the green's flank. No other injuries." L'ars released Darby from a hug and took another appreciative look at Evath's growing brood. "Looks like an excellent clutch. Our pair do good work, don't they?"

"Inspired," Darby replied. She stretched and yawned. "It's a narrow bed up there, but you're welcome to your half."

L'ars chuckled, accepting her offered hand and following her up the stairs. "There's more will than way, woman," he said. "After Phanth's chase of Virankath yesterday and tonight's 'Fall, I'm an exhausted man."

"Fair enough warning," Darby replied over one shoulder. "All I ask is that you keep me warm."

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Another day passed. Another half dozen eggs were added to the clutch on the Hatching Sands. The job was getting closer to done now, Darby knew. Evath refused that comfort. Unable to remember her last laying, Evath grew only more irritable and obsessed with turning out the eggs still within her.

"More snow," L'ars complained, rejoining Darby after the late afternoon Flightdrills, a mock-crossover with StarFlight. "The sky is fair spitting it."

Darby grinned. L'ars was Ista-born and bred. "Appreciate it, dragonman. Should make tomorrow's Fall easier for WindFlight. Freeze that Thread right to crackdust, if we're lucky."

L'ars snorted -- agreement, maybe. Or maybe not. "Eaten your dinner yet?"

"Not yet." Darby scooted aside on the step, making room for L'ars to sit beside her. "Evath's in a temper. Spoils my appetite."

L'ars settled, draping an arm companionably over Darby's shoulder. Her body against his was stiff. He glanced at her curiously. "Like dragon, like rider?" he asked.

Darby shrugged. Her eyes followed her dragon's movements. Evath was restless, almost pacing. She prowled around the Hatching Grounds, stopping from time to time to dig into the sand briefly as though shaping a new wallow for her eggs. When Phanth sought entry, Evath chased him out with a violent snarl and a waddling half-charge.

"At least your welcome is a little more warm," L'ars said, while Phanth retreated for his distant weyrlodge.

Darby snorted, then softened and leaned against his shoulder. "Thought only herders had to spend their nights awake and waiting for the lambs to drop," she said. "Silly weyrbrats may think being a queen's rider is all flower petals and moonbeams. I'd rather be flying Thread in a fog than this," she muttered. "I tell you -- when she's straining and straining to pass an egg, she's not doing it alone. Man, you have no idea what this is like. A basket of prunes doesn't ease this one."

L'ars laughed and planted a kiss against Darby's hair. "Never met a woman who had quite your way with words."

"Never will again," Darby retorted. She winced as Evath craned her head about and hissed, the muscles of the gold's torso rippling with a contraction. "Tell me," Darby said, turning a wicked look on her companion. "Men ever have to suffer something like this? You ever pass a stone?"

L'ars laughed outright. "Never, but I've known my share of wingmen who have." He turned a grin of his own onto

Darby. "Tell me. You ever think of being my weyrmate?"

Darby gaped at him. "You're shitting me."

"I take that for a no?"

Darby grinned, shaking her head. "Take that as I'm considering it, if you're not fooling with me."

L'ars kissed her again, this time on the forehead. "I'm not. Take your time. Think about it and let me know."

Darby rested her head against the bronzerider's shoulder, thoroughly startled by the man's offer. That he offered alone was rattling enough. L'ars was a man who could have his pick of women in the Weyr. He'd certainly had his share of lovers in the past, but he'd never found a lover who'd lasted beyond a few nights. She'd sensed in him a man on Search, and that he was looking for a human soulmate. And he thought maybe he had found one, in her?

It was a frightening thought. She was complimented, most thoroughly so. But Darby didn't find in herself the same need to seek out a human heart to compliment her own -- Evath completed her, and her dragon's love made any human relationship pale in comparison. Darby found herself frowning as she contemplated L'ars's offer. She adored the man, true. She was delighted to share her time and her bed with him. But did she love him enough to share his weyr?

Darby chuckled to herself, forcing her own mood to lighten. Well, she told herself, as a bride she wouldn't have had much choice in the matter of what man she was saddled with. And as a weyrmate, she always had the freedom to fly free should she wish it. L'ars was a fine man. She could certainly do worse.

Dearheart, what do you think? she asked her gold.

Evath's response was a wave of annoyance. The gold had no interest in what bed her rider chose to sleep in. She only wanted rid of the constant, burning pressure of the eggs within her. Phanth was a strong bronze, but she'd never let any bronze fly her again, not if it meant another cracking batch of eggs to push out!

Darby laughed at her dragon's fierce response. L'ars eyed her, concerned, no doubt, about what she found to laugh at. Darby met his concern with a grin.

"I'll think about it," she agreed. "I'll let you know. And I think my weyr would be the more comfortable of the two, don't you agree?"

L'ars answered her with a kiss.

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Evath prowled the Hatching Grounds restlessly, pausing from time to time to scrape the hot sands aside down to the rock beneath. The gold no longer even tried to settle; her eyes roiled in yellows and oranges of stress.

Darby had resumed her seat on the lowest step beneath the tiny goldrider's weyr, a quilt wrapped around her. She'd slept for a time, before Evath's discomfort had roused her from the crowded bed. Darby hadn't paused to dress, only delayed long enough to scoop up the closest tunic from the tangle of clothes strewn across the tiny bedroom's floor.

Evath paused in her pacing, hissing at a figure who entered the Hatching Grounds from the far, Lower Caverns corridor. Darby scrambled to her feet and trotted to join the other goldrider, ignoring the burn of the sand against her callused soles.

Tanara looked as sleep-tousled as Darby felt herself. The Werywoman had dressed in thick hide breeches and a heavy sweater before responding to the summons. Her chestnut hair fell loose and tangled around her shoulders. "What's wrong?" Tanara asked, her golden eyes taking in Evath's measure as the gold paced the length of the grounds, brushing past the circle of eggs without interest.

"Evath complains that she can't pass an egg," Darby said. "Shards, but this one's stubborn! Evath's been pushing and pushing, but the egg insists on taking its own dear time."

"How long has she been at it?"

"Three hours, at the least. More than twice as long with any of her other eggs." Darby frowned, trying to chase fear from her own mind. Evath was already anxious enough -- she didn't need her rider's influence making it worse.

Tanara studied the gold for several moments more, then looked back to Darby. "I'm going to go fetch Giselle," the Weyrwoman said.



Giselle arrived, no less sleep-rumpled than either of the other women. She set to work at once, asking Darby questions as she inspected Evath. The gold rumbled a constant, growling complaint but under Darby's control allowed herself to be poked, prodded, and closely examined in areas she normally would take exception to.

Giselle's sober expression never changed, but the worry lines between her brow deepened as she worked. At length, she spoke the words which both Darby and Tanara had avoided saying themselves.

"Evath is eggbound," the craftmaster said. "This is rare in dragons -- we see it far, far more often in watchwhers. Evath has an egg which is unable to pass through the oviduct. There could be some sort of obstruction, or the egg may be too large or mal positioned. Since she's already laid a clutch, we can rule out the problem being her pelvis being misshapen; there could be an obstructive mass, such as an abscess or internal cyst. More likely, two or more eggs may be bound together, or a single egg may be exceptionally large or strangely shaped."

Darby scowled at the slender, ginger-haired dragonhealer. Giselle was normally a woman of few words. That Giselle was suddenly talkative now was a bad sign. "What do we do about it?" Darby demanded.

Giselle glanced at Weyrwoman Tanara. "I've attended to a number of eggbound firelizards and watchwhers, but I've only read about such cases in dragons. To the best of my knowledge, there hasn't been an eggbound queen dragonsince early in the last Interval."

Tanara nodded, her expression guarded. "A goldrider from High Reaches," she murmured.

Darby's scowl deepened. She remembered that lesson from her goldrider training, only because the gold and her rider had both died of it. "What do we do?" she repeated.

Giselle was staring at Evath, her analytical gaze steady. "I know what is successful with watchwhers and with firelizards. The treatment is the same, for watchwher, firelizard, or dragon -- but with the major difference in scale is problematic. Our choices are limited. You can't reach inside a dragon to try and help ease an egg out, like you can try with a watchwher; the canal is too long, too deep, and the birth contractions would break a human's bones. We can do nothing, and wait to see if the egg will pass naturally. We can attempt to aspirate the egg in an attempt to remove the blockage -- but that will mean the loss of the dragonet. Our last choice is invasive surgery -- by far the last choice."

Darby took a deep breath, while Evath hissed and whipped her tail in misery. "It's been four hours or more since the last egg," Darby said. "Aspirating an egg -- that means you suck all of the juices out of it, right?"

Giselle nodded. "The fetus within the shell will be aborted. I hope that is a treatment we will not need to resort to. In order to reach the egg, we have to perform invasive surgery."

Darby scowled, knowing enough to understand the dangers of that. Invasive surgery was dangerous enough for human patients. Again, the problems of scale along made invasive surgery on a dragon an extremely dangerous effort. Trying to control the bleeding of a creature as large as a dragon -- with a heart as powerful as a dragon's -- was difficult, and dragonhealers only performed serious surgery on a draconic patient if they knew there was no other hope. She looked miserably at Tanara and Giselle, who both were waiting for her reaction. Darby shrugged. "Pull up some chairs then," she answered with a sigh. "Looks like we've not got a lot else to do but wait."

--uterine swelling and the beginning signs of respiratory stress. At this point, Evath has been in labor for two and a half days." Giselle was saying to her gathered staff. Kieran and Dawn, like Giselle herself, were full-time healers in the craft, while Ishanra, Katra, L'rino, D'vin, Casmir and Zia were all cross-crafted dragonriders who flew with the Queen's Wing. Giselle's newest apprentice, Coralia, had transferred in from Ista Weyr only the previous sevensday. The entire group stood listening intently, grim-faced at the prospect of treating for a condition which none of them had ever expected to see. "Instigating treatment for eggbinding in watchwhers can be just as dangerous as withholding it; aspiration of eggs in firelizards is not as difficult a process, and the success rates are..."

Evath lay stretched out on her side, still growling irritably in a low, thunderous mutter. Darby stood at her dragon's head, embracing Evath's muzzle as if her grip were strong enough to physically restrain the gold.

I want it out! Evath said fiercely. Her eyes still roiled in

shades of red and yellow, and her tail lashed the sands, at times whipping dangerously close to the healers. ***It hurts me, I want it out!***

"I know, love, I know," Darby murmured. "And we're going to get it out. Just don't flatten any of these fine healers. That'll cause a certain delay, dearheart, and you don't want that--"

OUT!

Darby winced from the force of her dragon's demand.

--in watchwhers, isn't the condition usually caused by a female not being active enough?" journeyman Kieran was saying.

"Are you suggesting that Evath has been a lazy queen?" Tanara asked dryly, with an edge of ice in her voice.

"Evath?" Kieran gave a breath of a laugh, realizing his mistake. Evath was the most athletic of all of the queens, a difficult reputation to win at the Kadanzer Weyr. "No, certainly not. Just trying to figure this condition out is all. Giselle, causal factors may include diet. A diet too light in boron, perhaps? Too many herd beasts or runners, and not enough wherry?"

"Best treat the condition now, and determine the cause when the patient has recovered," the craftmaster replied gravely. "For now, we need to watch Evath closely. Chances are good that her body itself may resolve the situation. But if the swelling grows worse, or she begins to show signs of increasing respiratory stress, we'll need to respond immediately. I want us to work in shifts of two for now, keeping constant vigil on Evath's condition and giving warning the moment it takes a turn..."

News of Evath's condition passed through the Weyrhall faster than klah at breakfast. Concerned weyrfolk, dragonriders and support staff alike had begun to converge in the Hatching Grounds corridor, until Tanara finally set Headsecond Bella there to kindly but firmly chase the curious on their way.

Giselle's dragonhealers had been separated into shifts; greenrider Katra sat shift now, with young Coralia. Darby sat at her dragon's head, while Evath lay listlessly, moaning with each futile contraction. The dragon's mind was concentrated on the pressure of the obstacle within her, focused on that with an intensity which frightened Darby. She sought to distract her queen, but nothing she said or thought could interrupt that single-minded obsession.

"So explain to me how the eggs are formed, and what's happening now to Evath," Katra said quietly to Coralia, no doubt testing the apprentice's understanding of the situation. Darby doubted they knew how well their voices carried in the strange acoustics of the vast chamber.

"The shell of the egg doesn't actually form until it's passing out of the body," Coralia replied, in a voice which sounded far more serious than her years. Which was a good thing, Darby thought. Had the girl sounded as bright and cheerful as the apprentice had looked the first time they'd

met, Darby would have felt it necessary to throw her bodily from the cavern. "The egg sare still soft when they are laid, and they harden up as the queen broods over them on the Hatching Sands."

"So what's happening to Evath?" Katra asked, her voice soft and sober.

"The dragonet embryos are surrounded by their yolk still, collecting shell as they pass. A dragonet isn't encased fully in an egg until they've been clutched and exit the queen's body. The embryos are almost fully formed in this stage of their development. A particularly big embryo could get wedged inside the egg-duct even before the shell forms. And if it is, then the body is forming more shell around it, making the situation even worse."

"That's right," Katra said. Darby shivered, grateful that Evath was too exhausted to pay any attention to the human conversation.

"An embryo that big must be a queen," Coralia said. "Maybe it's a bronze, but I think she must be a queen."

"It," Katra corrected the apprentice immediately. "We don't know if the embryo is male or female. It doesn't do us any good to speculate."

"If it were a bronze, we should do surgery now and aspirate," Coralia said. "After all, there are bronzes in every clutch. But if we go in and do surgery and find we've had to kill a queen--" Coralia shuddered in horror at the thought.

"Invasive surgery is always a danger," Katra said. "Loss of ichor is always a danger, even when you can transfuse fresh ichor and liquids into a patient to balance what's been lost. The size of our patients works against us in this aspect of our craft." Katra leaned back on her elbows. "Why do we test Evath's temperature every hour?"

Coralia's response sounded routine. "Concern for infection. If there's an internal rupture or presence of foreign matter, which might occur if the embryo has been crushed by contractions, an infection is almost certain. We should also be aware of any swelling, which may indicate the presence of internal trauma or infection." The girl sighed heavily, her eyes never straying from Evath's laboring sides. "Greenrider, were you a dragonhealer before you were Searched?"

Katra shook her head, her thick, dark hair swaying. "No."

Coralia's expression was miserable. "Knowing what you know now, having become a dragonhealer-- would you have stood candidate?"

Katra looked at the anxious apprentice, knowing Coralia would be standing Candidate at the hatching of Evath's eggs. "I would. Without question, I would."

A smile of relief blossomed on Coralia's face. Darby closed her eyes, no longer wanting to eavesdrop on the pair. She rested the side of her face wearily against Evath's muzzle, and tried with little success to control the fear that had settled in the marrow of her bones.

The day passed with little change. Evath alternated between pacing the cavern and lying inert, her sides heaving with the fruitless contractions. Darby left her dragon's side only long enough to visit the water closet.

And she waited. While shifts of dragonhealers came and went, Evath grew more exhausted from her labor.

The contractions worsened. For a dragon, the normal act of passing an egg was only a mild strain, wholly satisfying once the act was completed. A queen did not normally suffer during a clutching, although the process often made golds irritable. During Evath's first clutching on the Sands, Darby had teased L'ars that the experience was nothing worse than being constipated -- for three days on end.

But this had turned into something far, far worse. Evath's labor had grown worse, and as the day faded into dusk, the dragon's normally-brassy hide grew yellow, and her eyes began to blaze with white of pain. Craftmaster Giselle was a constant presence on the Hatching Sands now, her staff kept busy running to and from the Dragon Infirmary with supplies and records; Journeyman Kieran had been dispatched with a wingrider to visit the other Weyrs on a desperate search for other treatment options and advice from other craftmasters.

"We need to operate," Giselle said at last, late into the evening, as Evath's pain grew increasingly worse. "There was reason to hope that the egg would pass on its own, and that the dragonet might yet prove viable if it did. But we can't wait any longer."

Darby was grateful for the craftmaster's decision. "What do we do?"

"Aspirate the lodged egg -- we'll need to cut Evath open to get there, but not as wide as we would need to remove it. If you would stand aside, at Evath's muzzle, and help calm her as we work--"

Seeing other dragonhealers approach with buckets of numbweed, a work table to stand on, and the rest of the surgical equipment they needed, Darby retreated without comment. She scrambled to Evath's muzzle, embracing it tightly, her back turned to the healers and their work.

Evath did no more than hiss as the healers made their first incision. Darby was aware of the echoed sensation of the dragonhealer's work; the numbweed did its job, but Evath could still feel some of what the healers did as they carved into her. Giselle and her staff worked quickly and quietly. After some time, she heard Giselle call quietly for a fresh aspiration syringe. Darby closed her eyes and hugged Evath harder, resolved to be deaf to all else.

Suddenly a wash of pain flooded through Evath's lower belly. The gold groaned and jerked, ripping her muzzle from Darby's grip and sending the goldrider sprawling. Darby picked herself up, looking wildly at the healers.

A gout of ichor jetted from the incision site; the force of the spray had hit Kieran and knocked the healer sprawling. "Patch that!" Giselle yelled. "Dawn, patch that! Patch that immediately"

"Ishanra! Zia! Help me!" Dawn cried, her arms already



buried to the shoulders in Evath's opened side. From the volume of ichor spraying from the wound, it was clear that the healers had somehow nicked an artery.

Darby felt her heart squeezing painfully in her chest -- she had studied under Giselle long enough to understand the situation. On the scale in which the dragonhealers worked, with the amount of blood pressure a dragon's heart generated to force ichor through a dragon's veins, getting that artery closed was next to impossible. Evath was losing ichor like a split dike; shock would settle soon, followed by death. Darby flung herself at her dragon's muzzle, as if she had the weight or size to hold the beast's head down. *Do not move, do not move!* she demanded, using every bit of will she had to enforce the command.

The dragonhealers were working in a state of controlled panic. "I can't get it, I can't get it," Dawn was chanting.

"Katra!" Giselle snapped, her hands too busy with her own work to leave off.

Zia, Kieran and Ishanra were both already there, trying to lend their aid, while Katra was scrambling to join them. Darby closed her eyes against the sight of their desperation, focusing instead on the blaze of thought and emotion that was Evath.

"Don't move, stay with me," she murmured, until the words became a chant. "Stay with me, stay with me, hold on, love, the healers are doing their job, don't move, stay with me--"

"I can't stop it!" Kieran's voice was frantic.

"Ishanra, take this!" Giselle demanded. "Dawn, make room."

I want it out, Evath insisted, the touch of her mind and soul growing numb.

Darby heard a deep, throbbing croon. She looked up to find Tanara had arrived with Renorath. The senior queen scrambled toward them across the sands, her eyes roiling white and yellow.

"Stay with me, love, stay with me," Darby demanded, trying to find the reins for her own fear. "You're going to be all right, love, you're going to be all right."

No, Evath said, her mind touch weak. Like the flame of a candle, the glowing light of their bond seemed to flare for a moment -- then went out.

Voices disturbed her-- an argument? Darby was conscious of it briefly, hearing male voices shouting about something, L'ars and her brother D'zan. A woman urged them to quiet, and awareness faded with the soothing sounds of that urge--

-- awareness again. She was lying in her bed, dressing in the linen sleeping shift she never wore and which simply filled space in the wardrobe drawer. The heavy curtains were closed around one side of the bed; they were open on the other, allowing the dim light of a half-turned glow to touch her. Darby heard the soft sound of someone breathing. She turned her head to look --the simple movement was an

effort, like dragging in a storm anchor at sea. She saw L'ars asleep in a chair beside the bed. That was strange. Reflexively, she reached for her dragon to share the observation -- and recoiled from the emptiness that met her. Evath was gone-- the yawning absence overwhelmed her, drowning her with the enormity of loss. She embraced the despair and let it sink her again.

-- awareness again. She dragged against it, reluctant to face the living.

"She's awake," someone said. It was her brother D'zan's voice. There was movement in the room as several bodies converged on the bedside.

"Darby?" murmured Tanara, while someone else took up one of her limp hand and pressed it. A man's hands, wrapped around her own. She returned the gentle pressure experimentally, dully amazed to find the strength left in her to do so. She felt ancient and crippled, with a yawning, dark hole within her mind that she had to struggle to avoid falling into.

She opened her eyes with an effort. They felt scratchy and strange within her skull.

Tanara and D'zan were both there at one side of her bed. L'ars sat at her bedside, her hand lifted to his cheek. Her niece Tori lurked in the background, red-eyed and weeping.

"What are you all looking at?" Darby muttered sourly, hating the attention.

Tanara made a tearful noise that might have been a laugh, while D'zan hugged his weymate against him and gazed at Darby with eyes that looked as red-rimmed as Tori's. L'ars kissed her hand fiercely.

"What can we do for you?" D'zan asked, his voice even rougher with emotion.

'He's asking if I want to live or if I want to die,' Darby realized. 'My dragon is dead. They wait and worry and wonder -- am I going to follow?'

The weight of the question dragged her eyes closed. Darby lay limp in the bed, feeling crushed by the immensity of her loss. Evath was gone. It was worse than losing a limb, or limbs; it was worse than finding oneself deaf or blind. A part of her soul, her lifemate, the constant embrace of love and acceptance that had been Evath -- gone. Dead.

She felt her brother's hand on her forehead, stroking her hair in a touch strangely gentle from the rough, blunt-spoken man. "We're here for you, sister. We all love you, you're not alone in this," he murmured.

If Darby had had the strength, she would have hit him for that well-meant falsehood. Of course she was alone in this -- Evath was gone. She would be alone, aching and desperately alone, for the rest of her life. Nothing and no one could ever, would ever, fill the gaping hole that Evath left in her rider's heart and soul. Darby drew in a choking breath, feeling as though the grief might crush her utterly.

'I don't have to be alone,' Darby thought then. 'I have a choice in this. I can join her, wherever Evath has gone. It

would be easy to do.'

Easy to do. An end to this unendurable heartache. It was a seductive choice to make, and for a long, breathless moment Darby decided for it.

"Did you bring some of that firewater of yours?" she asked, opening her eyes and looking for D'zan. She knew how her brother had sat this death watch before, for wingmates and for weyrlings, and what aconite-laced succor he offered them as a mercy-dose.

D'zan's face look haunted and gray as he answered. "Blueberry brandy," he said then, pulling a silver flask from the pocket of his vest. "Your favorite," he said, twisting off the cap. His hands shook enough that he had to make a second effort. "I sent L'ward to get it, out of season as it is."

Tori had begun to weep again, and was making an effort not to be obvious about it. Tanara reached for the young greenrider and pulled her close in an embrace as Darby accepted the flask from her brother's hand. At the bed's other side, L'ars refused to release her. His grip on her hand was nearly bruising, and his expression was wretched as he watched her raise the flask to her lips. The silver was cool against her lips. The aconite would numb all feeling in her mouth and in her lips before it stopped her heart. Darby was aware of that in the moment before she drank.

It was the thought of Evath that stopped her in the act. Fierce, temperamental Evath, who had chosen her on the Hatching Sands years ago because she recognized in Darby a fellow warrior's heart. Evath, who chased the sire of her eggs off of the Hatching Grounds sands just for the joy of putting the big, powerful bronze on the retreat. Evath, who was contrary to the last breath. Had their roles been reversed, had biology given Evath a choice in the matter, Darby didn't have to ask what her gold would have chosen.

Evath would live, just to because it would be a daily fight to do so, and just because Evath would never back down from any fight.

Darby spat the first sip of liqueur back into the flask and let it drop, spilling its poison onto the ground. "Klah," she said. "Get me some klah."

Tori ran for the door, nearly falling over herself to do so. It was Tanara's turn to cry. The Weyrwoman did so, enfolded in her weyrmate's embrace, while D'zan's own eyes were leaking tears freely. At the other side of Darby's bed, L'ars had bent his head over her hand and kissed it fiercely.

Darby closed her eyes in exhaustion. "Look at the sorry lot of you," she muttered, thinking of Evath and of the brandy she'd spilled. "Would somebody mop that rot up before it stains the rug?"



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It was two days before she felt able to get out of bed, and she didn't make it any farther than the overstuffed couch in the central room of her weyrsuite before her strength failed her.

L'ars collected a quilt off of the bed and wrapped it

around her. Then he sank into his favorite chair. L'ars had been a constant, quiet presence since Evath's death, anticipating her needs and simply being there. It was a small comfort, a kind one.

"What about the eggs?" Darby asked. She hadn't asked about the world outside her empty weyr before now, and the others had taken that for their cue and said nothing.

"Twenty seven of them," L'ars said. "The healers aspirated the one. Two more were too damaged to survive. But the healers pulled two viable eggs from Evath's body. One of them is large enough to be a bronze. The other's possibly a gold egg. It's hard to know -- they both have thin preliminary shells and will have to be handled very, very gently if they're to survive until hatching."

Darby clutched the blanket around herself, shivering. Perhaps she should find comfort in that. L'ars probably hoped that she would. She stared straight ahead, looking at one of the tapestries which hung on the walls of the sitting room. It was a threadbare piece of work, featuring a riot of horses in running across a holder's field. She had found it in the storage rooms, flotsam of the Poisoning. Headsecond Bella hated the thing, old and worn as it was, and never failed the opportunity to suggest replacements. But Darby fancied the ragged thing. It reminded her of home, and of the herds of wild horses which she and her brothers used to chase.

L'ars was looking at her, his blue eyes sad. "My offer still stands," he said, dragging her from a reminiscence, from thoughts of heat and dust and hard riding on a summer afternoon. "I'd be honored if you'd be my weyrmate."

Darby stared at the man. The offer shocked her -- to be honest, she found she'd forgotten that he'd once asked her, days ago now.

"No," she said simply. "No. I can't."

L'ars looked down at his hands. "Then what?" he asked. "What do you think you'll do?"

Darby hadn't thought of that. She thought of it now. She didn't want anything more to do with dragons -- she doubted she could look at one without reconsidering the taste of brandy on her lips. "I'll see the eggs hatched, I'll stay here that long," she said, dreading every day of the wait. "But then-- I don't know."

L'ars gazed at her for a long moment, his heart in his eyes. Then he carefully embraced her, pressing a kiss against her forehead. "Can I do anything for you?" he asked earnestly.

Darby looked him in the eyes. "See to Phanth," she said, finding her voice no more than a harsh whisper. "He needs you. I'll take care of myself."

L'ars nodded. He released her and rose to his feet. Without another word, he left her.

Darby closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. She pulled the quilt tighter around herself, finding herself numb with a coldness that proved to have nothing to do with the heavy blanket, and everything to do with the raw, numbing loneliness that had once been Evath's warmth in her mind and heart.

The saddle leather creaked beneath her as Darby swung astride. Rawhide immediately shifted beneath her and she checked him automatically, a maneuver so familiar she never thought of it.

"She's ugly but sound," the Weyrherder said as he handing the pack horse's lead rope to Darby. "One of my apprentices gave her a wild ride on the road the other day; she's a jumper if you ask it of her, and game at heart."

"Thank you," Darby murmured, hardly interested in the spotted mare. She spoke the words automatically, without thought. With a willing horse beneath her, Darby wanted nothing but to be away.

"Wait a day or two," Marshall said, frowning with concern. "They've caught two of the raiders who killed Betlor and Zahlenka on the mountain, but there's still at least one of them loose. Stay until that threat has been eliminated."

Darby scowled. She had her knife at her belt, and a hunting bow sheathed beneath her knee. Even the drover's whip coiled at the saddle horn could be a crippling weapon, if used to that intent. "No one will stop me," she said. "I've got to go."

Marshall delayed her with a hand on her knee. "If there's anything, anything at all--" he murmured. "Please, send word."

"Thank you," Darby repeated. Rawhide turned his head to take a nip at Marshall's arm, and she checked that, hard.

"I thought you'd give us until morning," called a voice behind her. Darby turned in the saddle to see her brother approaching, his limp exaggerated with speed. "Darby--"

"I'm going. Now. Evath's eggs are hatched, I can't stay any longer."

D'zan halted, frowning concern. But he shrugged and nodded. "Tanara's on her way. Will you stay at least for goodbyes?"

Darby shook her head. Their breath steamed in the winter air. The Weyrlingmaster should be with his new weyrlings now, and both knew it. "I've got to go," Darby said, feeling a burst of anxiety in her chest. She was conscious of the caldera walls around them, lined with dragon weyrs, and of the splashes of green, blue, brown and bronze which graced those ledges. There was nothing here for her anymore. Evath was gone, and she never wanted to see another dragon in her life, if she could help it.

Rawhide caught scent of his rider's mood and began to fret, working at the bit. D'zan nodded and stepped aside.

"Tanara's calling for escort 'riders now," he said. "You'll not travel without Weyr protection, not with raiders loose on the mountain. They'll hang back and out of your way-- but they'll be there all the same."

Darby nodded, knowing she could not outrun or out maneuver such protections. It seemed a waste to her -- her life wasn't worth such an effort, not with Evath gone. Tanara and D'zan would do as they would, for their own reasons and for their own consciences. Darby just wanted nothing to do with the matter, and depended on the fact that an escort would not get in her way. "Thank you," she muttered. "Take care of Kip," she said to the two men, grateful that that particular duty would not burden her on this trip. Kip was safer at the Weyr, and as welcome as Marshall made him. Her son would not want to leave -- nor would he notice her gone.

"Of course," Marshall said.

Darby met her friend's eyes, then her brother's. She nodded tersely, then put her heels to the fractious dun. Rawhide leaped forward beneath her, as eager to be away as his rider. She put the stallion to a gallop, pulling the spotted mare behind them.

Darby kept that pace until they were well away down the tithing road, until the Weyr was no longer in sight behind them.



Kadanzer Weyr

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