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# The Long Way Home, Part 2

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They came out of their third jump *between* times, twenty-five Turns ahead of where they had been just minutes before. *Betweening* across times was not the same as just *betweening*... it was colder, darker, more airless, more endless, and less real.

Everything was less real, now. The blue taint of night was heavy over the landscape of the plateau below. The sky was pouring down rain, sharp, prickling drops that had already soaked G'teris to the skin as they circled, waiting to land. It would be another night of damp, unsheltered sleep, taking whatever rainbreak and warmth that Hareth's sleeping body would be able to provide.

Hareth took his turn and landed, settling to his blue haunches tired, bewildered and hungry, and G'teris thumped on his hide in reassurance. *How are our charges?* he asked out of routine.

### ***Jynth was lost. Myzuth was lost.***

G'teris had to swallow a sour taste. A green, smallest and weakest of their class, and a blue, both heavy weights on G'teris' conscience, to add to the sole casualty of the first jump. These weyrlings were his responsibility, and a prickly reminder that it was the blues and the greens who were already taking the heaviest toll from the hard jumps *between*. He wouldn't let himself dwell on the fact that Hareth was not the largest or strongest of the blues – his Benden blood was mixed, after all. He did allow himself a moment of angry bile directed at the queenrider from the future who had dragged them – without so much as the courtesy of warning – into this mad, mad scramble through time. She had no reason to be concerned for herself, as she was the one with the coordinates in mind, and who rode a sturdy gold. Convenient too, that she had managed to round up her own immediate family and loved ones for the leap, leaving the rest of the Weyr to their watery fate. *How are the rest of the weyrlings?*

***They are tired,*** Hareth said simply. Dragonspeech didn't taste like human speech – their sentences were short because they could be, with every word a world. 'They,' in this case, were the twenty-four remaining dragonets who looked to their Weyrlingmaster's blue. 'Tired' was not just tired, but also a touch hungry and confused and still shocky, all without the need of more words to cover it. G'teris could

sympathize – he hadn't been expecting Nioranth's command any more than they had, and while he'd at least had the advantage of a meal before, he was no less in shock, even three jumps... four days... seventy-five Turns later.

*Tell them we'll all hunt tomorrow morning.* G'teris dismounted, half-sliding down Hareth's water-slick hide. He was stiff from the cold of *between*, but it was far less flying than an average 'Fall – the bone-deep exhaustion felt less earned than it should. He turned to unbuckle Hareth's straps.

The two-day periods for rest and recuperation, these times they recovered from the chilly stress of *between*, were in some ways worse than the actual jumps. Now, it wasn't so bad, just a rush to find a comfortable place to sleep the last hours of the night away. But the following day, there was a mix of too much time -- to think about how woefully inadequate their supplies were, to wonder what the future was going to be like, and how entirely turned over their lives were – and too little time. There was back-grinding work to be done, hunting the dragons who needed it early so they could sleep and digest, gathering and cooking enough water and food for the whole ragged party, all in the brutal heat or drenching rains of an unforgiving day without shelter. And above that, the hanging promise of another night jump *between* times. *Tell A'del, V'shel and H'zik to go assist Vesoz in gathering up any dry materials for bedding, once their dragons are settled.* They may as well get used to the idea that riding bronze meant more responsibility to go with their shiny hides.

It occurred to him like a static shock from charged furs: he was Weyrlingmaster on borrowed time now. The Tenth Pass Weyr that wasn't Southern surely had its own figure in that position, and just as surely, it wouldn't be someone delighted to step aside in favor of a new Weyrlingmaster with flying techniques four hundred Turns out of date.

He was a bluerider, and he and Hareth were both sound of body – they would throw him to fly scoop in the combat Wings, where they would rot, unable to advance even to wingsecond due to the simple draconic limitations of the smaller colors. He was *useful* as a Weyrlingmaster, and he enjoyed the rank that came with it. The more he thought about losing that power, the more it gnawed at him, and the more he was finding something akin to true hatred for the goldrider that had uprooted them. He wasn't inclined to be charitable for her salvage of their lives – she could have warned the Weyr to move, or saved them in a far less chancy fashion at any time in the nine Turns she had been with them.

G'teris pulled the heavy straps off Hareth's shoulders. ***I itch,*** the blue told him peevishly, in reflection of his own mood. ***There,*** he showed mentally.

This was an itch easily relieved by vigorous scratching, but G'teris knew – as they all knew – that there wasn't enough oil to keep the itching from turning to flaking on this journey. From flaking, there would be cracking, and that would be a point of weakness that *between* would be happy to exploit.

***This is wrong***, Hareth said, but with his short memory, he could not say how it was, only that he was discontent. G'teris knew, but didn't supply him with images of the good wallow and sturdy cot they'd left behind.

*This will all be over soon*, G'teris promised. *Sleep and rest and tomorrow will be a fine day for hunting. You and I are too smart to lose each other between, and too stubborn not to show those cocky bronzes who's better.*

***I am not better than a bronze***, Hareth told him, as if G'teris were a child.

*You are*, G'teris told him, with utter belief. *And I'm better than any one of those stuff-shirted wherry-brains.*

That part Hareth could agree with, and they settled affectionately into a harmony only possible with the forgiving forgetfulness of a dragon.

G'teris wouldn't let Hareth share in his fear as the blue settled obediently to sleep, so he bottled it away behind a steady conscience stream of confidence and single-mindedness. There were fourteen jumps ahead of them, and they wouldn't get any easier as they grew more hungry and more tired, he knew that. He knew just as certainly that he had to believe that they could make it or they wouldn't.



Another rain squall passed through just before dawn, drowning the refugees' campfires and soaking the survivors who didn't find other shelter. Five of them gathered until blue Isalth's outstretched wing, huddled together to share their body warmth, and to sleep, if they could.

M'tin and C'dan had managed that. C'dan was tucked up beside E'darin, using the other greenrider's thigh for a pillow, while M'tin sprawled on the far side of their makeshift shelter, head back and snoring loudly.

"Good thing we thought to bring M'tin along," E'darin said cheerfully. "With such a mighty sound as he produces, we needn't worry about slashers attacking us. M'tin will scare them all off."

"Scorch it," V'tor muttered. "I was hoping one would come along and eat him, so the rest of us could manage some sleep."

"Hush," Bressa wished them both. She sat between her brother and E'darin, arms tight around her knees. "M'tin's snoring isn't half so bad as the two of you chattering away like kitchen girls."

There was silence for a time, save for the patter of rain overhead, and M'tin's steady, sonorous breathing. Then E'darin spoke up again. "Well, there's one thing we know now about the future."

V'tor traded a knowing glance with his sister Bressa. "Don't tell us," he said flatly.

"Now we know," E'darin continued, oblivious as always to any objection. "The weather in the future is just as bad as it is now."

"Whenever 'now' is," V'tor grumbled, looking up into the cloud-filled sky sourly. The sun would rise soon, and

when it did, he knew it would rise over an expanse of jungle that grew increasingly alien with each jump forward.

They had jumped twice more now. The human mind knew each jump meant the passing of twenty-five Turns, but the human body didn't feel any profound difference beyond the numbness and drain of a single long jump. The dragons weathered the jumps differently, however; dragon minds forgot what-had-been, while dragon hide began to suffer from lack of oil.

"I still say I could do it," V'tor said. "Land close by a hold, sneak in, and steal what we need. We know there are holds here still. They still tithed the Weyr during the Interval, right? We're owed what's due us to care for our dragons, no matter *when* we are."

"Can't. Too risky," Bressa said wearily.

"I could do it. In and out, in the middle of the night. No one would notice a thing until dawn. I could do it. And I'd bring back more than just oil. Food and tents and blankets, too."

"You'd enjoy yourself far too much," E'darin countered. "Remember, we're suffering. No fun allowed."

"Weyrleader said no," Bressa said, at the moment more serious and sober than their foster-brother E'darin had ever been. "J'hanos would skin you."

"Nioranth wouldn't even let you and Isalth take off to try it," E'darin agreed. "Let it go."

"But we *need* oil. This whole business is going to be one long misery if we don't get some." V'tor knew that the Weyrleader and Dunia had already forbidden a raid for supplies. He even understood *why*. But taking orders had always been a challenge for the bluerider, and sitting still was something he found even more difficult to settle himself with. "Just wait and see. The Weyrleader will come around. As soon as the dragons start to really suffer, he'll change his mind. And he'll send me."

"J'hanos is all bronzerider," E'darin chuckled. "I doubt he'll send anyone else to do the job. Can't let anyone else have all that fun, eh?"

M'tin jerked suddenly in his sleep; his snoring stopped as the older greenrider rolled over, tucking himself closer to V'tor. He murmured something, then smacked his lips and began to snore again. V'tor shifted position to support this wingmate's weight, heaving a long-suffering sigh. "Strutting bronzeriders," he muttered, draping an arm comfortably over M'tin's shoulders, and making sure the other man's feet were still sheltered from the rain.

"It'll be dawn, soon enough," Bressa said, in a tone as firm as any Weyrwoman's. "We've all day to fish. Maybe we'll catch something we can boil down for enough oil."

V'tor knew that was about as likely as J'hanos dispatching a bluerider to raid an isolated hold for supplies. He knew Bressa knew it as well. But to fail to offer such a suggestion would mean to accept the hopelessness of their situation – and he knew Bressa was no more capable of that than he was himself. She clung to her hopes for packtail like he clung to his hope of making a raid for supplies.

"I can do it. Oil, bread, blankets. We need the supplies. I should just do it, and let the Weyrleader punish me for it after the deed is done. Or we could become raiders. No. Better. We could become pirates. I always dreamed of being a pirate when I was just a little boy."

"You are still just a little boy," Bressa retorted. "V'tor – no raiding. You know Nioranth and Vhauth wouldn't let Isalth off the ground without their permission, and I'm willing to bet you won't find a farmcot growing flax anywhere within walking distance. So why don't you let it go for tonight? We all need our sleep. We all need to work hard tomorrow, if we're going to be able to feed ourselves and our dragons and be prepared for the next big jump."

"The next big jump," E'darin echoed dreamily, sounding half-asleep already. "And then the next. And the next. We'll jump until we're just shadows of ourselves. Tired shadows and figments of shadows. Figments and fragments of ourselves. But I can promise you one thing about the future, once we get there."

"Don't tell us," V'tor grumbled.

E'darin leaned his head against Bressa's shoulder comfortably, and smiled a beatific smile. "I can promise you both that whenever we get to whenever we're going, we'll sure look good for our age."



Dawn was cold and miserable, thanks to another set of rain-squalls from the ragged grey clouds scudding overhead. The ironic thing was, it was fresh water – and they had nothing to catch it in, not in any quantity. But the dragons seemed to like the feel of the cool, fresh water dripping over their hides, and many of them stood with their heads raised, eyes first-lidded and mouths open to the rain.

Looking out from under the shelter of Toth's wing, A'zelen wished he had a dragon's ability to forget everything but the here and now, and find enjoyment in the moment.

He sighed, realizing that this was only a postponement of problems ahead. The dragons might be content for now, but that wasn't going to last. Already many were complaining that they wanted scrubbing, and they didn't really understand why their riders were denying them that pleasure when the sea – the same sea and the same beaches they'd always bathed from – was *right there*. They wouldn't understand, either, when their hides itched and flaked and cracked, and their riders could do little or nothing for them.

Even this rain, refreshing though it might be, could be a big problem. A'zelen regarded the clouds with a practiced weather eye, trying to determine if these showers would be moving through quickly, or whether they were settling in to stay. The refugees had a whole day and a night and another day for rest, here, but if it rained for most of that time, they'd never dry out before it was time for the next jump forward. Their clothing would be damp, and every rider knew you weren't supposed to go *between* in damp clothes; and the leather of the riding gear and the dragons' straps would be worse.

But he was getting ahead of himself. Those were worries for tomorrow. Now, in this first dawn of the Turn 2515, they had more immediate concerns.

Behind him, Gavrill returned from the edge of the trees where he'd gone to relieve himself, and the guardsman came to stand next to the brownrider, looking out at the inhospitable dawn. He crossed his arms over his chest, looking chilled; he was wearing only his linen shirt, already stained and grubby, still damp from the rain that had met their arrival.

A'zelen was in much the same condition himself. He'd followed Gavrill's early lead, and left his riding jacket folded on the ground beside the guardsman's wherhide tunic, close to Toth's body, under his wing, safe from the rain. Their shirts, Gavrill had commented shortly on that first day, could be washed, or at least rinsed. If they didn't leave off their heavier garments, and give them a chance to air, then by the time they arrived at the end of their journey the things would be fit only for burning.

Gavrill scratched at the heavy growth of stubble on his chin, and peered up at the sky. His first words, though, surprised the brownrider. "They're all dead now, I suppose," he said.

A'zelen stared at him. "What?"

The guardsman didn't take his eyes off the sky, and its racing clouds. "Everyone we've ever known, I mean," he said finally. "We're – what? – seventy-five Turns into the future, now?"

"Yes." It wasn't something that A'zelen had been dwelling on. He'd had that brief thought, during the last stop, knowing that fifty Turns onward his parents would have died long since, over at Landing. Died thinking they knew what their only son's fate had been. No cataclysmic disaster for them, just the inexorable passage of time. "Maybe," he added, as an afterthought, "maybe J'hanos's children are still living, somewhere."

Gavrill slanted an unreadable look towards him. "Really."

A'zelen ignored the faint hostility in the other's tone. "Yes. He had a son, and a daughter. They were very young. They weren't at the Weyr – after his weymate died, he sent them to foster with his family at Tillek. But if they did live so long, they'd be ancient now." 'And after our next jump,' he didn't say aloud, 'they'll be long-dead, too.'

"Huh." The guardsman turned away, towards their meager pile of belongings.

A'zelen suppressed a sigh, and followed. Gavrill might have accepted his fate, acknowledged the Weyrleader's victory in their abortive argument – but it wasn't with good grace. It was hard to tell how much of A'zelen's attempts to convince and explain had sunk in. He wasn't even sure if he'd made the guardsman understand and *believe* in what A'zelen himself knew, without question, to be true – the impossibility of going back, the necessity to keep going forward. But even if he had, even if Gavrill accepted that now, it would be a long, long time before he forgave J'hanos for the bronzerider's method of persuasion.

At least, he reflected, Gavrill's experience with the Weyrleader and with Vhauth had not destroyed his tentative rapport with Toth. He still seemed to regard the brown as trustworthy, even if he maintained a wary view of all the rest.

The brownrider found himself, in a strange way, perversely grateful to J'hanos. A'zelen would have rather convinced his guardsman friend to stay with words, but by using force to win the argument, J'hanos had neatly made himself the focus of Gavrill's anger at the situation. It had distracted the other man from other questions – questions that A'zelen was just as glad to put off addressing, for now. So long as Gavrill remained angry at J'hanos, he was forgetting to be angry about the reason he was here in the first place.

Not that A'zelen was ever going to apologize for saving the other man's life. But he hadn't expected Gavrill to be happy about the method of it – and he was right, the guardsman had woken up confused, sitting on the ground, unaware that he'd just been taken *between* in Toth's claws; a confusion that had been heading rapidly towards anger as he put the facts together to figure out how he'd gotten the painful lump on the back of his head. His rising indignation over that was swamped, though, by the revelations of what had happened to him, to all of them, and then he'd found himself with a bronze dragon sitting on his chest.

A'zelen didn't think the matter was resolved; only postponed. But that gave him time, at least, time to marshal his own thoughts, to clear up his own confusion, to prepare his arguments. He was absolutely clear on a few things, anyway. He wasn't sorry that they'd escaped, that he was still alive. And he'd *never* be sorry that he'd saved Gavrill, no matter what he had to do.

That was something he didn't think he'd ever be able to explain to Gavrill, though, so he was glad that they could put off all discussion and argument over the issue until later – later, when A'zelen had managed to get his complex feelings of relief and... other things, under control.



Vesoz looked up at the rain pattering through the canopy above and hugged his arms, feeling the fine material of his wet gather tunic stick to his skin. There was a chill to the morning breeze that made him shiver and wish to be curled up against Vhauth's warmth once more, but the bronze had moved from his makeshift wallow and J'hanos had gone to speak to Corsan, leaving Vesoz to make his way across their small camp to see about organizing supplies for the day.

The rain had extinguished the fires that they had lit the previous night, using the dry firewood that R'banon had thought to bring with them from their previous stop. Vesoz trudged through the low, wet undergrowth towards the largest of the fire-pits anyway, finding the women already there, talking quietly amongst themselves beneath the spreading branches of a young spongewood tree while

dragons and riders sought their own shelter elsewhere around the clearing. Mirelli had emerged as the motherly leader of that group, the younger women drawn to her calm, purposeful presence. Their gather finery was bedraggled now, stained and starting to get torn. Collina, T'sald's weymate, had torn strips from the bottom of her skirts to make a head-cloth for herself, and Vesoz saw that the other women had followed her lead.

"Lovely weather we're having this Turn," the headsecond quipped as he reached the others, casting an annoyed look upwards and then blinking as a large drop fell from a leaf to splash into his eye. Dillon, Mirelli's young son, giggled, as did young Farnya, who had been sent along to help by one or other of her parents. Vesoz sighed and pushed his wet hair back off his forehead. "Right, I suppose we'd better get started. As before, we're going to need fresh water, whatever fruits or nuts might be in season, and what meats or fish we can find --"

"Eating tunnelsnake is one thing," Mirelli said, gesturing to the blackened remains of the fire, "but *raw* tunnelsnake?"

Vesoz pulled a face. "Yeah, well, hopefully the weather will clear and we can find some dry wood, otherwise we're all going to be sick of yellowfruit before the day is out."

Collina snorted. "Some of us already are."

"I doubt you're the only one," Siska, her younger sister, said with a smile, "but if they all want breakfast, yellowfruit is it!"

"All right, we can round up some of the riders to help with the hunting and gathering once they've seen to their dragons," Vesoz continued, slipping, not entirely comfortably, into his headsecond role. "Dillon, you can help them again." He smiled tiredly as the boy puffed up with pride. "Collina, you get weyrling-wrangling; Mirelli, I'll trust your judgment on how to prepare whatever goodies we find so that we don't poison ourselves. Siska, Fallahi, Lorelli and I will help out wherever we're needed." He shoved his hair back out of his eyes again, wishing that he had something to tie it back with. "Hopefully we can find something other than bloody yellowfruit that we can carry with us this time around..."

"I'd settle for being able to build a fire *now* than worry about what we'll be eating in another quarter-century," Mirelli said, and there was a muttering of agreement from the others.

"What can I do, sir?" Timlin asked deferentially.

"Can you dry out wood so we can cook?" Vesoz asked rhetorically, then shook his head and sighed. "No, I know you can't. Look, why don't you and Fallahi head into the trees and see if you can find anything that stands a chance at being burnt. There has to be *something*."

Timlin blinked. "It's pretty wet out, and Fallahi's..." Timlin glanced back to where Fallahi was filling the front of Farnya's grubby skirt with the inevitable yellowfruits.

Vesoz gave him a direct look, daring the young herder to protest the command. "Well then, no one will wonder *why* if you come back empty-handed, will they?" he said

pointedly. Timlin and Fallahi were the youngest of the couples on this journey by some few Turns and Vesoz could only imagine that they were eager for a little time alone together in the midst of all this madness. Faranth alone knew that they *all* needed some reminder that they were still breathing. "But some dry wood *would* be nice if you get the time...."

Timlin blushed crimson and avoided the knowing looks and cheerful grins from the others who had guessed at the headsecond's purpose. "I, er... yes, sir!" He moved away to grab Fallahi's hand and the pair half-ran for the cover of the jungle, their flight followed by the laughter of the others.

Vesoz chuckled to himself as the pair vanished into the trees -- hopefully they'd be all the more willing to work once they'd finished exploring one another. Turning his attention back to the others, he frowned as he realized that they were still missing one of the non-riders. "Right," he said, his tone taking on an uncharacteristic edge of steel, "Where's Gavrrill?"



J'hanos followed Corsan as the dragonhealer made his way around their encampment, checking each of the dragons in turn, the weyrings first. It was obvious to the Weyrleader that the younger dragons were suffering, their hides grayer than they should be and their postures revealing an exhaustion that did not bode well so early in their journey. They had already lost two greens and a blue and J'hanos didn't think for a moment that that would be the full extent of their casualties as they made their slow way into the future.

"What can we do for them?" the bronzerider murmured in an undertone as Corsan finished his checks on Y'sak's brown Chassenth.

"Right now?" the dragonhealer replied. "Let them rest, get them to eat, make sure they're well-hydrated. Other than that, just hope that their strength holds out. There's nothing else we *can* do."

J'hanos swore under his breath as he followed Corsan through the trees. The usually garrulous dragonhealer was uncharacteristically quiet and the bronzerider doubted that it had much to do with the strain of the time jumps -- the man had barely said a word to or about his weyrmate since their first stop. Not that J'hanos could really blame him; after three children and almost ten Turns, it would be something of a shock to the system to suddenly discover that your beloved had been hiding a secret of *that* magnitude. The Weyrleader didn't doubt for a moment that Corsan had been as ignorant of Dunia's knowledge as the rest of them -- the man wasn't made to be an actor, his emotions all too readable on his square features -- and he was glad that none of the others had seen fit to accuse the dragonhealer of hiding that information from the Weyr. Of all of them, Corsan was the only one who had agreed to see the Tenth Pass with Dunia... but not under these circumstances.

They made their way around each of the adult pairs, Corsan checking on the dragons' conditions while J'hanos spoke with the riders, trying to gauge their mood and offer what encouragement he could. Most tried to put a brave face on things, finding distraction in humor and in general complaints about the weather, but their worries were all too close to the surface, too visible in eyes shadowed from too little sleep and too little food. A few more jumps, a few more casualties, and then, the Weyrleader knew, there could well be trouble from those left behind.

"What's the verdict?" he asked Corsan as they finished their rounds and trudged across to where Vhauth waited, the big bronze the last of the dragons -- bar one, the Weyrleader couldn't help but notice -- to be inspected. "How are they holding up?"

Corsan shook his head. "They're... holding up, but it's not going to be much longer before their hides start to suffer. Keeping them out of the sea is helping as is -- believe it or not -- this rain, but another stop, maybe two, and they'll all be complaining of itching. And that's when we'll start to see the flaking and the cracking." He stopped, looking up at Vhauth, who rumbled a greeting. "And after that, the infections will start." He gave a soft snort. "Aren't *I* the cheerful one today?"

"I'd rather honesty than false hope," J'hanos told him, looking at his dragon and trying not to imagine the sleek, dark bronze hide dull and cracked and leaking pus. He sent a quick mental command to Vhauth and the dragon obediently extended a wing for Corsan's inspection. "If they're going to weaken, we need to be as prepared as we can be. If there's *anything* that we can do to reduce the strain on the weakest, I need to know it."

The dragonhealer paused, his hands resting on the underside of Vhauth's wing-elbow. "The only thing that I can suggest right now, Weyrleader, is to redistribute the passenger load. The greens and blues will be the first to weaken, so reducing the amount they have to carry can only help. You've already taken Vesoz off of Devereth and onto Vhauth -- we should do that with all of the non-riders."

"Take them off of the smaller dragons and onto the larger ones, you mean?"

Corsan nodded, resuming his probing of Vhauth's joints. "One per dragon, bronze or brown, maybe some of the larger blues if the numbers don't work out. Nioranth..." He paused, taking a shaky breath. "Nioranth should be fine with the three children, but it's as well that I'm riding with N'Iarion anyway."

J'hanos frowned, counting quickly in his head. They would need to use a blue or two to make up the numbers if they weren't to use the bronze weyrings, and the youngsters were under enough strain already. Not everybody would appreciate being put onto different dragons, the moves splitting couples and families in some cases, but J'hanos didn't consider that to be an obstacle -- if people wished to survive this ordeal, they would just have to learn to do as they were told....

"All right," he said, "we'll do that -- I'll make the announcement before the next jump. If it saves us even one life, it's worth it."

The dragonhealer nodded and continued his inspection of Vhauth in silence until, finally finished, he stepped back with a nod. "He's doing well, Weyrleader -- you'll need to pay attention to his joint creases, same as everyone else, but his size and strength should keep him going for a while yet. Now I guess I should, er --"

"Nioranth?" J'hanos asked carefully. Corsan nodded. "Do you want company?" The bronzerider was in no great hurry to speak to Dunia himself, but he could appreciate the other man's position and Nioranth, with her advancing pregnancy, needed his attentions more than most.

"I... yes," the dragonhealer admitted.

Vhauth rumbled again, lowering his head, and J'hanos reached up to scratch at the proffered eyeridges. For a moment he let himself drift in the sensations of his dragon's pleasure... then he sighed and turned to Corsan. "Come on then, Dragonhealer. Let's see to our queen."



The two other surviving dragons from J'hanos's Wing had settled near to Toth's comforting presence. Both Z'mos and his green, and T'sald and his blue had gone to the Fort gather and were returning at just the right moment to be caught up in Nioranth's orders. Driven to ask them, on the first night, A'zelen had discovered that only three other wingmates of theirs had still been at the gather when these two had departed with the group of Southern riders who were here now -- three from a Wing of thirty-seven, who'd survived because they were still at Fort when the wave hit Southern.

It didn't help to think about them. It didn't help to think about all those who had died because they had returned from the gather earlier.

Leaving his tunic and sword-belt in a pile next to the brown dragon, Gavriil picked up the cluster of globefruit rinds they were using for carrying water, strung together on a vine for carrying. He inspected the rinds critically -- they'd probably have to discard them soon, and gather and hollow out another set. But for now, he slung the vine-strap over his shoulder, and said, with false heartiness, "Well! Let's see what chores the lordling has for us today."

Following him, A'zelen rolled his eyes but didn't respond. "The lordling" was how Gavriil had taken to referring to Vesoz, after finding out about the brothers' connection to the Tillek Blood. It didn't help that J'hanos had put the headsecond in charge of practical matters like food gathering, or that both had made it *quite* clear that Gavriil was expected to follow the younger man's orders -- but A'zelen knew that wasn't the problem, either. The guardsman's resentment towards the Weyrleader would probably have made him wary of the Weyrleader's brother anyway, but it was just as clear that Vesoz was unhappy with Gavriil.

Given the younger man's protective instincts towards the bronzerider, A'zelen guessed that Vesoz's attitude was rooted in the shock of seeing the guardsman draw his sword on the Weyrleader -- even if J'hanos had defused the matter easily and without harm. The bronzerider, A'zelen was sure, had already dismissed the matter from his mind, but Vesoz hadn't, and he was likely to hold a grudge over it for far longer than J'hanos would. As a result, the young man's dealings with the guardsman tended to be haughty and snide, and it was no use expecting Gavriil not to bristle and respond in kind. A'zelen could have done without their posturing, but at least it was no more than that -- they were working together, at least, if not smoothly, and that was all he could ask for.

Over to the side of the now-cold fire they'd built on arrival, T'sald crossed to stand alongside L'dras, the two men drawn together by the shared circumstance of being responsible for the small families with them. Z'mos was gravitating towards the group of greenriders that had formed around Bressa and E'darin, and Bressa's brother, bluerider V'tor. Nobody in their rag-tag company, it seemed, wished to be without some form of human company, some reminder that not *everyone* had been lost. The full enormity of what had happened might not sink in for some time to come, maybe not until they were safely in the Tenth Pass, but until then, the knowledge that they weren't alone helped to keep the grief at bay a while longer.

The brownrider felt a nudge, and he looked behind him and then down to see Farnya, Corsan and Dunia's oldest child, standing there with her skirts filled with yellowfruit, offering them to him with a solemn expression. A'zelen smiled at her and took one of the fruits, and she moved off purposefully to the next people -- the three riders from K'med's old Wing -- arriving at the loose circle gathering around the fire-pit.

Across the circle, Mirelli's young son Dillon came racing out when he saw Gavriil arrive, and the guardsman stopped, crouching down to talk to the boy. A'zelen was too far away to hear what he was saying, but he could see the boy's eager expression, and after a moment Gavriil straightened up again. He gave the boy's shoulder a quick, steadying squeeze, and ruffled his hair, before passing over the string of make-shift water flasks. Dillon looped the vine over his own shoulder and gave the tall guardsman an imitation of a salute, before setting off importantly to offer what drinkable water there was to the gathering people.

Vesoz was standing beside the fire-pit, looking down at it with a scowl. Gavriil wordlessly handed him the pouch that contained the guardsman's flint and steel, but the younger man's expression didn't lighten. To make a fire again, they'd have to find dry wood, somewhere. That, and hope that the rains were over for the day -- because while they could shelter under the dragons' wings, they couldn't exactly build fires under there.

"If you want to make yourself useful, captain, you can go and find us some firewood," Vesoz said irritably. "We're not going to have much luck with *this* soggy mess."

"Why certainly, my lord," Gavriil said, with a mocking bow, and A'zelen sighed as the younger man glared at the guardsman. "Any suggestions for where I might find it in this dripping wet forest?"

"You're the one who's supposed to know about living in the wilds," Vesoz snapped. "You tell me. Right now, we can't cook anything, which means that we're going to be eating yellowfruit for the foreseeable future if we don't do something about it."

"We?" Gavriil cocked his head at the headsecond. "Going to dry it out by standing there and glaring at it, were you, my lord? Good plan, that...."

"Oddly enough, I was waiting to ask someone who might just have an idea of the best places to look for something flammable." Vesoz folded his arms over his chest. "So?"

The guardsman regarded him for a moment. "Fine, I'll show you where to look. But you're the one who's going to be putting his hand into the treehopper nests to get the dry kindling...."

A'zelen shook his head and left them to it.



Dinner that night proved to be fish and tunnelsnake, spitted and cooked over the reluctant flames of rain-threatened campfires. Elounda sat huddled close to her fellow weyrling, Caryli, waiting for their share of dinner to stop dripping ichor into the coals. A number of their male classmates were gathered around the fire as well, letting the two girls oversee the cooking of their shared meal. Having two of their number able to keep dinner from charring to ash was no small thing, Elounda figured. Their male classmates had never before admitted the value of girls Impressing greens, but with Caryli being holdbred and Elounda herself having spent many of her young Turns working in the Weyr's kitchen, suddenly the boys were willing to place some value on the abilities of the girl weyrlings.

"Isn't it done yet?" asked brownrider Y'sak.

"Not unless you want to eat it your tunnelsnake raw," Caryli countered. "And as long as it's raw, there's always the risk of bellyworms. Nasty things, those. You've seen what they do to wherries and firelizards, haven't you?"

Y'sak made a face but didn't continue to complain. However, Elounda's own stomach chose that moment to rumble a noisy protest at the wait.

"What was that?" teased bluerider I'lian, who sat across the weyrlings' fire. "Someone hear wildcats?"

"I only wish," countered bronzerider V'shel. "If one or two of them came to call, they'd be welcome to stay as a main course."

"Ugh. Bet they'd taste nasty," Caryli retorted.

"I don't care how bad wildcat would taste, I'm hungry enough to eat 'em raw!" brownrider F'geres protested.

"That's a novel idea," V'shel said. He grinned at greenrider A'latal, who was the smallest and youngest of the weyrlings, then pounced on the boy, bowling him over and

shoving the boy's nose into his armpit. A'latal shrieked and squealed, his young voice sharp, high and true. "Just what we need to bring in a wildcat -- the sound of prey in distress!"

"That's enough," goldrider Revanne said sternly, from the edges of the neighboring campfire. "Bronzerider, you can choose either to act your age or your rank -- and I know which one we'd prefer."

V'shel sat up and let A'latal go. He rolled his eyes and made a face, miming Revanne mockingly -- but silently as well. The rest of the weyrling class held Revanne in a mixture of annoyance and awe. She was a Turn older than any of the rest of the class physically -- and temperamentally, possibly older by ten. It was at times like having two Weyrlingmasters, Elounda thought to herself. She respected Revanne, but found her too prickly to be easy in the goldrider's company.

"We don't need to invite trouble," Elounda said to V'shel.

"I agree," Caryli said tartly. "I think we've got quite enough of it already."

"Pisspots," V'shel said dismissively. "That sounds just like a girl. Yes, we're in a bit of a spot here, but you can feel sorry for yourself or you can decide it's a grand adventure. By the end of this, we're all gonna be featured in harpersongs!"

"Tell that to Y'kes and R'stau," bluerider I'lian said dryly. "The harpers won't be mentioning them, now, will they?"

There was an uncomfortable silence at the mention of their two classmates, whose blue and green had not carried them out of *between* after the last jump. Elounda sat with her arms wrapped around her growling stomach, thinking miserably that they might all fare as badly as R'stau and Y'kes had. She did not care a wherry's wet end about being sung about by harpers -- she just wanted to herself and her Kventh to survive this trip, and wanted all of her friends to survive it as well.

"That should do it," Caryli said at last, inspecting the meat on the stick she held. "Boys, it should be done enough now to be safe. Just don't burn yourselves. Remember, there's no numbweed to be had until we get to the Tenth Pass."



The rain continued, off and on during the night, but the next day dawned clear and bright. Breakfast was more fruit -- globefruit, yellowfruit, and redfruit which had been gathered the previous day. J'hanos and his brother circulated among the small groups clustered around each campfire. The weyrlings had all been allowed to hunt their dragons the day before -- today would be the adult dragons' chance for a meal, if luck was with them and the hunting proved good again. J'hanos paused by each of the riders, making sure that they understood that their dragons were to eat lightly, with the promise of more at the next stop or the

one after that -- gorged beasts would not fare well on the jump that they needed to make that night. Vesoz, meanwhile, reordered his gathering teams in order to take advantage of the morning's low tide.

"Let's take advantage of better weather," the headsecond said, with a cheer that was starting to sound a little forced. "If we're lucky, we might even begin to develop a bit of a surplus. We don't know what weather we'll be jumping into tonight, so the more food we can stockpile and carry ahead for ourselves, the more comfortable we'll all be. And if we can't stockpile, hopefully we'll at least have full stomachs before we go...."



"The tide's coming in," Collina said, shielding her eyes with one hand from the glare of the sun off the sea as she looked out over the ocean. "We'd better hurry."

"You heard the lady," snapped A'dek importantly; the weyring bronzerider's voice cracked with the order. He and nine other weyrings had been sent out under Collina's supervision to scour the rocks at the side of the northern curve of the beach, where they had found shellfish and greystalks during the last two-day wait between jumps. The weyrings scrambled toward the beach, knowing well enough not to be caught stranded by the incoming sea.

There was a shrill squeal from farther out. Fallahi, Lorelli, Mirelli, Siska, and four of the weyrings had waded out with a pair of makeshift nets knotted together out of the thin, fine linen of the women's gather petticoats, in hopes of catching fliptails or orangegills. Each of them held one corner of one of those awkward squares up out of the water; apparently they had trapped something within the center of their net. Young Lorelli squealed again as a wave swept in, almost swamping her and the other women laughed.

The sound cheered Collina's heart. She watched for a moment longer, glad to hear her sister Siska laughing along with the others. Then she followed the weyrings towards the safety of the beach.



They were sweating and scratched from the jungle underbrush, but V'tor and young Dillon were both grinning as they made their way back to where the others were camped.

"Look!" Dillon shrieked, running to present to his mother the treehoppers he carried by the tail. "I got four of 'em!"

V'tor carried two more in one hand, and had several dead whitewings hanging over one shoulder, using the sling he'd made from his gather belt as a carrying strap. "Found some wild whitebulb as well."

"Good!" called Vesoz, who was overseeing the makings of their evening meal. Mirelli, Siska, Collina, Fallahi and Lorelli were shelling a large pile of fliptails, which would be wrapped in sealeaf and roasted in the coals of a campfire.

"Never thought of treehoppers as good eating before," Collina said with a rueful laugh.

"Or tunnelsnakes!" Lorelli added with a shy grin. "But it wasn't so bad."

"Hunger is always the best spice," Mirelli chuckled. "And I'll be grateful for anything we can put in the soup pot. These fliptails won't go far, with all of the mouths we have to feed." She patted her son on the shoulder proudly, and gave him a push back toward Vesoz and V'tor. "Now have the bluerider show you how to clean and skin 'em, and the rest of us will be sure the Weyrleader hears about how good a hunter you are."

Dillion scrambled to join the two men, pleading with Vesoz to borrow the man's beltknife, cutting across Dunia's path as he did so. The goldrider, her infant son strapped to her chest in a sling, walked into camp with her two daughters and their contribution for the evening meal, the girls' skirts filled with a variety of roots and greens from the jungle. The friendly chatter among the other women went silent as Dunia arrived. She knelt at the edge of their circle, and began helping her daughters to sort through the contents of their skirts. "We've found a patch of mockweed," Dunia offered. "I know it doesn't taste the best, but it'll be filling, and maybe it'll spread during our next jump."

The response to her words was an icy silence. Dunia ducked her head and bleakly finished helping her daughters with their sorting. "Let's go see if we can't find some more, shall we?" Dunia said as soon as they had finished, handing over the piles to Lorelli and Siska. The goldrider shifted her infant into her arms and retreated, her daughters trailing after her.

"Mockweed," Mirelli sniffed, with a chilly stare after Dunia's back.

"You could be more forgiving," Fallahi said. "It's not Dunia's fault, after all. She didn't cause the great wave."

"No," Mirelli retorted. "She only knew about it. She knew about it for going on ten full Turns, and she didn't warn a one of us. Your family, and mine, and all of the Weyr and Hold – dead, because she felt her time was more important than ours."

"You're being unfair. Dunia couldn't change the future," Fallahi said.

"Why not?" Lorelli asked. "I still don't understand. I mean, I guess I do, the Weyrleader made it clear that the rest of Pern had to find... find the bodies and all, but why?"

"Yes, why?" Collina said with some heat. "Rot that, and the Benden-like arrogance of it! We welcomed her, we took her in with open arms, and she lived as one of us for so many Turns – that woman must have ice in her veins, in order to do to us what she's done."

"I think she's suffered," Siska offered. "Dunia looks so miserable --"

"And well that she should!" Mirelli snapped. "I'll forgive a body an awful lot, but this... shards, think of the children who drowned. She chose to save her own, but she wouldn't have saved any of ours, not if the Weyrleader hadn't forced her to do it."

"I don't know about that," Fallahi said. "All of Corsan's nieces and nephews – you know they were like family to Dunia. She's lost loved ones to this disaster, just the same as we have."

"Yes, and doesn't her weyrmate know it," Collina added acidly. There was silence after her words; everyone in the refugee group had noticed by now that things between Corsan and Dunia were badly strained, and that the dragonhealer was avoiding his children's mothers as though she were diseased. At length, it was Mirelli who sighed and took up the thread of conversation again.

"Aye, that the poor man does. Those poor children, too. I don't know how much of any of this they can understand. Stars above, poor Dillon has a hard enough time understanding why we can't go back to the Weyr and get blankets to stay warm under at night, or where his cousins and foster-brothers have gone too, and he's Farnya's elder by two or so Turns. Yes, maybe the goldrider is suffering, same as we all are. But that doesn't mean I'm ready yet to forgive her. Not for a long while yet. Someday, maybe. But not *yet*. In the meanwhile, we've got ourselves a fine bit of mockweed here. Anyone have any suggestions for what we might do with it, to make it worth the eating tonight?"



Dusk was drawing closer as the last of the day's hunters and gatherers returned to camp.

"Our Oldtimer returns!" Greenrider E'darin greeted V'harn with his usual moon-faced grin. "We had begun to miss you!"

"Shut up," V'harn said as he brushed past the greenrider and on into camp, carrying his cargo sack. A few other people nodded or waved, as he passed, but most seemed engrossed in their own concerns. V'harn made for the support staff women at the large, central firepit, where Dunia's little stewpot, the only one the group had, was steaming away.

"And what have you brought us, bluerider?" Mirelli sounded tired but grateful as V'harn squatted down between her and Siska.

"Redfruit," he said, starting to take the fruit out and stack it neatly atop a wide palm frond he had brought. Siska reached over to help but V'harn backed her off with a growl. "I'll take care of this."

"I was just trying to help," the girl said in a wounded voice.

"Tend to your work." Ordinarily he might try to make nice with her -- she was ripening well at sixteen Turns old -- but right now V'harn could not risk anyone knowing that there was anything in the sack besides fruit.

"What's for dinner?" he asked Mirelli.

Collina answered with a snap, "Maybe a nice big bowl of 'quit being an ass', hmm?"

V'harn stared at her. "Somebody's in a bad mood today."

"Why wouldn't we be in a bad mood?" Collina snapped back, but Mirelli hushed her.

"Calm down, both of you," she said firmly. "We've all had a hard time of it, but we can't afford to go at each other like 'snakes in a sack. At least we're alive, and look! It didn't even rain on us today."

"Still alive, but--" V'harn started to say, but Mirelli overrode him.

"Thank you for the fruit, bluerider. Now be off with you. We have too much work to do to stand about gabbing."

Sourly, V'harn stood and started walking towards where Tengith lay. Before he was halfway there, though, the trio from K'med's Wing stopped him. They looked as though they were back from a successful hunt; blueriders E'gar and B'ranur each had a small wherry, and brownrider T'mor carried a whersport. They had already cleaned and gutted their catches; all that needed to be done was to carve the carcasses and stick the meat over open flames to cook.

"Can we use your sack?" B'ranur asked.

"What for?"

"To carry things in, naturally," E'gar replied. T'mor collected the wherry carcasses from his wingmates and carried them off towards the cookfire along with his own prize.

"I need that sack for a blanket." V'harn said. "And to collect fruit. And besides, Vesoz already has me carrying things in it whenever we jump." That had been a close call, last stop; the headsecond had collared him and was about to take the sack, with his wine still in it, until V'harn had convinced him to let Tengith keep carrying the bag, and more importantly, to let V'harn be the one to load and unload it.

"Sure, if you aren't any good at hunting, I guess you need to do something, eh?" E'gar said sarcastically.

"Your mouth is as big as ever, I see," V'harn muttered. He *was* good at hunting, having brought down many a big wherry with a noose thrown from astride Tengith, or shot slashers with a crossbow from a safe height, but now he had neither rope nor weapon. Even if he had either, Tengith could barely spare the strength to hunt for himself if he was to survive the mad course they were all caught in, so V'harn was reduced to foraging for fruit. Everyone had to do *something* at least, or they would never make it through this

"Look," B'ranur put in. "We found a bunch of nice sling stones, some globefruit rinds for water, and T'mor got a good straight branch he wants to make a bow out of."

"Make a bow out of green wood? What's T'mor thinking?" V'harn asked incredulously.

T'mor came back, obviously having heard the question. "It's something to try anyway," he said with a shrug. "It doesn't have to shoot for dragonlengths, just so long as it can get an arrow far enough to shoot a wherry off a branch."

"And you want my sack."

"It can't be much good as a blanket," E'gar said. "Too small to cover much. Why, your bad attitude must stick out on all sides," he grinned.

"Fine way to talk to someone you want something from."

"Wait," T'mor said in a conciliatory tone. "I know J'hanos and Vesoz already have you carrying some cargo, what little we have. So what if we just sort of slip our stuff in with that? We'll take it right back out again as soon as we land. You won't even know we were there."

"It's not much weight either," E'gar added.

"I won't have you dumping stuff in my sack. Like as not you'd leave that stick poking out to scratch Tengith's hide."

"Well, then we'll give it to you before each jump, and you can take it out when we land again. Is that all right?"

V'harn supposed they had a point. He couldn't make too much of a stink, after all, or people would start wondering what he was hiding. "Fine. Come find me when we're packing and I'll haul your stuff for you."

"That's all we want," T'mor said, forestalling another comment from E'gar. The three headed off towards their dragons.

V'harn sighed with relief. He definitely needed a drink. Nobody else stopped him on his way back to Tengith. His blue opened one sleepy eye and closed it again, sending out vague thoughts of weariness and warmth. V'harn slipped behind Tengith's bulk and, shielding the cargo sack with his body, he pulled out the wineskin and took a shot. He hesitated, and started to take another... just as Corsan walked into view, heading for the undergrowth with little Corsia in tow. Trying to look nonchalant, V'harn capped the skin again and put it away.

Corsan looked his way, frowned, but then was distracted by something Corsia said, and kept walking.

'That was too close,' thought V'harn. 'Too close by half.'



The ragged survivors gathered around the central firepit for their evening meal, which was consumed in a atmosphere of false gaiety – for the first time in several nights, there was enough food for everyone to eat well, even if the variety was questionable. Tunnelsnake and bush wherry seasoned with sea salt, with mockweed, blueleek, rootmelon and fliptail wasn't anyone's idea of a proper feast, but beggars learned not to be too choosy.

When J'hanos rose purposefully to his feet, the gathering fell silent. The Weyrleader stood for a moment, his face shadowed by the flicking bonfire flames as he looked around at the gathered remnants of Southern. "You all know the routine by now," he said at last, his voice raised to carry to them all. "We jump late tonight; Nioranth and Vhauth will provide the rest of the dragons with the necessary coordinates. Once we emerge, we set down and establish a camp as before, then rest until sun-up. After that, we're foraging for supplies again. I *know* that it's tiring and that it's not what you're used to, but it won't be for much longer."

"No, just another three centuries or so!" someone called, raising quiet laughter from around the group.

J'hanos waited for everyone to settle before continuing. "There will, however, be a few changes to our previous routine when we leave here tonight. After consultation with Dragonhealer Corsan, I have decided to redistribute some of the passenger load. The smaller dragons are going to be feeling the worst of the strain with each jump and I don't want to burden them with any more than is absolutely necessary. With that in mind," he said, looking around to make sure he had everyone's attention, "Vesoz will remain with me; Nioranth will continue to carry Dunia and her children, and Corsan will remain with N'larion and Mulujath. A'zelen will keep his stray holder. The rest of our passengers will be more evenly divided between the largest and strongest dragons. J'ver, your green cannot continue to carry yourself *and* two passengers. Fallahi, you're with T'del and Suloth; Timlin, you'll ride with T'mor and Kelbanth. T'sald, your Kalth is a strong blue -- he can continue to carry your weyrmate as well as yourself, but K'gal, I want you to take up Siska with you. L'dras, Mirelli will stay with you on Tanth but I'm putting Dillon and Lorelli with V'tor and R'banon --"

"No!" said Mirelli. "I'm sorry, Weyrleader, but... Lorelli will ride with her father. R'banon, I'll fly with you."

"Mirelli --" L'dras began.

"Weyrleader, I demand this," Mirelli said firmly. "Lorelli's always trusted Tanth. And Dillon won't be much of a burden for a blue." She looked down at the boy fondly. "Besides, I think he'd rather enjoy riding with his hunting partner, wouldn't you, sweetie?"

Dillon grinned at his mother with all the enthusiasm of youth. "Yes!"

J'hanos regarded the small family silently, then nodded his agreement. "So be it, then. Does anyone else have any concerns regarding this matter?" There was no response, only quiet, anxious stares. The Weyrleader managed a confident smile, and gestured back toward the coals of the fire. "Well, in that case, let us finish our meal and get what rest we can before it's time to go."



All too soon, the hour for their departure arrived. One by one, the time-lost dragons launched themselves into the dark sky, where a Weyrleader without a Weyr watched them assemble into formation, great wings and bodies blocking the light of the stars.

Vesoz was a warm presence at his brother's back, his arms wrapped tight around J'hanos's chest. Bronze Lan was already safely tucked away in Vhauth's harness bags, his tiny mind a small, vibrant star of its own amongst J'hanos's busy thoughts.

The formation grew and widened, so that the bronzerider could no longer see each dragon as they wheeled above the darkness of the young forest. But Vhauth could, and watched keenly as the formation

tightened and filled out. *Hareth's rider says all of the young ones are in flight and in place*, the big bronze reported. *Suloth comes -- he is the last. We wait now.*

J'hanos nodded, steeling himself for what was to come. *Nioranth?*

*She gives the visualization.*

J'hanos looked out into the darkness of the night sky, wishing that he could verify with his own eyes their number and readiness. He had left the last jump with fifty-three dragons and sixty-six humans; he left tonight with fifty-one dragons, and sixty-four. And as much as he hated it, he knew the attrition only just begun.

*Suloth joins us*, Vhauth reported, and J'hanos could see the other bronze as T'del joined them with A'zelen's Toth in a wedge position, forming up just behind Nioranth over the headlands which had once housed the Weyr. Beneath them, the sea was deceptively gentle, and the two moons reflected brokenly on the slow swells of her surface. *We are ready. It is time to go.*

J'hanos took a deep breath, and gave the order for them all to make another leap *between*.

*to be contined...*



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