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# Borrowed Time, Part 2

by Ellen Million

Ninth Pass: 2690/2740

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J'ver made Timlin eat, or the greenrider was sure the man wouldn't have. Timlin had always been a quiet young man, a little shy among the girls, and possessed of a booming laugh that never failed to embarrass him. That laugh had been one of the sole bright spots in J'ver's life since the first jump forward – that helpless guffah mixed with Fallahi's gentle laugh.

It had been two days since J'ver had heard either laugh. Two days or fifty years, depending on how you counted time.

"You're not eating," the greenrider reminded the herder.

Timlin looked down at the peeled yellowfruit he was holding. "I can't be the only one who is sick to death of this stuff," he said with a shred of humor that gave J'ver some hope. It was all they'd found that day – the few palatable greens they'd had time to scavenge had been reserved for the children and Dunia, who was nursing, though she hadn't wanted to take them.

"Nah," J'ver said with careful cheer. "I don't think anyone of us will ever want one again."

Timlin lapsed into silence again before looking over at J'ver with mournful eyes. He looked ragged, but J'ver supposed all of them did. He would be grateful to shave off the scruffy facial hair that made him feel like a holdless man, and they were all in dire need of soapsand and bathwater. "I shouldn't have yelled at Dunia," the herder confessed. "I'm sorry for it."

J'ver was not terribly surprised – Timlin was one of those gentle types who hated to cause anyone grief or lay blame at anyone's door, who respected rank more than J'ver felt it deserved, and Dunia's feelings of guilt and despair were obvious. J'ver wasn't sure she didn't deserve it, but he had expected Timlin to regret his hasty, out-of-character, words. He shrugged, uncertain how to reply. "I don't think anyone could blame you."

Timlin made an expression that might have been a smile. "Yeah," he agreed simply. After a long moment, he confessed, "I miss her."

J'ver had to busy himself peeling another yellowfruit. The smell, or possibly pain on behalf of his friend, made his throat close, but his stomach still pled

for food. There was something he should have said in that moment, but the moment was past before he could think what it might be.

They were ready too soon to jump again, and before Timlin went to Kelbanth and T'mor to take his place, J'ver caught his friend in an impulsive embrace. "We'll be at Barrier Mountain Weyr in a few days," he promised Timlin. "Things will be better."

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2740 (Twelfth Stop)

J'ver did not dismount when Tiath landed. He wasn't sure he was able. He could only clench fists around Tiath's riding straps and cling to her presence in his mind. ***I will not leave you***, they promised each other meaninglessly. It was as empty a promise as his assurance to Timlin had been.

After a long moment, sweltering in unexpected dark heat, he had to move.

B'ranur and E'gar were standing together, sharing their grief over their wingmate T'mor's loss, and they opened to let him into their small circle. J'ver had no wingmates left – he had left with none from the very first jump – but there were few enough riders remaining that all of them were as wingmates now. He considered joining them. Consolation drinks would have been appropriate under the conditions, but there were none to be had. He nodded gravely and walked on.

Dunia was kneeling, scrubbing uselessly at young Corsia's face with a corner of her abused shirt. "I'm going to get dirty again," the little girl protested with 4-year old logic. She fell quiet and still as she saw J'ver's approach, and wondered how she saw him – they all looked more like raiders than riders now. Dunia looked up expectantly.

"Goldrider," J'ver said curtly. "I thought you ought to know that Tim—" He had to swallow before continuing. "Timlin was sorry for what he said to you. He didn't really blame you, at the end." At his end, J'ver added. "I thought you'd want to know that."

Dunia looked tired and grief-worn. She nodded. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm glad you aren't angry..."

Tired, hungry, still grieving the loss of a friend he'd had since they'd both been candidates, J'ver could not quite keep himself from saying sharply, "I said *he* didn't blame you," and then he turned and left her there before he had to say much worse.



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