

But on the tenth day after the hatching, if one could call it that, Raylan's thoughts were interrupted when Galirras unexpectedly opened his eyes. The group was still riding as it was in the middle of the day.

Raylan felt him stir in the sling, just before he heard Galirras' voice inside his head.

"What's happening?"

"We're still riding. Go back to sleep."

Ca'lek, who rode besides Raylan, looked at him, wondering what he was talking about.

"It's Galirras," he said, with a quick smile. "He's awake."

"I smell horse."

Looking down into the sling, he said, "That's because we're on one."

"Can I eat it? I'm hungry."

"No...you can't."

"Why not? It smells great, much better than those small things I ate earlier."

The horse neighed as if it fully understood that they were talking about it.

"Those small things are called birds, and we need the horses for our travels. Now just go back to sleep; we've still got a while to go. When we take our next break, I will wake you for your food."

Raylan felt Galirras tuck his head against his side, and soon felt the little dragon relax again.

He was glad Galirras woke up by himself. Over the next few days, he woke up more often and stayed awake much longer. His scales darkened, a little, and lost its softness, somewhat. The scaled skin began to feel pleasantly warm to the touch—much warmer than his own skin—which meant Galirras more easily kept his own temperature up. Raylan and Peadar looked at his wing, multiple times, encouraging him to open it. Peadar was astounded how fast the swelling disappeared. The cuts Galirras received from his violent hatching were also healing at an incredible rate. Still, every time they moved his wing, Galirras complained that it was painful and he could not move it further.

According to Peadar, it looked fine and was healing great. Raylan wondered if the wing really still hurt, or if Galirras was afraid to stretch it out completely. If Galirras was in any pain, he did not let it ruin his appetite. The meat did him well, it seemed. Raylan swore he had already grown ten inches in length, in the last two days.

On the seventeenth day, they circled back, dodging two large patrols. Raylan had just made his fire, when Galirras got to his feet. He moved around, more and more, during the breaks—stretching his legs, walking around the

fire, grooming himself. His talk became livelier, too. Raylan saw him turn his neck and nudge the wing that had been dislocated.

"How does it feel?" Raylan said, hoping the answer would be different today.

"It does not hurt much," said Galirras.

"Can you stretch it out?"

Galirras stretched his wing outward. The framework of bones moved outward as the thin membrane between them slowly unfolded. The yellow-brown color reflected the sunlight on his body's scales, almost giving him a golden sparkle.

For a second, Raylan thought today would be the day his wing would go past the critical point, but Galirras flinched and tucked his wing back against his flank again.

"It will not go any further."

"Come on, you just have to try. I know you can do it," encouraged Raylan.

Once again, Galirras started to spread his wing. He slowed down when he reached the familiar point. Raylan saw the muscles trembling under his scales.

"That's it, just a little further. You can do it."

But the wing refolded abruptly, as Galirras whimpered.

"It is no good. I will never be able to fly."

His head hung low as he lay down next to the fire.

"Are Kevhin and Rohan back yet with my food?" he asked, disgruntled.

"Not yet," said Raylan. Noticing Galirras' mood change, he added, "Perhaps...you should try to hunt some, for yourself."

That got his attention. He saw Galirras' head snap upward.

"I can?" he asked.

"Well, you seem to be moving around, better and better. I'm thinking it will help you build up more muscles. Sitting around, riding on a horse won't help much, so why don't we go and see if we can catch our own food."

"But how can I hunt without flying? It feels wrong to stay on the ground," said Galirras, sulking slightly.

"I'm sure you'll manage," countered Raylan, "you got four legs, don't you? With sharp talons, right? But okay, if you want to just sit here and wait for Kevhin and Rohan to get back, that's fine by me."

"No, no, I'll go!" Galirras said quickly, as he got to his feet.

Raylan informed Gavin they would be going for a quick hunt. As he returned, Galirras paced on the spot, like an overly enthusiastic kid on his name-day.

“What did he say? Can we go now?” he asked.

“He’s fine with it, as long as we’re as quiet as possible,” he answered. But Galirras did not hear the last part, as he darted off ahead, between the trees. Raylan ran to catch up.

They spent some time moving amongst the trees. When Raylan finally caught up, he stressed the importance of keeping a low profile in the forest. Taking the task very serious, Galirras adjusted his movements. As Raylan followed him, Galirras seemed almost like a stalking cat. A very large cat, nonetheless, with a long neck and an even longer tail; but the elegance of his low movements was fascinating to watch.

Galirras attempted to chase down a couple of birds, but they were too quick to be taken by surprise by such a large predator.

During the small trip, Raylan saw the dragon’s movements improve before his eyes. Where the wobbly trampling of its talons scared away birds—or small game—in the beginning, Galirras had already figured out how to move his claws along spots that were more solid, making less noise. His movements became more precise and coordinated. Instinct took over.

Over the next few days, Raylan and Galirras went out hunting during each break. On the second day, Galirras came close to biting a tuft of fur from a rabbit’s tail. The day after that, another rabbit seemed to get away, as it ducked into a hole in the ground at the last second. But Galirras, annoyed that he had not caught anything the first two days, did not give up that easily. Digging wildly with his two front claws, he tore open the hole. Raylan clenched his hands, in anticipation.

Suddenly, the rabbit tried to escape by jumping out of his hiding spot, but Galirras was prepared. He snatched it out of midair and shook his head, violently, for a moment, ripping the rabbit apart. Pieces of meat dangled from his teeth as he feasted on the small creature.

As Galirras tore up the rabbit and fed on his very first, self-made kill, Raylan swore that he saw a grin on the dragon’s face. He had not seen many big predators feed after a kill, and he was slightly taken aback by the gory scene and the ferociousness of Galirras’ eating.

Misinterpreting Raylan’s stare, somewhat, Galirras looked at him.

“Do you want some? You can have a leg, if you want.”

Raylan chuckled.

“No, thanks. It’s all yours. That was an excellent kill, so enjoy it. I’ll eat something back at the camp.”

Walking back to the camp, Raylan felt the adrenaline of the hunt, and Galirras' excitement still rushed through him. As they arrived, Peadar offered Raylan a bowl of meat soup, but he had some trouble finding his appetite again. He wondered if it was due to the excitement or the sloppy eating.

Galirras continued exploring during the breaks. He even started to walk with the group while they were traveling, which probably was a good thing, since the dragon was rapidly increasing in weight and was becoming too big to ride on a horse's back. The horses, which had now been around Galirras for a number of weeks, were adjusting surprisingly quickly. As they were not on his menu at the moment, the horses seemed to tolerate the small dragon quite well.at least for now.

The exercise benefited Galirras. Raylan saw Galirras' shoulder and leg muscles increase, but it worried him that Galirras rarely used his wings. The bands around his wing—to keep it stationary—had been taken off more than seven days ago, but his wings remained tucked tightly against his flank. Raylan thought it was partly because they would get in the way of his walking.

As he grew stronger, Galirras ventured away from the group to seek new challenges. At one point, during one of their hunts, Raylan found Galirras twenty feet above ground, climbing a tree with his sharp talons. He was on his way to a bird's nest to devour the eggs in it.

At the end of the twenty-third day after hatching, Kevhin came up, riding next to Raylan for a bit. They had not seen any patrols for the last four days, so Raylan hoped they had outmaneuvered their pursuers for the time being.

"The trees keep getting bigger ever since we crossed the mountain chain; but man, these are something else. Look at the size of them, they're huge!"

Raylan had not paid much attention to their surroundings. He had been keeping track of Galirras' movements. When he looked up, in reaction to Kevhin's voice, it was the first time he truly noticed the size of the trees in this forest.

"I wonder how old they are," continued Kevhin. "They must be at least a thousand years old."

"Amazing," mumbled Raylan, in awe. "When did they get so big?"

"Ha, you've been daydreaming, man. The forest has been widening for the last two days already. The tree's roots have been taking more room as they get taller. Look at that one over there. I bet if we all hold hands, we wouldn't even reach halfway around it!"

Raylan saw what Kevhin meant. The trees grew further away from each other, providing plenty of space for their horses to pass through the forest, even

with all the large roots running across the forest floor. Some roots were higher than Raylan, sitting on his horse. It looked like he was riding along a brown wall, until the root dropped into the ground, at the end. The ground was covered with moss and needles, almost completely dampening the sound of their horses' hooves. The needled leaves seemed to be three or four times the size of the needles up north. Stones broke through the surface, every now and then, looking like islands in a green and brown sea.

"They look like giants in comparison to the trees at home. Even the ancient forests of Lash don't have trees this big," said Raylan.

Rohan joined them.

"And these go almost straight up. Look at how far up they go before the first branches. The trees in Lash grow in almost every direction, their branches and roots are like squirming snakes. Hey, remember our training missions there, Kev?" said the archer.

"How much fun we had moving around in those trees?" added Rohan, with a sparkle in his eyes.

And although Kevhin acted as if he had not heard the hinting tone in Rohan's voice, the playful remark was not entirely lost on Raylan. He often wondered what the bond between them was. Rohan never appeared unnecessarily far from Kevhin and vice versa.

Lately, he noticed more gestures of affection, similar to the ones he increasingly saw between his brother and Xi'Lao. Small things, like a hand lingering a little longer than usual on a shoulder. He wondered if anyone else noticed, but he did not think anyone else paid enough attention to such small details. Since his link with Galirras, he spotted such small things, more and more. Something about the connection with the dragon gave him a deeper appreciation of all things, and an eye that was even keener than before.

Raylan knew both archers met during their army training. They were probably put together because both had exceptional archery skill. But, he did not know how serious they were.

"*Why would it matter?*" said Galirras, who had been following Raylan's thoughts.

Raylan shrugged, and then answered to himself.

"It wouldn't...to me, at least. I mean, I don't mind at all...on the contrary, I'd be happy for them, if they enjoyed each other's company to that extent, especially being so far from home. However, having relationships within the army is not tolerated. There are no official sanctions for same gender preference; but any relationship, discovered within the same platoon, is broken up. Usually, by

reassigning one partner, to prevent conflicts of priorities. So, while I don't mind at all, I don't know if they'd want other people to know."

"Why is that? It is not as if they are hurting anyone...right?" Galirras said.

"No, not at all, and I don't always agree with that rule. Unfortunately, same gender lovers are heavily frowned upon by some. You often hear about such people being ridiculed, beaten up, or worse. They're ignorant and small-minded people that do those things. I mean, who gave them the right to judge how others should feel?" thought Raylan, forcefully.

Shocked at his careless remark, he looked over at Kevhin to explain what he was talking about; but the words stuck in his throat, and it dawned on him what had just happened.

"Hold on...Galirras, did you just read my thoughts?" Raylan thought, in his own head.

"No, I just listened to them. Why?" responded Galirras, with curiosity, in the same manner.

"And...did I just reply to you without actually speaking?" Raylan thought the unspoken words.

"Yes, why do you sound so surprised? You did it before, in the well," said the little dragon.

"The well? I thought that was just a dream. Xi'Lao mentioned this telepathy thing earlier, but I thought it only meant that I could hear your voice, not the other way around. It might have been hurtful and, at the very least, inconsiderate of me to speak like that next to Kevhin and Rohan."

"Well, no one can hear you, except me. So, no worries there," said Galirras, cheerfully.

"Can you hear anyone else?"

"No, why would I? You're the only one that is mine."

"So, since when are you able to hear my thoughts? Can you hear me all the time?" Raylan inquired further, wanting to get all the details right.

"Only when I'm close, otherwise you become too soft to hear. And, only if I choose to listen, of course. Why? Did...did I do something bad?"

The thought of doing something that Raylan would not approve of made the dragon's voice a little shaky.

Hearing the reaction, Raylan quickly adjusted his tone.

"No...no, little one, not precisely. It's just that I'm not used to sharing all my thoughts so openly. Most people would like to keep their thoughts their own, I guess. Sometimes, people think over multiple things before deciding on what to say or do. I would not want you to misinterpret anything."

“Oh, but I do not judge,” said Galirras quickly. His voice was a mixture of hurt and disappointment now. *“But if you want, I can stop. I mean, I will stop listening.”*

Instantly, Raylan felt bad for coming on so strong. It seemed to be completely natural for Galirras to communicate in such a way. And he always enjoyed talking to Galirras. At least now, their conversations will not draw the looks of his comrades when it seemed like he was having a one-sided conversation.

“No, sorry, it’s okay. I just overreacted a bit. Just promise me that you’ll ask me when you don’t fully understand something. Aaaand, I might need some time to get used to having another perso...I mean, a dragon in my head,” he added, with a chuckle, while he winked at Galirras, walking to his left.

Instantly, he felt a warm feeling stream through him, filling him with a content and happy sensation.