
The Edge of Belonging

by Juniper

2860.04.04

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2860.01.12

The shutters were open and N'vai bent to lean on the frame of the window as he looked out. This weyringcot was familiar: it was the one he shared with D'lyn at Southern Weyr, with their two beds pushed together at one end of the room to make space for a small sitting area at the other. Through the window he saw, with no more than a faint sense of unease, that there were only a few feet of grass between himself and the sheer cliff edge. The cot must have moved. Out to sea was the familiar low outline of the Whitewing Islands, and that was wrong, too, but he couldn't think why.

A light footstep behind was the only warning he had before arms wrapped themselves round his waist.

"Hello, 'Vai. Not still homesick, are you?" The light tenor voice was warm, and so well known. N'vai spun round to embrace D'lyn, drinking in the sight of sparkling eyes and a broad smile before burying his face in the older boy's shoulder and clinging to him with a sense of profound relief. He felt D'lyn's lips press against the base of his neck, and the first stirrings of his own body's reaction.

"Not now. Now I'm home."

Someone was speaking in the back of his mind. ***And I want you to oil me, so that my hide will shine and Cyeth and Zeth and Hadriath will admire me.***

He groaned, reluctant to be disturbed, holding on to this moment of complete happiness. *Not now, Zalyth. Later.*

In that instant of distraction, he felt the body in his arms turn cold and wet. He opened his eyes and released his friend, then stared in horror as D'lyn sank into the expanse of water before him and his features were transformed into the bloated, pasty image of N'vai's young sister, with her hair floating around her drowned face in a ghastly corona. He gasped and cried out.

You are dreaming. You should wake up. I want a bath and some oil.

The details of the dream were already fading as he sat up in bed and rubbed the tears from his eyes. He'd not had that nightmare for a while, and what came before it he couldn't now remember, except that he knew he'd been happy. He could tell from the light that it was still very early, and tried to hide the resentment he felt towards Zalyth for waking him.

It is a fine day for flying.

Something in her tone was unfamiliar: a note of smug anticipation and something else, something that N'vai didn't

recognise at once. He threw back the sheet and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

A fine day to fly high and far.

Her mind was on other dragons and she wasn't really talking to him at all. He rose and went to look through the window towards her wallow. She was angling her head this way and that, for all the world like a girl posing in front of a mirror, and even in the grey morning light, her hide seemed to have a rich, deep lustre. He felt his stomach muscles clench, and took deep breaths to try to calm himself. It would be today, then.



The warm evening sunlight shining on N'vai's closed eyelids roused him from a satiated sleep. His limbs felt heavy and totally relaxed. He considered moving, but it seemed an unnecessary effort. Why open his eyes, even, when he was enjoying the afterglow of – Zalyth had risen! As the realisation hit home, he blinked, and threw his forearm across his face to protect his eyes from the sunlight. She had risen in her first mating flight, and he had just slept with – someone – for the first time in over a Turn. Who was it? Was he anyone that N'vai knew? He remembered a blue looming above him – above *her*, rather, because he had been almost lost in the storm of her emotions – but beyond that there was only the vague recollection of urgent passion. Everything else about the flight eluded him. Slowly, he lowered his arm, turned onto his side, and opened his eyes.

A woman was standing by the bed looking down at him. That in itself was a shock. He'd known that there were women riding male dragons at Kadanzer, strange as that still seemed to him. He'd even worried whether he'd be able to respond as he should if one of their dragons caught Zalyth: although he knew perfectly well that his usual preference would make no difference at all in the heat of a flight, that hadn't stopped him from being uneasy. He hadn't seriously expected it to happen. There weren't that many of them, after all. Yet, here was someone whose face was only vaguely familiar, already dressed and looking ready to leave. He should say something. What? What did you say to someone you'd just slept with – especially when she looked as old as your mother? She had the same light red hair, too. He said the first thing that came into his head.

"What's your name?" To his chagrin, his voice squeaked, making him sound like a child in his own ears. He swallowed to moisten his throat.

She smiled. "Ismarra. Blue Hadriath's rider – we're in StrongWind. Nice of you to ask. Not all of them do." He noticed that she had green eyes. She was very thin, and the way she'd pulled her hair back from her face made her features look bony.

"Uh, thank you." He couldn't think of another thing to say, except, 'was I all right?' and he certainly wasn't going to ask that!

"Was it your first flight? Don't worry, you'll get used to it. And it was fine, in case you're wondering."

He smiled gratefully, then sat up. With a shock, he realised that he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. He grabbed for the sheet.

Ismarra chuckled. "It's a bit late for that. But I'll leave you to get dressed. Clear skies, N'vai." She turned her back and strode confidently out of the weycot, leaving a disconcerted N'vai to wonder how she knew his name when he hadn't known hers.

She really did remind him of his mother.



2860.03.09

Ismarra sipped tentatively at her klah as the breakfast conversation at StrongWind's table washed over her. For once, she wasn't taking much interest. At the head of the table, Z'hon and T'noh were deep in conversation. Closer to her, O'ris was laying down the law about something or other, with Y'heto and Anyara and a couple of others listening.

Veska was next to Anyara, nodding absently, but she glanced round and caught Ismarra's eye, then mouthed something that Ismarra couldn't quite make out. It looked as if it might be, "Men!"

Ismarra smiled, then returned to picking at her meal. Just looking at the food made her feel nauseous again. She pushed the plate away and picked up her mug again, taking deep breaths.

A hand passed in front of her face. "Anyone home?"

Nivwilya was next to her, smiling. "I've asked you three times if you wanted any fruit. You seemed miles away. Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about something. No, thank you; I'll stay with klah."

"You haven't eaten a thing, again. How are you going to last for a morning of drills with nothing but klah inside you? Let me get you some porridge, if you don't fancy bread. You can put some sweetener on it, and – what?"

Bile rose in Ismarra's throat at the well-meaning offer. She swallowed hard, then started to edge her chair backwards. "Nothing. I just need to go outside for a moment."

Nivwilya frowned, and watched her appraisingly. "Aren't you feeling well? I thought you didn't look so good yesterday."

"Well, thank you," Ismarra protested. "It's always nice to know that."

"Now *that* isn't like you at all," the greenrider said kindly. "What's the matter?"

Ismarra realised that some of the others were listening, and heat rose to her face. "I don't know. I'm just a bit preoccupied, that's all. I think I'll get some air for a few minutes before the briefing." She stood up and made her way out of the Weyrhall.

Outside, the day was warming up already. Ismarra leaned her back against the stone wall. It was the height of summer, and wearing flying leathers was going to be unbearable with her stomach so unsettled. The thought of the upcoming drill was daunting, and the last few morning runs and exercise sessions had been almost more than she could manage. She couldn't put off making her decision any longer, and making no decision was itself a decision.

She began to rehearse the arguments again, as she had so many times over the last few days. She didn't want to spend time away from the Wing, and yet, in some ways it would be a relief. Ever since the memorial for Sarais and V'vam, at which she and Br'mig had spoken of how the Wing had changed from the old StrongWind, she had been unsettled, and she knew that she was seen as a troublemaker. The atmosphere wasn't as bad as it had been, but some of Z'hon's closest followers had been openly hostile at times, and she was sick and tired of it. Perhaps some time away would help her to get some perspective. It wasn't as if...

"Ismarra?" Nivwilya's voice interrupted her thoughts, and she turned her head sharply towards the greenrider. That set off another wave of nausea, and this time she couldn't resist it. She doubled over, vomiting. Nivwilya laid a hand on her arm, but stayed quiet until she'd straightened.

She looked down at the remains of her meagre breakfast and said resignedly, "I'd better clean that up."

Nivwilya's grip became firmer. "Wait a moment. Tell me: have you seen the healers yet? And are you going to have it?"

The smell rising from the mess at Ismarra's feet wasn't helping her stomach to settle. She swallowed hard, and the taste in her mouth made her nose wrinkle involuntarily. "I don't know. I don't know! And I've got to decide, before *betweening* decides for me."

"Yes." The older woman's voice was calm. "You could have a few months out of all this. And you're not getting any younger, you know. It's hard for riders to conceive, especially older riders. If you ever want to do it, maybe this would be a good time? You can have the child fostered; it's up to you much or how little you see of it. Who's the father, anyway? I didn't think you were seeing anyone."

"I'm not. I think it must have been a flight – he won one, a couple of months back. That young greenrider in the Queens' Wing. Zalyth's. He's one of J'hanos' people. But really, he's hardly old enough – that's why he's in the Queens' wing."

Nivwilya chuckled. "If he's the one I think you mean, he looks young enough to be *your* child. But then, if he were a holder lad, he could have been married off by now, so there's no need to get squeamish. Not the one you'd have chosen to father your firstborn, then?"

"Rather not." Ismarra briefly considered whom she would have chosen, given the opportunity, and didn't come up with an obvious answer. G'nan, perhaps. "But, that hardly matters. Flights happen, and we take what comes."

"So, what are you going to do? Z'hon won't mind if you decide to have it, you know. He wouldn't stop you coming back to the wing afterwards, if that's what you want. He likes children."

"I'm going to.... go and get a shovel," Ismarra said firmly, and turned towards the door, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"I'll clear that up. Whatever you decide, you need to do it now. It's much harder on your body if you abort when you're further along, you know."

Ismarra leaned back against the wall again for a moment, then stood up straight. "Look at me, wilting like a flower in the sun." Even if she had the child, she'd want

to come back to the Wing, of course. The child would have to be fostered: she couldn't look after it properly alongside the commitment of being a dragonrider. But she could keep in touch, be part of its life. Did she want that? Biting her lip, she tried to imagine being huge with child, nursing a baby, playing with an infant. Those things were so different from her life in StrongWind. The appeal of spending time on things that seemed clean, and wholesome, and free from back-biting and bullying, was almost overwhelming. These last few months...

This Wing makes you unhappy.

Hadriath. She hadn't thought to discuss it with him, and now that she realised it, the omission amazed her. *Would you mind flying with the Queens' Wing for a while?*

Of course not. It would be good for you, too. You do not like all the arguing.

It was true. Things were calmer now than they had been a few months ago, but even so, she'd had as much conflict as she could take, especially now that she was feeling ill for much of the time. A tight, determined smile spread across her face. She faced Nivwilya, who was watching her in silence, and said firmly, "Thank you. That's kind of you. I need to speak to Z'hon."

She threaded her way through the people emerging from the Weyrhall and found the wingleader just standing up to leave. He raised a questioning eyebrow as she approached him. "Well?"

"Sir, request to be excused from drill this morning to attend the infirmary. And—" She took a deep breath, "I need to request a transfer to the Queens' Wing for a while. I'm going to have a baby."

Z'hon replied gruffly, "Permission granted. Get fit before you come back." He left her standing there as he headed for the door.

"Well," Ismarra thought, 'at least he's expecting me back. After all that's happened, that's not so bad.'



2860.03.12

It was strange to drill with a new Wing after so many Turns with StrongWind, and the tactics used in the Queens' Wing were different, based on the need to see and flame scattered strands of Thread at low level rather than the denser 'Fall encountered higher up. Still, Ismarra thought, she and Hadriath hadn't done badly, and the few points where they'd lapsed were more to do with her feeling sick than with any real difficulty. That had to pass soon, surely? Now that they'd been debriefed and dismissed, she walked back towards Hadriath. Next to him was a large olive-toned green that she recognised as Zalyth. N'vai was there, too, and looking at her curiously. Well, there wasn't much point in putting this off. She walked over to the greenrider.

"N'vai. You're still here, then? When are you old enough to transfer?"

"I'm old enough now," he said, smiling ruefully. "It just hasn't happened yet."

"Have you asked about it? When it's likely to be?"

"Not yet. I will. If... well, I haven't got round to it. Not sure I want to hear why it hasn't happened, really. Maybe B'nalsh doesn't want me back."

The bitterness in his voice took Ismarra by surprise. "Well, is it all right here?"

N'vai shrugged. "All right, yes. It was useful to be able to get back into flying more gently, after I was scored. Just – my arm's almost right now, and I'm ready to move on." He looked at her curiously. "You're not a dragonhealer, are you?"

Ismarra laughed. "Which is a polite way of asking me what I'm doing here? Well, as it happens, I need to talk to you about that." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to have a baby. It's your child."

She was aware that she was smiling uncontrollably, that telling her baby's father the news seemed to make it real in a way that it hadn't been before. N'vai, though, was gaping. "Mine? From the flight? But... oh, shells. I'm not old enough!"

Ismarra chuckled. "Well, it seems that you are. Fathering a child doesn't actually require any great degree of maturity, you know. Just working equipment."

An expression of wonder was spreading over the young man's face. 'He's realising that he's going to be a father. Bet he says it. Such a cliché...'

"I thought – I never thought I was going to have any blood kin ever again." The remark puzzled Ismarra until she remembered that he was one of the Ninth Pass riders, who had come forward in time.

"You lost your whole family?"

"My parents, my brothers and sister, my grandparents – everyone. And most of my friends, as we came forward." He stared at Ismarra's middle for a second, then blushed and averted his eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit stunned. It's... wonderful. Can I... will I be able to... I mean, I want to really *be* its father."

'He'll try to make a good one, too,' Ismarra thought. 'And better a lad like that, who really wants a family, than some handsome bronzer who's bedded half the females in the Weyr and doesn't take an interest in his children.' She'd never had romantic sun-dreams of bringing up children with someone she loved, but she was glad that this child would have a father who wanted it. Yes, it could have been a lot worse.



2860.03.19

N'vai stood on the step of his weycot and looked over the Queens' Wing area. The cots seemed crowded, too close together, though he knew rationally that that was just his imagination: the ones in FireStar's area had been spaced out in the same way.

He still missed FireStar. He missed his old weycot on the cliff, and sitting on the grass with his back against the wall, looking out to sea. He missed having T'varren and V'ret nearby, though he still saw them, especially T'varren. The brownrider had been very good about visiting when N'vai was first injured, and they'd become friends, often

finding a quiet beach to bathe their dragons together, and then walking while the brown and the green sunned, or just sitting on the clifftop behind N'vai's cot.

His new wingmates seemed friendly enough. The younger ones were mostly dragonhealers. He'd enjoyed playing music with bluerider Z'blon a few times, too; he'd been able to borrow a pipe, and Z'blon played the guitar very well. It was strange having the goldriders as wingmates, though – the gulf between him and them was so vast, though Cassidora seemed friendly. Anyway, it had hardly seemed worth making a great deal of effort to make friends in this Wing, as he'd expected to be there for only a couple of months. But he still hadn't been transferred back to FireStar.

He rehearsed the questions that had been plaguing him. Was he still not thought ready, even though he was old enough now? He'd been doing his exercises faithfully, and his arm felt fine, most of the time. Had they just forgotten? Another weyring class had graduated, and FireStar had more new riders. Did they no longer need him? Would he be sent somewhere else? Should he ask?

He smiled as a sense of warmth filled him. None of it seemed to matter as much, now. If they kept him in the Queens' Wing longer, it just increased his chances of seeing his child before Thread got him. Some people said that blood ties hardly mattered in the Weyr, but he'd known and loved his parents, and they him. It mattered. It mattered that there would be someone in this Weyr, in this time, who was tied to him by blood. He wanted to live to know that child. He wanted that child to know him, too. A child should know his parents.

Zalyth seemed uncomfortable with that thought. ***I do not remember the gold who clutched me or the bronze who sired me. They are not here.***

Patiently, though they'd had this conversation several times in the last sevenday, N'vai repeated, "Your dam was Irineth and your sire was Moreth. Irineth and her rider founded this Weyr – Kadana was the first Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain Weyr, which became Kadanzer. And Moreth and his rider were Oldtimers – they travelled forward in time, just like we did. They travelled forward from their time to our time, just like we did from our time to now."

Zalyth was starting to get annoyed. ***This is our time. You think too much about what is past.***

N'vai couldn't help smiling as he was filled with something he'd long missed – the sense of having someone to belong to, another human being to connect him to this time and place. *Well, I'm not thinking about the past now. I'm thinking about the future. We're going to have a baby, my love! A little boy, or a girl like my sister. Hadriath's rider even looks a bit like my mother – our son or daughter might look just like the rest of my family.*

Zalyth must have heard enough over the last sevenday to recall that Hadriath had won her, even if she didn't remember the flight. ***Hadriath is a good-natured blue, she concluded. If it makes you this happy, perhaps I shall let him fly me again. Then you can mate with his rider again and she can have another one.***

N'vai could hardly contain the laughter welling up inside him. *My love, I keep telling you – girls aren't gold dragons. You can't just decide like that!*

Zalyth muttered grumpily at the back of his mind, but N'vai settled contentedly onto the small bench beside his weycot door. Zalyth was right: the present mattered. She was here, he had friends, and now he was going to have family. This was his time now.



2860.04.03

Ismarra still found it strange not to be sitting with StrongWind at dinner, though she was enjoying getting to know her new, albeit temporary, wingmates. Still, when she saw Anyara waving to her from StrongWind's table as she made her way across the Weyrhall with a plate of salad and sliced meat, she diverted to go over and talk to her friends and slipped into a space next to Nivwilya.

"How are you feeling?" Anyara asked. "Still sick?"

"It's quite a bit better," she replied. "You do get over it, and I think the easier pace is helping, too. Good enough to fly 'Fall this morning, anyway."

"Yes, how are you getting on in the ranks of the softshells?" That was Veska.

Next to her, T'noh said reprovingly, "Make sure you don't lose your edge. You're better than that."

"Oh, I'm no softshell," she laughed. "But the baby's not ready for StrongWind just yet, so I'm afraid you'll just have to miss me for a bit longer."

Nivwilya chimed in with, "And having a baby isn't going to turn her into one. You men don't know the half of it! It's hard work – ask anyone who's tried it!"

"Like lifting weights, only all the time," Olindia added with a smile. "And then there's the birth. Lots of exercise for muscles *you* don't possess! And the pain, of course."

"That's right, encourage her," Nivwilya chuckled, then added innocently, "Why, T'noh, you look a little pale. Are you sure you're up to this conversation? If a little talk about women's matters has you so squeamish, are you quite sure *your* shell's not softening?"

T'noh looked suddenly angry. "Don't!"

At the same time, Veska chipped in with, "Anyway, it'll be ages before you can come back. If you do. If Z'hon even wants you back."

Ismarra stared at her. Veska had stood up to Z'hon when it had been needed, but now that things had calmed down, her continuing resentment and hostility grated. In fact, when it came down to it, most of the Wing were just wearing to be with, apart from a few old friends. Oh, she'd be back – but right now, she just wanted some peace, away from these people, this Weyr...

Something inside her started to churn. "And that's all I need. I thought I was getting over that." She stood up abruptly. "Sorry. Whoever called this *morning* sickness obviously never had it." She hurried outside, leaving most of her meal uneaten.

As soon as she was out of the Weyrhall, though, her stomach settled, and she wondered if it was the company making her feel sick, rather than her condition. Well, she'd heard that strange things happened in pregnancy. The anger and the urge to be elsewhere remained, though.

She called for Hadriath, and when the blue arrived, they climbed through the evening air, then jumped *between* to the

northern tip of Dorado and landed on the cliffs that extended north from Whitesands Seahold. It was a favourite spot. Half an hour of total quiet, looking over the stunning view of the coast, was enough to calm her mind. She wasn't going to let herself be driven out of her Wing by those idiots, and whatever Veska had said, Z'hon was quite accepting of her absence and her pregnancy. She was hardly the first rider to have a baby and return to the Wing, after all. She'd be back. If she transferred, it would be because *she* wanted to.

That thought took her by surprise; she'd not seriously considered it before, but perhaps it was worth thinking about. 'Plenty of time to think about that, anyway.'

She got to her feet, aware as she moved of the first changes in balance and body shape, and returned to the Weyr with a sense of new possibilities opening.

The cramps crept up on her as she was preparing for bed, but she only realised what the discomfort signified when she felt the warmth of blood between her legs.



2860.04.04

Ismarra felt utterly weary, but sleep eluded her, kept away by too many thoughts. She lay with her eyes closed, in the hope that it would keep people away. The day after a 'Fall, there were other patients in the Infirmary apart from herself, and both she and they had had visitors. She really didn't want to talk to anyone else.

She heard hesitant footsteps approaching the bed and opened her eyes. Apparently her pretence hadn't fooled the healers. It was the boy, looking nervously down at her. Well, she was going to have to face him sooner or later.

"Dunia told me what happened. Are you all right?"

"N'vai," she said flatly. "Yes, I'm all right. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," he said awkwardly. "It happens sometimes, that's all."

Guilt screamed in her mind, 'Yes, it was!' If she hadn't decided to make a totally unnecessary trip out of the Weyr, with two jumps *between* in less than an hour, on top of flying Fall... Journeywoman Carran had told her that there was no way of knowing how many trips *between* would cause a miscarriage, but however much the healer insisted that she couldn't blame herself or those jumps, she did, and she was going to keep on blaming herself.

N'vai was still standing there, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere else. She didn't have anything to say to him. Eventually, he said, "You'll be able to go back to your Wing."

"Right now, I can't think beyond going to sleep," she snapped, then apologised. He was trying to do the right thing, and clearly didn't have a clue what to say. "Sorry, N'vai," she repeated.

"I'll let you rest, then," he said, with obvious relief. This must be hard for him, too.

N'vai smiled at her, then left as quietly as he'd come.

'Back to your Wing.' Well, that was the question. She'd not only lost the baby, she'd lost her break from StrongWind, lost her time to think. She was surprised by

how much she resented that. Maybe that alone was telling her something. Or maybe she'd feel better in the morning. She was too tired to think. At last, the need for sleep was breaking over her like a great wave.



Zalyth didn't like it when N'vai wouldn't listen to her. Right now, he just wanted to be alone in his own mind, and he was hurting. What the woman in the bed had said had upset him a great deal, even though she had hardly said anything. Zalyth didn't like that, either: her rider shouldn't hurt over someone that never existed. Now, N'vai was sitting on the clifftop behind a weycot that seemed somehow familiar, though Zalyth didn't remember why. His knees were drawn up in front of him, with his arms wrapped round them, and she could sense that he was trying to hold himself together. She lay a little distance away, positioned where she could watch him.

You have me, she ventured.

I know, he replied, but his mind was closed; he didn't want to share his thoughts.

Zalyth didn't know what to do. She knew, because he remembered them sometimes, that bad things had happened to him in the past, but she didn't know how to help him when those things happened, not if he wouldn't listen to her. Perhaps he would listen to somebody else? An image came to mind. She reached out to brown Darjenth.

My rider needs your rider...



N'vai didn't look up as T'varren sat down next to him, but he was glad the brownrider was there.

"Zalyth told Darjenth," T'varren said. "I'm sorry."

"It happens," N'vai said bleakly. "I shouldn't get so... it's not like it was an actual baby."

"No, but it would have been. You've lost all that future."

Now N'vai did look at him. "I suppose so." He stared out to sea again. "Not just that."

He heard the rustle of T'varren's tunic as he moved, but the brownrider didn't speak. The silence grew, filled with unasked questions. Finally, he explained,

"And... belonging. Having someone to belong to, in this time. Blood-ties. Family. It made me feel I belonged." He shot a sideways glance towards his friend. "Does that sound stupid?"

"No." T'varren was a man of few words. It was a while before he added, "There are other kinds of belonging."

N'vai nodded, because it was true. There was Zalyth, who was still worrying about him at the edge of his mind. He belonged to her, and she to him. There was belonging to a Wing, and the camaraderie of the shared fight. He wasn't doing too well there, but it would come, in time. There was love – it was hard to imagine, when he still missed D'lyn so much, but it might happen one day, maybe. There was friendship. The long journey forward in time had cemented a bond between his classmates that wouldn't easily be broken, but only a couple of them were proper friends. His

close friends were all dead. After a moment, he mentally corrected himself. Here was T'varren, sitting beside him, not from his own time but a true friend none the less.

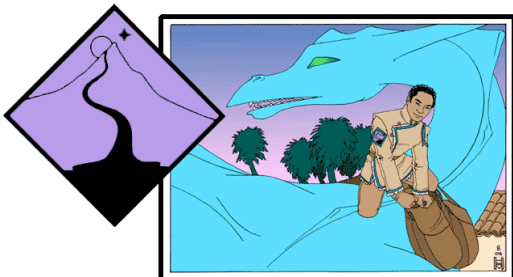
'He anchors me,' he thought, and wondered how that could be so.

He turned his face towards the older boy, and found brown eyes watching him.

"I guess there are," he agreed with a faint smile, then looked out to sea again before he should betray too much emotion.

Beside him, he heard T'varren shift to a more comfortable position. They settled down to watch the view in companionable silence.

End



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