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# Unfit

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Some time before dawn, judging by the dim grey of his surroundings, Sovar awoke to the sensation of a head stuffed with cotton wool. He blinked in confusion, and his gummy eyes obeyed reluctantly, clearing his vision only after he'd ground the balls of his hands against them. His first breath rattled, and the cough it produced caused an echoing throb behind his eyes. He rolled to sit on the edge of his bunk – which hurt far more than it ought – and had to close his eyes to resist a wave of sickening vertigo. He cradled his head in both hands, and when the dizziness passed, scraped his hands over his face and prickly-short hair, willing the room to come into focus.

It obeyed, slowly. The long row of bunks and covered glows was not unlike his quarters in Thornblaze, but he felt no familiarity here. Kadanzer had been his home for over a seven-day now, but it was not quite home yet.

Ugh. Of all the times and all the places to get ill, this was most definitely not what he would have chosen. Not that he'd have chosen to suffer it in the first place. Another pound somewhere in his head – shells, it hurt – solidified that sentiment, and his moan of disgust had the thick, muffled quality that only an unimaginable quantity of mucus was able to produce.

A tousled head appeared above him, his bunkmate woken by the sound. Around a jaw-cracking yawn, Kesyr mumbled, "I bet that'll look as good as it sounds."

Sovar glowered down at his blanket. Both his wits and nerves failed to provide him with a suitable comeback, and instead he muttered, "That isn't funny." His voice was barely recognisable as his own, distorted by his clogged sinuses. He glanced upward, and his mouth paused half-open, uncertain – he'd never been comfortable asking for help, but who was he to report ill to?

"Kesyr." A grunt from his bedmate. "What am I supposed to do now? Find the Headsecond?"

"Jus...find Resla," the half-asleep Candidate murmured, half into his pillow. "F'she isn't at her at cot...try Ellya. S'close enough, you can find it..."

Sovar rolled his eyes, then winced at how unusually painful that turned out to be. Well, at least he had a goal. He pulled himself up and began to dress; by the time he'd stumbled out of the barracks, the air was just starting to get the smell of morning, but the sounds were yet to follow. Not a soul, human or otherwise, crossed his path as he headed northward towards the huddle of Weyrlingstaff buildings. He wondered, with a sense of dread, if he'd be deemed unfit for the upcoming Hatching. Even in

Thornblaze he'd been hearing stories and whispers about the goldrider returned from the Ninth Pass, and already the pre-hatching deaths within the clutch were causing rampant speculation among Kadanzer's residents. Old blood, the whispers said, and from what he'd seen of the Ninth Pass dragons, he was more than willing to believe it. Being given the chance to Impress had been like a kiss from Lady Luck herself, and as he picked up his pace towards the Headsecond's cot, he spared a moment's anxious hope that she hadn't deserted him yet. He couldn't miss this Hatching.



After a bit of poking and prodding from one of the early morning Infirmary staff, Sovar had been informed that, despite how miserable he felt, he was really only suffering from a minor head cold. The healer had then suggested that it wouldn't be unreasonable if he just wanted to go back to bed. But idleness drove him mad, and buoyed by the relief that he would still be allowed to attend the Hatching, he'd asked about other options. So he'd been kept out of the Weyrfarm and its demanding chores, and had instead been set to the task of tending the Infirmary herb garden.

The light-labour job consisted mostly of weeding and watering, and the herbal fumes were soothing, but after only a few hours' work, he began regret working at all. Though late morning saw his progress reduced to bare minimum, he stubbornly trudged through the chores until a cheerful female voice cut through the monotony.

"Sovar!"

"Aaaah, don't – don't yell, it hurts." On his knees in front of a patch of chamomile, Sovar pinched the bridge of his nose with one earth-stained hand and flinched away from the sound. When the throb of headache passed, he looked up to see who had caused it.

It was Carran, the woman who'd treated him that morning. She gave him a knowing smile, sympathetic. "Sorry. Feeling it now, dear?"

He offered a polite smile of his own, agreeing quietly with a touch of sheepishness. "Yes, m'am."

"Well, lunch will be soon and I can tell you're not up for much else." He gave a heartfelt nod, at which she chuckled. "Go on. I'll make sure whoever needs to know you're indisposed knows. And I think the kitchen's put together a red stew – I'd try it if I were you. The spice is intense, but it'll clear up your head like you'd never believe."

Sovar stood and brushed the dirt from his hands and clothes. "Yes, m'am. Ah...thank you."



The steam that wafted from Sovar's bowl made his eyes water as he moved from the serving line to where the rest of the candidate's were sat eating. No greetings were exchanged between himself and his tablemates when he took a place at the end of the table; they had been friendly enough to him since his arrival, but his responses had been lukewarm at best. His mind tended to go blank whenever a social opportunity presented itself. He'd shyly fumbled to failure their attempts to break the ice, and when he'd shown no

more sign of wanting contact, they'd quickly stopped offering any.

Once he was seated, he poked his spoon at the stew dubiously. The chunky mix of peppers, beans, and minced beef shifted in its thick tomato paste. The spicy scent sharpened, more potent than anything he was accustomed to, and suddenly the extra rags he'd tucked into his belt for his leaking nose and eyes didn't seem so unreasonable a preparation. The dull roar of mealtime conversation evoked a constant thumping in his head, and thinking around it was more trouble than it was worth, so he scooped up a mouthful and tucked it away.

Well, he decided reasonably, it wasn't so bad. At least at first. The initial tingle on his lips and tongue was tolerable, pleasant event, and the spicy flavour did cause the pressure behind his nose and eyes to loosen. However, a second spoonful saw his cheeks flush slowly, and by the third the tingle had become a burn, and his stomach shifted nauseously. His eyes were watering again, and he pushed the bowl away and reached hurriedly for the water pitcher.

The liquid sloshed a little as he poured it, and his haste caught the attention of his tablemates. Morres, directly beside him, chuckled and patted his back as he bolted the water. "Whew, someone forgot to warn you – Kedria's red stew might as well be firestone in a bowl. Sure feels like a bellyful of flames, at any rate. Always share, because you're not going to want more than a bite to yourself."

Wiping his mouth and coughing a little, Sovar ducked self-consciously away from the familiar contact, almost out of his seat. Without making eye contact, he waved the bowl away, his blush taking on a glow of embarrassment. "You're welcome to it," he managed between mouthfuls of water, eyes going briefly to the herder's handsome profile before they skittered away nervously.

"I think a taste'll be enough for me, but thanks." Morres took a spoonful, and a moment later stole a furtive sip from his own cup, a slight red tinge to his cheeks. Sovar was about to pour himself a second glass of water when Morres waved him off it, passing him another jug instead. "Hang on, milk works much better. A bread roll might help too, and won't make your gut slosh quite as much afterward."

A few places down, Tanyer grinned and gestured at the herder.

"Let's have a try," he said, and with a knowing grin Morres slid the bowl down the table. Tanyer coughed once after he'd swallowed, but didn't touch his cup; after a moment a sloe-eyed girl with black hair sauntered over from the other end of the table. She tipped up Tanyer's head with a caress and the kiss she gave him made Sovar's eyes drop and a deeper blush to suffuse his face.

"Mmm...spicy," she purred, and Sovar wasn't the only one who blushed then. Laughter broke out as well, and someone catcalled.

Things might have gotten worse had the bowl not passed next to Zaras, who wafted the fumes to his nose, winced slightly, and eyed the dark-haired girl. He said with dry amusement, "You know I can't match that, Solea. I'll pass, thanks." There was a communal laugh, and Sovar ducked his head behind his cup, glad the attention had gone elsewhere. He felt his stomach turn and grimaced – its queasy roil distracted him from Solea and Zaras' sharp yet

friendly banter, and the effect of their good nature was lost on him.

Extracting his lanky body from the bench as unobtrusively as possible, Sovar slipped away unnoticed, heading for the nearest privy. He blew his dripping nose into a rag, grimacing and refusing to either confirm Kesyr's morning prediction or increase his nausea by looking. The bright midday sunlight gave an unwelcome vigour to the pounding in his head, and he gave a wretched sigh. Getting sick was horrid, but this was going to make the next few days feel like an eternity...



The nausea faded after a day, for which Sovar was profoundly grateful. By the day of Nioranth's Hatching, his health had improved from tattered shreds to something merely shabby, though the stuffed head lingered even as the coughing slowly calmed. Amid the wisecracks and laughter of the boys' side of the barracks as they donned their white robes, the quiet sniffing was his sole contribution – if some part of him longed to join in, he lacked the courage to oblige it, and he made a silent tail to the line of marching Candidates.

He soon found himself following K'darin without really looking at him, twisting his head from side to side as he tried to take in all the sights and sounds that were assaulting his senses. The Weyr was full to bursting with attendees for the coming event, which didn't surprise him in the slightest – the clutch's fame had brought names and faces he'd only ever heard of to Kadanzer, and people moved about with a quickened sense of purpose as they prepared for the Hatching and the feast to come after. As they headed for the Hatching Grounds, Sovar tried to picture what the Weyr had looked at when he'd first arrived, flushed with the cold of *between*.

From above, Kadanzer Weyr had been a massive sprawl of buildings, people, and most unsettling of all, dragons, unimaginably big – the Weyr and the dragons. He'd caught a brief glimpse of the massive creatures being bathed further out on the peninsula's tip – the idea of being so close to Impression now made him weak with excitement. At the time his blue mount had dipped down towards that sprawl, and he'd been far too concerned with keeping his stomach in his throat and not on the bluerider's back to notice the scenery. His legs had buckled upon touching ground, but thankfully no one had laughed – walking between small cots towards a collection of larger structures, Sovar felt his cheeks warm at the memory, and he wondered glumly if anyone would remember.

The last of the guests were being seen to their seats as they arrived at the stone-walled caldera. Sovar uneasily eyed the heat rising in visible waves from the sand. In the time between his Search and his departure from Thornblaze, he'd heard the most horrid stories, and despite his undying hate for his old bunkmate, Noalin had told a good story. His last before Sovar's departure had claimed that dragon-sand could burn the very skin from your feet, through boots and all. Sovar had been to visit the eggs before, and his leather boots had disproved the story admirably. This time, however, he had only the thin sandals issued to each Candidate along with their robe, and he felt a prickle of doubt.

*Don't let that little holdbrat scare you now*, he berated himself. He forced a timid first step, some paces behind the rest, and almost sighed with relief when his foot sunk in inch into hot – but not scalding – sand. Distracted as he was, he almost tripped over his own feet when he remembered Nioranth. His eyes snapped to her, but she was too busy turning, licking, and otherwise fussing over her eggs to pay the Candidates much mind. The figure of her rider was rendered tiny beside her magnificent size, and as beautiful as the gold was, he couldn't help but feel relieved when she retreated to the far wall of the Hatching Grounds, settling like some great, winged cat.

*Remind me to never, ever annoy something her size*, he told himself with feeling as he and his fellows arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle around the twitching eggs.

When one egg took the next step and shattered entirely, Sovar caught his breath – his first sight of a hatchling dragon! Cheers erupted around him, and a thrill went through him, but it turned slowly to a chill as the cheering died. The hatchling, its bronze hide dim and greyed, remained sprawled on the ground and heaved for breath. Nioranth's nudging seemed to encourage it to its feet, but it went down again a moment later, clearly exhausted.

Sovar snuck a look at the people around him, who were whispering to one another with worry on their faces, and felt sick. There'd been definite fears that this clutch would have health issues, but to see the poor creature struggling to even *breathe*...well, it certainly brought the message home. He watched as other colours started to break shell, but one by one they passed him by with barely a glance. One of the first Impressions took place nearby – the joy obviously painted on the young candidate's face sparked a slight twinge of envy in him. And then there was a shriek.

The sickly bronze had chosen a lifemate, but now the young man cradled the hatchling limp in his arms. Sovar's stomach turned as a haunting keen issued from Nioranth and, distantly, other dragons. It was like nothing he'd ever heard before, higher pitched than a dog's howl, and it rattled the bones. It drowned out the candidate's sorrow and made Sovar want to cover his ears. The little bronze had died, that's what that sound meant. His insides shivered at the thought. Riders would suicide, he knew to be true by now, when their beast died – was that this boy's fate? To end his life for a moment's joy lost to an eternity of emptiness?

He shook his head, horrified. Maybe he was going to have to reconsider this whole Candidate thing...



People flowed out of the Hatching Ground in a subdued stream, the light mood burdened by the weight of lives lost. Knowing he was supposed to exit the Hatching Ground along with the other failed candidates, but unable to help himself, Sovar lingered behind to watch the dragonhealers descend on the scene. He felt a touch of morbid fascination as a slow trickle of clear fluid oozed around the half-hatched brown to drip into the sand. The hatchling's one free wing lay in a pitiful crumple, like some discarded tissue. Its eyes were half-open, a parody of life, and Sovar couldn't will away the sick ache deep in his gut. If all Hatchings were like

this, than perhaps he'd be better to pack his bags and go back to Thornblaze.

He wondered if that brown had been meant to be his; if he were not unfit for Impression, but his hatchling simply unfit for life. His eyes flickered to Orisan and the dead bronze. Better a dragonpair for an instant than never at all? Bah...he was too cynical for that.

He deliberately turned his eyes to the new weyrings and their lifemates. Most were leading their young charges off the Sands, but the sole bronze pair – the dragonet too weak to risk a long walk just yet – remained behind. The young man carefully scooped a handful of bloody chunks out of a basket and fed them to the bronze. Unlike the hatchling corpses, the blood and mess of the feeding didn't faze Sovar – he'd seen animals butchered before, and handled raw meat during his rare kitchen chores. What held his attention was the reverence with which the weyring treated his new companion. It wasn't glaring, but the relieved awe in his face with every touch, every look, was visible even to the candidate. It was fascinating to watch, and woke an echo of the envy he felt when he saw any dragonrider with their lifemate. It was a partnership of utter devotion that he could only hope for.

Also lingering behind was another candidate that had failed to Impress. The boy's features reminded Sovar strongly of Tanyer, and he recognised the farmhand's younger brother. His mind sent up a name like a tentative red flag: Tasyr? That sounded right. As he watched, Tasyr scooped a shovelful of sand into the bucket near his feet. The expression on his face as he did it and the small spread of moistened sand made his situation obvious even from a distance – he must have lost his lunch. Sovar's stomach gurgled in sympathy. Feeling eyes on him, Tasyr looked over his shoulder at the stands. Their eyes met, and Sovar felt a sympathetic half-smile pull at his mouth. His eyes flickered to the wet sand, and when they returned to Tasyr's face the other boy was also wearing a rueful half grin, but there was more than a touch of determination there as well. Sovar put his hand on his abdomen and made a face, and he saw a nod.

The moment of nonverbal conversation was interrupted by a sidelong glimpse of Resla moving slowly through the weyrings, pausing now and then – to offer a congratulatory word or compliment, no doubt, and occasionally a warm embrace. She was somewhat hampered by the advanced state of her pregnancy. She began herding the remaining candidates, who looked generally disappointed by their failure and shocked by their experience. She caught sight of Sovar lingering behind, and gestured to him with some reproach.

Contritely, he headed towards her with a hurried step. He wasn't surprised that her smile was slightly strained, up close. He didn't offer her one of his own, but gave a sincere apology once he was close enough. "I'm sorry, Headsecond. I didn't mean to dally."

"That's all right. Just don't forget that you still have duties to attend to before the feast," she said. Her tone was surprisingly normal, and he looked at her oddly – there was no false cheer in her voice, but a sort of resigned evenness. It was as though she were...well, *accustomed* to such tragedies as the Hatching. At the very least, she sounded unsurprised.

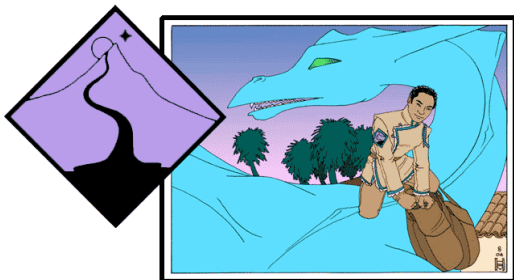
What kind of a place was this? He hesitated, but curiosity got the better of him.

“How...I mean, aren't you bothered?” he asked, stumbling awkwardly. He gestured vaguely to the still-morbid scene before them. “By all of that, I mean?”

For a moment a ghost of tired sadness lurked around her eyes, but then she smiled gently and answered with a bit of firmness, “Let's just say that dragonriding is no easy life.”

“Yes, m'am,” Sovar got the feeling that he'd accidentally hit a nerve with his question, and a small feeling of guilt that he hadn't considered it before asking kept him from inquiring further. They moved towards the same opening he'd entered before the Hatching. Sovar couldn't help a last look back as they were leaving – Tasyr had since gone, and dragonhealers were removing the dead brown from his shell with professional care. He caught a last glimpse of the thin, dim crescent of a lifeless eye.

What kind of a place, indeed...



# Kadanzer Weyr

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