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# Borrowed Time

by Ellen Million

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The *\*\*between\*\** felt wrong... deeper and colder than it ought to, and Timlin couldn't feel the lithe, not-exactly-comfortable (though surely not unpleasant) curve of Fallahi's waist in his hands for far longer than was right. He hadn't been expecting J'ver to take them *\*\*between\*\** again at all after they'd returned from the gather to circle down to land at Southern, and the wrong feeling only deepened when they finally emerged into a night sky that wasn't the night sky they had just left.

He was clinging to Fallahi – too hard, he realized as he could feel her gasping for air, and he was aware of J'ver behind him holding on nearly as hard. “What happened?” he demanded. “What was that?” The air smelled different – the woodsmoke from the kitchens was gone, he realized, and it was more green to his nose. The light in the sky was different, as if the moons had changed and there were no lights below. After a moment of confusion, Timlin realized there were no rooftops or neat clearings, though the curve of the beach and the placement of the rocks was the same as the skyview of Southern. Coincidence? A place that was only like Southern, but not? “Where have you taken us?”

J'ver sounded as baffled as he could when shouting over the wind of flight. “I don't know! Nioranth told us to jump and told Tiath where, but I don't know. We just... jumped. Tiath says we're still here.”

There were other dragons, dark shapes in the sky with them, and Timlin took some comfort in the fact that they weren't entirely alone.



There was a knot of folks gathered around the largest of the dragons – there were forty or fifty, by Timlin's rough count, nearly half of them a nervously posturing collection of weyrling dragons that were gathered around their Weyrilingmaster's blue.

There were shouts from the crowd, but too far off to make words out of. Timlin took Fallahi's hand, a liberty he had been dying to take all evening at the Fort Gather that seemed perfectly natural now. She gathered up close; he could feel the warmth from her shoulder against his own. He pulled her with him to stay close to J'ver as they

approached the group, relying on the greenrider to relay anything he found out.

“What's going on?” he prompted, when J'ver seemed more inclined to trance off with Tiath than supply them with information.

Dazedly, J'ver told them, “Dead, everyone at Southern is dead of a tidal wave. We came forward, forward in time. Toth says we can't go back, that it's... destiny. Already done. Or... I don't know, there isn't really a word for it – we can't change it, and Dunia didn't change it either, and it's already done and happened. It was supposed to happen, everything is supposed to happen and does. We're going forward again, with Dunia, to her time.”

Fallahi shuddered. “We have to go forward again? Like that?”

J'ver conferred with the network of dragons, and replied in horror, “No, that was only 25 Turns. We still have nearly 400 more to go. We have to do that again another sixteen times.”

Fallahi made a little sound of dismay, and clamped her lips shut as if she wished she hadn't. Timlin squeezed her hand. “But we can rest, right? And take breaks? It won't be such a shock next time.” He said it as much to her as to J'ver. J'ver shrugged, most of his attention on whatever commotion and agitation was happening beyond the loose wall of riders and causing some of the dragons to make threatening noises. Timlin had a moment of frustration for the dragonrider's ability to know so much and share so little.

It was still a shock, and Timlin couldn't help be aware of the unrealness of everything. Going forward in time to some unknown destiny? Southern Weyr, home these last ten Turns, destroyed? He shook his head; he'd think about that later... for now, he just had to push forward and pretend this was normal, for Fallahi if nothing else. It would have been much harder without her standing there soaking up his comfort. All over again, more meaningfully, he was grateful he had finally managed to dredge up the courage to ask her to the gather. If they hadn't stayed until late, dancing and reluctant to leave... they would have been just another one of the people they were trying not to think about now, swept away in a wall of water. He didn't realize he was squeezing Fallahi's hand too tightly until he noticed his fingers were getting numb. When he loosened his grip, she clung more tightly.

“Can we help?” Fallahi asked quietly. “We'll need a place to sleep. And water. What about food?”

Whatever had been taking so much of J'ver's attention seemed to dissipate following a movement among the largest of the dragons, and the greenrider turned back to them. “We're told to settle for the night. We'll forage in the daylight and take stock then. You can bunk up against Tiath with me.”

“Who's with us?” Timlin had to ask. “Who made it forward?” *\*\*Who was lost?\** He didn't ask.

J'ver looked startled, as if he'd forgotten Timlin wouldn't know. He listed them by dragon, as dragonriders often did, and Timlin had to piece them together with the

riders that he knew. The list was too short – nearly two dozen adult riders, more than that in weyrlings, and a handful of support staff that left his heart bleeding for the gaps in the list. Fallahi turned her head into his shoulder at the end, not sobbing, but Timlin could guess that she was crying in the darkness; she had left a large and loving family behind, and none of them were on the list of survivors. He put an arm around her and she snaked an arm around his waist.



It was hard to sleep.

They found large leaves to line the sand with and sleep upon, and Tiath provided a large useful break from the wind as well as a little warmth, but it was still a bed of sand, not a real bed. Fallahi was as warm as Tiath, and more comfortable to hold than Timlin had imagined, but she was as much a detriment to trying to sleep as the unfamiliar sleeping surface. J'ver had accorded them a little privacy by sleeping on Tiath's other side, but exposed in the darkness of the beach, there was little privacy, and the moons provided enough silvery light to keep Timlin's eyes from desiring to close.

Other dragons made large, close lumps in the beach, and there were quiet conversations that were mere murmurs over the steady thrum of the waves on the beach.

“Do you believe in destiny?” Fallahi surprised him by asking, so quietly that he wouldn't have heard if he hadn't had his face pressed into her hair.

“I thought you were asleep,” he didn't answer.

She stirred and pulled his arm closer around her. “I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking.”

“Me neither.” He had one of her hairs in his mouth, but didn't want to reclaim his arm to remove it.

“Do you believe in destiny?” Fallahi asked again. “Do you think A'zelen is right, that we couldn't change anything even if we tried?”

“I don't know,” Timlin confessed, and he wished he had something wiser and more comforting to say than that. “I suppose I want to think that I have choices, and that they are mine to make. I don't understand time, I'm not sure I could.”

Fallahi nodded against Timlin's chin. “Me too,” she agreed. “But I think it's nice to think that maybe this was meant to be, too. That you and I were supposed to come forward... together like this.”

Warmth that had nothing to do with temperature rushed to Timlin's head. She felt right in his arms, soft and firm in

all the right places, as if she had been fitted for his body, and after all the discomforts of the last hours, she was right – there was enormous comfort in the fact that she was here with him, and that maybe it was supposed to be. He grit his teeth at the fact that they were so exposed to others, and settled for kissing Fallahi's head and holding her tight. She snuggled closer – Timlin had not thought it possible – and after a long, quiet while, they fell asleep.



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