
The Long Way Home, Part 4

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When the order came to pack up quickly and move out early, the response amongst the refugees was immediate, and automatic. Without a dragon to tell him, Gavrill had no idea what the crisis was. That didn't matter. If the queenrider and the Weyrleader were saying they had to go, then they had to go.

By now, Gavrill even had a resigned kind of trust in the order. Not a lot about this journey made sense to him – nothing about stepping *forward through time* made sense, if you tried to think about it. But, apart from that fundamentally insane decision, it was clear even to him that the group's leaders were trying their hardest to keep everyone together and alive. If they were moving too fast, and pushing too hard, it wasn't because they were callous. It wasn't that they couldn't see the strain it placed on everyone. You didn't need to ask whether they cared. It was clear that every loss hit them just as hard as anyone – maybe more.

They were all being squeezed by forces beyond their control, and Gavrill had led missions like that himself, in his time. He knew what it was like, to be down to no choices but bad and worse. He knew what it was like to be the man who made the hard call. Even when you hated it, you had to do it. And much as the man tried to hide it, Gavrill could tell that the Weyrleader hated it. It didn't make him like the bronzerider any better, but he felt sorry for the arrogant bastard, all the same.

Now it was the end of a long, exhausting day. On top of everything else, the dragons' cracking hides were a new emergency. There was no putting that off, they'd had to deal with it. At least they'd gotten cooked meat out of it – that was a bright spot. But now it looked like they weren't going to get the leisure to enjoy it while it was hot. They weren't going to get a good night's rest, either. Sighing with resignation, Gavrill made his way over to the cook-fires they'd built.

Vesoz was there, already receiving Collina's protests, although the woman was dutifully finishing packing up what food they'd gathered. Her man, the bluerider T'sald, was having his arms filled with tied-up envelopes of cooked looper meat.

"Why are we leaving?" Gavrill asked Vesoz bluntly, when he arrived.

The younger man looked harried, and gave him an impatient look. "There's a ship off-shore, it looks like it's coming in for a closer look," he said, simply. He seemed to be bracing for an argument.

Gavrill didn't give him one. "And we need to be gone before they send a boat ashore," he agreed. The Headsecond's surprised look amused him, in a dark way, and he smiled sardonically at the other man. "We don't exactly look like a group out for a gather-day, now do we?" He waved a hand widely to take in them all.

Brownrider K'gal laughed shortly. He'd come to fetch Siska, Collina's younger sister, who was riding with him on his brown Osserth. "If it wasn't for the dragons, they'd think we were holdless raiders," he said, slanting a meaningful look towards Gavrill.

Gavrill shrugged in return. At this stage, none of them looked reputable. He knew from past experience what he looked like after two sevendays without a shave or a bath, he didn't need anyone to tell him. He wasn't the only one of the men who looked like a desperate criminal around the edges.

"So, we can't be seen," he said, matter-of-factly. "Or we might just be so interesting that those seamen wind up putting us in a Record somewhere, and Faranth knows we can't have *that*." He couldn't resist adding that, sarcastically, and he saw Vesoz roll his eyes.

"Make sure the fire-pits are covered," the young headsecond ordered. "And don't leave anything odd lying around – they might just land here and poke around anyway. So let's make sure there isn't anything for them to find."

"You got it, my lord." Gavrill gave Vesoz an insincere smile, and a sloppy salute. He was pleased to get a last, irritated glare from the Weyrleader's brother, and that left him smiling to himself more broadly as he turned to his task.

K'gal moved to help him kicking sand over the ashes of the fire-pit. "Why do you keep calling him that?" the brownrider asked.

"Because it annoys him," he answered, readily. He was sure that the brownrider knew *why* he did it; it was just that the man didn't approve of the guardsman giving Vesoz a hard time. "And that amuses me."

He didn't add that it was his natural, instinctive response to the headsecond's obvious hostility towards him. A'zelen had tried to make peace between them, but so far it hadn't worked. Vesoz wasn't going to forgive Gavrill for drawing a sword on his precious bronzerider brother, not anytime soon, anyway. Gavrill figured that matter was between the Weyrleader and himself. Vesoz could go take a flying leap without a dragon, for all that Gavrill cared what he thought.

It was his animosity towards the guardsman that brought out that superior, lordly air – Gavrill had seen the way he acted towards others, like the women. Vesoz's manner with them hinted at a young man who might be likeable, in other circumstances. For now, though? As long as the headsecond wanted to act like a prick, Gavrill intended to give back as good as he got.

"What can we do about the wherries, though?" Collina was saying to T'sald, in some despair. She indicated the

spitted carcasses of whitewings that bluerider V'tor had brought to them for cooking. They weren't anywhere near done.

"Throw them into the jungle," Gavrill told her, sharing her pained smile. They smelled good – and now that it looked like they weren't going to get to eat them, the aroma was almost torture.

"If we had time to get more leaves –" she said, not wanting to concede defeat.

"I don't think we have that much time." Then he looked at T'sald, whose arms were overflowing with packets already. "And I don't think we could carry them, even if we did."

She sighed. "You're right. You're right – I just hate waste, that's all." She picked up a spit, and hefted it. "Well, just in case those seamen do land, we can't let them see that we left our meals half-cooked just to avoid them."

"Right." He picked up a spit of his own, and then sent it spinning into the trees and undergrowth. "The whersports are going to eat well tonight!"

Collina laughed, but it wasn't a very happy sound.



Climbing onto a dragon was also starting to feel like second nature. How odd was that?

There were loops to provide hand-holds and foot-holds attached to the flight-harness that encircled the dragon's neck. Using Toth's cocked forearm as a step up, Gavrill hauled himself the rest of the way until he could throw a leg over the dragon's neckridge, settling into place behind A'zelen. The brownrider didn't even offer him a hand up this time; it was clear that Gavrill had the knack of it by now.

Settling himself, he gave the length of vine in his hands a sharp tug, testing its strength. Even seasoned dragonriders used straps that buckled to a belt, or that looped around a passenger's waist, to prevent coming unseated during flight. They didn't normally carry extras, though. A'zelen had only one set of straps, his own. He'd tried to offer them to Gavrill, early on. Gavrill had said he didn't think it would do him much good, if A'zelen happened to fall off the big brown while he stayed strapped on.

A sturdy vine tied through the rings on the harness, and around his waist, was the best substitute they could come up with. Unlike A'zelen, he didn't have stirrup-straps for his feet, either. And it went without saying that trying to hold onto a dragon's neck with your legs wasn't anything like using thighs and calves to grip the barrel of a horse. Still, A'zelen was strapped on and secure, and that gave Gavrill all the anchor he needed.

"Are we going, or what?" he asked as he got himself strapped in.

"Just about." A'zelen gave him a look over his shoulder. "I thought you'd be complaining about having to go *between* again this soon."

Gavrill suppressed a shudder. He didn't want to talk about going *between*, not now. Not when it was looming right in front of them. "That ship is getting sharded close," was what he said, instead.

"Get ready," A'zelen told him, his customary warning just before take-off. He put his flight-helmet on, settling the eye-shields into place.

Gavrill wrapped his arms firmly around the brownrider's waist. A'zelen had never protested that he was holding on too tightly, so he locked the grip of his right hand onto his left wrist, and held on for dear life. Not for the first time, he wished he hadn't left his gloves sitting on the table in the watch-shelter. He tucked his face into the lee of A'zelen's neck and shoulder – he'd wrenched his neck, on that first take-off, when he hadn't been properly braced.

He could feel the bunching of the dragon's shoulder muscles as the brown's wings opened and swept back. They shifted and settled as the dragon's haunches coiled, and then with a snapping thrust they were leaping into the air, wings beating downward and then pumping strongly.

He risked a look as they climbed, all the dragons of their group rising in the air around them. It was hard to look for long. The rush of the air brought tears to his eyes, and even when he tried to look behind them, he couldn't spare a hand to rake the hair out of his face.

Except for that, though, flying wasn't so bad. That had surprised him. His stomach had never liked ships on the sea, but for some reason the feeling of flying was different, and didn't affect him at all. Which was a small mercy, he thought. How much worse would this trip have been if he'd wanted to puke his guts out every time Toth took off?

He'd like to try this sometime, with real straps, and something to protect his eyes. But especially, when taking off wasn't a prelude to the horror that he knew was coming....

"We're going!" A'zelen shouted back to him, as he always did so that Gavrill could prepare himself. As if there was any way you could really prepare that would do any good.

It wasn't even dusk, yet. Every other time, they'd waited for nightfall to jump. He hoped that didn't make a difference....

Sight, sound, light, warmth, feeling – all of it went away.

All except his heartbeat. He could hear that – or maybe he could feel it. Why could he feel that, if he couldn't feel anything else? He wanted to be sure he had a secure grip on the rider in front of him, but there was no way to know. He was holding his breath while he counted heartbeats, just like he would if he were underwater. It didn't feel anything like being underwater. What would happen if he tried to take a breath, while they were *between*? He didn't know, he kept forgetting to ask. A'zelen had told him he should hold his breath, so he did.

They also told him that this wasn't what *between* was usually like. At least, it never went on this long. You went in and out so fast you barely noticed it, they said. Not like

this. These jumps went on, and on, and on. He knew his heart was beating faster than normal, but his count still went past thirty before they came out again. It was long enough that he could just feel his chest want to start heaving for breath, forcing him to master that reflex. Long enough that he started wondering if something was very wrong. If their luck had run out and they were never going to come out....

Everything came back at once. The sound of the wind roared past his ears, and he could hear dragons calling. He gulped a lungful of moist air that probably wasn't really that warm but that stung on the chilled skin of his face and hands. He risked a look and saw darkness that was only the normal night sky – and, what was that? A light?

Shining light, where light didn't belong, in the spread of dark jungle below them. Shellshards. Someone was down there – had to be.

There was another round of bellowing between the dragons, and Gavrill felt Toth swoop into a banking turn. A'zelen leaned against the bank, and Gavrill leaned with him, wishing he could see better. "What is it?" he shouted against the rush of the wind.

"Don't know!" A'zelen shouted back. Gavrill snuck a look around the man's head and shoulder, and saw Toth's head angled down, looking. The dragon's eyes were whirling with hot colors. That didn't bode well.

"Thought she said there wasn't any holding here!" he said. That was what A'zelen had reported the queenrider as saying. They could safely keep jumping here because this land would lay empty for centuries, until the start of the Pass.

Most of the dragons were no longer with them, he realized. He didn't have a full range of view, but besides Toth, there seemed to be only one or two more in the sky. That made sense. The rest must have been told to fly elsewhere, maybe to the bowl of the Hatching Grounds, where they'd be safe from curious eyes.

"It isn't –" A'zelen began, but he broke off abruptly, and at the same time, one of the other dragons howled. That anguished voice was answered by an angry rumble from Toth and an echo from another, and then a great bronze shape was soaring up and away from them.

"What? What?" he demanded.

"Th – they – I don't believe it, they –" the brownrider stammered, and abruptly, Toth wheeled.

Gavrill loosened one hand, to shake the other man's shoulder. "A'zelen, *what?* What's happening?"

"They shot Suloth!" A'zelen's voice was deeply shocked.

"They *what?*" It wasn't that he hadn't heard. He just couldn't believe it.

"They're *shooting* at us!" said the brownrider. Now he sounded indignant, too.

Toth dove, skimming just above the tops of the trees, roaring constantly. There was another huge shape still in the sky with them. Gavrill guessed that had to be the Weyrleader's dragon. The bronze was roaring, too. Toth executed another sharp turn that had Gavrill renewing his

firm grip around the brownrider's waist. He completely understood now why even riders strapped themselves to their dragons.

Unless the queenrider had failed to tell them some vital things about the relationship between Weyr and Hold in the Interval, the men below them couldn't be holders. Not if they were shooting at dragons in the night sky. "Gotta be bandits," he yelled.

"Makes sense!" A'zelen agreed.

It did. Empty land, along the coastline, and a source of fresh water nearby, as they well knew. Clearly the men camped below hadn't been expecting the appearance of sweepriders... then Gavrill berated himself for forgetting. Of course there were no sweepriders. This was an Interval. There was no Threadfall.

"They're running!" the brownrider reported, then.

Gavrill wondered how he could tell. Maybe the dragons could see them, somehow. He couldn't see a scorched thing, except the light of what had to be their campfires. Of course they would run. Bandits might shoot at dragons, but they'd know the odds were against them. A dragon might make a big, tempting target, but the shooting was just a gesture. Bandits weren't the kind who would stand and fight.

And these didn't know that the dragons harassing them couldn't call in reinforcements. Or that they weren't about to just start flaming, because they had no firestone and no way to get it. Shards, they didn't even have a crossbow amongst them. The only fighting weapon they had was Gavrill's sword, and that was no good from the air.

He was turning it all over in his head, looking for some advantage. There wasn't any. All they could do was what they were doing – try to scare the men away, and hope it worked.

Toth's roars changed pitch suddenly, and at the same moment, A'zelen shouted. Gavrill was thrown back against the pull of the vine-straps, the brownrider pressed to his chest, as the dragon surged upwards abruptly, with a whining growl. "What in the --?" he exclaimed, but the brownrider interrupted him.

"Where? Where are you hit?" A'zelen yelled, twisting around to look behind them.

"What? Toth's hit?" Gavrill craned around too, but could see nothing. They were still in the air, so it couldn't be too bad, could it?

A'zelen was breathing heavily. He sounded on the verge of panic. "I can feel that it hurts!" he was saying. "Can you still fly?"

If he was speaking aloud for Gavrill's benefit, it wasn't helping him much. Not when he could hear only half the conversation. It was more likely that the rider didn't even realize it. "Where is he hit?" he asked, hoping to get A'zelen's attention.

At length, A'zelen seemed to remember he was there. "It went through his finger-sail," he reported. He still sounded strained, but a little relieved.

"He has a *hole* in his wing?" Gavrill demanded. He didn't like that idea. Not at all.

"Yes." The brownrider paused, and then gave him a tight smile, over his shoulder. "He says it's a very small hole."

It still didn't sound good. "Do we need to land?" he asked, wondering if it was safe. Well, even if it wasn't safe below, it would be over in the Hatching Grounds....

"Toth says he can still fly...." The brownrider didn't sound happy about it, though.

So they could make it to the bowl, across the plateau. Good. But Toth wasn't flying in that direction. He was going lower again, in a wider circle, but still scanning the area around the visible campfires in the jungle below.

"Vhauth says it's all right to land now. Toth agrees," A'zelen reported.

"What? We're landing? Why?" That didn't make any sense to Gavrill. The jungle was dark below, and while most of the bandits might have fled, who knew *what* was lurking down there? Of the spots they'd used for campsites, the Hatching Ground bowl was the most easily defensible, and several miles away. They'd be safe there, for the night at least. They could post a watch on the bowl's rim, in case anyone decided to come snooping around, but Gavrill would be willing to bet that nobody would. A couple of miles of jungle was too much to hack through, to satisfy curiosity, and bandits wouldn't want to get that close to dragons anyway.

"Vhauth says that J'hanos wants to see if they left anything useful behind," A'zelen told him.

That was just the kind of foolhardy, arrogant idea he should have expected from the Weyrleader. "You'd better land us near them, then," he said, with weary resignation.

The bandits' campsite was just underneath the jungle's edge, close to one of the more accessible slopes down onto the sandy banks of the stream that drained from the plateau to the west -- the stream that had been their source of fresh water on every stop thus far, in the gorge where the globefruit vines ran wild. In the moonlight, the sandy flats stretched out emptily. The glow of three campfires could still be seen under the dark jungle canopy.

Where had the men gone? Maybe there had been small boats here, now paddled frantically out into the bay and disappeared around the headland. Maybe the men had splashed desperately across the stream and were heading south along the coast. Maybe they'd melted into the jungle, in either direction. Maybe some were still watching, with arrows nocked on their strings.

Gavrill knew the Weyrleader was right, that men fleeing their camp might have left something useful behind. Sure, he wanted to search the site -- but it could wait for daylight. If bandits were using this place, then they would know it well. The refugees knew it well, too -- or they thought they did. But right now, their knowledge was a quarter-century out of date. Gavrill would have hesitated to lead a company of soldiers through that jungle, at night, knowing he'd just flushed bandits out of hiding.

He didn't have a company of soldiers. What he had was two dragonriders and a headsecond, and one sword between them. That made for lousy odds, against an enemy known to be armed with bows, at least. And willing to shoot at dragons.

They landed. A'zelen slid down Toth's shoulder immediately while the dragon sat with his right wing still half-spread. As he untied himself and started to dismount, Gavrill could hear the brown hissing softly. The brownrider was saying something, but was already too far away for him to make out the words. Preoccupied with his damaged wing, Toth paid no attention to his passenger. Unlike other times, he didn't raise a courteous forearm, to make dismounting easier. Gavrill eyed the drop with misgiving, but there wasn't an alternative. He couldn't stay sitting up on the dragon.

He used one of A'zelen's stirrup-straps to help lower himself, but still landed with a jarring thump, staggering against the brown's shoulder. He spared a worried glance for the brownrider, inspecting the dragon's wound, but didn't pause as he ducked under Toth's head and made for the Weyrleader's dragon.

Vesoz was already heading towards the nearest campfire. Unbelievable.

"Don't you think we should leave this for morning?" he called out to the Weyrleader, who was looking up at his dragon. The man turned to him, slowly. "So we can see what we're sharding doing?"

"What? No," said the bronzerider shortly. "I don't want to give those 'snakes time to sneak back and salvage anything. Not before we've taken whatever we can find."

Gavrill had managed to catch up with the headsecond. He reached out, snagging the collar of the younger man's flight-jacket, and yanked him to a halt.

"Hey!" Even in the moonlight, he could see Vesoz looked affronted. But it let Gavrill get in front of him, at least.

"How about you let the guy with the sword go first, huh?" he suggested, acerbically, drawing the weapon.

Vesoz gave him a strange look. "What, you think their bedrolls are going to leap out and attack us?"

"I don't know," he shot back, with exaggerated, sarcastic patience. "I'd rather not find out the hard way." He might not like doing it, but at least he'd done this kind of thing before. It was blindingly obvious that the headsecond hadn't.

Gavrill scrambled up the low embankment, trailed by Vesoz and, further back, the Weyrleader. He wished the two dragons weren't making so much noise. Toth was still muttering, and the bronze seemed to be rumbling in response. He was straining to listen for any tell-tale noise from the surrounding jungle, but everything was still.

"Looks deserted to me," Vesoz observed brightly, coming up close behind him when he paused to squint around at what was clearly the center of the ragged camp.

He shot the headsecond a narrow look. "Will you keep your voice down?" he hissed.

"What for? They're all gone," the younger man said, in normal tones.

Gavrill was half tempted to let him go crashing around and find out for himself, but his conscience wouldn't let him do that. Not yet, anyway. He could have explained his caution. Just because most of the men had fled, didn't mean there might not be one or two left who hadn't, or couldn't. If there were, they'd be lying very still, and they'd be armed. And desperate. If they had bows, then he or the headsecond or the Weyrleader could be dead the moment they stepped into the firelight. Seeing him holding a sword, they'd probably aim for him, first.

But this wasn't the time to walk the young man through a lesson in battle tactics. So he only said, "Humor me," and moved cautiously in a wide circle around the edge of the camp.

Piles of gear, and bags containing who-knew-what, lay hap-hazardly in rough circles around the fires. They'd go through those at leisure, later. The blankets alone would be welcome, even if they wouldn't go far in a group their size. Like most bands of holdless raiders, this one had consisted of no more than a dozen men, he estimated. But he could already see more cooking pots, around the fires. He could smell something still cooking in them.

Gavrill noted these things with half his attention. He kept to the edge of the fire-lit circle, cautiously probing the heavy shadows of the undergrowth first. Nobody had shot at them yet. That didn't mean a man might not be lying in wait, with a beltknife or a machete.

Vesoz, he could see, was ignoring his advice. The headsecond was pawing through the largest pile of gear, kicking some of the bags and opening others. Gavrill sighed, and kept up his own search. He'd lost sight of the Weyrleader, too, and hoped the man had stayed back near the dragons. He wished he knew what was going on with A'zelen and with Toth.

There was an explosion of noise and movement out of the corner of his eye, and Gavrill swung in that direction in time to see Vesoz staggering backwards, his yell cut off. He didn't stop to think; he lunged, hooked his arm under the younger man's shoulder, and threw both of them to the ground.

They narrowly missed falling into one of the fires. Vesoz yelled again, when Gavrill landed on top of him. Gavrill ignored him, making sure he kept the headsecond pressed down and out of the way as he twisted, ready to meet and block the attack he was sure must be coming....

He saw nothing but furiously thrashing foliage. He heard nothing but continued shrieking, that almost drowned out the sound of Vesoz's muttered curses.

He was still lying there, with Vesoz angrily trying to wriggle out from under him, when the Weyrleader walked past them both and pushed back the low-hanging spear-leaf fronds to reveal the culprit. Beating its wings and protesting loudly, a marsh-wherry fluttered and tugged furiously at the end of the rope that pegged one of its feet to the ground. It

must have been crouching still as a stone under its bush, until Vesoz disturbed it.

"False alarm," the Weyrleader told them, with an amused smile.

"Could you get your elbow out of my gut?" the headsecond demanded irritably.

Absently, Gavrill moved away from him and rolled to his feet. He felt shaky with pent-up energy, ready for a crisis that didn't exist. Vesoz followed, brushing dirt and twigs from his clothes, complaining mildly. "Shells, you numbwit – it feels like you cracked a rib...."

Gavrill shot him an exasperated glare. Ungrateful little lordling.... "I didn't tackle you that hard," he told the other man sharply.

"You didn't need to tackle me at all!" Vesoz shot back. "I think I could have handled one stupid wherry –"

"I'll remember that if we come across any slashers," Gavrill muttered, going to take a closer look at their catch. The wherry was still bating, but more weakly, and trying to peck at the Weyrleader's boots.

The look that the bronzerider was giving him was carefully neutral. "Good reflexes," he commented. "If a little over-cautious, captain."

Gavrill wasn't going to let the Weyrleader's use of his proper rank divert him. "Over-cautious is better than the alternative," he said, darkly.

"True." The bronzerider cocked his head back at his still-muttering brother. "But I wouldn't have let either Ves or you walk in here if I'd thought it was still dangerous." Gavrill opened his mouth for a retort, but the other man said first, "As Ves told you, the bandits are all long gone."

"I don't see how you –" he began, but the bronzerider interrupted him again.

"The dragons."

"The dragons can see whether or not there are men hiding in the trees? Under the bushes? In the dark?" Gavrill demanded. He meant the question to sound sarcastic, but the Weyrleader's calmly superior expression didn't change.

"Yes," the bronzerider said, simply. "Dragons see in the dark. At least, they can see warm things, like bodies, against a cool background like plants and trees. Generally, they can hear as well. Believe me when I tell you, Vhauth is quite sure there are no men left in this area, but us."

"Oh," was the only thing he could say, for a moment. He should have known it would come down to some freaky draconic talent. He'd always heard that dragons had good night-vision, but this was the first time anyone had mentioned they could see warm bodies in pitch darkness. He glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't see the dragons from here. But apparently, they could see *him*. And wasn't *that* unsettling....

"You could have said that in the first place," he observed, not bothering to hide his annoyance. For one thing, he might have avoided looking like a fool.

The bronzerider had moved away, and was inspecting some of the piles of gear himself. "I forgot that you wouldn't know," he responded. Then he paused, and turned

his head towards where the dragons were sitting, a far-away look on his face. "I'll have some of the other riders come and fetch all of this. We're needed back with the others."

"Toth's wing –" Gavrill started, but the Weyrleader waved a hand dismissively.

"I'm aware," he said. "But Corsan is busy with Suloth at the moment, and Toth says he can wait."

Gavrill had forgotten about the other dragon's injury. "Oh. Right."

"I'll leave the two of you here until the others arrive," the bronzerider went on, already starting to walk away. "They won't be long. But Lan will stay with Vesoz – just in case."

Well, that was better than nothing. Still, Gavrill couldn't help saying, "In case what? Weren't you the one just saying all the bandits are long gone?"

He still couldn't read the expression on the Weyrleader's face. He couldn't decide whether it was amused, or patronizing. "In case it's worth listening to the instincts of a trained guardsman, after all," the bronzerider said, with a slight smile.

Gavrill regarded the other man warily. He wasn't sure if that was meant as a peace offering, or not. He wasn't sure he was ready to accept it yet, if it was. "Do me a favor, then," was what he said aloud. The bronzerider gave him an inviting look. "Explain that to your brother."



The sight of firelight in the jungle below came as a shock to R'banon, almost more shocking than the sudden appearance of the ship that had sent them fleeing *between*.

Narith emerged perfectly in formation, flying just above and behind Suloth's right wing. They all saw the light of what must be fires just under the treeline below.

Almost immediately, Nioranth, in the lead, soared upwards. Vhauth, Toth, and Suloth peeled away to the left, circling around. R'banon prepared to follow his wingleader, but then Narith relayed T'del's order: ***Suloth's rider tells us to lead the rest to the Hatching Ground.***

Frustrated, R'banon watched the three big dragons spiral closer to the jungle to investigate. Narith was already following the bronze's command. He let the adult queen take the lead as he dropped back, casting an eye back the dragons who followed behind Narith and Nioranth. Moonlight showed a formation that had wavered but was regrouping, even as he watched.

Did we lose anyone? R'banon remembered to ask, his head still turned to follow the dwindling spark of the fires.

After a moment, the brown answered, ***Cyth. A weyrling green.***

No surprise there, the wingsecond thought wearily.

"Is something wrong?" Mirelli yelled, near his ear. Her arms around his chest were almost painfully tight.

"They're going to find out," he told his passenger. "In the meantime, we'll lie low."

The Hatching Ground wasn't the most comfortable place, although time was slowly softening it – coastal storms depositing more and more sand and soil into the bowl that had been scoured clean by the wave. A wave that was, now, almost two centuries in the past....

R'banon shook himself. It was best to take follow the dragons' example, and not think about the past. The Hatching Ground would hide them, easily. And it was still early enough that they shouldn't have to worry about the queen wanting to use it for its traditional purpose.

They were already spiraling down into the open bowl when Narith reported, ***The men are shooting at them!***

"What?" It took the brownrider a moment to realize that he'd exclaimed aloud, then the woman clinging behind him echoed his question. The brownrider was turning to respond when Narith trumpeted, the call immediately taken up by all of the other dragons and echoing brassily off the Hatching Ground walls. ***Suloth hurts!*** the brown said angrily. His eyes whirled a hot orange of outrage.

Great Faranth – those whersons must have actually hit the bronze with one of their arrows! R'banon felt a chill as Narith backwinged to land. What kind of future were they flying into?

"It sounds like those fires were a raider camp," he told Mirelli. Unconnected to the dragons, she wouldn't know what was going on. "They fired arrows – Suloth was hit."

"Oh no!" she said, but he wasn't listening to her any longer.

He isn't badly hurt? the brownrider asked his dragon, anxiously. Thank the Egg, the dragons weren't keening, at least....

He hurts, the brown repeated, but his mind-tone was calmer. He added, ***They come.***

All of them?

Suloth and his rider, the dragon elaborated. ***The others watch the men. They flee. He*** meant the men.

"Good."

R'banon remembered to turn and assist Mirelli, helping her to unfasten the borrowed riding straps, then dismounting himself and waiting on Narith's forearm to give her a courteous hand to the ground. She was a good woman, he thought, not for the first time. L'dras was a lucky man... then he remembered, the two were not weyrmates. Not now, anyway, though in the past, they'd had a daughter together. Mirelli had insisted that L'dras carry their child, Lorelli, while her younger son, Dillon, had gone with bluerider V'tor. R'banon couldn't remember the name of Dillon's father, or whether the man had died in Threadfall or not.

When she was on the ground, the woman thanked him, and thanked Narith, before moving off quickly to find her children.

Toth is hit! Narith said suddenly. The dragon's head turned upwards, and R'banon looked in that direction too, in time to see Suloth glide over the edge of the Hatching Ground's rim.

"Ashes! Badly?" he demanded.

No. He still flies.

R'banon walked across the open area, toward N'larion's brown. Dragonhealer Corsan had already dismounted and hurried to meet him. They both paused, looking up, waiting for Suloth to land.

"Are there any medicines left?" R'banon asked quietly, worried.

The dragonhealer's open, pleasant face was set in grim lines. He shook his head. "No. We never had much, and now it's used up." Corsan looked at him then. "I need water. Freshwater, and seawater too."

Until T'del landed, and until the Weyrleader and Weyrsecond arrived, R'banon knew he was in charge, as the ranking brownrider. "I'll send someone immediately." Then he paused. "Seawater?"

Corsan nodded unhappily. "Believe it or not, it may be the best way to clean the wound. Though Suloth won't like it..."

R'banon had Narith summon the other three of T'del's wingriders – blueriders all. The faces of the three men were worried, as they watched their wingleader's dragon circle in to land. When they were close enough, he ordered briskly, "Find something to carry water in – the dragonhealer needs it. O'kimos, B'kal – head down to that new river we spotted emptying to the east. Stay away from the estuary. M'turon – the dragonhealer wants seawater. Get as much as you can, and watch your steps in the dark."

The three nodded, saluted, and ran off at once.

Suloth landed close to where Narith and Mulujath were sitting, to one side of the watchful golden bulk of Nioranth. The big bronze's eyes were whirling with a sickly-looking mixture of violet and yellow, and he was voicing a low but constant whine.

As worried for his dragon as he must be, T'del handed his passenger down the bronze's shoulder first, into the waiting arms of her man, Timlin. They moved off to the side, murmuring to each other. The girl stood in the young man's arms, holding him, but her attention was back on the older bronzerider and his dragon, watching worriedly.

T'del hit the ground yelling. "Corsan!"

The dragonhealer was already waving. "I'm here! Where is he hit?"

R'banon was torn between his own curiosity and worry, and knowing that it was his duty to make sure the rest were settled, or as settled as they could be. But looking around, he saw that most of the group was milling around their dragons, watching, riveted by Suloth's visible distress. They'd also be waiting for further word, through their dragons, of what was going on over near the raiders' camp; waiting for Toth's appearance, and to see how badly the brown was hurt.

Men shooting arrows at dragons. R'banon shook his head. It was another shock, on top of so many shocks that they were already straining to bear. Just the thought of people being on the plateau with them – he hadn't realized how much they had come to think of themselves as the only people in the world. Hadn't realized it, until their unnatural reaction to the appearance of that ship – yesterday, or only

hours ago, or twenty-five Turns in the past, whichever way you chose to think of it.

They'd fled Southern and since that night, had seen not another soul. It wasn't just Southern they'd lost, but all of Pern as well. You'd think that the sight of other human beings would be welcome proof that out there, the world still went on. Instead, they'd had to regard the ship's appearance with alarm, hurriedly slinking away, as if they were criminals. As if they didn't have a right to be there, or be alive at all.

It was a terrible feeling. And now, this – to jump to a place they'd come to regard as *theirs*, as safe, and instead find someone there already. Someone who welcomed them with arrows... For the first time in his life, R'banon wished he could send Narith flaming against men. He knew the brown wouldn't have done it; the dragons were angry, but not nearly angry enough for that. Besides, they didn't have any firestone.

So he cast a quick eye over the group, noting that those who'd been carrying firewood had unloaded it and were clearing rough firepits. Others had passed some of their make-shift water-flasks on to his men, who'd already left on their errand. He saw that G'teris and the young queenrider had marshaled the weyrlings – demoralized by the loss of another of their number – and were keeping them from underfoot.

R'banon felt a presence at his elbow. He turned, and with surprise saw Dunia. He remembered thinking what a pretty girl the goldrider was – not a beauty out of a harper ballad, but pretty in a sweet and earthy way. He realized with a start that she didn't look like a girl any longer. She was a woman, a mother three times over now, and the strain of this ordeal was plain in the lines on her face.

The wingsecond had shoved aside thoughts about *why* they were there, and her role in that. He followed T'del's lead, and T'del, like Weyrleader J'hanos, knew that anger at the goldrider wasn't going to help any of them reach the Tenth Pass alive. It was hard to do that, but he knew that T'del was right. Anger at each other, over things that couldn't be changed and couldn't be helped, would do no one any good. Faranth willing, there'd be time enough later, once they were all safe again, to think on those things.

So now he looked down at her and said, "Goldrider?" in a neutral way. Dunia tore her troubled gaze away from watching the dragonhealer try to examine Suloth's wound.

"Here." She was holding a small pouch out to him. He took it. "Corsan needs light to work. I'm not that good at starting a fire with these, though."

To tell the truth, neither was R'banon. Every time they'd landed before, either the Weyrleader's headsecond brother or that Hold guardsman had used the tools. Neither of them was here now. But he promised, "I'll see to it," and she nodded gratefully, letting her attention go back to her estranged weyrmate.

R'banon left her like that, and set about to getting some kind of torch lit.

It took him several attempts before he could get a piece of dry kindling to take fire, and he was wary of falling sparks as he carried his brand back to Suloth's side. The flickering light threw irregular shadows on the faces of the trio gathered around the bronze's injury.

The arrow was fletched in red, and stuck out of the meat of Suloth's upper left forelimb, buried deep in the muscle. "It's embedded in the bone, though I don't think the bone has broken," Corsan muttered aloud as he inspected the wound. "But this is going to hurt a lot more coming out than it did going in, I'm afraid. We're going to have to do a little surgery here...."

"Can I be of any help?" offered a voice at R'banon's elbow. Greenrider Bressa pushed forward, her pretty face troubled as she looked on over Corsan's shoulder. "I spent enough time aiding my father around the Infirmary," she added. "I know the basics, at least."

"Darling, you're the *just* morning star I needed to see," the dragonhealer said with some relief. "R'banon, give us a bit more light – yes, that's good. Bressa, sweet, I'm going to need some steady hands here. But before we start, we'll need water that's been boiled."

"I'll get the pot," Dunia offered quietly. She didn't wait to hear her weymate's response, but moved off at once.

Glancing over his shoulder, the brownrider saw that his wingmen had returned. "B'kal!" he called. "Help her!" He nodded in the goldrider's direction.

The bronze dragon moaned, and his head thrashed from side to side when Corsan touched the arrow. The dragonhealer grimaced, but carefully kept examining the wound. "Blast it, if I only had more redwort and medicinal alcohol – wait, *wait*, but that we can make do with, can't we? Wingleader, I'm afraid I'll need some of your men to help confiscate --" Corsan began to say, glancing over his shoulder toward T'del. Then the dragonhealer's eyebrows quirked curiously, and he lost the thread of what he was saying. "T'del?" he asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

R'banon looked that way, and saw that his wingleader was slumped against Suloth's neck, mostly supported by his dragon. The man's face in the torchlight was a pasty shade of grey, and sheened with sweat. "Just help Suloth," the man said in a voice gone strange. "This will pass."

R'banon had served under T'del for Turns, and he had never heard that raw, shaken note in his wingleader's voice, nor ever seen quite that look of *constriction* on the other man's face. Without thinking about his actions, he shoved his torch into the nearest hands -- realizing belatedly that they belonged to the Weyrleader -- and lunged to the

bronzerider's side. "T'del!" he cried in shock as the older man crumpled in his arms.

Suloth gave a strangled moan as R'banon sank under T'del's weight. The wingleader's skin was clammy and pale, and he was gasping for breath. "Bressa!" R'banon called, easing T'del's head onto his lap and groping for the throat of the man's flying jacket, thinking something much be choking the bronzerider.

Suloth says his rider's chest hurts, Narith offered, his own thoughts growing spiky with alarm.

Bressa was there in the next moment, tearing at T'del's tunic and feeling for the pulse at the bronzerider's neck. She pressed her ear against his chest, then turned a terrified look toward the others. "He's having heart seizures. Corsan -- aconite! Do you have any aconite?"

"Aconite? No, normally I'd carry a suicide dose, but this kit was assembled for an easy trip, one with the children --"

"T'del! T'del!" R'banon slapped at the bronzerider's face lightly. His friend's eyes had closed, and his head lolled to the side.

"That won't help!" Bressa snapped at him, shouldering him aside. "He can't breathe!" He watched helplessly as she tilted the bronzerider's head back, using her fingers to pry his mouth open....

Just as she did so, Suloth lurched up from his half-crouch. Corsan fell back from the bronze with a startled exclamation as the wounded dragon reared on his haunches, and howled at the sky.

R'banon looked up at the towering bronze form, frozen with dread. *Narith* -- he began.

It was too late. The echoes of his howl still ringing through the bowl, Suloth launched himself from the ground. The downsweep of his great wings threw a cloud of dust and sand up around all of them, and then there was nothing where the bronze had been....

Instantly, all the dragons sitting in the bowl raised their heads, and their keen for the dead rose up all around them. As always, the sound set the hair on the back of R'banon's neck on end, and he felt a chill prickling over his skin.

Bressa stared in shock at the body of the man under her hands. With a heavy heart, R'banon reached out, and closed his friend's jaw. Then he looked up, and met the wide, horrified eyes of the queenrider as the dragons' grief rang around them and in that moment he knew what had to be passing through her mind: *Can the other Weyr hear this? Do they know we're here?*

Then she was stumbling back, away from them. "We have to leave! *Now!*"



Kadanzer Weyr

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