
The Long Way Home, Part 3

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The fourth and fifth stops on their journey went without incident in terms of each being a successful jump. At each emergence Dunia heaved a sigh of relief as Nioranth confirmed that everyone in their ragtag band had made it. The physical and mental toll was growing however – riders and non-riders alike were becoming exhausted and stressed by the lack of decent food, bedding and washing facilities, not to mention the continual hard work just to ensure their basic survival.

The sixth stop – an emergence into a moonlit night in 2590 – set Dunia's nerves jarring again, as the dragons reported the loss of three more of their number. Caryli's green Maith, I'dun's blue Tesyth and M'jeru's blue Santh were gone. Again, all the casualties were weyrings from Weyrilingmaster G'teris' class. The young dragons were suffering doubly on this journey – their inexperience at *betweening* and their weaker stamina had now resulted in the loss of six lives. Dunia knew, with sinking heart, that that not likely to be the final tally.

She relied on Nioranth's nightvision to pick out the volcanic cone of the old Southern Weyr hatching grounds in the dark. She oriented herself relative to that as they skimmed down to land on the beach near the braided river, close enough that riders could go to collect fresh water, but not too near the treacherous sands that might get a dragon bogged down.

I itch, commented Nioranth, as Dunia began to unload the children and their meagre possessions. Around them on the beach, others were repeating the by now familiar routine of getting the dragons unharnessed and settling down to sleep through the rest of this new night. ***I itch and I am hungry***.

The oil that Dunia had carefully packed for her journey was long gone. It had never been intended that the jars should be the sole supply for fifty-five dragons! *Do you want to bathe before we sleep?* she asked. She could at least scrub Nioranth's hide, even if she could not oil it afterwards.

No, but I will hunt. Nioranth spread her great pinions in preparation for take off. ***Devereth and Toth saw wherries on the plateau as we flew over. Devereth and I will hunt. Some of the weyrings come also***. Dunia backed off and watched with her daughters as Nioranth surged upwards. Baby Murgon squirmed in her arms.

J'hanos approached along the moonlit beach, Corsan's familiar figure dogging his tracks. The dragonhealer didn't meet Dunia's eyes, but instead dropped to his haunches to help Farnya with her little sister's blankets. Corsia was complaining that she wanted to cuddle up to Nioranth, because the gold was nice and warm. Her father told her that Nioranth was busy, so she'd have to cuddle up to Farnya for now.

"The first hide cracks are showing," J'hanos said by way of greeting, his expression coldly neutral in the moonlight. "Kelbanth and Kireth both have chafing at their wingshoulders and Moranth has a weeping crack on her chest where the vines A'ranis has been using for straps are rubbing her. G'teris is checking over the weyrings now." He turned, looking back down the beach to where a large, dark shape was curled by the cliff face. "And Vhauth is itching. He's not the only one."

Dunia nodded solemnly. As the senior goldrider there, she might have expected the riders to report directly to her, via Nioranth, but the survivors' trust in her was still sorely lacking. For which she could hardly blame them given their current situation. "Nioranth too," she said. "She's hunting now," she added unnecessarily – both men would know where the gold had gone – and waved a hand up towards the plateau. "I'll ask her to get all those hunting to make a couple of extra kills if they can. It'll be more meat than we can use, but perhaps we could render down the fat to give some sort of lubricant..."

She flicked a glance to Corsan, who ruffled Farnya's hair and stood up. He briefly met his weyrmate's gaze, but she flinched away from the anger and pain she saw in his eyes. "Yes, we could try that," Corsan said wearily. "But exactly *how* we render down carcasses for fat with only sticks and stones as tools..." He gestured helplessly at the beach to demonstrate its lack of craft facilities. "The best we may be able to do is trim off pieces of fat by hand and heat it through to sterilise it. The empty oil jars should be able to stand that much heat, assuming we can even get beach fires hot enough to do the job. Even then, though, there's the danger that we may do more harm than good if we end up sealing infection **into** the wounds. Never mind giving the local crawlers and bugs something tasty to feed on -- it may start out sterile but it won't stay that way for long."

J'hanos's brown gaze was keen. "It's not worth the risk?"

"I don't know," Corsan said honestly. "As a healer, I can't say that it's something that I would ever recommend under normal circumstances but --" he flicked a bitter glance towards Dunia, "-- these are *hardly* normal circumstances. At this point I'd say that that it's the riders' call. It may help to give the dragons some relief and lubricate any flaking patches before they crack, but they'll need to scrape it off before going *between* so it doesn't set and fracture on the jump. I wouldn't suggest anybody using it for simple itches because of that -- it's fat, not oil. This would be strictly for those with visible hide problems already."

J'hanos nodded. "Right. I'll round up those with butchery skills and we'll see what we get from the hunters. Hopefully the beasts are fat at this time of Turn... whatever that might be." He laid a hand on the dragonhealer's shoulder. "And if and when we get something useable, *you* need to decide who takes priority."

Corsan sighed and nodded. "I'm on it. I just hope it does us some good."



In the end they received roughly three and a quarter wherry carcasses, all mid sized lopers. Devereth managed to kill two beyond the one she consumed, and one of the weyrings also proudly returned with one. Nioranth, however, wolfed down most of the two lopers she killed before the herd vanished into the cover of the jungle. ***I was hungry. My eggs are hungry,*** she said by way of explanation when she returned with only one loper haunch dangling from her jaws. Dunia sighed and passed the mutilated limb on to the butchery team, to see what could be salvaged.

Little could be done at night without glows, but the riders were up at first light, and a production line of sorts was assembled. Belt knives were not ideal tools for the butchery of carcasses as large as these lopers, but they had only the two kitchen knives that Dunia had packed and the sword that Guard Captain Gavril carried as additional tools to aid the task. However, even with this motley collection, meat and fat could be carved off the carcasses, even if the cuts were not the efficient, elegant ones that the Weyr kitchens always used. Breakfast was loper meat cooked on an open fire, with whatever greens the weyrings managed to gather from the forest under the careful eye of Weyrilingmaster G'teris.

Nioranth's complaints about itching were voiced on and off throughout the morning. Dunia tried not to look too wistfully in the direction of the hunks of trimmed fat that had been piled on a loper hide, nor at the fire where Corsan was industriously stirring the contents of two clay jars, occasionally stopping to pour part of the contents of one into the other through a rough filter of perforated leaves. Even if this worked, the rendered fat could not be used to ease the itching of the undamaged hide.. but that didn't make Nioranth's irritation any easier to ignore.

With little Murgon bundled onto her hip, and her daughters by her side, the goldrider set to helping brownrider N'larion bundle up cooked meat into parcels made from large flat leaves collected from the plateau jungle. Around them on the beach, other riders and the few non-riders present were engaged in similar little tasks that would have seemed trivial a couple of sevendays ago, but which were now becoming intrinsic to their very survival. There was little of the chatter or banter that you would expect from such a large group of people – most of the survivors were still overwhelmed by the enormity of it all.

The task of wrapping the cooked loper meat was just completed when Corsan tiredly announced that the melted fat was ready for use. A cooling jar was carried carefully to a spot where the dragons with the worst cracks in their hide had been gathered and the riders shared the contents, smoothing the warm wherry fat onto the cracked and chafed hide, Nioranth's oil paddle and scrubbing brush having long since become communal property. Corsan watched them closely, stopping them from applying too much or applying the fat to any undamaged areas, and took the pot away for further rendering as soon as he considered them done. The fat would set well enough for easy transport *between*, but there was no telling when they might find a fresh supply and so they needed to take as much with them as was possible.

Nioranth reported that green Kireth said the fat smelled funny and did not rub into her hide as well as proper oil did. *Tell her beggars can't be choosers,* remarked Dunia.

I tell her, said Nioranth. ***Terth tells her that he will have the fat if she does not like it. He itches too. We all itch.***

It's not for itches, Dunia told her queen.

Nioranth snorted her annoyance but said nothing. By the time the sun had reached its zenith, Nioranth was again grumbling that she itched and wanted her hide oiled. Dunia was patiently explaining that they couldn't use the fat on healthy hide in case it made it crack all the faster *between*, when Nioranth's head jerked up sharply and she stared towards the Whitewing Islands.

Along the beach, other dragons were also gazing out to sea, their riders stirring to see what had caught their attention. Dunia looked to see what had sparked their sudden interest and saw a sail just edging into view from behind the furthest island. A ship! A trading vessel rather than a trawler, she reckoned from its shape – what Holds might have been founded in the area by this time?

Nioranth, can you see the colours or design of the flag they are flying? She squinted, trying to make out the distant vessel's flag herself. Who were they? What would the crew do if they sighted a large collection of dragons on the normally deserted beach?

It is white with a blue thing on it. Vhauth's rider also wishes to know about the colours. Toth says that the blue thing is shaped like a ship, reported Nioranth. ***Vhauth says that a man watches us with a starsmith tube. Vhauth's rider wishes to speak to you.***

A Seacrafter vessel, then. And the shipmaster had seen them. Dunia bit her lip. She hurriedly handed Murgon over to his sisters and strode along the sand towards the bronze bulk of Vhauth. Would the vessel continue onwards or come to investigate? Crafters and holders alike would be curious as to why there was a Wing of dragons here, where no Weyr had stood in a century and a half. *Nioranth, tell the others that we may have to leave. Get them to start packing things up.*

J'hanos met her halfway, his jaw set and his eyes angry – evidently Vhauth had passed on Nioranth's message. "We're

about to hear another argument about causality, aren't we, goldrider?" "We can't let them see us --"

"In case you hadn't noticed, they *have* seen us!" J'hanos snapped. "Vhauth informs me that one of the crew has a distance viewer as we're not exactly camouflaged here on the beach."

Dunia glared back at him. "Up close! We can't let them see us up close. From this distance we're just dragonriders on the beach, distance viewer or not. But if that ship comes in closer or puts a boat to shore, then they'll see far more -- including a man who hasn't had a bath in a sevenday wearing Weyrleader's cords for an extinct Weyr!"

J'hanos's eyes narrowed dangerously and he took a step towards her. "Whatever they see evidently doesn't make much of a mark if you'd never heard of it before you joined us. These people," he waved a hand at the others on the beach, "are tired and in shock and they need to *rest!*"

"We can't stay here," Dunia insisted, holding her ground. "And we can't just move everyone up to the plateau," she continued urgently.

"That would strike those seamen as more odd than if we just left outright. For all they know at the moment, our intentions were always to leave now. But if we just fly up to the cliffs it will look like exactly what it is -- that we're avoiding them."

"And that's worse than forcing everybody to jump again so soon?"

"Yes!" Dunia could feel Nioranth stirring in her mind, angry that someone would distress her rider so. "We *have* to go. Now."

Weyrleader G'teris and bronzerider T'del had approached, hanging back slightly to give the pair space. J'hanos glanced towards them, his frustration written clearly on his unshaven features, then returned his attention to Dunia. "If we go now, when we come out we land on the plateau, understand? We're on the main shipping route from Ista, for crying out loud, even without a port being here! We're *going* to see ships! And I refuse to put my people in danger every time you panic about something that isn't going to make the slightest bit of difference to your history."

"You don't know that," Dunia said.

"Don't I?" J'hanos replied bitterly. He beckoned G'teris and T'del over to him. "We're leaving," he said tersely. "Don't make it look rushed, but get everyone prepped for take off as soon as you can. G'teris, will the weyrings be able to handle another jump so soon?"

G'teris looked anguished. "Weyrleader, the only person here who is anything near to an expert on this is bluerider V'harn. Hareth and I can try to reinforce the coordinates as best we can, but...." He shrugged helplessly. "I'll do my best for all of them."

Dunia felt her throat constrict and turned away, heading back up the beach to Nioranth and the children. The last thing she heard from the conversation were J'hanos's words to G'teris, "If any of them don't make it, you know who to blame."



The ship drew closer as they strapped the harnesses on to the dragons and pulled on flying leathers. Dunia was astride her gold and rechecking the straps on the children when a blue firelizard blinked into the air beside them. It cheeped inquisitively, but an irritable snort from Nioranth sent it abruptly back *between*.

The man watches us with his tube again, reported the queen.

Never mind that now. Looking along the beach, Dunia could see the weyrings arrayed ready for take off. On her other side, Fallahi kicked sand over the last of the fires and scrambled up to take her position as passenger on T'del's bronze Suloth.

Vhauth bulged a signal and the assembled dragons took to the skies in unison. Aloft, Dunia glanced briefly down at the ship sailing serenely below, a strangely calm presence to cause such concern. Then she concentrated on visualising the next set of coordinates and waited for Nioranth to report that everyone could 'see' where they had to go next.

Nioranth confirmed the visual and an instant later, Vhauth gave the order to go *between*.

Blackness.

to be continued...



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