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# Vertigo

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Jaharath was up to his neck in a third meat bowl, and it was with a great deal of crunching and slurping that each mouthful slid down his long throat. Aria had little to do but sit back and watch him eat, and remind him now and then to breathe. Malnourishment in the egg gave an edge of desperation to his hunger; she hoped that she'd be able to recognize if he tried to overeat. In a daze she stroked a hand down his back as he wolfed down the pre-chopped chunks of bloody meat.

*Jaharath, you're perfect.*

A pleased hum emerged from the depths of the bowl, and the hatchling's narrow head came up long enough to nuzzle into her lap. His muzzle left bloody pink streaks on her arms and white candidate's robe, and though both were already smeared with egg fluid, she laughed and pushed his head away. Her fingers came away sticky. "Oh no, you keep that slimy stuff to yourself."

*It's not slimy, the brown answered blissfully, burying his face back into the rapidly emptying bowl. It's tasty and fills up the empty hurt in my middle!*

Aria couldn't argue with that – her own stomach felt squeezed by the intensity of the hatchling's hunger. Though there was something mildly nauseating to her about the sensation of raw meat chunks sliding down her throat, she also couldn't help but share the fierce satisfaction Jaharath radiated at the easing of his ravenous appetite. She was lost in her own head, in the press and meld of another mind against her own, and was only marginally aware of the bustle of other new weyrings feeding their hatchlings and dragonhealers making the rounds to inspect the sickly clutch.

Aria watched as Tallah examined Jaharath carefully with eyes and hands, finding only an unusual thinness to distinguish the brown from the normal hatchlings she was accustomed to seeing. His unblemished hide was the dark brown of klah bark, with darker eye ridges and paling to coppery brown on the wings and belly. The journeyman could detect no wheezing in his excitement-quickened breathing. He was one of the healthiest of the day's larger colours, and Aria felt a surge of emotion that was a complicated mixture of relief and gloating pride – Jaharath would survive where others had not and still might not, and his mixed Benden heritage would make up for any stunting his pre-hatching complications might cause in terms of his adult size.

*All those Turns of failure were worth you, she told him.*

*More food!* demanded Jaharath as a reply, having reached the bottom of the bowl. He sat impatiently licking the last scraps from the bottom, while Aria chuckled and acquired him a fourth helping. He fell upon it with as much enthusiasm as the first three, his sharp teeth making nicks in the wood of the bowl. Aria leaned back and watched, entertained by the fact that the dragonet continued to plough through the food at the same hasty pace until she could feel the edges of his belly protesting. There was no slowing in his eating, only the sudden reaching of his stomach's threshold, and her eyelids began to droop almost before she registered the fatigue seeping in.

*Sleep time now, Jaharath said, starting to lean his still considerable weight onto her bent knees. She would have let him, had she not noticed the new weyrings thinning as dragonhealers led the ready out of the Hatching Ground, presumably to bathe their new partners. She also spotted Resla herding off the remaining candidates. Bits of Aria's lessons came prodding in the back of her mind like bright pieces of sharp glass. You may feel overwhelmed by the hatchling's projected emotions, such as hunger or fatigue, but it is your responsibility to retain your awareness and keep your needs separate from those of your lifemate. You must provide for and satisfy your dragon's needs, but not allow them to overcome you.*

With effort, she forced her eyes open and used both hands to pull up Jaharath's head. *Wait, no sleeping yet. Jaharath. Look at me.* The brown's blue-green eyes, which had begun to laze closed, perked open again. *Don't fall asleep. You need a bath and oiling first. I can feel your itchy spots; don't you want me to scrub them away and make your hide clean and soft?*

The bribe seemed to be enough to motivate the hatchling, because he shuffled along willingly, impeded by his bulging belly. They had almost caught up with the main group of weyrings when Aria began to sense the strain of placing one foot in front of the other. As they moved between two empty goldrider cots in the Weyrleader's Complex, she felt an abrupt, squeezing pain beneath her breastbone. Her gasp and Jaharath's shuddering stumble were simultaneous, and the wave of fear from the brown brought her to her knees. Distantly she was aware of the cries of the other hatchlings' panic, but they were drowned out by the pound of Jaharath's hearts, heavy and forced. It was like every particle of air was being forcibly wrung out of her lungs, and though air still passed through her lips with every breath, the tight choking feeling persisted as though it did not.

*It hurts!* Jaharath wailed in her mind, his body rigid and his eyes gone shock-grey. *Make it stop, make it stop!*

Then as soon as it had started, the pain vanished, leaving Aria clinging to her brown and panting. Jaharath trembled and tried to climb onto her, but she wrestled him down before he could claw her and panic himself even more. More riders and healers had arrived to help the weyrings calm their distressed dragonets, and a hand on her shoulder caused her to look up into a stern female face, features now set in an expression of professional concern. Journeyman Aretei, and that silly deaf mute, Deza, whose worried expression suggested she'd been the one to summon the more senior dragonhealer.

“What’s wrong, weyrling?”

“Pain,” Aria said. The light breeze felt unusually cool on her face, and she realized she’d broken into a sweat. “There’s something wrong, Jaharath is having pains in his chest.”

“Calm him,” Aretei demanded. There was a note of hardness in her tone. Taking a deep breath, Aria clapped down on the surging waves of Jaharath’s fear, soothing them instead of just trying to keep her head above them. At the same time she ran her hands down the brown’s back and over his curved wings, hoping the touch would relax him. Slowly the brown stopped trembling, though he still huddled against her side, eyes swirling greyish yellow. Aretei nodded approvingly. “Describe the pain he’s having.”

Aria closed her eyes, grimacing and putting one hand to her chest. “It’s like I was having the air squeezed out of me. It almost hurt when his heart beat; the rhythm wasn’t right, and it felt too hard.”

*It hurt*, Jaharath repeated, mental touch subdued. She stroked his face comfortingly.

“It’s passed now?”

Jaharath’s weary exhaustion was like a physical weight, and the girl fought hard to ignore it. “He’s going to fall asleep on me soon if we don’t keep going.”

Aretei was examining the brown critically, and Aria thought the woman was ignoring her before she finally spoke. “The rest of the clutch seems to have expressed their underdevelopment in the form of respiratory troubles, but your Jaharath might have one heart that’s weaker than the other. There’s little I can do now, and he needs rest...keep going, but walk slowly and pause as frequently as he needs. Let’s keep moving, everyone!”

*I hear her in my head*, Jaharath said, distracting Aria from the other dragonhealers with a mental flash of Deza. Aria’s features sharpened, and as soon as Aretei had turned to attend another concerned weyrling, she scowled blackly at the young apprentice. Jaharath was *hers*, and Deza could keep her sharding thoughts to herself.

*Just ignore her if you can, Jaharath*, she told her brown. He was drooping against her once more, and she felt a flush of dismay that she’d let her anger distract her from his needs. She shook him gently. *Come on, we’ll go give you a nice bath. You can relax as soon as you’re in the water, all right?*

The dragonet took her at her word, for the moment he entered the shallow man-made bathing pool he rolled his head against its wooden siding, dozing standing up. She supposed she should consider it lucky that he didn’t complain each time she roused him to expose some new area to be cleaned and rinsed. At some point a group of failed candidates arrived with news of the belongings of those who’d Impressed – Solea told her shortly that her things were in the third trunk from the back wall, and didn’t remain to exchange pleasantries.

She and Jaharath were one of the last pairs to leave the pool. Oiling the brown turned out to be an even harder task than bathing had been, as the act of massaging the thick stuff into his soft infant’s hide and delicate wings seemed to lull him even more effectively to sleep. Coaxing him into his wallow took some persuasion.

When he dropped fully and truly into sleep, it was like a heavy mist suddenly clearing in her head – the need to sleep receded and her stomach, now lacking the false bulge of Jaharath’s dinner, gave its own grumble of hunger. She ignored it at first and sat by his sleeping form, letting her mind accustom itself to the subtle weight, the ghostly press of the dormant dragonet’s presence on the inside of her skull. A strange disorientation had settled over her, reminding her of the vertigo she often suffered near the cliff edges at the old Weyr, and it took some thought to identify its cause. Impressing Jaharath, she suddenly had the one thing she’d desired most...and was at a complete loss for how to react.

Impressing brown was unexpected – this late in her candidacy, she had become desperate to impress any colour, and had placed her bet with green simply because that was where the best odds lay. Oh, she had pipe dreamed about gold like every other female candidate on Pern. But being a female brownrider had seemed equally unattainable only a scant few hours ago; she hadn’t liked her odds against its rarity. Now she was one.

It was almost funny to think of herself in comparison to the other girls she’d watched walk off the sand with brown over the years. There hadn’t been many. Lir, from one of Aria’s first Kadanzer hatchings, was practically a boy. Tallah had also Impressed from that clutch, and looked like a stiff wind might blow her over. There was Ryuri, who’d had no taste for Aria’s underhanded personality...and was that really all? She snorted softly to herself – at least there wasn’t much precedent to live up to.

Before she could introspect any longer, her stomach gave another demanding groan. Aria stroked her brown’s soft hide, and her reluctance to leave was almost overpowering. The pain in Jaharath’s chest had not recurred, but she’d spent a good portion of the evening in a state of nervous anticipation that it would. Now, she had to resist the clutches of paranoia, reassuring herself firmly that the hatchling would sleep fine alone.

The girls’ side of the barracks was empty, and she stripped out of her soiled candidate robe. A loose wrap skirt of soft klah-coloured cotton was knotted at one hip, and paired with an off white blouse with no sleeves. With one last tender gaze at her brown, Aria headed for the celebration feast at Main.



Her classmates looked a ragged bunch when she arrived at the weyrling table with her plate, and she noted with rather cruel amusement that some of them were far deeper in their cups than they should be. She avoided the end of the table where Villsha, Nyissa, and Alix sat. She spotted Orlen – O’len now, she remembered – sitting at nearly the opposite end of the long table, and moved to take the empty seat across from him.

“Bluerider,” she said, stressing the new title with a note of teasing in her voice. He glanced up and made greeting noises, but his fork was coming out of his mouth as she sat down and she waved him into silence with a half-disgusted laugh before he could speak with his mouth full. She poured herself a cup of fruit juice, and its heavy fragrance suggested

it was laced with alcohol. Her perceptions felt sharper, and like colours seemed to glow from the banners, the sweet scent clung to the back of her throat like something thick and tangible. She took a sip before offering O'len a slow smile. "Congratulations."

"And to you, brownrider," he answered once he'd swallowed, responding to her expression with a languid grin of his own. "Ugh, listen to me, spouting courtesies of rank already."

Her smirk widened a notch. "Having hide envy, are we?"

"Don't even get me started," he warned, emphasizing with his eating knife. "I wouldn't trade Gresuth for anything, but scorch it. He should have been a bronze."

"I'd think about that wish before making it," Aria told him sardonically.

O'len glanced at her, and she mentally bit her cheek – she'd let more slip than she'd meant to with the comment, the emotion in her voice giving away her fear in a way she'd not intended. As he bent over his plate for another bite, he asked, "Speaking of which, Gresuth got a little panicked with the rest over your Jaharath earlier, but I couldn't get details out of him. What happened?"

Aria felt worry prickle across her mind again. She relentlessly beat it down, covering her pause with another sip of punch that she pretended to savour, though for a moment it was soured by fear. She shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "You saw how weak the larger colours of this clutch were. One of the journeymen said he might have a weak heart instead of weak lungs like Kaiyith had. But it only happened once on the way to the Weyrling Complex, so maybe it won't happen again." The statement lacked confidence even to her own ears, and she felt a touch of resentment at the pity that O'len tried to hide.

"I hope so," was all he said aloud. His expression went soft. "I'm just glad there's nothing wrong with my Gresuth. He's hale and healthy, if a little thin, is what the dragonhealers say. I feel bad for Orisan, though... no one's heard yet how he's faring. And I suppose I have to feel bad for L'drun, getting that sickling, though at least it should keep his head from inflating any further over Impressing bronze. I'd resigned myself to over a Turn of big-brothering when I saw what colour he'd gotten."

Aria wrinkled her nose a little. "I don't know what I'd do if I got stuck with a dragonet like Rhynt. Better L'drun than me, I say."

O'len made a noncommittal noise into his cup, attention caught by something at the other end of the table, and he pointed it out to Aria. "Watch it, it's the personality man himself."

Aria slid her gaze down the table, rolling her eyes when

she saw the red-haired weyrling seat himself with the flutterbies. "Faranth, I wish he'd keep that whershit to himself sometimes."

O'len chuckled. "He's right, though, we should be celebrating." He raised his cup and tipped it at her meaningfully. "To finally being dragonriders?"

Aria smiled sharply at that, raising her own cup but making no move to touch it against O'len's. "To six months of celibacy?" she suggested, and O'len's smile grew a notch at the wink she offered him.

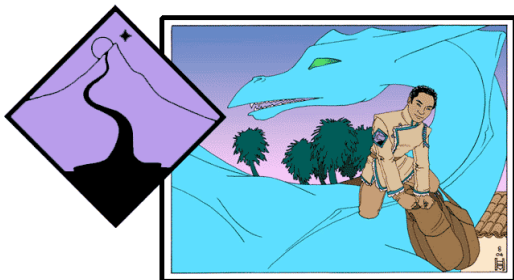
The new bluerider dropped his gaze to what skin her blouse exposed, raking it slowly back up to her face. He smirked, mild frustration edging the interest in his eyes, and moved his glass so it clicked against the one she held out. "Cruel."

Aria laughed, and they each took a mouthful from their respective cups. The fruit juice was light and slightly tart on her tongue, only a subtle zing giving away its alcohol content. Her stomach growled loudly, and she lifted and took a delicate bite out of a small roll from her plate, seasoned rice and ground meat wrapped in a grape leaf. She broke open a fresh bun as well, smearing a layer of golden butter onto its steaming insides.

When her hunger settled, satisfied, Aria took another lingering sip of the punch and smiled at O'len. She gestured with the cup to the crowded area of the hall that had been set aside for dancing. She quirked a brow at him, dark eyes heated. "How about we show everyone what they'll be missing for the next six months?"

He grinned, and offered his hand. Aria took it, and felt the vertigo recede, chased away by the steady tangibility of his fingers on her wrist.

END



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