
The Long Way Home: Part 1

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The sky was still dark as *between* surrendered Devereth and her passengers to the world once more. On the green's back, Vesoz coughed violently and gasped for air, trying to push away the panic that had enfolded him as the jump went on and on, the bitter blackness lasting far longer than any transfer he had ever made before. He felt Devereth's bugling call as much as heard it, and he looked up as he heard other voices joining the green's, other dragons still wheeling and calling in moonlit confusion. He could feel Bressa's chest heaving for breath beneath his hands... or heaving with sobs, it was suddenly hard to tell which. His own panic was refusing to subside, the sense that something was *very* wrong threaded through with a loss and grief that he couldn't understand --

It was only then that he realized that Ennie was no longer with them.

"What happened?" Vesoz shouted in Bressa's ear, against the roar of the wind and the dragons' calling. "What was that? What just happened?"

The greenrider shook her head, evidently unable to find the words or the voice to say them. Vesoz swore and looked around him in helpless desperation, wishing, almost for the first time, that he could hear what the dragons were saying as he tried to work out where they were. They'd been over Southern Weyr in the moments before that terrifyingly long jump, safely home after a long night of dancing at the Fort Harvest Gather. Now they were above a low, moonlight-silvered jungle devoid of any fire or glowlight. A huge, dark peak stood off to one side and the sea stretched towards the invisible horizon before them, lapping silently at beaches and headlands that looked almost familiar beneath the waning curve of Belior...

"*The moons!*" he yelled at Bressa and the world in general. "What's happened to the moons?" Timor was at three-quarters, and the larger Belior a waning sliver near the western horizon... yet both had been full, silvery globes when they'd left Fort, less than a half hour before. He twisted against the straps, trying to see his surroundings more fully as his mind slid away from the too-obvious answer to that puzzle. "Where are we?" he tried again. Bressa hadn't answered his earlier questions.

"I don't know!" she called over her shoulder, finally. "I don't know! Devereth says that we haven't gone anywhere!"

Vesoz looked towards the dark peak and felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind or with the prolonged jump *between*. Dragons weren't known for their fanciful imaginations. Dark shapes skimmed low over the growth of jungle beneath them, their colors hard to make out in the faint light and, as Devereth swooped to join them, Vesoz found himself hoping against hope that Vhauth was amongst them.

"They're landing!" the greenrider told him, leaning into her dragon's movements as they swept down towards the headland.

"*Who's landing?*" he returned. He could guess that those closest to them were the same wingriders they'd returned from the Gather with -- Bressa's brother V'tor and his friends E'darin and M'tin; L'dras and C'dan from Bressa's Wing; J'ver, T'sald and Z'mos -- but there were more than that here, he was certain, although their movement and the light made it almost impossible to count....

The dragons were settling, not without some difficulty, in a semi-clear area near to the point of land that overlooked the sea.. One of the landed beasts was clearly larger than its neighbors and Vesoz leaned forward to point it out. "Who's that? The big one?"

"That's Nioranth!" Bressa answered. Vesoz nodded, feeling the beginnings of hope -- if that was a queen, then the two big shapes nearest her must be bronzes....

'Please, please,' he thought fervently as Devereth circled over the beach, 'let Jal be here...!' He had no idea if his brother had already left for the Weyrleaders' meeting at Benden or not, had no idea if he had been swept up in this insanity. But whatever was going on, wherever they were, he found himself hoping that somehow his brother would be there to deal with it. "What about Vhauth?" he demanded of Bressa, trying to keep the dark shapes of the bronzes in view as Devereth sought a place to land.

"Yes! He's there too. So is Suloth."

Vesoz felt the knot of tension that had been threatening to choke him ease a little at that news. "Land us near them?" he pleaded, and saw her nod. Whatever was happening here was bad, very bad, but if J'hanos were there then at least he had something....

Just beyond Nioranth's bulk was a clutch of smaller dragons -- literally, Vesoz realized. They were small enough that they had to be weyrlings, and the gleam of Orylath's pale golden hide told him that they were the youngsters of Irineth's last Southern Hatching before her transfer to Barrier Mountain, barely old enough to be jumping *between* regardless of circumstance. Other pairs were setting down around them, their eyes showing the colors of confusion and fear, and Vesoz felt the sick weight in his stomach return as Devereth backwinged to land neatly behind a huge bronze whose Threadscarred flank identified him as Vhauth. Vesoz thought that the dark shape on the other side of the bronze might be A'zelen's Toth, but he didn't stop to think too hard on it as he shouted thanks to Bressa and kicked his leg over Devereth's neckridge, sliding to the ground almost before the green had fully settled.

His legs were shaky with adrenaline and the last of the Gather wine, but Vesoz was running as soon as he hit the ground. He rounded Vhauth's shoulder in time to see his brother's back as J'hanos marched in the direction of Nioranth, his shoulders stiff and his entire body all but radiating an anger that did nothing to ease Vesoz's mind. There was a group of people in the queen's shadow and Vesoz couldn't make out details, but he thought some of them must be children. J'hanos seemed certain of his target, though, for in another few strides, he raised his arm and pointed, shouting, "*You! You knew! Flame it to ash, you murderous bitch, you bloody knew!*"

The bronzerider lunged towards Dunia, and Vesoz instinctively lunged as well, catching the older man around the shoulders before he could reach the queenrider. "*Jal! Jal, what are you doing?*"

Vesoz had always known that J'hanos had a temper on him, but he didn't think he'd ever seen it this close to the surface, certainly not since his brother's Search. Infuriated at being kept from his target, the bronzerider snarled and twisted... and stopped, hesitating momentarily as he realized just who it was that had a hold of him. "*Jal!*" Vesoz tried again, not loosening his grip. "*Jal, what's going on? Where are we?*"

"I'm not the one you should be asking." J'hanos's body was tense and he was practically spitting with fury as his gaze snapped back to the goldrider. Vesoz cast a desperate, inquiring glance at Dunia, who stood near her queen's shoulder, and almost recoiled from her stricken look. One of her arms was clutched around a sling across her chest, and the other was stretched back behind her, reaching back towards, or perhaps trying to protect, the figures of her children and her dragonhealer weyrmate, Corsan. Corsan was crouched with his arms around both girls, and his wide, alarmed gaze was trained on Dunia alone. "*You vicious bloody she-wher,*" J'hanos hissed at her, his body all but vibrating with his anger. "*You knew!*"

J'hanos took a shaking breath, and that moment of silence Vesoz could hear the queenrider's quiet words, a soft litany of guilt and grief. "*I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I couldn't – I'm sorry – it's all gone, but I couldn't –*"

"You're from Southern!" the Weyrleader yelled at her. "*You said you came from Southern, so you knew! You had to know!*"

"She had to know *what*, Jal?" Vesoz demanded in his brother's ear, tightening his grip when the man tried to jerk forward again. He didn't know what the bronzerider intended to do, but Vesoz didn't think it would be a good idea to let him go just yet. "*Please, Jal –*"

"Yes, Weyrleader – she knew what?" Wingleader T'del asked as he approached, his tone brisk. Beyond him, Vesoz could see other figures gathering as more people dismounted, the familiar figure of Weyrlingmaster G'teris amongst them, trailed at a distance by the group of weyrlings. Glancing briefly back over his shoulder, Vesoz caught a strained smile from Bressa that he struggled to return and looked for A'zelen, hoping that his brother's

Weyrsecond might be able to offer some backup. The brownrider was still over near Toth, however, bent over something in the dragon's claws that absorbed the attention of both.

"Vhauth and Nioranth gave our dragons orders, no explanations," T'del went on. "What happened? What did she know?" His question was echoed by shouts from others in the growing crowd.

"Narith says that this is Southern!" said R'banon, T'del's wingsecond, coming up to stand at the bronzerider's side. The man sounded angry where his Wingleader had seemed calm. "*How can this be bloody Southern?*"

J'hanos shook Vesoz off roughly, and cautiously, the younger man let him go. The Weyrleader drew himself up, and glared in Dunia's direction. "*Do you want to answer him, Goldrider?*" he asked icily.

Dunia seemed to be pulling herself together at last, though her expression was still drawn, her eyes huge, and she hugged the sling with her infant child close to her. She averted her gaze from the furious Weyrleader, and looked around at the rest of them, taking a deep breath. "*This is... Southern,*" she affirmed. "*In the Turn 2465.*"

There was a whisper of reaction through the gathering crowd, a rising tide of questions and exclamations. Vesoz swallowed hard as her words sank in – he had known that they had made a time jump, of course he'd known, it was the only explanation for the moons... but this? This couldn't be Southern Weyr....

"We jumped *forward* in time?" T'del demanded. "*Not into the past? Before the founding?*"

"What happened to the Weyr?" called a voice that Vesoz couldn't immediately recognize, and Dunia looked, if possible, even more distressed.

"In spring of 2440, in the thirty-ninth Turn of the Ninth Pass," the queenrider said, sounding as if she was reciting from a Record, her voice wavering, "a great wave came without warning, in the dead of night, and destroyed Southern Weyr and Hold." There was a shocked silence, and Dunia dropped her head, unable to look at any of them. "*I couldn't tell you.*"

"A wave?" someone said, incredulously.

"Destroyed?" someone else asked. "*All of it? The entire Weyr?*"

"I saw what was coming, as we were leaving for Benden," the Weyrleader said finally, in a flat voice. "Just after that tremor, the sea drew back – back out of sight, left the ships in the Hold harbor grounded. Seamen know what a sign like that means. They have a word for it. *Tsunami.*" He had not removed his glare from Dunia, who was looking back at him now, her face still anguished. "*That's why I had Vhauth raise the alarm – but it was far too late.*" J'hanos moved forward a few steps before he checked himself, holding his arms rigidly at his side, fists clenched. "*We would have needed far more warning than that to save the Weyr. Wouldn't we, goldrider?*"

"I couldn't tell –" she repeated automatically, but she hadn't even finished the phrase before he overrode her.

"Why? Why did you give us no more than a few minutes' warning!?"

The queenrider took another deep, steadying breath that seemed to do her little good. "Because all the Records and the Ballads say that nobody survived."

J'hanos barked out a humorless laugh. "No? Well, look around you!" He waved his arm to take in the gathered crowd. "It looks like the Records and the Ballads were *wrong!*"

Bressa's brother V'tor had come up and stood quietly beside his sister. Now, his voice empty and shocked, he said, "So everyone else... everyone's dead? But we were – they were just – The dragons!" he managed at last. "They can't be dead! The dragons didn't keen for them!"

"Why would they?" Bressa asked numbly. "They were alive when we left, and now – we're too far – I don't think dragons can hear that far, across time, can they? They really are dead," she finished in a whisper, and Vesoz reached for her hand.

"Long dead," he agreed softly, feeling the full enormity of their situation sink in. Alstan was dead, dead and gone and rotted to nothing in the tropical heat. The Weyrwoman was dead, along with Headwoman Ima; with Fujita and bubble-headed Vivia; with K'med and L'tan and Bressa's father, Reilen; with Enril and Lord Toric and all of the rest of the Weyr and Hold and who knew how many others....

Dead. All of them, dead.

And they were all that was left to tell their tale.

"Sir!" said R'banon, taking a few steps closer to the Weyrleader and holding out an entreating hand, his gaze flicking back and forth between T'del and J'hanos and Dunia. "We're here now. We survived. We *know!* So we can go back now – we can warn them, we can save them!"

"No!" Dunia cried. "No, you can't!" But she was drowned out by a swell of agreement from other gathered survivors as they leapt on the brownrider's suggestion, desperate for the opportunity to do *something*. "No! You can't go back, you'd --"

"It wouldn't work," said new voice confidently, and Vesoz turned to see A'zelen approaching. There was another man behind him, his hunched posture and hand to his head seeming to indicate pain, but he stayed back on the fringe of the crowd while the brownrider strode forward to stand beside his Weyrleader. "We can't go back and warn anyone," A'zelen continued, sounding unnaturally calm, as if he was discussing weather reports before a Threadfall. "We can't do that any more than Dunia could have warned the Weyr in time to save itself."

"Why not?" demanded T'mor, a brownrider from K'med's Wing. "All we have to do is jump a little farther back, to earlier in the evening – we could do it by the moons --"

"No, we can't," A'zelen countered. "We can't, because we all just *came* from there, and we all know that *didn't happen.*"

"That's not the way timing works, boy," a gruff, older man told T'mor, and Vesoz recognized the Oldtimer, V'harn.

The bluerider flew in Bressa's Wing, but had drawn watchrider duty after insulting J'hanos to his face. "You can't just change what's already been."

T'mor bristled at the bluerider's condescending tone, and V'harn shot him a glare. "Don't believe me, boy? Who here knows more about timing than I do? The Weyrsecond is right – if someone was going to jump from the past or the future or somewhere to save the Weyr, then they would have done it already, and we wouldn't be standing here talking about it."

"But we *are* standing here talking about it!" said greenrider E'darin. "If the Records say that nobody survived, how can *that* be?"

A'zelen folded his arms over his chest, and glanced at Dunia. "Because the Records that say that are all from her past," he explained patiently. "And we are from her future."

Even J'hanos gave him a strange look, at that; E'darin shook his head, and T'mor said aloud, "I don't understand!"

Wingsecond R'banon took up the argument again. "But if the Records she knows were wrong about us, then maybe they were wrong about other things as well," he said, doggedly. "If we rescued the Weyr, took everyone forward with us – then it *would* look as though there were no survivors, wouldn't it?"

A'zelen cocked his head, and frowned at the other brownrider. "I hate to say it, but, no, it wouldn't. It would look like the Weyr disappeared, and *that's* a mystery the Records wouldn't have left unmentioned."

"What's the *difference?*" T'mor cried, throwing up his hands.

"The difference," J'hanos said, harshly, speaking for the first time in several minutes, "is that if Southern Weyr is rescued, instead of dying, then the rest of the dragons of Pern at the time won't keen that loss, and the land we're standing on right now wouldn't have been littered with bodies, twenty-five Turns ago."

That grim image shocked everyone into momentary silence, and J'hanos waved a hand at them all. "We few won't be missed, because a wave like that – two dragonlengths or more tall, a wall of water bigger than any storm surge you've ever seen in your life – it drags things back into the sea with it, when it finally retreats. There are stories of waves like that in the Tillek Records, waves that swallowed ships and cots and storehouses whole, and scores of people whose bodies were never found. But it doesn't take *everything.*"

"For them to declare Southern destroyed, there must have been something left for them to find," A'zelen agreed.

"The Ballad of Southern was very clear," Dunia said, in a small voice. "Things were... found."

"And you've known about this?" Corsan asked, undisguised horror in his voice. The dragonhealer hadn't moved from his crouching position, hugging his two oldest children to him as if afraid to let them go. "You've known about this ever since the day you arrived?"

"Yes," the queenrider agreed miserably. Corsan only shook his head and looked away from his weyrmate, as if unable to bear looking at her any longer.

"Well," said Wingleader T'del heartily, breaking the awkward silence, "we seem to have few options, then. What do you propose we do now, Weyrleader?"

J'hanos looked up from his brooding, regarding the older bronzerider – and former Weyrleader himself, Vesoz realized – with a level stare. "The only thing we *can* do, Wingleader. We go with *her*." He jerked his head in Dunia's direction.

T'del nodded. "If we had reappeared anywhere during the Interval, then the queenrider's histories would have recorded that too, no doubt. Since it seems that they didn't, then we must follow her to her own time."

"Or die trying," J'hanos said grimly. "It looks as though you have company, goldrider – assuming you have no objections to *that*?" the Weyrleader asked her, with a thin, humorless smile.

Dunia mutely shook her head.

"Good. In that case –"

"Yeah, well, you all can follow her, if you want," came a voice that Vesoz didn't recognize at all. "I'm staying."

The man who'd earlier been standing with A'zelen walked forward, stopping near to where the brownrider now stood. He was wearing a green wherhide tunic rather than a riding jacket, and the strap of a swordbelt hung across his chest. He looked like a guard from the Hold, and Vesoz thought he remembered A'zelen talking about some guardsman from time to time. He couldn't remember the name, though, and didn't even know if this was the same man.

The guard's bald announcement caused a ripple of reaction, and A'zelen swung around to face him. "You – you're *what*?" he stammered.

"Staying," the guardsman repeated, his voice and posture challenging.

"You can't –" the queenrider began, her tone entreating, but J'hanos cut her off with his own sharp response.

"You're not," the Weyrleader said, dismissively. "You're coming with us."

The soldier's stance shifted, and his chin went up. "Listen, you want to fly off far into the future, fine, you do that." He sounded as if he thought the idea was insane, and he made a shooing gesture with one hand. "But we're still close enough to our time for me to find –"

"Look around you!" J'hanos interrupted, moving closer to confront him. "It's all *gone*, everyone is *dead*. There's nothing to stay here for."

The soldier looked unmoved by that answer. "I have family far enough to the south that the wave wouldn't have come anywhere near them. Some of them will still be living."

"Your family thinks you died *twenty-five Turns ago*," J'hanos told him.

"Well, surprise," the guardsman drawled. "Here I am."

"Gavrill, you can't do that, you can't just walk back into their lives," A'zelen argued, in a much more moderate tone than his Weyrleader's. "Even if you could explain how it was you weren't killed – they've all aged, and you haven't, and how could you explain that?"

That seemed to give the man pause for the first time, and he shot the brownrider a look of surprise before his features settled back into an expression that was stubborn and insolent and determined all at once. "I'll think of something," he said, shrugging, which earned an incredulous noise from A'zelen.

"Nobody can leave," Dunia protested. "Not now – not any time during the Interval, because the Records –"

"Don't worry," Gavrill promised, with grim humor. "I won't tell anybody, and I'll make sure nobody makes note of my survival in any sharded Records –"

"Nobody's going to put you in any Records, Guardsman," J'hanos said bluntly, "because you're coming with us." He held up a staying hand. "This is not open to negotiation."

The soldier scowled at him. "Yeah? Well, I'm not *negotiating*, and I'm not one of your weyrfolk, *Weyrleader*."

Vesoz swore under his breath and released Bressa's hand, all too able to guess how his brother would take this challenge to his authority – especially with everyone else hanging on this argument, some of them perhaps thinking along the same lines as the guardsman. He edged closer to the bronzerider, trying to catch A'zelen's eye. But his brother's Weyrsecond, standing there and watching the confrontation with his arms folded and a frown on his face, just shrugged at him, apparently unwilling to get between the two increasingly angry men.

J'hanos took a step closer, crowding into the guard's space. "I don't see a Hold around here," he said, his tone a little amused and more than a little superior, "so I rather think that that *makes* you one of mine."

That got a snort, and put the guardsman in motion. "Not in my view, Weyrleader," he said, shrugging again and starting to turn away.

"I couldn't care less about *your view*," said the bronzerider contemptuously. "All I need you to do is understand that I am not *allowing* you to leave –"

J'hanos reached out to grab the other man's arm, and the guardsman responded by twisting out of the Weyrleader's grip and backing up swiftly, putting distance between them while in the same smooth motion drawing his sword.

J'hanos paused with his hand still upraised, and Vesoz, his heart pounding in his chest, halted after a single step in pursuit of his brother. A'zelen had abandoned his waiting posture, but he froze as well, saying only "Gav –!" before he cut himself off. Other exclamations of surprise and anger were quickly lost beneath an ominous rumbling from both Vhauth and Toth, which started a reaction amongst the other dragons – and then, for long moments, everyone seemed to be holding their breath, eyes fixed on the bright, silvered line of the blade that the guardsman held ready across his body.

There was no way, just *no way*, Vesoz knew, that the bronzerider was going to back down from this; no way that he would ever consider letting this man go. Not now, not at this point, not with so very much at stake. But for all that he would trust his brother with his life, Vesoz found himself fearing what the bronzerider might do next. Tempers were frayed and emotions running high and the *last* bloody thing this fragile group of survivors needed right now was for two of them, and the Weyrleader no less, to wind up in a duel.

Not least because Vesoz seriously doubted that a duel with a soldier was something his brother was likely to win. He could only hope that J'hanos would realize the same thing.

The guardsmen held the sword as a barrier between himself and the bronzerider, ignoring A'zelen and keeping his attention fixed on J'hanos. "With all due respect, Weyrleader," he said finally, his tone heavy with irony, "I don't think you can stop me."

J'hanos let his arm drop and Vesoz wished that he could see his brother's face, but the angle was wrong. "Perhaps I can't," the bronzerider said mildly and Vesoz tensed yet further, knowing that that tone would be warning enough to anyone who knew him....

The guardsman seemed to take it at face value, however, and he backed away a few more steps before lowering the sword and, giving J'hanos a nod, turned towards A'zelen. He and the brownrider stared at each other for a long moment before Gavriil shook his head, looking down and beginning to turn away.

One moment Vesoz was watching his brother allow the guardsman to leave, and then he blinked and suddenly the man was flat on his back with a bronze dragon's forepaw planted squarely on his chest. Vhauth had moved so quickly and so silently that his lunge caught the guardsman completely by surprise, the man only aware in the last second and able to do nothing but try to twist out of the way, overbalancing in the process. The expression of surprise on his face would have been comical if it hadn't been underlaid by naked fear as he found himself pressed to the ground, head bracketed by claws the length of his forearm and sword-arm pinned by the dragon's thumb.

J'hanos ignored the flurry of reaction around them – the buzz of comments and the grumbling of dragons, Toth and several others nearby rearing back and spreading their wings for balance – and strolled across to stand beside his dragon, one hand resting casually on the bronze's forearm. Vhauth had stopped emitting his low growl, and now he peered down at his catch with interest and a slightly opened mouth, a sight that couldn't have eased the guardsman's mind.

"As I was saying, perhaps *I* can't stop you," J'hanos repeated, his voice pleasant. "But I meant what I said – I won't allow you to leave. And, as you can see, that's a promise I have no trouble keeping."

"Oh, sure, if you're going to *cheat*..." the guardsman retorted, his attempt at a light tone sounding somewhat forced and breathless. His free hand was wrapped around

one of the bronze's claws, but it was clear that he couldn't shift even that.

"Just shut up, and listen – and listen well," the Weyrleader said briskly, leaning down. Above him Vhauth cocked his head.

"Yeah, you've got my attention," the other man shot back sarcastically, giving up any attempt at struggling. "I'm all ears."

J'hanos made an impatient noise and bent to grab the crossguard of the sword still held in the guardsman's hand, easily twisting it from his grasp. He straightened up, examining the long, heavy blade for a few moments before planting the tip of it in the dirt and resting both hands on the pommel.

"There are bloody good reasons why we cannot stay in this time," the Weyrleader said finally, addressing the man on the ground but pitching his voice to reach all those watching this unlikely scene play out. "Just as there are good reasons why we cannot go back. None of us may *like* that, but those are the facts, and if you cannot understand *why* – and I'm sure that A'zelen would be only too happy to explain it to you, at length – then you'd better simply accept that those of us who *do* understand feel sufficiently strongly about it that we *will* enforce this decision."

J'hanos swept his gaze around the crowd, making sure that they knew he included them all. "We are all in the same boat now – and that ship has sailed. Mid-voyage is no time to be trying to get off. The journey ahead of us was unplanned – by *most* of us, anyway –" here he shot another narrow look at where Dunia stood with her family, "and let *no one* make the mistake of thinking it will be easy. It will be long, and hard, and we will *all* need to work *together* if we expect to live to see the end of it."

The Weyrleader paused a moment, then looked back down at the guardsman. "We have no supplies, no shelter, nothing but the clothes on our backs, and we have women and children along with us. These are *my* people, and I intend to make sure that all of them reach the end of this journey safely – to which end, a man like you is far too valuable a resource to allow to walk off alone into the jungle, even there weren't other good reasons to stop you." He smiled, though not very warmly. "Like it or not, you *are* one of us now, one of the survivors of Southern. I expect you to act the part."

When there was no response from the pinned man, the bronzerider straightened and stabbed the sword more deeply into the ground so that it stood on its own. "One final thing, Guardsman. Don't *ever* pull a blade on me again."

"Tell you what," Gavriil said, at length, a hint of his earlier bravado back in his voice. "You don't give me a reason to, and I'll think about it."

But J'hanos had already turned away, waving one hand towards the looming bronze dragon as he stalked off. "Let him up, Vhauth."

Vesoz saw A'zelen go to help the other man as soon as the big bronze moved away. While he would have been more than a little interested to hear what the brownrider said

to the guardsman, he instead followed his brother as the Weyrleader strode back to where Wingleader T'del and the Weyrleadermaster waited, near Dunia and her family.

"G'teris," the Weyrleader started, "Vhauth tells me that you lost one of your weyrlings on the jump. I'm sorry."

The older man nodded grimly. Though his expression was strained, he had clearly buried whatever emotions he was feeling, aware of his responsibilities towards the young riders and dragons under his care. "To be honest, Weyrleader, we're lucky we didn't lose more. The class started learning to go *between* barely a month back -- they were never trained for this." He rubbed a hand over his face, then scratched briefly at his moustache in a gesture Vesoz remembered from countless candidate classes. "There's going to be more trouble, I can tell you that right now. And, Faranth help us, these are the lucky ones."

J'hanos put a hand on the bluerider's shoulder. "I know. We'll do everything we can for them, try to match our pace to theirs --"

Dunia took a deep breath, and stepped forward. "We have another problem," she said, and when all eyes turned to her, her chin went up at the unfriendly expressions.

"And what might *that* be, goldrider?" J'hanos asked curtly.

Dunia shifted the bundle of her infant son to a more comfortable position, and met his gaze squarely. "Nioranth."

"What's wrong with --?" T'del started, turning to look up at the queen, and then he spun back to look at the goldrider. "Oh, no --"

Dunia nodded. "Yes. We have only a month before she'll need to clutch."

J'hanos muttered figures under his breath, and then said, "I assume you planned your journey forward with the help of the Starsmiths?" Dunia nodded. "With jumps at what interval? Twenty-five Turns, like this one?"

"Yes. They said that was long enough to make for clearer coordinates, but based on what little we know about doing this sort of thing safely..." she trailed off, looking in the direction of the Oldtimer, V'harn, before continuing. "A jump of twenty-five Turns is a strain, but thought to be within an acceptable margin --"

"For a strong, adult dragon," J'hanos finished, with a bleak look towards G'teris.

"At that rate, it will take us sixteen jumps to reach the Tenth Pass," said T'del.

"Seventeen," Dunia corrected him. "When I left, we were ten Turns into the Tenth Pass." She looked back at J'hanos. "I was planning on a jump every two days, at first, to give Nioranth time to rest, but... that might be cutting it too close."

"Never mind *Nioranth* needing to rest," the Weyrleader said sourly. "The younger and smaller dragons will definitely need a recovery period between jumps."

Vesoz moved closer to his brother. "The dragons aren't our only problem," he said.

J'hanos cast him a look over his shoulder and sighed. "Go on."

Pointing up at Nioranth, Vesoz said, "You planned for this trip, right?" Dunia nodded. "So I bet you brought supplies with you -- food, drink, soap, blankets, extra clothing, everything you could fit. Everything you wouldn't expect to be easy to get on the way."

"Of course, we'll share everything we brought --" Dunia said quickly, but Vesoz shook his head.

"I'm sure you would, but *that* isn't the problem," he told her, finding a modicum of comfort in being able to fall back into the concerns of his role as a headsecond. "Your supplies were never meant to sustain a group of this size."

J'hanos was nodding. "Right. We're going to have to find a way to gather food for everyone --"

"Food? We don't even have anything to carry fresh water in," Vesoz pointed out. "Or, not nearly as much water as we'll need. The dragons are going to need to hunt for themselves, and we can scavenge off some of their kills, but -- every time we stop, finding food and water is going to be a priority. If we're lucky, some of the edible plants will be in season, but if they're not..."

"That's why I said that we're *all* going to have to work together and that it isn't going to be easy." J'hanos looked up at the larger crowd of people, who had by now drifted together into smaller groups, talking intently, comforting each other perhaps but with half their attention on this conference of those they recognized as their leaders. "For the next month, we're all that there is to the world."

"G'teris, T'del," the Weyrleader said, turning to the older men, and both straightened up expectantly. "I know that everyone is tired, and that we've all had a shock. It will be easier to prepare for our next move when daylight comes, and we should try to rest until then. But I need to know how large a group we actually are -- and I need to know everything about each and every one of them, who they are and what skills they might have. I need to know *exactly* what we're dealing with here."

T'del nodded in agreement. "I'll speak to V'harn -- I'm sure you'll want to talk to him as well. His experience is going to prove invaluable."

"Oh yes, I'm *so* looking forward to consulting with V'harn," J'hanos said, his tone ironic. The older Wingleader gave a humorless laugh and a quick salute before moving away.

"Let me get back to my weyrlings, and get them settled," said G'teris tiredly. "I can give you a detailed report on them whenever you want it."

"Thank you, Weyrleadermaster," the bronzerider said, as the other man nodded and left as well. There was a moment of tense silence, then, before J'hanos turned to Dunia. "See to your family, goldrider. I'll need to speak to your weymate, but that can wait until morning. And please be ready to give Vesoz a list of your supplies."

"Of course, Weyrleader." Dunia looked as though she wanted to say more, but then she stopped herself and turned away.

The bronzerider watched her go before finally turning to his brother, and Vesoz was surprised to find himself suddenly enveloped in a tight embrace. "*Shells, Ves...*" J'hanos breathed, choking slightly as his Weyrleader mask finally slipped, and Vesoz wrapped his arms around his brother and squeezed back just as fiercely, each clinging to the other as though for dear life. "Shard it, little brother, if I'd lost you as well...."

"I'm here, Jal, I'm here, it's –" Vesoz couldn't finish that thought, because it wasn't all right, might never be all right again. Everything he'd ever known was lost, gone, and he could barely comprehend how he was supposed to grieve for it all... but so long as his brother was there with him, things couldn't be *quite* as bad as they might. "You know the rules – I go where you go...."

J'hanos finally released him, drawing back and gripping Vesoz's shoulders as he examined his brother's moonlit features. "I didn't know if you'd come back from Fort earlier or not," he said softly, his composure threatening to crumble under the onslaught of emotion that Vesoz could hear in his voice. "There wasn't time to even begin looking and then we were going *between* and all I could do was hope that you were safely at Fort, and *ashes*, Ves –"

"You have no idea how glad I was when Bressa told me Vhauth was here." Vesoz smiled shakily as tears started to blur the edges of his vision. "It's all gone, isn't it? The Weyr. *Ennie...* oh, my poor *Ennie...*"

The bronzerider pulled him close again, holding him until Vesoz fought down the grief that suddenly threatened to swallow him. "I know, I know, little brother, but we have to hold it together until we get to where we're going...."

"You haven't called me that since I was eleven," Vesoz said with a weak laugh, resting his forehead against J'hanos's leather-clad shoulder. "Shit, Jal, if you hadn't been here...."

"I am here."

"But all the others –"

"*No*," J'hanos said sharply. "Don't. Don't feel guilty for what you couldn't change, Ves." He gently pushed Vesoz back, lifting the younger man's chin to make him look at him. "And don't *ever* feel guilty for being alive. I'm not. And I refuse to feel guilty for being glad that you made it too."

Vesoz took a deep breath and nodded. "They're gone, we're not."

"Remember that. Even when it gets bad – and it will – remember that." J'hanos reached out to ruffle his brother's hair and Vesoz ducked away with the ghost of a smile. "For now, though... I know we have other non-riders here besides A'zelen's stray," the bronzerider said, assuming the mantle of Weyrleader again. "And, other than that guardsman, I'll take it that they're all our weyrfolk but I need you to confirm that for me. I need to know who they are, how many children we're dealing with, and what skills the adults may have."

"I'm on it," Vesoz told him. "Do you need this now, or in the morning?"

J'hanos sighed and rubbed at his temples. "Now. Check in on each of them and let me know how they're doing; who's looking after the children, at least."

Vesoz nodded. "Leave it with me." He squeezed J'hanos's shoulder, needing the contact, and was startled when the bronzerider caught his wrist.

"I'll give my apologies to Bressa but the next time we jump, Ves – you're riding with me."

"Right." Vesoz actually managed a smile as he turned away from his brother and set off to carry out his task. J'hanos's morning had begun just before their precipitous departure, but for Vesoz it was the end of a long, tiring day. Exhaustion, compounded with shock and grief and the numb sense of *Ennie's* loss, gnawed at the edged of his mind, yet he felt strangely detached from it, the turmoil of his thoughts refusing to allow him rest. He doubted that he was the only one in their ragtag band to feel that way, but at least he had a task now, something to focus on other than the enormity of what had just happened. It might not help to hold off the worry and the uncertainty for long, but for now it was enough.

Clinging to that sense of purpose, Vesoz moved off on his errand.



"Bluerider. We need to talk." It was Wingleader T'del.

V'harn raised his head and glowered at the man standing over him, wanting nothing more than to be left alone with his thoughts, dark as they were.

"What about?" the bluerider snarled. He needed a drink, and didn't feel like being polite. Back in the old time, he had been thrilled at the thought of going forward; eager to fight Thread again, in a world of holders properly grateful for being saved. But look how that had turned out, and now here he was again. He glared up at his wingleader, waiting for an answer.

T'del's craggy features were unreadable in the moonlight. "What do you think, bluerider? Just come on, before everyone else decides to listen in."

Grunting, V'harn got to his feet. Tengith stirred and groaned, but did not wake – the old blue had fallen asleep almost as soon as the excitement with Vhauth and the Hold guardsman had ended, leaving his rider to brood in the darkness. V'harn followed the wingleader – former wingleader, he suddenly realized; for with the Weyr gone, the bronzerider's rank meant nothing – into the whispering shadows of the young forest.

"Now listen, bluerider," T'del said briskly, stopping and turning to face the other man. "You're the only one of us here that's done this before, and we need your experience."

"*We?* That idiot pup of a Weyrleader send you, did he? What, J'hanos too scared of the answers to ask me himself?"

T'del's eyes narrowed. "Behave yourself, bluerider, and be grateful that we're asking for your advice at all."

"What do you need?" V'harn asked, relenting. He could go along with this for a while at least.

"I want to know what you think of our chances, and what we can do to maximize them."

V'harn sighed, remembering the great journey the Five Weyrs had made from the Eighth Pass. "It'll be hard," he said bluntly. "There'll be deaths, the oldest and the youngest first -- timing's not easy on a dragon. We had plenty of supplies last time; food and water for ourselves, oil for the dragons, everything we needed, planned well in advance. This time we don't."

"I know that," T'del said. "Food we can find, even if we have to live on fruit --"

"And all end up with the runs, like as not," V'harn grumbled, but the bronzerider kept right on talking.

"-- but lack of oil could be a big problem."

"You're right there. Last time every dragon carried a cask and we still didn't have enough. I don't suppose that mad goldrider knows about a hold nearby that we can raid for some sort of oil supply?"

"No raiding," the Wingleader said in a tone that brooked no argument. "No single holding would have enough for what we need and as far as this time is concerned, we don't exist."

"Then we'll have sores and hide splits inside of a sevenday. Spending longer *between* will make it a lot worse than usual."

T'del sighed. "It can't be helped."

"Then why not camp for a while and catch packtail? No way we'll get enough for whole bodies but if we can even just oil under the straps and in the joint creases..."

"Even that would take too long, as you'd know if you knew anything about fishing," T'del said, frowning. "We can't risk Nioranth clutching before we get there, so we're going to have to push on through."

V'harn snorted. "Why can't we just stop here?"

"We've already thrashed that one out," T'del said firmly, "although I'm sure that Weyrleader J'hanos would be happy to explain it to you again..."

"Yes, all right, so *you* believe that crazy goldrider and her ideas about protecting history. But how does she know we didn't stop? You all managed to keep a goldrider out of the records, so the same thing can be done again."

"For one dragon, not fifty."

V'harn waved dismissively. "It's still over three hundred Turns until her time. A lot can be forgotten."

"You're the one who's forgetting something, bluerider," T'del said, an edge of steel in his voice.

"And what's that, *bronzerider*?" V'harn was getting sick of this.

"That Nioranth is a gold. If Dunia says jump, your dragon will jump. So don't go getting any bright ideas about setting off on your own."

V'harn stared at him. "Tengith isn't young anymore, you know. He has Turns of fighting left in him, but you'll soon see that jumping *between* times makes fighting Thread look like flitting to a gather. How many jumps do you

expect him to make?"

"We don't have any choice." T'del said flatly.

"Well, flame your bloody mad goldrider to ash and gas, then! Where does she get off, dragging us all here with no chance to prepare? She might as well have left us for the sea! If you won't take my advice, why ask for it?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, bluerider," the Wingleader snapped.

"Or *what*? T'ron might have taken us through this, but you and that overbred fool J'hanos'll kill us all for sure!"

"If you can't give us any advice that helps, go back to your dragon." T'del's expression was stony in the moonlight. "But if I hear you spreading that kind of talk, you'll regret it, by Faranth!"

V'harn stared, feeling his lips curl in a snarl. For a long moment he thought of just going for the bronzerider's throat, but too many Turns of discipline stopped him. T'del just stared back, finally smiling in satisfaction as V'harn shook his head and backed off a step. The bluerider turned and stalked back to Tengith. Funny thing was, he had not even even told T'del the worst part; that came after the journey, when you had to try to live in a new world, stumbling every day over differences you never expected, having to deal with people who would never understand.

What a choice -- face yet another wrenching change in the world or die on the way there.

It was definitely time for a drink.



Once morning came and they could see their surroundings, it was obvious that they were sitting amidst the shattered remains of Southern Weyr. In twenty-five Turns, the fast-growing Southern jungle had swallowed a great deal of the site but the green-fringed remains of a few of the largest buildings were still visible as low, roofless shells, silent testimony to the sheer power of the tsunami that had scoured the Weyr from existence. J'hanos could only imagine what it had looked like when the sun rose on that first morning, all those Turns ago.

The Weyrleader stood near the cliff edge at the most northerly point of the headland, looking out at the deceptively calm, sunlit waters. Lan was perched on his shoulder, his small mind still and subdued as he pressed himself close to J'hanos's throat. Precious few firelizards had made the transition into the future, unable to follow the dragons *between* times on their own. Only those who had been physically pulled along with the dragons remained, Lan's lazy habit of hiding in Vhauth's harness bags saving him from the fate that had befallen Vesoz's green Ennie. J'hanos was grateful for the little bronze's presence -- he had grief enough to deal with without adding another loss to the tally.

He had made sure to circulate amongst the others before trying to get any rest himself, meeting them and putting their names and faces into his memory. There was a pervasive sense of disbelief amongst the survivors, an inability to

comprehend what had just happened to them. Most had fled because they were ordered to, not because they had seen the danger bearing down on them and, here in the stillness of the empty jungle, it was hard for them to *feel* its impact, to understand the full enormity of their loss. As far as most of these people were concerned, they had left a still-living Weyr, and now they all had to take on faith the news of what had happened immediately after their departure. J'hanos could barely believe it himself and he had been one of the very few to truly recognize and understand what they were escaping.

Southern was gone, Weyr and Hold both, dead and gone and reclaimed by nature. But as the confrontation with A'zelen's guardsman passenger proved, without the evidence of it, the *experience* of it, it was hard for the survivors to accept as fact. The ruined buildings that surrounded them now seemed far less real than their vivid memories of their homes and even J'hanos himself found it frighteningly hard to believe from moment to moment that they could not, *must not* mount their dragons and simply jump back to all that was living and familiar....

Especially difficult to believe, when it was a matter of overcoming the powerful instinctive need to *return home*.

The bronzerider turned away from the sea, unable to face the traitorous waves any longer and walked back to where they had set up camp. Just as the survivors of Southern were struggling to accept the reality of their world's destruction, they also had to accept the sudden necessity of this journey to the Tenth Pass. Time travel was not intuitive. J'hanos understood the basic principles, although doubtless not nearly as well as A'zelen, or V'harn, or even Dunia, who had spent the last decade coming to grips with it. Everyone might know the Ballad of Lessa's Ride, but nobody had been encouraged to examine such a situation as a problem to be solved. Everyone, himself included, had been discouraged from the mere idea of using *between* to travel through time and the queens had prohibited the dragons from even trying....

And now they were all being forced to it at a queen's command, on the word of a woman whose own weyrmate could barely stand to look at her any more. For all the claimed necessity, it was hard not to feel the pull of the time and place they'd just left, or to feel the instinct to stay in the here and now, where they might still find something familiar. It was human nature to want to keep to what was *known*, but here the known was gone, destroyed, and it was falling to Southern's last Weyrleader to keep the ragged remnants of his Weyr moving forward, no matter the resistance.

J'hanos moved tiredly through their makeshift campsite, wishing for a cup of klah and realizing that was another luxury they'd all have to do without for the next month or more. During the night, a few fires had been started, more for the comfort of the people who huddled around them than for any practical use – the queenrider's baggage had included a flint and steel, and the guardsman was carrying such a set as well. As J'hanos moved amongst the refugees,

he wondered how many of them had managed to get any rest at all.

They were sixty-six in all, with fifty-three dragons of varying age and color – not a small group, until you compared it to the number lost in Weyr and Hold. Twenty-six of them were weyrings, some of them little more than children. J'hanos had discovered that they and their Weyrleader owed their survival to, of all things, a prank, which had spurred G'teris to call for the before-dawn drill as punishment. A handful of riders were from the three Wings that were preparing for Threadfall that day – T'del and his wingsecond, up to see their sweepriders off, and the other sweepriders preparing to depart as well. N'larion, retired from the Wings through injury, had been returning from a passenger run. Most of the rest, including the nonriders, were a group whose return from Fort's gather had been, for them, fortuitously timed. The Weyrleader wondered how many other Southern folk had survived by staying at the gather even later; he hadn't asked yet, but someone from that group might have a rough idea. It could not have been many, though, and certainly not enough.

Of the other survivors, there was a scattering of men whose wakefulness had been sheer chance – two of them literally snatched up by their dragons when the warning came – and of course, the two on watch-duty, V'harn and A'zelen. J'hanos felt a little guilty for thinking that while he mourned the loss of his junior wingsecond, Sh'dan, he was glad that of the two, it was A'zelen who had survived.

They were all going to have to get used to such thoughts, with the question of why they, out of all the Weyr, had escaped the fate that history had apparently written for them. So many were dead that it felt impossible to mourn them properly....

The bronzerider frowned and shook himself out of that train of thought. For nonriders, they had four adult men – Dunia's dragonhealer weyrmate, Corsan, whose reactions made clear that, while he had been planning to accompany Dunia to her own time, he'd had no idea of the fate about to befall Southern Weyr; A'zelen's troublesome guest; Timlin, an assistant of the Weyrherder and a friend of greenrider J'ver; and, of course, Vesoz, for whose presence J'hanos could never thank greenrider Bressa enough. In those men, they were lucky, J'hanos knew. They could have picked no one better to have with them on this journey than a master-ranked dragonhealer, and Vesoz and the guardsman, Gavrill, each had a range of skills that would make both of them invaluable given that few of the dragonriders had ever needed to think about the practicalities of survival outside of the well-run communities they lived in and took for granted. Timlin's skills with beasts would be little called-for on this trip, but he was a strong young man who was willing to do as he was directed, his eagerness a welcome contrast to the guardsman's grudging cooperation.

In addition to Dunia and Corsan's three children, and one other boy under the age of ten, there were also five women – two who'd worked in the Weyr's kitchens, according to Vesoz, one from the laundries, and two who

were little more than girls, used to a variety of drudge-duties. Fallahi was involved with Timlin; Collina was the weyrmate of bluerider T'sald, Siska was Collina's younger sister; and Mirelli was the mother of both Lorelli, brownrider L'dras's daughter, and the young boy, Dillon.

It was a small comfort, J'hanos thought, that each of them had someone, family or loved-one, who'd survived as well – and of course the women knew each other already, as small and close-knit a world as a Weyr's support staff was. Only the guardsman was a stranger to everyone, except, apparently, to A'zelen.

J'hanos looked up to see his Weyrsecond approaching, as if that thought had summoned him, and he stopped his contemplative progress to wait for the brownrider. A'zelen gave him a searching look, and immediately handed him one of the two round fruits he carried.

"Thank you," J'hanos said, accepting the yellowfruit and taking out his beltknife so that he could skin it. Lan sniffed briefly at the fruit, then launched himself from the bronzerider's shoulder to pursue a flying crawler that buzzed past.

"We have plenty of fruit," the brownrider said. "Luckily this is in season."

"Water?" J'hanos asked, and A'zelen nodded.

"Wasn't easy," he reported. "Dunia only has two waterskins, which won't hold nearly enough for all of us. G'teris organized the Weyrlings for water-duty, although finding fresh water was a little trickier – the lake's gone."

"What?" the bronzerider said in surprise.

"The lake that was near the feeding grounds – it's no longer there." A'zelen had a distant look on his face as he gazed southwards. "I guess the wave... altered some of the terrain. The spring is still draining down the gorge below West... where West used to be, though, and the water seems to be good." The brownrider's expression was neutral as he went on, "There's still a lot of globefruit vines all over the gorge, more than there were before actually. The fruits aren't ripe enough to eat, but Gav had the idea of hollowing out the rinds to carry water in."

"Good to see that he's making himself useful," J'hanos said, and then couldn't resist adding, "Vhauth is keeping an eye on him."

A'zelen sighed. "That isn't necessary. You made your point and he's committed now, he's given his word –"

"Not to *me*, he hasn't," the Weyrleader reminded him.

The brownrider shrugged. "Did you really expect him to?" he asked.

"I *expected* him to be able to follow orders," said J'hanos, letting some of his exasperation show. "None of the men in my father's Guard would dare –"

His Weyrsecond snorted and interrupted before he could warm to his tirade. "I think it's safe to assume that Toric's Guard was trained a bit differently from your father's," he said. "And Gavril is – uh, *was* a captain, not just a soldier."

"Well, all the more reason that he should appreciate the vital need to obey the highest authority in an emergency," the Weyrleader stated firmly.

"He does appreciate that," A'zelen assured him. "I promise you, he does."

"If you say so." J'hanos wasn't convinced, and let himself sound it.

"This is a great strain on everyone, you know that," the other man said gently. "But as much as we've lost, as few of us as are left, we do have each other. He's lost everyone, Jal – and I'm the only dragonrider he's ever known. And your little stunt with Vhauth didn't help matters."

The bronzerider blinked. "He drew a *sword* on me, scorch it!" he said incredulously. "What was I supposed to do? Let him walk away?"

"But he didn't *attack* you – you're the one who grabbed *him*," countered A'zelen, his tone reasonable. Then it sharpened as he added, "And you completely ignored me telling you through Toth to let me handle him."

J'hanos snorted. "You know enough about leading men to know why that wasn't an option. It wasn't a private conversation, A'zelen, and there was too much at stake to worry about minor issues like some guardsman's pride." He shook his head. "I needed him to back down, I needed him to do it fast, and most of all I needed to remind everyone else watching that I'm still the Weyrleader and still the one they have to listen to."

"Leaving *me* with the task of getting him up on a dragon when it's time for us to leave," the brownrider pointed out sourly. "Thanks so much for that."

"Oh, come on," J'hanos scoffed. "Vhauth wouldn't really have hurt him. Everyone knows –"

"He's a *holder*, Jal, and no, he *didn't* know – and having Vhauth pin him like prey hardly set his mind at ease."

"He'll get over it. At least he's still alive to *be* worried about it." The important thing, J'hanos decided, was that A'zelen seemed to think that the man wouldn't give them any more trouble, and whatever other problems there might be there, he was quite sure that his Weyrsecond could handle them. "Now, we need to consult with T'del and G'teris, and speak with Corsan as well. Then we need to sit down with Dunia and review in more detail the plans for these jumps."

A'zelen sighed, and let the matter go. "Yes. I want a look at the notes the Starsmiths assembled for her. I'm assuming there'll be diagrams as well..."

Messages passed through Vhauth ensured that J'hanos's makeshift council was assembled when they reached the fire around which Dunia's family was sitting. Vesoz was poking distractedly at the fire with a stick, speaking to Corsan in low tones; the pair looked up at the Weyrleader's approach and Vesoz offered his brother a small smile that the bronzerider did not return. T'del had his wingsecond, R'banon, with him, and N'larion, L'tan's former wingsecond before his injury, followed behind. G'teris was accompanied by a dark-haired woman who J'hanos recognized as the weyrling queenrider, Revanne. She was a good deal older than most of her class and, if he recalled Genna's reports

correctly – the thought of the Weyrwoman bringing with it a sharp stab of renewed grief, quickly pushed aside – she was a practically-minded and capable young woman, a queenrider more in Genna's own mold than Vivia's. Though still immature, young Orylath's influence over her clutchmates could prove very helpful, and he approved G'teris's inclusion of Revanne in this meeting.

J'hanos looked at Corsan first. The usually cheerful dragonhealer wore a grim expression, and the bronzerider noticed immediately that he was sitting well apart from his weyrmate Dunia, not looking at the queenrider, who herself looked drawn and exhausted. When J'hanos nodded and signaled him to start, Corsan glanced in T'del's direction, then began.

"All of the dragons present are healthy. M'tin's Perith is a month recovered from minor scoring on her wing-arm, though, and I intend to keep an eye on her. Not," he added bleakly, "that we have the supplies to treat extensive medical problems, either dragon or human."

"We have some –" Dunia began, and although her weyrmate did not directly acknowledge her, he nodded.

"What we *have*," Corsan said, "is a basic-aid kit and supplies that were assembled with only Nioranth in mind. Oil, for example, but with this many dragons that will run out within the day, especially with the strain we'll be putting on all of them." He raked his hair back with both hands, seeming to gather his thoughts. "Going *between* is always an effort and a strain, for dragon as well as rider, even if we feel the cold before they do. A longer jump is even more effort and puts an even greater strain on the dragon. We're going to be asking them to make successive long jumps – and we just don't have adequate supplies to care for them, not for the period of time we're talking about."

J'hanos nodded. "What do you recommend?"

Corsan looked worried, resigned, and apologetic all at once. "Right now, most of the dragons have fed recently, but even they will need to eat again within a sevenday. And the weyring dragons will need to eat more often, though in smaller amounts. We're going to have to spend some part of each rest stop figuring out what's available for them to eat and where it's safe to let them hunt. Also, because of the time-limit imposed by Nioranth's gestation, we can't allow the dragons to eat as they'd normally prefer – large meals at weekly intervals, followed by sleep. We need to keep them strong, but we have to keep them sharp as well."

The bronzerider hadn't thought of that, but he knew that the dragonhealer was right. "So they'll all need smaller meals, more often?"

Corsan nodded. "That would give them a steadier supply of energy without diverting as much of it to digestion. But the trade-off, obviously, is the energy they'll expend on hunting more often, especially since there are no convenient feeding grounds to supply them."

"On the bright side," Vesoz pointed out, "we can try to have them kill extra beasts for our use, as well."

"Maybe, maybe not," Corsan warned. "Wild herds are an undependable resource. I'd be worried about finding the

numbers, consistently, just to keep the dragons fed. As it is, we have to be prepared for them becoming undernourished – we'll have to keep a particularly close eye on the weyrlings. We might get to the point where the strongest dragons will need to hunt and give food to the weaker ones, even when they're hungry themselves."

"That's going to be a lot of fun to explain to them," said R'banon dryly.

"I know, dragons aren't big on the concept of rationing," Corsan agreed. "With luck it won't be necessary. But that isn't the only problem we face."

"What else?" J'hanos asked.

"Their hides are going to deteriorate," the dragonhealer said. "There's no getting around that. If we still had the lake nearby, that would help, but I'm told that we don't?" Corsan looked at A'zelen, and received the brownrider's nod. "Bathing them in the sea and scrubbing their hides with sand is fine – when you can oil them thoroughly afterwards. Without that step, well, salt-water is only going to accelerate the drying out of their hides, and that, as I'm sure you all know, will soon lead to patching and flaking, and after that, cracking – and the prolonged jumps *between* are hardly going to help."

"Is there anything we can do?" the bronzerider said, without much hope, and he was answered with a shrug.

"The best thing to do would be not to bathe them and not to let them swim – and yes, I know that they'll protest that when they start itching. Fresh water would be better on their hides than salt water, but even there I think that riders would be better washing off problem areas individually rather than letting their dragons go immerse themselves as they'd prefer." The dragonhealer sighed. "They're going to have to get used to being a bit grubby... but at the same time, we can't let too much sweat and dirt build up because that will just increase the possibility of infection if and when we do start seeing hide cracks, especially at the joints. If the stream that used to drain the old lake is big enough, you could stand the dragons in that to at least splash them down, rather than in the sea," the dragonhealer suggested. "But that's the best I can offer."

"This would be downstream from where we're collecting drinking water, of course?" Vesoz asked hastily.

"Of course," Corsan agreed. "The dragons themselves are going to need a lot of that water too – they should be encouraged to drink more than they might normally. It won't keep them completely hydrated, but every little bit will help."

"We'll make sure that becomes a routine at every landing, then," J'hanos said. "Anything else?"

Corsan shot him a slightly incredulous look, as if he thought it a stupid question. "Each rider is going to have to pay careful attention to inspecting their dragon for harness sores – as time goes on and hide condition worsens, that's where the skin is most likely to break, and where infection is most likely to set in. I don't know yet what we can use as bandaging, if we need it, and I can't think of anything that we could get here to use to cushion sore spots from further

rubbing. People are just going to have to make sure that they only use the straps for making the jumps, and strip them off as soon as they land."

"We might have to re-rig some of the harnesses," offered T'del thoughtfully. "Cannibalize existing straps but tie them differently, just enough to aid the riders in staying on."

"At least whatever we come up with won't have to stand up to the rigor of anything like flying 'Fall," J'hanos said, and the other riders nodded. "Thread is the one thing we *don't* need to worry about on this trip."

"Yes, we may have to do that," said Corsan, nodding to T'del. "We have a harness kit in our luggage, just in case, so we do have a leather knife. But I wouldn't suggest doing that until it becomes a necessity – which it may, sooner or later, in a few cases anyway. I don't know if you noticed last night, Weyrleader –"

"Noticed what?"

"One of my wingriders has no flying harness at all," T'del said. He met J'hanos's surprised look with a grimace. "O'kimos, one of my blueriders. He was awake – wasn't sleeping well, thought he'd get up early and prepare for Fall – but he hadn't harnessed Yelth, and when the order came there wasn't time for him to do anything about it. He was running back to his weycot from the Weyrhall when Yelth snatched him up off the ground."

"We have three other riders in similar situations," A'zelen reported. "R'yeran actually scrambled up on Hinth and just held onto her neckridge for the jump. None of the four have a flying strap between them, and E'gar and O'kimos don't even have their riding jackets."

"As if we don't have problems enough," the Weyrleader sighed. "Is there any way we can rig basic flying straps, at least?"

The brownrider nodded. "We can cut strips off of some existing harnesses – it won't be pretty, but at least it gives the riders something to hang onto."

"But," Corsan jumped in quickly, "we're going to have to watch those four carefully if we do that. Harnesses that aren't well-fitted to the dragon can cause chafing. These are being fastened around parts of the dragon's neck that aren't normally rubbed against, and the straps have rough, unfinished edges on top of that. In addition, those riders whose harnesses are cut to provide the straps had better pay closer attention to the raw edges that are left on their own gear."

J'hanos rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the scratch of stubble against his palm, and nodded. "All right. What else?"

"Believe it or not, Weyrleader, I think that's it. For now." Corsan gave him a sad smile.

"I had a talk with V'harn," T'del began next. "He is..." The older bronzerider seemed to grope for words, then he shrugged. "He's concerned about our chances of making it to the Tenth Pass. The journey from the Eighth to the Ninth was carefully planned and carefully provisioned – this one isn't. And he warns that there were casualties, despite that –"

mostly weyrings, and the oldest riders. We should probably expect the same."

"We do expect the same," Weyrleader G'teris spoke up. "It's already happened."

"Obviously, we will do all we can to help the weyrings –" J'hanos began, but the younger queenrider interrupted him.

"But we are out of options," she said flatly.

"Revanne..." the Weyrleader chastised, quietly, and belatedly the young woman nodded at J'hanos.

"Your pardon, Weyrleader," she said, not sounding in the least apologetic, "but that's how it is. Nioranth's clutching schedule is only one thing creating a deadline for us. As the dragonhealer told us all, no matter how long we rest between jumps or how well-fed we keep the dragons, nothing we can do will keep their hides healthy, and that means that it's only a matter of time before even the strongest will be unable to survive a trip *between*. And the weyrings will be dead long before that."

"What do you suggest we do, then?" J'hanos asked her, interested in her answer. He'd had little contact with Revanne before this, the training of goldriders not being a part of the Weyrleader's purview, but Genna had spoken highly of her, as had the Weyrsmith.

"Move as quickly as we can," Revanne said promptly. "And try to outrun the problem."

"Either way," said Dunia, who had listened quietly, with a troubled look on her face, for a very long time as the realities of their predicament were outlined, "we are going to lose people. If we push too hard, we'll only force some of the weakest to fail."

"I agree," the younger queenrider said. "But we don't exactly have a choice."

Much as he hated to admit it, J'hanos agreed with Revanne's blunt assessment. However they organized the jumps, the weyrings would bear the brunt of the strain, and the adult dragons would not be immune. It was almost a relief to know that the Weyrleader understood that, and harbored no false hopes for J'hanos to deliver some miracle to them. The miracle would be making it to the Tenth Pass with any of this weyring class still alive.

"We do at least know how the leaders of the Eighth Pass Weyr kept their groups together, on their jumps," A'zelen said. "We know that each Weyr jumped in place at its own site, but they must have had plans to coordinate all of them, and each Weyrleader and Weyrwoman would have had to coordinate all the riders under them..."

"Yes," Dunia said, nodding. "From everything I learned when I was trying to... plan, the key is not to allow individual riders try to form the coordinates – there's too much scope for confusion and faulty visualization. When the Five Weyr came forward, the queens passed on the visualizations; the task of the rider was to reinforce the temporal component of the coordinates – the purpose of moving through time as well as space. Dragons can pick that up from other dragons as well, especially from a queen, but it's better if the rider is reinforcing the idea as well."

A'zelen was nodding thoughtfully. "Yes, that would make sense. So in our case, the obvious choice for the broadcasting of the coordinates is Nioranth – with Vhauth to help her reinforce the order to use those instead of any variations dragons might pick up from their riders, and to pass on the order to remind the riders to think about moving forward in time."

"And so long as Nioranth's orders are very clear," put in Revanne, "Orylath should be able to give the same reinforcement to the weyring dragons – they'll listen to her."

G'teris nodded. "They'd listen to Hareth, too, but they'll listen to a gold more – even a young gold."

"When are we going to hit Southern again?" N'larion asked.

"What?" Dunia started, her eyes widening. "What do you...?"

"What he *means*," J'hanos said, "is that if you're from Southern Weyr and if Nioranth thought she had jumped home when she came to us, then if we keep jumping here, sooner or later we're going to find ourselves sitting in the middle of a Weyr, which could be a little awkward to keep out of the Records."

"The Weyr..." Dunia swallowed, her gaze flicking down towards the fire. "The Weyr wasn't rebuilt until the start of the Tenth Pass. We won't find it here until the last jump."

"That late?" T'del asked. J'hanos could understand the older bronzerider's surprise -- the peak of the Hatching Grounds stood unchanged on the headland's eastern edge, its presence the reason that Southern Weyr had been founded here in the first place. It seemed to make little sense to leave the site abandoned for the jungle to reclaim, but then they had no idea of the history of the Interval.

"This site wasn't needed until after Thread started falling again," the goldrider said simply.

"All right," J'hanos said at last, looking around at them all before allowing his gaze to rest finally on Dunia. She met his eyes steadily, but then, it wasn't her ability to carry out a task like this that he'd lost faith in, and he wasn't worried that she would fail them *now*. He suppressed a sigh. "I want a look at the notes the starsmiths prepared for you, goldrider, and I want A'zelen to see them as well, even if we're not going to be visualizing them ourselves. I want to understand what we're doing here."

"I assume we're following the same principles that Lessa's Ride did?" A'zelen asked, and Dunia nodded.

"The positions of some constellations, the waxing and waning of the Red Star, as well as the phases of the moons," the queenrider confirmed. "I have notes, and they painted maps of the night sky for each jump, as well."

"May I?" the brownrider asked, gesturing, and Dunia turned back towards Nioranth and her baggage, with him following.

J'hanos looked at the others, "We need to make sure that we speak to each rider, individually, and make sure they understand what's being asked of them. I don't want anyone failing because we didn't make it clear enough to them. If

you get an idea that anyone may have a problem, any problem at all, *tell me*. I want to know, even if you think you can take care of it yourself." They all nodded. "Weyrleader, goldrider, your charges are obvious; N'larion, the weyrings may need help with hunting, so I'll ask you to work with G'teris on that. T'del – you and R'banon have the survivors of R'verel, M'tanan, G'tur, and Y'kinal's wings. A'zelen and I will take the rest. Corsan, I don't need to tell you what to do -- just let me know of any health problems as they arise. Vesoz, I need you to organize the gathering and distribution of supplies – work with the other non-riders and make sure to talk to A'zelen's new friend, see what he knows about living off the land."

He paused a moment, gathering his thoughts. "We'll rest tonight, gather what supplies we can and let the dragons regain their strength. We jump at dusk tomorrow. That's all for now. We have a long journey ahead of us, so we'd better get started on it."

As the small group left to see to their assigned tasks, Corsan made his way around the fire to where J'hanos stood. "Sir?"

The bronzerider looked at him. "We have a problem already?"

"Not with the dragons," Corsan said with a weak laugh, glancing back in the direction of Nioranth's pregnant bulk. "I was... wondering if you could find me another ride. I don't think that I can... you know. Not after that."

"She didn't tell you, did she?" J'hanos asked, and Corsan closed his eyes and shook his head.

"No. No she didn't," he said tiredly. "I don't know when she would have."

The bronzerider nodded. Vhauth was carrying Vesoz as well as himself, and A'zelen already had a passenger, but there were other beasts as yet unburdened. Looking up, he saw N'larion speaking with G'teris at the edge of the small clearing and called, "Brownrider!"

N'larion turned with a frown and made his way back to where the Weyrleader waited. "Sir?"

"You and Mulujath were on a transport run before we found ourselves here, correct? You still have the additional riding straps in place?"

"Yes, sir," the stocky brownrider said. "We took Steward Cynestan over to Landing for a meeting."

J'hanos snorted softly. "Of *course* the Steward would survive it all – that one's slippery as an oiled seasnake." Shaking his head, he looked at N'larion. "You have a new passenger; the dragonhealer here is in need of a ride."

N'larion flicked a look towards Nioranth, then nodded. "Not a problem, Weyrleader."

"Good. I'll leave you two to sort out the details between you."

The two men walked away, leaving J'hanos to his thoughts. Lan reappeared from out of the trees, dropping onto the bronzerider's shoulder and rubbing his small head against J'hanos's scarred cheek. Raising a hand to soothe the firelizard, the Weyrleader looked up at the sky, at the sun

nearing its zenith, and wondered what lay in store for them now that they were committed to this nightmare path.

Their past was dead, as lost to them as they were to it. Their future was an unknown to be faced again and again and again in increasingly deadly increments until they finally washed up on the shore of Dunia's long-lost home, of a Weyr both familiar and impossibly alien where he would need to give his people into another Weyrleader's care. The journey would not be an easy one but they had no other *choice....*

Pushing such thoughts aside, J'hanos squared his shoulders and started back towards the makeshift campsite, determined to be Weyrleader to what remained of his Weyr for as long as he had left.

to be continued...



Kadanzer Weyr

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