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# Six Feet Under: Turn

## 2859

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2859.01.07

He was dying.

There, she had finally admitted it, had finally allowed herself to see what had been painfully obvious to everyone else for days. Her beautiful Seideth was dying and there was nothing that she nor anyone else could do about it. He was dying in pain and in misery and she couldn't stop it....

Zila sagged back into the sheets of the low bunk, never taking her eyes from the still blue form lying in the infirmary wallow. She wanted to scream, to shout, to cry, to do something, *anything*... but instead all she could manage was a sense of numb exhaustion, a final realisation of failure.

It was over.

"It wasn't supposed to end like this," she whispered softly to her dragon, knowing that Seideth was too deeply unconscious to hear her cracking voice or to feel the raw confusion of her thoughts. "We were going to see the end of the Pass together. I was going to have children, grandchildren. It was going to be *perfect*...."

Perfect. Until a moment's inattention and an unlucky updraft had torn Seideth's azure wing to bloody shreds and turned a lifetime of dreams and ambitions to so much char. If only they had turned sooner, if only they had gone *between* at Ursuth's first warning, if only –

Zila stifled a sob, suddenly too aware of the heavy stench of numbweed and ichor that filled the air, the scents underlaid by the sicklier tang of infected flesh. She herself was unhurt but her blue, her beautiful blue.... Sudden death or lingering injury was an ever-present shadow in the Weyrs, Thread snatching lives with ruthlessly random efficiency, but somehow it had always seemed to be a threat that applied to everybody *else*. Zila had lost friends and lovers, certainly, had mourned and moved on, but *this*? This was unthinkable. It couldn't be happening, not to her, not to her Seideth....

He couldn't leave her like this.

There was a sudden stirring at the back of her skull, a too-faint touch as Seideth lurched towards consciousness.

Rolling quickly to her feet, Zila pressed herself against his blue shoulder, the hide almost gray and far too hot against her hands. *I'm here, love.*

**Hurts.**

*I know it does, love.* How could it not with one wing awkwardly supported in a sling, the membrane tattered and dripping with the yellow traces of infection. The dragonhealers had done what they could but it had spread so fast and numbweed couldn't touch the internal abscesses.... *It won't....* She swallowed hard. *It won't be for much longer.*

**Good,** Seideth said softly, his mind-voice infinitely tired. Zila felt a tear slide down one brown cheek as she recalled how bright that same voice had sounded on the Sands little more than two Turns before, when everything had been new and wonderful.... **I am tired.**

*I know you are, love.* The bluerider closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against greying hide. Oh *shells*, but she wanted him to live... but she wanted his suffering to be over more. She couldn't bear to see him like this....

**So very, very tired. I wish to sleep.** Seideth gave a rattling sigh, one near-colourless eye cracking open to regard his rider. **Will you rest with me?** he asked plaintively. **I do not wish to sleep alone....**

Zila took a deep breath, suddenly knowing, beyond any doubt, that it was time. So soon. It wasn't fair, there was still so very much she wanted, needed to do.... She hadn't even had time to decide whether she was going to follow or if she

–  
**Zila?**

She smiled sadly against blue hide. In truth, there was no decision to make. Seideth needed her. Pulling her beltknife from its sheath, she cradled it against her breast, like a lover, like a child, and felt a sense of peace that she had thought she would never know again.

She was ready.

*Yes, love, I'll rest with you.*

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2859.03.14

It wasn't unusual for Kip to disappear for days at a time from his home in the Feeding Ground barn. The boy was a feral creature, locked in his own private world where animal sounds replaced human speech, and collecting the iridescent flight feathers from tiny nectar-drinking hummers was a profession. Luka had never quite understood if the boy was insane, or simply a halfwit. Either way, he was harmless, and he was Craftmaster Marshall's ward – so he was tolerated with varying degrees of affection by the rest of the Feeding Grounds staff.

A large tithe had come in three days before from Izmir: the herd of cattle was road-lean and flighty as a mob of cats, and Marshall and his senior staff had been working long shifts sorting and assessing the beasts, inspecting each for sign of illness, selecting out the best quality for the Weyr's own new breeding herds, and shifting the remainder into the back feedlot pastures to put weight back on before they would be turned out into to the Feeding Ground itself.

Marshall and his staff had been too busy to notice Kip's absence. But Luka, who came to the Feeding Grounds to lend a hand when she had the hours to spare, noticed, and began to grow concerned when she tried to count back the days to when she had seen him last.

"Have you seen Kip?" she asked, of the two apprentices who were hurrying about their morning chores.

"Haven't seen him around at all," said Hakel, who was pumping the dregs of the water from the water-wagon, which would then be driven down to the river and refilled

"Not since yesterday," replied Tanvi, who slung a shovel of manure into the wheel barrow and then stopped to reconsider. "No, not yesterday – no, it was the morning the Izmir title arrived."

"He'll show up again, he always does," Hakel said, absently swiping his forehead with his sleeve. "Tanvi, when you're done, I need your help hitching up Dusty and Ash."

"I can help with that," Luka said, automatically turning toward the paddock where the heavy work horses grazed. The great beasts came to meet her at the gate, eager for the peppermint sweetballs they knew she always had in her pockets. Luka led the two heavy-footed drafts back to the Feeding Ground barn and had their hooves picked clean and their coats groomed clean by the time Hakel was ready to harness them to the water-wagon. As Hakel drove the water wagon away toward the distant river dock, Luka picked up a shovel, thinking first to help Tanvi finish mucking stalls. Then she remembered Kip, and put the shovel down. She climbed the wooden ladder up to the hay loft instead.

"Kip?" she called as she pulled herself from the ladder into the barn loft. It was dark and dusty, and sweetly fragrant of dried grass. "Kip, are you there?"

The boy lived in the barn loft, fashioning a nest among the piles of baled straw. The nest location moved about at the boy's whim and as the amount of straw grew or declined. Sometimes the boy came when called – other times he ignored a summons, or would bleat or bark back in the animal language he preferred. Luka stood silent for a moment, listening. At first there was nothing but the faint stirrings of a barn cat or tunnelsnake among the piles of straw. But then she heard something faint – a mewling sound, like a newborn kitten.

"Kip?" Luka called again, following that whisper-soft noise. The mewling continued; the tunnelsnake-scuffling did not. "Kip?"

Savukath woke and stirred, alert to the sudden spike of her rider's concern. The breathy mewling continued, leading Luka to what looked like the mouth of a burrow in the straw. The area stank of urine. "Kip?"

The burrow was a makeshift subterranean tent made of horse blankets, broken harness and support-sticks. Luka climbed in cautiously, her eyes on the wiry shape of Kip's body, curled tightly into a fetal position where he lay. The weak mewling continued. "Hey there," Luka murmured softly, in the steady tones she would use with a fractious horse. "Hey now, what're you doing still abed? " Kip never liked to be touched – he jerked away from her as she expected. The boy's skin felt clammy and cold to the touch, and damp with fever-sweat. The boy stopped mewling for a

breath, then gave a low, bovine groan and curled even tighter around himself.

"Hey there, are you hurt? Are you ill?" Luka spoke aloud for her own comfort, not expecting response. She gently tried to roll Kip onto his back, expecting resistance and, alarmingly, meeting none. The boy simply moaned again, a low, deep sound like a cow calling a lost calf.

Luka began to check the boy for injury – and found his abdomen rigid and distended. The boy cried out in agony at her touch – and it was the first human-sounding noise she had ever heard him make.

*Savukath!* Luka called then, picking Kip up and pushing out of his stinking burrow. Kip was runty for his age; his body hung almost boneless in her arms. *I need a healer here at the Feeding Grounds! I need one now!*

She scrambled for the hayloft ladder, yelling for Tanvi. They got Kip down out of the barn loft, and she sent Tanvi off at a run to collect Craftmaster Marshall. Kip lay limp, belly distended, his eyes sunken and his skin gone blue-gray, his only sign of life the soft mewling exhalation of his breath.. Luka scrambled after horse blankets from the tack room, thinking too late that if the boy had internal injuries, having moved him could have been a dire mistake. Assured by Savukath that healers were being scrambled a-dragonback, Luka wrapped the boy in blankets and cradled his head on her lap. Helpless to do more, she was still waiting for the healers' arrival when the boy's soft, mewling cries faded to a final silence.



2859.05.07

"N'eska, I'm warning you, be careful there today." V'rili's tone was heavy with warning.

"Yes, wingsecond." N'eska tried not to look as bored as he felt. Across the landing field he could see the tents and stalls of the Sunstone Hold Harvest Gather; he wanted to run off and see the sights instead of listening to V'rili warning him yet again about how stupid holdbreds were.

"I mean it. You got chased out of Dawn Sisters last time, remember?"

"Of course I remember! You should have seen the looks on their faces!" N'eska laughed.

V'rili sighed. "Do I need to set someone to watch you?"

"No, no!" N'eska said hastily. "I promise to behave."

"All right. Get going, then." With a last warning look, V'rili turned and walked over to where his wife Lista stood browsing at one of the nearest stalls.

N'eska grinned as soon as the wingsecond's back was turned. "But I didn't say how I would behave!" he murmured as he headed off towards the bustling gather ground. Green Ossith was already settling contentedly in a sunny spot. There were plenty of sights to see; mostly of the male variety. He pretended to ponder a display of belt pouches while actually looking through them at the fine tight rear of a slim man haggling over a bolt of cloth at the next stall. The man turned and frowned when caught N'eska looking at him; the greenrider just tossed his long hair and made kissy

motions with his lips until the man gave a disgusted grunt and stomped off. Holders were so fun to tease.

He walked on towards the jewelcrafters' stalls, wondering if their wares were as interesting as his own designs. Before he got there, he felt a tug at his sleeve and turned around.

"Um, Ma'am?" The boy couldn't have been more than fifteen, and he gulped nervously as N'eska turned. "I mean sir?"

"Yes?" The boy had fine features, though he was a bit skinny for the greenrider's taste. The apple of his throat bobbed as the boy gulped again, eyes darting nervously to and fro.

"Um, sir? Can I talk to you? I mean in private?"

N'eska instantly decided. "Of course. Where shall we go?"

"Follow me," the boy said, and darted between two stalls. He had a nice-looking bottom, N'eska thought as he followed at a more leisurely pace. And the greenrider thought he knew what the boy wanted in private. He himself had been an awkward boy once, frightened of being different, nursing secret desires he couldn't tell anyone...

"Come on, hurry!" the boy said, waving at him from the door of one of the tents that stood in rows behind the last rank of stalls. His family must have traveled a ways, but been too poor, or thrifty, to get places in a guestcot.

N'eska stooped under the tent flap. There were three bundles of sleeping furs on the ground, and a few personal possessions scattered about. "So, what is it that you want?" he asked. How bold would the boy be, now that they were alone?

"I-- well, um, I don't know," he looked away, suddenly seeming twice as nervous.

N'eska stepped closer and began to reach for him. The boy shrank away, blushing fetchingly, but then appeared to gather his courage. "If I do what you want, will you Search me? Will you take me to the Weyr?"

"We'll see." Of course, it didn't really work that way, so he'd have to come up with an excuse later. "Are you sure you really want to?"

"I want to go to the Weyr, whatever it takes!"

Well, the boy probably couldn't bring himself to say out loud that he wanted N'eska. But why else get him off alone so eagerly? N'eska knew how beautiful he was, and how nervous he made a lot of holdbreds.

"Hurry up, my brother will be back soon. Or my Da."

"All right," N'eska said with a grin. This would be fun. He clasped the boy in his arms, feeling the sudden tension in the thin young body, and feeling the more pleasant tension rising in his own loins.

"W-will it hurt?" The boy's eyes were tightly closed as N'eska kissed the side of his neck, and he squeaked as the greenrider groped at his trousers.

N'eska didn't answer, busy unbuckling both belts. He dropped his trousers and put his hand down the boy's, still kissing him. His cheek was wet and tasted salty.

Then a gruff voice sounded from outside. "Hey, Beldan! Time to get back to the stall, you lazy lump!"

The boy stiffened in shock. N'eska knew he had to get out of there fast, but before he could even push the boy away, the tent flap swished aside. "Beldan, you'd better--GAAAAH! Get away from him, you filth!"

N'eska caught a glimpse of a rough face with a big red nose and a mouth twisted in rage. He tried hauling up his trousers so he could make a break for it, but only managed to trip and fall towards the boy, on one of the sleeping furs. In his mind, Ossith surged to panicked wakefulness.

"Dragonrider filth!" The big man roared again, and as N'eska scrambled on all fours away from the door, he heard the whisking sound of a knife being drawn. He had to get out! He pulled his own knife, hoping to cut his way through the tent wall.

"Draw steel on me? You shaffing filth!" A numbing, shocking blow struck N'eska in the back. Ossith screamed, somewhere far away. Something tugged at his back. It made a grating noise. He had to get out! He tried to crawl, but his legs collapsed under him. Another blow struck, and another. He tried to draw breath, but it bubbled and tasted salty. The world narrowed down to a tunnel, centered on the boy's shocked face. His mind filled with Ossith's despairing wail.

Then it stopped.



2859.07.18

A'tar/Benneth flew well in pursuit of green Ryssith. He trailed her closely, his nostrils filled with her fiery heat and the rutting musk of the blues and browns around him. She led them on a wild, erratic flight, letting her agility give her the advantage over their greater strength and endurance.

He jostled for position among the other suitors. He was aflame with that burning hunger that would be satisfied when he caught her and joined with her in mating ecstasy. He had participated in many flights; he had won his share; he had some experience. Ryssith rose and dodged and banked, then dove, and ascended again. A'tar/Benneth expected her to bank again, and maneuvered himself to a spot just below the fray, where he would have a clean shot at her as she turned her wings.

But she surprised him. A'tar/Benneth bellowed as Ryssith took an unexpected dive and breezed past him. He clasped at her but missed. Unable to slow his momentum, he found himself in the flight path of the other suitors. He banked to avoid them, but not soon enough.

Sharp, white-hot pain as someone slammed into his left wingshoulder. Fiery pain as the other clawed at him, tearing open his chest cavity. Ichor, entrails and shattered wing were trapped between them. The other shrieked and opened his wings wide to slow his descent. A'tar/Benneth fell away from him, and tried to spread his own wings, but the broken one crumpled like a spent sail, unable to bear his weight. There would be no Queen's Wing to catch him here. The earth rose up to meet him. Benneth sent pain and sorrow to his rider, trapped on the ground amongst the other flight participants. Then Benneth sought the painless void of *between...*

.... When A'tar woke again, he found himself a small room on a small cot. He felt spent. The air was full of the 'clean' scents of the infirmary. Why was he here? he had been guiding Benneth through a mating flight. They had been so close. Surely they had won? Surely they should still be at the flight cots? Why did his mouth taste of fellis? He mentally reached for Benneth -- and shrank from the gaping hole he found there.

He still smelled the musk of the other riders, pressed close around the greenrider. He remembered faces still in mating flight stupor as he was thrust violently out of his own. He remembered... intense pain, a shattered wing, a chest cavity clawed open, ichor-laced entrails... and a dragon falling. He remembered shock and screams. His own?

"No..." he croaked. His voice was so hoarse.

He sat up. Numbly he recognized that he was in one of the private rooms in the back of the Dragon Infirmary, reserved for dragonriders whose life partners were injured... or deceased.

No, Benneth must be injured... Badly, if A'tar was here. A'tar reached again for the part of his consciousness that was Benneth, only to find something so much worse than nothing. It was as though the part of him that had been Benneth had been torn away from him, and not cleanly; taking tendrils of himself with it, leaving a gaping hole in himself that nothing could fill.

"No," he said again, louder. "No no no no NO NO!!!" He clutched the pillow to him and rocked back and forth, sobbing. His dear, beautiful, blue Benneth. Gone. Not in Threadfall, as A'tar had expected. Death and injury were forever a dragonrider's future, but not like this... not like this..

A'tar felt a hand on his shoulder. He blinked to clear his eyes and looked up into the sorrowful face of Wingsecond V'lar. He turned away furiously. What reason did V'lar have to be sad? He still had his Jreth, and A'tar had *nothing* now, *nothing*...

"Alatar?" V'lar said tentatively.

A shock ran up the bluerider's spine at hearing his full birthname. "I don't want your sympathy," he said hoarsely.

"I know," V'lar replied. "I'm just here to find out... what you want to do next."

What he wanted to *do*? Bile rose in his throat. What use was there in doing anything if Benneth was gone? He was weyrborn and weyrbred. He had nowhere else to go. If he stayed, he would forever be reminded of what he'd had and lost. *Oh, Benneth...* He turned back to V'lar to give a biting comment, but it died on his tongue when he saw the small, stoppered vial in the Wingsecond's right hand. Alatar knew what it held, and immediately longed for that long emptiness, for something to take away the pain he felt and would always feel.

V'lar held the mercy draught up tentatively. Alatar nodded and held out his hand.

It was a perfect day.

Deftly twining silky strands of his inky hair into a braid with his long fingers, B'dor walked along the rim of the cliff-face. Far below him the sea pounded against the roots of the cliff, rebounding with a trail of lacy white foam. The sea air was crisp and the sky bright. Puffy white clouds hovered far above the ocean and a stiff little breeze danced with leaf and cloth and hair. It was B'dor's rest day and he had decided to fly off to a little cove he knew of to the east of the Weyr. After surveying the place, which she had been to at least a dozen times before, though she didn't remember, Yerlenth had informed him regally that the sun on the beach on the *other* side of the cliff was far superior to the one he had chosen to bathe in, and she was still dozing where she had curled up, dreaming happy, dainty dreams. In short, the day was sunny, clear, gorgeous, and ultimately, perfect.

The hem of the traditional Igenite robe he wore billowed around B'dor's slender ankles, caught by a fervent wind that rushed pebbles and rivulets of dust along the ground. The greenrider daydreamed as he walked, looping the finished braid around his head and beginning on the next. Yerlenth's latest mating flight was merely a sevenday past and it had been *delicious* as usual, as had been the *gorgeous* rider whose brown had caught her. Love had not yet found the greenrider, but in his heart, he knew it would one day. Until then there were plenty of riders to tease and fill his bed. B'dor giggled at the thought, and memories of a few choice encounters came to mind.

Unseen by the greenrider, a little brown firelizard in the long, sweeping grasses nibbled at the smooth lip of a clam held in his foreclaws. He watched the Man with absent curiosity as he tried to work his small sharp teeth and talons into the crevice of the recalcitrant clam.

He remembered Men. He remembered them when they had come in Big Fiery Objects, and he remembered when the Mountain exploded. More recently he remembered digging up his clam.

As the Man fiddled with the fluttering strands of his hair, the little brown watched him walk across the cliff. His robe billowed around his legs with another gust of wind, and he twirled in delight, laughing.

He also tripped on the hem of his robe, stumbled, caught himself, rolled an ankle, and promptly toppled off the cliff.

"AAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

"

The little brown's head cocked at the unexpected sound, curious but unalarmed. He hopped aloft with his clam in his foreclaws and settled along the cliff's edge on his haunches, staring downward.

The Man had become a fluttery, tumbling shape, buffeted by the wind like a leaf falling very, very fast. The brown did not understand why the Man did not simply fly; that is what the brown would do if he were falling. Stupid Man. The brown gnawed on his clam.

A bugle split the air and bounced off the cliff and the clouds, loud and alarmed, and a mammoth green Big One burst into the sky level with the cliff and dove, screaming.



Greens were very scatterbrained, the little brown knew. He liked greens. He liked to chase them when they were proper-sized, like him.

They were very stupid.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGG  
GGGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

A whitewing landed on the cliff a few feet away from the little brown, attracted by the movement of potential prey. It cocked its narrow head and stared downward with one beady eye. The little brown and the whitewing watched in silent curious accord as the Man tumbled end over end. He smacked into the cliff wall and he stopped making noises. He kept falling, growing smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller, smaller than the little brown’s clam. The Wide Water swallowed him up.

The great green Big One shrieked and left to the place between the air, where it was very cold, but she did not come out again. Stupid Big One. Even hatchlings knew how to leave for the cold place between the air and come out again.

The whitewing’s head rotated to the little brown, beady eyes focusing in on the little brown. They considered each other for a moment. The little brown abandoned his clam and pounced on the whitewing, and had a delicious lunch.

It was a perfect day.



2859.11.14

By the time he reached the track that climbed the hillside towards Bent Peak Cothold, Torkin had managed to rouse himself to a fine state of anger. So, his young wife had betrayed him at the Solstice Gather, had she? Been seen going into one of the Hold barns with a man, had she? So that’s what she’d got up to while he was drinking! A fine way to repay him for the treat he’d given her, taking her to the Hold! Well, he’d have the truth of it as soon as he got home.

He’d even left today’s Shearing Gather as soon as he’d sold his fleeces, rather than staying overnight as he’d planned. Of course, his cousin hadn’t actually seen the man’s face, just his back. “A short fellow, dressed in leathers,” Darnik had said. “Hair down to his collar – looked like some fancy-man.” Torkin spat. He hoped the worthless piece of wherry-dung had had more joy of Brenada than he ever had! He’d thought that marrying a young wife would give him a new lease on life, but she turned away from him in bed, and when he insisted, she just lay there and let him get on with it. All right, he was a mature man – must be nearer sixty Turns than fifty – but, shaffit! A man still had needs!

As he approached the cothold, his frown deepened. Brenada should have been working on the vegetable garden at this time of day, but there was nobody there. Slacking off while he was away, was she? He urged the mare to a brisker trot, but then reined her back as a thought arrested him. What if she were still seeing the man? She’d been different

lately. Happier, as if she had some smug little secret. Sometimes, he’d even heard her singing when he came back from the hills after a night with the sheep. Maybe her fancy-boy had been visiting her! Maybe he was there now!

He left the cart some way from the cottage and crept inside as quietly as he could. Brenada wasn’t in the kitchen, where they lived and worked. Torkin crossed the stone floor to the curtain that screened their sleeping area, trying to silence each booted step. He listened for several moments, then snatched at the curtain and tore it aside. The bed was empty. He stomped out and made for the barn.

As he approached the barn door, he heard a murmur. A woman’s voice, low and caressing. He couldn’t make out the words, but the tone was unmistakable. She’d never talked like that to him. Without thinking, he picked up the pitchfork that was leaning against the wall, then slipped quietly through the door.

They were lying on some bales of hay, the man on top of Brenada. Torkin could see the rumpled brown hair, long enough to hide the face; the short body, bare to the waist; the wherhide trousers – it was the same man! They hadn’t seen him enter. They didn’t hear his silent approach. He could see the man’s hand touch her face as they kissed...

Hot anger seized Torkin. Grabbing the man’s shoulder he dragged him away from Brenada and threw him down, so that he lay face up on the stone floor. Almost blinded by rage, he drove the pitchfork into the adulterer’s chest. He heard the harsh sigh as life left the body, saw green eyes stare blankly upwards from a delicate face, saw the blood-red blossom where the pitchfork’s tine had pierced the heart. His mouth fell open and stayed that way as he gaped at the bare breasts of a woman.

His wife’s lover was a woman! The very idea was horrible. It seemed to freeze his mind, so that he couldn’t think.

“You’ve killed her! You’ve killed her! You murderous bastard! I loved her, and you’ve killed her!” As she stood up and lunged towards him, Brenada seemed almost hysterical.

“You...” He gestured weakly with the pitchfork.

Brenada halted, still leaning towards him, then rocked back on her heels. “She was a dragonrider. You killed a dragonrider.” A note of calculation crept into her voice. “You killed a dragon, too. Toraith was on the hillside. Didn’t you hear her scream? You know they go \*between\* when their riders die.”

“A dragon!” Torkin was shocked. For all his faults, he told himself, he knew his duty to the Weyr. Conflicting emotions tore him. “But – you – that woman. It’s...” Words came to mind, but none of them seemed to do justice to the enormity of what had happened.

“*That woman* was called Ineshra, and she was the finest person I ever met. She made me happy, which is more than you ever did. So what are you going to do about it? Kill me too?” Brenada waited while he tightened his grip on the pitchfork and stared at her helplessly. “Or,” she added slyly, “do you want me to help you hide the body?”

He looked down at the fallen dragonrider. “Hide the body?”

She stepped round Ineshra and stood next to him, looking sadly down as she pulled her tunic closed. "They'll come looking, you know. She'd have left word where she'd gone. Dragons can get here in an instant. You won't get a grave dug in time without me."

Torkin's hand opened slowly and the pitchfork fell to the ground. It was just starting to occur to him that the woman – the dragonrider – would have had no reason to say where she was going, when Brenada seized her chance. As she darted away from him, he turned to follow, and found himself sprawling on the floor as he tripped over the handle of the pitchfork. By the time he'd got to his feet, she was out of the barn and running down the path, too far ahead on those young legs of hers for him to catch her. And she was running towards the cothold's only horse, with his gather-takings still in the saddlebag.



2859.13.31

There was a Threadfall to be met in stormy weather over the headlands of Windsong Hold, so Craftmaster Glynda had not thought twice about leaving the childbirth to Kendi. While not a ranked crafter, Kendi was an experienced midwife. She had a pair of apprentices to aid her, and there had been nothing unusual or worrisome about Corianna's pregnancy, so Glynda had had no compunctions about leaving the young mother in Kendi's experienced hands. After all – the windy, rainless 'Fall could prove brutal to dragon and rider alike, and Glynda expected that she and her journeyman staff would have their hands full of injured dragonriders to tend. A healthy young woman bearing her a child wasn't likely to be a problem, and Glynda and her staff were within call if one developed.

Unfortunately, one developed.

Word had just been relayed to the Infirmary that R'mal's riders had met the Leading Edge over the lush shores of Windsong Hold when Apprentice Nori came rushing out of the hallway which led to the back treatment rooms.

"Hurry," was all the girl said, wide-eyed and ashen-faced.

Glynda made eye contact with the closest of her senior journeymen – Amano nodded back, acknowledging a silent passing of command, and then Glynda turned and followed her fleet-footed apprentice back to the birthing room.

"Report!" Glynda snapped as she arrived.

Corianna lay limp on the birthing couch, her head propped up by a firm round pillow. Apprentice Tymania was doing chest compressions on the woman, while Kendi was pressing on Corianna's enormous belly. "The birthing was coming along just fine," Kendi said, panting for breath as she worked. "Everything was coming along normally. Corianna's contractions were strong and decreasing at a quick pace; she is well dilated to pass the child, and I was expecting it to crown shortly. But then between one contraction and the next, Corianna complained of a severe headache – you know it must be bad, for her to even notice it during childbirth! One contraction – just one – and when it

had passed, she could no longer speak. I sent Nori for you immediately. Nori was hardly out the door when suddenly your apprentice could no longer hear a heartbeat."

Tymania continued with the chest compressions, her hands steadier than the terrified expression on her face. Glynda moved to check Corianna's eyes for reaction, nodding approval to her apprentice for having wit enough to elevate the stricken woman's head. Corianna's right pupil was fully dilated, while the left was just a black pin-point surrounded by green, brown-ringed iris. Neither pupil was responsive to light or the gentle brush of a fingertip.

"Eyes are blown," Glynda said aloud, her tone emotionless. "I won't know for sure until we have time to look, but it could be a blood clot in the brain." It wasn't the first patient Glynda had lost to a stroke – and blood clots were a rare but dangerous side effect for some pregnancies. However, Glynda had never lost a mother in childbirth in this way, or someone so very young. She turned away from the blindly staring face, and reached after the nearest instrument tray for a scalpel. "Tymania, she's gone. You can stop the chest compressions." The dark-haired girl sagged back from the birthing chair, while Glynda readied her scalpel. "Kendi, we need to get that baby out while there's still a chance for it."

It was a quick, vertical cut across the swollen abdomen from just below the navel to just above the pubic bone, then a deft horizontal cut to open the uterus. Kendi had no hesitation to reach into Corianna's still-living body and pluck out the squirming, blood-streaked infant. As Glynda clamped and cut the umbilical cord, Kendi sucked fluids from the baby's nose and mouth, and in the moment which followed, the newborn waved its arms and gave a high-pitched squawk.

Glynda took the infant from Kendi to examine the child. It was a boy, with strong lungs and a thick tuft of black hair. His heart sounded strong, his weight was good, and his color was pinking up nicely. Glynda nodded to herself as she handed the infant back to Kendi. "Dyenia is nursing her newest, isn't she?"

Kendi nodded as she finished cleaning the newborn. "There will be others as well, to help nurse this poor little man," she murmured.

Glynda turned back to her apprentices. Nori had joined Tymania, and the girls were hugging one another, looking badly rattled. Too late, Glynda realized Corianna had been a Candidate in the barracks with her apprentices for several months, before the freedoms of Weyr life and healthy youthful hormones had led to Corianna's pregnancy. Her family back at Izmir didn't want her back, so Corianna had shifted into the Weyrhall staff, with the understanding that once her babe was weaned, she could stand Candidate again.

Glynda fixed her shaken apprentices with a sternly sympathetic look. "This is why the Weyr has ample supplies of the greenrider's tea," she said, knowing they were both looking into the unpleasant face of their own mortalities. "Use it when you've need. In the meanwhile, sew her back up and wrap her in a shroud. We can dispose of her after the rush of the Fall. Kendi, please notify the Headwoman. Who

knows. Maybe Corianna's family will have a change of heart and want her son.”

Apprentice Josana appeared in the doorway, breathless from a run. “Amano sent me. We've got two injured dragons landing in the Square,” she reported. “And one of the riders took a clump full in the chest.”

Glynda spared a last look for the new life cradled in the midwife's arms, then put Corianna's death behind her and went in search of patients who could still be saved.