
Entwined

by Smitty

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"Now that, Jal, *that* is what I call beautiful."

"She certainly is." J'hanos's gaze was admiring. "Just look at the way she moves -- there's not many can carry themselves with that grace."

"Does the heart good, it does," Vesoz sighed and rested his chin on his hands. "You know her name?"

J'hanos looked vaguely insulted. "Of course. She's the *Belarra's Hope*, out of Boll. Comes this way on a trading run every six or seven months -- she does a circuit around the Big Bay and Ista, then down to Southern before heading home. She's been following the same route for Turns." The bronzerider glanced down at his half-brother. "You're the one who was in the Seacraft, you really should know some of this."

"Yeah," Vesoz acknowledged cheerfully, still watching the big three-master as she made her way towards the docks of Southern Hold, "but I was always more concerned with where *I* was going to end up, not anybody else." He was lying on his stomach on the grassy bank that lay between the trees and the cliffs of Southern Weyr's eastern shore, overlooking the beach the Weyr shared with the neighbouring Hold. "And anyway, I'm here now."

"As I'm reminded, at length, every time I see Father...."

Vesoz snorted. "Serves him right for trying to marry me off to that Holder's hideous sister. Besides, he was the one who accepted the Search and I'm not going back now!"

J'hanos chuckled and leaned forward, feeling the afternoon sun on his face as he rested his forearms on his knees. There had been an early morning 'Fall over some of the more southerly settlements but, with that done and Vhauth scrubbed and oiled, the rest of the day was his own. "So what's the latest on our other illicit arrival?"

"Who's to say that I know anything?"

The bronzerider raised one dark eyebrow. "Ves, you're grinning like an idiot and have been almost vibrating since you got here. Given your usual ability to withhold information, I suspect that you may rupture something if you don't spill soon."

"K'med and Genna are going to make an announcement at the evening meal," the younger man said, "assuming that Vivia doesn't just burble it all out first. But then, nobody ever listens to a word Vivia says anyway."

"Including Vivia," J'hanos noted dryly.

"Including Vivia," Vesoz agreed cheerfully. "Anyway, the *big* news is that our mysterious new friend is back in the land of the living."

J'hanos frowned at him. "I could have guessed *that*."

"I've not finished yet!" Vesoz threw his brother an irritated look, then continued. "They've had us candidates helping take care of Nioranth -- the dragonhealers are dealing with her injuries, of course, but we've been keeping her fed, watered, oiled --"

"Yes, yes, I know all this."

"And I was helping in her wallow when the Weyrhealer called in the Weyrwoman, and I just *happened* to be close enough to the weyrcot window to catch most of what was said." Vesoz blinked innocently. "And...." He paused, his manner suddenly turning uncharacteristically hesitant.

"And?" the bronzerider prompted.

Vesoz looked up at him. "And I don't think many folks are going to *like* this evening's announcement."

J'hanos rolled his eyes. "Ves, will you just spit it out?"

"Her name is Dunia. She's a Southern Weyr goldrider. And she's from the *Tenth* Pass."

A pair of firelizards, bronze and green, swooped down out of the trees in the silence that followed those words, circling twice before settling onto the grass. J'hanos snapped his fingers and the bronze chirped and hopped up onto his shoulder, leaving the green to settle herself on Vesoz's back, where she curled up with the obvious intention of sleeping. Reaching to stroke the little bronze, J'hanos tried to make sense of his brother's words. "But... they were so certain that this would be the last Pass. You mean that after all that fuss at Landing, the idiots were *wrong*?" He closed his eyes, then snapped them open again as another thought occurred. "If she's expecting us to all go forward with her, she'll have to wait until we're done with *this* Pass first!"

"No, no, don't worry, there's nothing like that!" Vesoz reassured him. "The girl and the gold got themselves hurt, screwed up the co-ordinates, ended up in the here and now. Apparently there's going to be another Long Interval before Thread falls again. But that was all she'd say, or all I caught at least."

J'hanos sighed and ran his hands across his face and back through his black hair, drawing a protest from Lan, his firelizard. "So, there's going to be a Tenth Pass," he muttered, mentally filing this new information as fact -- whatever else might be said of Vesoz, his information-gathering skills were generally superb. "Nothing we can do about that, I suppose."

"Not really," Vesoz agreed. "And it's not as though any of us are going to need to worry about it anyway, not if it's on the other end of a Long Interval."

"True, true." J'hanos looked down at his brother, his expression suddenly calculating. "Have you told anybody else this?"

"Just you so far."

"Good, keep it that way." The bronzerider smiled slyly. "I want to see A'zelen's face when they drop this one on us."

Finally, proof that Landing *isn't* the source of all knowledge...."

Vesoz laughed. "Who would have thought it? This could keep him frothing nicely for a while...."

"I'm certain the Wing will make sure of that," J'hanos assured him. "Heard anything else interesting?"

"Dragonhealers are saying that it'll be a good three or four months before Nioranth's wing will bear her weight, and it'll be months more before she's strong enough to even think about making the return trip."

"So she'll probably rise before she leaves?"

"I'd imagine so, though only her rider can tell us what her usual cycle is like. Why?" Vesoz rolled onto his side, dislodging the green firelizard curled on his back, and grinned at his sibling. "Fancy your chances, do you?"

"I might do," the bronzerider replied noncommittally, feeling a flicker of interest from his dragon as the dozing bronze caught the tenor of his thoughts. "Vhauth's popular with the greens and he was one of the last three in Zyath's flight."

"Yeah, well, you should be grateful that he didn't manage to catch her, Jal," Vesoz told him, amused. "From what I've heard, poor Y'kinal has been fighting Vivia off with a stick ever since!"

J'hanos winced -- the young goldrider had been pursuing the unfortunate Wingleader with terrifying enthusiasm ever since Zyath's rising. "There is that. I don't think she's quite absorbed the idea that flights don't count yet...."

"She's not the only one with that problem," Vesoz said, a little too casually. "If Vhauth caught Zyath, Enasha would likely kill the pair of you."

"Enasha would be fine about it," J'hanos replied confidently. "She's always known that I ride bronze -- goldflights are a part of that. She wouldn't have accepted the weyrmating if she had a problem with flights. And besides," he added, "she's always seemed quite happy with Vhauth flying greens."

"Greens," Vesoz pointed out, "don't have female riders. Well, apart from Hesione and Suna, I guess, but both their dragons favour blues."

"Flightmates are flightmates. They don't mean anything." J'hanos shrugged. "Enasha knows that."

"Of course," Vesoz said mildly, looking back out towards Southern Hold. "Anyway, it looks as though Nioranth is going to be here for a while, so tell Vhauth to start making nice if he wants her favour! I imagine that there's going to be quite some competition there, though."

J'hanos nodded. "There will be a few who see her as an easy catch if she's not at full strength."

"You disagree?"

"There *are* no easy catches, Ves. If there were, Vhauth would have sired a clutch by now." J'hanos scowled at his feet and at the memory of too many golden chances missed. "We're getting closer, but we're not there yet...."

"You will," Vesoz told him cheerfully. The younger man sat up, scooping his green firelizard, Ennie, into his lap

and tickling her olive belly as she crooned and kicked in delight. "Vhauth's got his full growth now and the others aren't getting any younger. He's got the size to compete with the Benden-bloods and healthier genes besides -- what sensible queen could resist?"

"Too many, it seems." The *Hope* had passed out of sight around the Hold's headland, the silvery wake of her passage slowly merging back into the brilliant blue of the ocean. J'hanos watched the waves for a few moments before speaking again. "Elnath should be rising next month. Hopefully she'll show better taste this time."

"Teshea certainly has better sense than to go chasing bronzeriders after flights," Vesoz allowed, then grinned. "Who was it that won her last time?"

"L'tan's Aneth." J'hanos's tone made it quite clear what he thought of the pair. "Useless bloody idiot with an oversized, inbred lump of a dragon barely older than Vhauth. But then, you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but it's so entertaining to hear your descriptions of him!" Vesoz beamed. "Last time, I think it was 'square-jawed, slack-brained yokel who's bought into the Benden bullshit a little too deeply'."

J'hanos snorted softly. "I still stand by that."

"I thought you might. So you *might* want to know," Vesoz threw his brother a conspiratorial look, "that the rumour in the kitchens is that he got some holder girl pregnant at Trelanth's last Hatching."

"L'tan?" J'hanos laughed. "You are joking!"

"Oh no! His wingmates are insisting that it must have been someone else, of course, and that she's just naming a bronzerider to try to attach herself to some rank," Vesoz related gleefully. "Her family is rather upset about the whole business and giving the Weyrwoman quite the headache -- they lose her brother to a blue, then find that his sister is carrying some dragonrider's bastard!"

"And she says it's L'tan's?" J'hanos chuckled. "And there was I thinking that most of the stray pregnancies around here these days could be traced back to you...."

Vesoz placed a hand over his heart, the image of injured innocence. "Jal! You wound me!"

"No, Ves, I *know* you."

"Yeah, whatever." Vesoz's grin returned. "Anyway, this one isn't my fault. Oh, and just *wait* until you hear what L'vin and R'yeran have been up to...."

J'hanos smiled and let his brother ramble on, knowing that, in just few hours, Nioranth and her time-lost rider would be the only topic that anybody cared to talk about.



"I don't see why she has to stay here," Enasha said irritably, adjusting Jeshan's position at her breast. The child grizzled for a few moments before reclaiming his mother's swollen nipple and suckling greedily. "Southern has four queens already -- we don't need a fifth."

"Well, by all accounts, Nioranth *is* a Southern queen," J'hanos reminded his weyrmate. The bronzerider stretched

and rolled onto his side on their bed, lazily propping himself on one elbow as he watched her feed their son. "And right now, she is a flightless queen too -- even if she wished to go elsewhere, she couldn't."

"And when her wing heals?" Enasha's tone was sharp.

"Then she returns to wherever... *whenever* it is that she came from, I would imagine."

Enasha frowned, uncomfortable with the idea of the future being known and yet still out of reach. All of Southern Weyr had been eagerly waiting for their newest arrival to awaken and tell her story, and there were few who hadn't believed her to be a stray from another time. But the confirmation, from the Weyrleaders at the evening meal, had still been somehow startling and the news of the *when* of it more startling still -- most had believed her to be from the end of their own Pass. "We don't need another queen," she repeated. "Especially not that one. They told us that there wouldn't *be* a Tenth Pass and now she's here with her Threadscars and her flamethrower and all these oh-so-vague warnings that I can't even pass to my family!"

"Because, as K'med said, the Holders don't know -- won't know," J'hanos corrected himself, "about the next Pass happening. And she can't risk changing history... although, from what I know of these things, I'm not entirely certain that she *can*. If she's here," he said slowly, as though trying to reconstruct some old piece of rote logic, "it means that she was always going to be here, and everything that is going to happen between now and when she leaves the Tenth Pass already *has* happened. Once things are in motion...." The bronzerider shrugged, evidently giving up on that line of reasoning before he gave himself a headache. "Regardless, she *is* here and she *is* injured, so for now we have our fifth queen."

"She should have gone to Benden, not here -- that's where all the exhibitionist freaks come from, isn't it?"

J'hanos chuckled. "In this Pass, so it would seem, but I rather like the idea of Southern stealing Benden's thunder for once. It does the North good to remember that there's more to us than grubs, dirt and dragonhealers."

Enasha shuddered at the mention of grubs, drawing a squawk of protest from Jeshan. "Benden is welcome to her," she muttered.

"Oh, I don't know," J'hanos mused, a smile playing across his features. "Vhauth rather likes the idea of having her here. I think he's hoping for a rising before Nioranth returns to when she belongs...."

Turning her attention abruptly towards her suckling child, Enasha fought down her reaction to that casual comment. "I'm sure he is," she replied tightly, not looking up. J'hanos's Vhauth was still young compared to many in the Weyr but, five Turns out of the Weyrling Wing, the bronze had reached his full maturity and it was only a matter of time before one of his golden pursuits proved successful. And when that day came -- and it would, she knew, it would -- she would have to accept sharing her weyrmate with another woman, if only for a few hours.

And *that* was a thought that her holdbred heart could not abide.

Jeshan had stopped feeding, his infant appetite finally sated. Enasha wiped his mouth and her breast, adjusting her robe before lifting the child and rubbing his back to free any wind. She was aware of J'hanos's gaze on her as she walked their son up and down their weyr, aware that, for the moment, his regard was for her and her alone. Which was only as it should be -- she had worked hard to catch his attention and harder still to keep it. It was rare that a minor Holder's fifth daughter had a chance to snare the son of a Lord, no matter what the circumstances. And even if J'hanos were out of Tillek's line of succession, his son might yet not be....

As if on cue, Jeshan released a loud belch and began drooling on his mother's shoulder. Enasha sighed and retreated behind the screen that divided the weycot, settling her child into his crib and pulling the sheets up to cover him. Jeshan yawned hugely and gurgled to himself for a few moments, his small hands plucking at his covers, and Enasha smiled and retreated, knowing that sleep would claim him before much longer.

"So, are you going to tuck me in as well?" J'hanos purred as Enasha emerged from behind the screen. He rolled onto his back, sprawling across their bed. "Jeshan's not the only one in need of attention, you know...."

Enasha arched an eyebrow. "I'm sure you're old enough to put yourself to bed by now."

"True," J'hanos allowed, his smile inviting. "But where's the fun in that?"

Resting one slender hand on the screen support, Enasha took a few moments to admire her weyrmate. J'hanos's bloodline was impressive, but even without it he was quite the catch -- tall and athletic, with dark hair and eyes, olive skin, and bone structure that many women would envy. Small Threadscores on his forearms marked him as a dragonrider, their twisting lines standing in contrast to the straighter scars left by human hands across ribs and cheek, evidence of duels in his holder past. He was young and he was beautiful --

And he knew it just as well as she did.

As, it seemed, did half of the Weyr. And for all that she knew he shared no bed but hers, he did absolutely nothing to discourage the admiring attentions of others. Not for the first time, Enasha wished that Zyath had had the wit to choose her and not that empty-headed fool, Vivia. If she had a gold dragon at her command, J'hanos would acknowledge no gaze but hers and she would be the one that turned heads, the one that others competed for. To be mother to a child of the Blood was more than she might have dreamed before her Search, but to ride a queen, to hold rank of her own beyond that reflected from a man who would never make her his wife....

"Are you coming to bed? Or am I going to be lonely tonight?"

Enasha sighed softly and favoured her weyrmate with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm just admiring the view."

"It's a lot better close up, you know...."

Enasha's smile was a little more genuine as she crossed to the bed and her weyrmate's embrace. J'hanos was hers... and yet one day he would taste gold and what kitchen girl, no matter her birth, could compete with a queenrider's charms? He was hers and yet she knew that no matter how many sons she bore him, in his heart she would always come a pale second to Vhauth, and probably to his idiot of a bastard half-brother as well. But for all that she dreaded the thought of another woman's hands on him, she also knew that queen flights could bring other rewards. For now, J'hanos was merely a wingrider, but he was skilled enough that a wingsecond position was a virtual certainty within the next few Turns. Such rank permitted a bronzerider to compete in Senior flights and if Yashelth were to one day accept Vhauth as her mate....

Her chance to be a goldrider was past, but there was more than one route to glory. Opening her robe, Enasha wrapped herself around J'hanos and set to making sure that his attention stayed exactly where she wanted it to be.



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Ennie crouched on the edge of a low shelf, a high, eager note issuing from her green throat as her half-spread wings quivered in anticipation. Vesoz smiled and made a show of deliberately ignoring his firelizard as he slid his blade in beneath the gill covers of a yellowfin and sliced neatly down the length of its belly, tugging the guts free and dropping them into the slop bucket at his feet. A few moments' work removed the brilliantly golden fins and the streamlined head came free with a quick, sharp *twist*, following the guts into the pail.

"There," Vesoz said to the other candidates sitting to either side of him, tossing the cleaned fish into the barrel of salted water that awaited it. "Told you it was easy! Now it's your turn -- I'm not meant to be teacher here, you know."

Dyzon looked unconvinced. "That were disgustin'!"

Vesoz quirked an eyebrow at the younger lad. "It's a fish, Dyzon, that's what they have inside them."

"Dy's from Crom," commented a smirking Nonios from the boy's other side. "Probably never even *seen* a fish before!"

"Have too!" Dyzon shot back. "Eaten 'em an' all! But guttin' 'em were *women's* work!"

"Not in the Seacraft," Vesoz told him cheerfully. "You get to be *really* good at gutting fish when you're a deckhand."

"Even when you're the son of a Lord?" asked Leimar sceptically.

"*Especially* then," Vesoz said, grabbing another yellowfin from the ice crate and going to work on it. "Because they want to see if you're willing to get your hands

dirty." He grinned and dangled a handful of fish guts at the other candidate, making Leimar squeak and lean back in his chair. "Anyway, the sooner we get done here, the sooner we get to lunch. And if we do a good enough job, we get onto Ima's good side, and having the Headwoman happy with you is never a bad thing."

Ennie gave an impatient chirp as the candidates set to cleaning the yellowfins, bouncing lightly on her perch. Vesoz glanced at her, then shifted his grip on the fish in his hands, using the point of his blade to prise one glistening compound eye from its seat. He paused a moment to examine the green-stained eye, then flicked it into the air, causing Dyzon to jump.

"Ugh! Why'd you --"

Olive wings flashed as Ennie threw herself into motion and snatched the fish eye up in her claws before returning to the shelf to crunch on her prize. Vesoz smiled fondly at his pet and went back to decapitating the yellowfin. "Ennie likes eyes," he explained to the others. "We used to play this game all the time when I was a deckhand and now she rather expects it when I'm gutting...."

Dyzon looked at him as though he was quite mad, but Nonios laughed and picked at his own fish until an eye came free. Ennie watched with greedy interest, arrowing in to grab at the morsel as soon as the boy tossed it upwards. Settling back on her perch, she flipped her wings to her back and eyed the group of young men hopefully, her small thoughts filled with treats from unfamiliar sources. Vesoz chuckled and pulled a head from his slop bucket, winking out an eye and rolling it thoughtfully around on his palm, feeling his firelizard's attention focus in on the movement.

"All right, Ennie, let's see if you're up to a bit of a challenge...."

The little green let out a piping bugle as Vesoz pulled his arm back and sent the fish eye zipping across the preparation room. Launching herself, Ennie surged in pursuit... and then pulled up and vanished with a shriek as the door opened and the bloody morsel lodged itself firmly in the hair of the unfortunate who had chosen that moment to check on the candidates.

Vesoz swore under his breath as the younger candidates suddenly developed an industrious interest in yellowfin innards, leaving him caught empty-handed as Enasha reached up to pluck the wayward piece of offal from her dark hair. She examined it for a few moments, an expression of disgust crossing her features, then stalked across the room to drop the eye into the bucket at Vesoz's feet. "Candidate? What have you been told about allowing pets into food preparation areas?"

Realising that he'd get no help from the others, Vesoz sighed and looked up at his brother's weyrmate, trying not to bristle at her tone. "No pets allowed in food prep areas," he recited dutifully. "Not even those that don't shed."

"Good. So would you care to explain what your green was doing in here?"

"She was just watching," Vesoz replied, knowing that it would be the wrong answer, whatever he said.

"Just watching?" Enasha smiled thinly. "And chasing low-flying eyeballs around the room, it would seem. Candidate, with me...."

Vesoz rolled his eyes and got to his feet, cleaning his hands on a wipe-cloth as he followed her out of the room. He could hear the others whispering amongst themselves as the door swung shut behind him, leaving him trailing Enasha down the corridor. He sighed. "Enasha, where are we going?"

She stopped and turned to look at him. "Did I *say* that you could speak, Candidate?"

Vesoz set his jaw, folding his arms over his chest. "You *know* what my name is, Enasha. What's bitten your backside today, anyway?"

Enasha crossed the space between them, her green eyes furious as she looked up at him. "Vesoz, it's time that you remembered your position in this Weyr. You are a Candidate and as such are bound by rules --"

"Oh, please! There are firelizards sitting in the kitchen rafters everywhere you look! Nobody *cares* so long as they don't thieve from the tables. Ennie wasn't doing any harm!"

"Well, we'll just have to see what Headwoman Ima says about that, won't we?"

"Right." Vesoz narrowed his eyes, grabbed Enasha by the shoulder, and shoved her bodily into the nearest storeroom, pulling the door shut behind him and keeping a hold of the handle. "What is your bloody problem?"

"How dare you --"

"Oh, get a grip, Enasha!" Vesoz snapped. "This is stupid. Fujita knows that Ennie follows me around and she's never given me any grief about it! If this is about getting that thing in your hair --"

"I'm not Fujita," Enasha hissed. "You can't talk your way out of trouble by taking a detour under *my* skirts."

"Of course I can't," Vesoz shot back. "I'm only a half-Blood -- takes something a little richer to loosen your legs, doesn't it?"

Enasha flushed scarlet. "Why, you --"

Vesoz smiled nastily, scenting blood. "What's the matter? Jal talking about going for gold again, is he?" He caught her wrist before the slap could connect with his face. "Vhauth's going to catch one sooner or later, you know."

"Take your hands *off* of me, *Candidate*, or I'll see to it that you never set foot on the sands for another clutch, no matter *who* the sire might be!"

"He's going to catch a queen, and you know what that'll mean to Jal? It'll mean absolutely bloody *nothing*," Vesoz continued, "because for some reason he's in love with you, when all *you* care about is his rank."

"And what does that matter to you?" Enasha snarled, pulling her hand free of his grasp and not even bothering to deny the accusation. "He's happy, Vesoz. We both are. Live with it."

"He's my brother and he can do a bloody sight better than you!"

Enasha laughed in his face. "Yes, your precious brother who faked a Search because *you* refused your duty to your

family! You shouldn't even *be* here! And if you don't start showing more respect to your betters, you'll be going right back to Tillek and whatever wife they wish on you."

"*Betters?*"

"Yes, *Candidate*. Betters." Enasha's smile was smug. "Just imagine what J'hanos would say if you found yourself dismissed for insubordination?"

Vesoz met her gaze squarely. "I'd rather imagine what he'd say when he found out that you were the one behind it."

The silence stretched between them for long moments as each realised the stalemate, the point beyond which neither dared venture. Finally, Enasha threw Vesoz a last, poisonous glare and pushed past him, slamming the door behind her as she returned to the kitchens. Leaning back against the wall, Vesoz closed his eyes and swore softly and at length, only stopping when Ennie reappeared and clung to his sleeve, crooning anxiously. "Worthless bloody rankwhore," he muttered, reaching up to soothe his firelizard. "Don't know why Jal can't see it. She doesn't care about him...."

But J'hanos cared about *her*, just as he cared about the younger half-brother who had been his eager shadow even after Jalhanos had earned their family's ire. He cared... and neither Vesoz nor Enasha were quite prepared to push the bronzerider into a situation where he might have to choose between them, for fear that his choice would not be in their favour. There were days when Vesoz wondered if J'hanos were genuinely ignorant of their feud or if he simply chose to play dumb in order to keep them both close.

And he knew that that was something else he would never dare put to his brother. If the stalemate were to be broken, it would not be from within.

But if Vhauth were to catch a queen....

Chuckling softly at that thought, Vesoz pushed away from the wall, sending Ennie off with a firm instruction to sun herself and wait for him *outside* as he headed back to where the candidates would still be gutting the Weyr's dinner, inventing some suitably plausible tale of chastisement as he went. A queenflight might just force Enasha to show her true colours. And if it did, Vesoz would be waiting.



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