

---

# The Long Way Home, Part 5

by Holly Hutchison, Ellen Million, Smitty, Ron Swartzendruber & Whitney Ware

Ninth Pass: 2615/2640

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr ([www.kadanzer.org](http://www.kadanzer.org)), a fan club approved by Anne McCaffrey in 1995. Kadanzer Weyr is a non-profit group -- all materials pertaining to Ms. McCaffrey's works displayed on this website may only be accessed for personal, non-commercial purposes. Please do not reproduce without permission. All references to worlds and characters based on Anne McCaffrey's fiction are copyright© Anne McCaffrey 1967, 2005, all rights reserved, and used by permission of the author. The Dragonriders of Pern® is registered U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, by Anne McCaffrey, used here with permission. Use or reproduction without a license is strictly prohibited.

---

"We have to leave! *Now!*" Dunia stumbled back from T'del's body as the keening faded, the sound echoing from the walls of the Hatching Grounds for long moments after the dragons had fallen silent. "We can't let them find us!"

"What?" J'hanos threw the torch he'd been given to one side and stalked towards her. "We are not going *anywhere*, goldrider -- we've only just *got* here --"

"The keening! They will have heard the keening! We *have to leave!*"

"I don't bloody *care* if they heard the keening!" J'hanos grabbed her shoulder, keeping himself from shaking some sense into her with an effort. "We didn't have the time to rest properly at the last stop -- I will *not* ask these people to jump again so soon!"

"You don't have to *ask* them! You have to *tell* them! You have to!" Dunia's eyes were wide and desperate. "We can't stay here! Not now!"

The Weyrleader set his jaw. "We are *not* leaving this place until everybody is fed and rested or there'll be more deaths than T'del's to deal with! Pull yourself together, woman -- your bloody Records aren't worth *this!*"

Dunia tried to pull away from him, and he tightened his grip, not caring if he left bruises. "We can't stay!"

"We have a wounded dragon, exhausted weyrings, some of our people halfway across the blasted plateau -- *we can't do it*. You'll kill us all if you panic every time something unexpected happens!"

"We can't risk it! We've already been seen in this time --"

"As if *anybody* is going to listen to the word of bandits!" Nioranth rumbled in the background, her eyes shifting to the colors of anger, and Vhauth sent a small spike of warning into his rider's mind. J'hanos ignored him. "We're staying."

"No! If we stay --"

"If we stay, absolutely bloody *nothing will happen!*" J'hanos shouted at her. "Because nobody is coming!" He let her go and swept an arm up at the empty night sky. "If they were, they'd bloody well *be* here by now, *wouldn't they*, goldrider? It doesn't take long to send sweepriders to a place as memorable as this! Or to have a queen feel for unfamiliar minds."

Dunia hesitated, staring at him. "But...." Her shoulders sagged and she turned away with a soft, strangled sound. "We can't take the risk," she said quietly.

"The only risk here is what would happen if we tried to make everybody jump again. Nobody is ready for that, not yet. Let them rest." He shook his head and stepped away from her. "If Barrier Mountain or Ista want to investigate, let them. We'll deal with it if and when it happens."

Looking up, the Weyrleader found himself facing their assembled company, some faces tear-stained, others shocked, some angry. "It's over," he told them all. "Get camp set up, get some fires started, and let's hope this place is less over-run with tunnelsnakes than it was the last time we stopped here." They had attempted to camp in the Hatching Grounds on their second stop, figuring it to be sheltered and easily guarded against prying eyes, but the tsunami-scoured floor had proved to be jagged and uncomfortable and the rocky walls had been alive with bright-eyed vermin. Time had deposited sand and soil and other debris in the ancient bowl, but the plant growth was less than it was outside and the ability to watch for bandits at the entrances to the Grounds would put a lot of minds at rest. "I've sent B'ranur, E'gar and T'mor to help Vesoz and Gavril bring back what our bandit friends left for us -- we should have more supplies arriving shortly. Settle down, try to get some rest if you can, and we'll see about rounding up provisions after sun-up." He looked around the group, meeting as many eyes as he could. "Is everybody clear on that?"

There was a pause, then a scattering of murmured agreements as the survivors moved away to begin the familiar tasks of setting camp. J'hanos watched them go, feeling the adrenaline finally release him as things settled back into what passed for normality on this insane journey. He closed his eyes for a moment, centering his thoughts, then turned to where R'banon and Bressa were still crouched beside T'del's body. "Greenrider," he said to Bressa, "go and help Corsan with Toth. I'll deal with this."

Bressa nodded and moved away. J'hanos laid a sympathetic hand on R'banon's shoulder. "You two went back a long way, didn't you?"

The brownrider nodded. "That we did, Weyrleader. He was just a wingrider when I first knew him -- shards, that was a long time ago." He shook his head and gave a shaky laugh. "Bloody long time ago now. I should take him to join Suloth --"

"No," J'hanos said firmly, "Vhauth and I will do it."

R'banon frowned at him and shook his head. "With all due respect, Weyrleader, we --"

"You're too shaky right now and Narith too tired," J'hanos told him. "Of all of the dragons here, Vhauth is the one with the most strength to spare and your health is *my* responsibility. I'll not have another death here tonight. Next time, they might just come looking."

"Sir --"

The bronzerider shook his head. "I know you want to see him off yourself, but I'm not willing to let you take that risk."

R'banon looked at him for a long moment, then his gaze dropped down to where his old friend lay. "I suppose..." He rubbed at his face for a few moments, then said, "I suppose we should take anything that might be useful. It's what he would have wanted."

J'hanos nodded grimly. It didn't seem right to be stripping the dead... but there were things that they needed far more than T'del did at that moment. "E'gar and O'kimos don't have flying jackets. We take that, belt and beltknife, boots as well. We'll leave him his clothes... they're no better than anything else we have and it's only right to leave him with some dignity. Then..." he sighed and looked down at the old wingleader's composed features. "Then we take him *between*. I want this over with."

"Thank you, Weyrleader," the brownrider said softly, and the pair of them moved to carry out their grim task.



Corsan was still standing and staring blankly in the direction of the old wingleader's body when A'zelen came up to shake him out of his inaction. The brownrider would feel the regret for T'del's death later, but he didn't have time for that now. He didn't have time to listen to or make sense of the words that Dunia and J'hanos were exchanging. Toth was hurt, and he needed his dragon seen to *now*.

"Corsan? Corsan!" the brownrider reached out and shook the other man's shoulder. The dragonhealer turned wide blue eyes towards him, uncomprehending for a moment, and then focusing.

"Yes? What? Oh... oh! Yes!" Corsan turned so fast, he almost staggered, steadying himself with a hand on A'zelen's shoulder. "Right, N'laron told me – where is he hurt? How badly?"

A'zelen dragged him in the right direction, as the big brown stoically angled his wing to the right height for the dragonhealer to examine it. "The arrow went through his wing," he explained. "Out here."

Corsan ducked underneath for a look, and then came out on the other side to look again from the top. He reached out, touching the glistening surface of the wing membrane, and his hand came away dark with ichor. He shouted, "Bressa! Bressa, bring that torch over here! Please!"

"It didn't interfere with his flying," A'zelen went on, unable to keep still or silent. "But adjusting the wing hurt, and the air going over it hurt..."

"And you kept on flying anyway, didn't you, big fellow?" the dragonhealer murmured, running a hand experimentally along the long bone of the spar nearest the injury. The skin twitched and rippled, but Toth regarded him silently, his nearest eye visibly whirling steady and slow, though in anxious colors.

Bressa was soon there, bearing her light. It revealed a fairly small, torn hole in the wing's secondary mainsail, near

the middle spar. The hole was no bigger than a man's hand – the fletching of the arrow would have made the tear wider, and probably Toth's exertions afterwards worsened it – but like any injury to the wing membranes, it had bled profusely and unlike with Thread, the arrow had not cauterized the wound. It seemed to A'zelen – who felt a little queasy, getting his first good look at it – that yards of his dragon's wing were glistening green in the torchlight.

He swayed a little with a sense of dislocation – the mental doubling of feeling Toth's pain as if it was a shadowy extension of his own body, and at the same time, standing on the outside, detached, watching. It was an odd, vertiginous feeling that didn't help to settle his stomach. Distantly, another part of his mind noted that it might be shock, settling in, or else the sudden ebb of adrenalin.

At the movement, though, Corsan's and Bressa's worried attention snapped to him. He waved at them and gave them a sickly smile, urging them to go back to looking after Toth. "I'm fine. Just, a little bit... no, I'm – I'm fine."

Corsan took a deep breath, held it, then blew out his cheeks. "If you're going to throw up, point yourself in that direction," he said pointedly, jerking his head to the side. "If you're going to faint, sit down." His tone was sharper and more sarcastic than it usually was.

A'zelen realized only after a moment that he and the greenrider were both still spooked by T'del's collapse. "Sorry, it's just a little – I didn't – I'm not going to *faint*," he muttered, but the two had stopped paying attention to him.

"The water will be ready soon," Bressa told the dragonhealer. He nodded in response, regarding the wing thoughtfully.

A'zelen found that talking helped the queasy feeling. "You can do something for him, can't you? I mean, we – he has to be able to fly. And keep going *between*. Obviously. Is there anything...?" He trailed off hopefully, looking for an encouraging sign on the other man's face.

Corsan gave him a worried look. "I'll do everything I can," he promised. "And wings... wings are a lot tougher than they look. They heal very quickly... under the right circumstances."

"And this is the complete opposite of the right circumstances," said A'zelen soberly. After a moment, the dragonhealer nodded.

"I'll do all I can," he repeated.

***It does not bother me, much,*** Toth told his rider, stolidly. ***It bothers me less than the itching does.***

A fleeting smile passed across A'zelen's face. *I know.*

***If the healer wishes to help, he should do something to stop me itching,*** the dragon went on, decisively. ***Then I would be comfortable.***

*I know,* A'zelen said again, making his response as soothing as possible. *But he can't do anything about that, old friend. And I can't either. Not just yet – I will, as soon as I can. You know that.* The brown's only response was to huff a disgruntled sigh.

Corsan looked up at the noise. "What's the matter?"

"Itching," the brownrider told him, and Corsan nodded. They shared rueful shrugs.

"We need to wash this off, and we need to sterilize it. We'll never be able to keep it sterile, but we have to do the best we can," the dragonhealer said. He squared his shoulders. "And that means it's time for something very unpleasant."

The brownrider frowned at him. "Meaning, what?"

Corsan gave him a wry look. "Meaning, I'm about to make myself very unpopular with our resident Oldtimer...."



T'del's death left a marked melancholy on the refugees as they began to settle down to whatever rest they could find in the remaining hours before dawn. V'harn hunched close to Tengith's side, feeling a coldness in his gut that he wasn't eager to examine. It was *regret*, he thought suspiciously, and it was an emotion he wanted nothing to do with. Wingleader T'del's death had been as unexpected as arrows being shot off at dragons out of the jungle; even worse for coming when everyone thought the danger past. He had not even *liked* the man, but just the same, T'del's death had rattled his nerves badly.

He wanted a drink. V'harn clutched his cargo sack against his chest, knowing that one of the bulky lumps inside held the sweet promise of distilled wine. He *needed* a drink like a newborn its mother's milk, but knew in his bones that if he were to take a quick taste now, his raw nerves would require a second, and a third.... No. As long as he and Tengith had a chance to survive this, he had to maintain control of himself. He would wait until just before time to pack, when he was calm, and take one sip. One.

Tengith's breath rasped out in a wheezing snore with each exhalation. V'harn envied his dragon the sleep. He closed his own eyes and tried to rest, wrestling his thoughts away from the desire for drink and toward the remembered pleasures of a certain big-boned, large-mouthed Lower Caverns girl he had once courted. Truly Lynvis hadn't been much to look at, but the tricks that girl had known with her...

"Well, at least it's not raining," said a voice nearby. V'harn started, and saw bluerider V'tor walking around the bulk of Tengith's hip. The man had a natural swagger that had always put V'harn's teeth on edge. O'kimos followed a half-step behind, a shorter man who wasn't so wide across the shoulders. "We've enough shit to deal with tonight, without having more rain. Wouldn't you agree?"

V'harn glared at the other man as V'tor dropped down to sit in the windbreak Tengith provided, right at the Oldtimer's side. "Bugger off, I'm trying to sleep," he said.

Then O'kimos had dropped down at V'harn's other side, and V'harn's already-raw nerves jangled in alarm. "Just trying to be friendly," V'tor said, his white teeth flashing in the moonlight in a grin that V'harn didn't like at all.

"Be friendly with your greenriders, then," V'harn said shoving himself to his feet, still clutching his cargo sack against his chest. "I don't do--"

O'kimos moved first, lunging at V'harn's legs. Startled, the Oldtimer backpedaled, only to slam into V'tor's solid bulk. V'tor grappled with him as O'kimos brought him down. "Hey!" V'harn shouted, struggling against them, but the other blueriders were both heavier men, younger and skilled at wrestling as well. In the few heartbeats it took Tengith to start awake and begin to react in his rider's defense, V'tor had wrestled V'harn's sack away, tossed it to O'kimos, and both men were scrambling out of reach.

"Wherry-loving bastards!" V'harn shouted, scrabbling to follow them. But he could see that it was already too late -- both of them knew, apparently, what they were looking for, and O'kimos was already pawing through the cargo sack and pulling V'harn's wineskin free.

"Here you go," O'kimos said with a smile, tossing the sack back to V'harn. "Sorry about that, Oldtimer, but the dragonhealer did ask, and we didn't think you'd be willing to share."

"But don't worry yourself on it," V'tor added cheerfully. "We'll both be happy enough to stand you a few rounds, when we get to the Tenth Pass."



A'zelen watched doubtfully as Corsan unstopped the wineskin. Toth had held himself very still while they used the boiled and cooled water to wash the ichor from his wing. Unfortunately, that had started the bleeding again, and they had very little to blot it with. The brown stoically followed directions for the placement of his wing, while Corsan prepared to pour the strong alcohol around the wound's edges.

"Can you really use that --" A'zelen waved at the wineskin, "--for something like this?"

"In an emergency," Corsan said, with a shrug. "It's not ideal, but it'll do. It won't hurt... well, I mean, it *will* hurt -- sting, that is. Anything like this would. We'd normally use numbeewd first, but --"

"We don't have any more," the brownrider finished. "I know."

"Right." Corsan looked up at Toth's head. The dragon was no longer watching him work; he stared off towards the rest of the dragons, acting as if he didn't notice what was being done to him. "He's very, uh -- you'll give him some warning, right? Because it really is going to sting like a -- it's, ah, going to sting a *lot*. And we -- well, I -- really don't want him thrashing..."

"I'll warn him," A'zelen said, with a faint smile. "But he's ready for it. I told him it would be over quickly, and that seems to be good enough for him. He promises -- no thrashing."

"Well, that's nice to know," the dragonhealer commented. He shook his head. "That's one phlegmatic dragon you've got."

"Don't I know it," the brownrider agreed fondly.

Toth's wing did twitch when Corsan poured a liberal dose of the fortified wine over the edges of the wound, and possibly the brown's eyes whirled a little faster. But it was, indeed, over quickly, and Corsan slung the strap of the wineskin over his shoulder -- clearly, he intended to keep it against further medical needs.

*It is done*, Toth announced suddenly, and A'zelen looked up. The dragon wasn't talking about Corsan's rough treatment. Far above, outlined by the moonlight, Vhauth reappeared from *between* and began to spiral back down into the Hatching Ground's bowl.

At the same time, three smaller shapes glided over the crater's rim, and angled in for a landing. *Kelbanth, Tordith, and Lanoth return*, the brown added.

Looking up, Corsan frowned. "Who's that? Where were they?"

"J'hanos sent them over to help clear out anything useful from the bandit camp we found," A'zelen told him. The dragonhealer gave him a surprised look.

"Huh. I never even noticed them leaving." He was using a thin, stained white rag to dab at the edges of the still-oozing wound. Wondering where he'd got it, it took A'zelen a moment to realize that it was probably an extra undershirt that had belonged to one of the man's children.

The brownrider registered the approach of a fast-striding figure, burdened down with two bags and something bulky slung over one shoulder, and realized with a jolt that for the last half-hour, perhaps, he had almost completely put Gavrill from his mind. He'd been so preoccupied with Toth, and getting the dragonhealer to tend to him, that he'd forgotten until this moment that he was leaving his guardsman friend to fend for himself. And worse, perhaps -- be forced to accept a ride back to their camp on a dragon he didn't know, with a rider who would be a near-stranger to him.

The guardsman was here now, though; so at least he hadn't refused the ride, or anything foolish like that. A'zelen hadn't been paying much attention to anything at all after Toth was wounded, and he wondered now what he'd missed. But he didn't detect any annoyance or anger in the other man's face; only concern, when he looked up at the brown dragon's head as he walked by.

Gavrill dropped one of the bags on the ground nearby, and unslung the other from over his shoulder. "I come bearing healer supplies," he announced, and Corsan's head snapped up from his task.

"You do? What? Let me see!" He took the bag that Gavrill held out to him, and dropped to one knee, starting to go through it.

"Not a whole lot, actually," the guardsman said, sounding apologetic. "It was all we could find. It looks like they may have carried most of their stuff away with them when they ran."

"I'll take anything, at this point -- ah!" the dragonhealer exclaimed. He unstopped a flask, sniffed, and his head jerked back violently, but he grinned. "Redwort!" he said.

"And this looks like... yes! It *is*, by Faranth's shell!" He unscrewed the lid of a squat pot, and held it up triumphantly. "Numbweed!"

Gavrill jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "We also found a flask of oil, for cooking." Then he shook his head, at Corsan's eager look. "Sorry -- they weren't that well-stocked. It'll probably be enough for three or four dragons, for one day, if used *very* sparingly -- and that's stretching it."

"We'll see about that. But first things first..." The dragonhealer stood up, holding the pot of numbweed, and immediately began to apply sparing amounts to the edge of Toth's small wound.

"Hey," said the guardsman, softly, and A'zelen took his attention off of Corsan's actions and the spreading sense of relief that he felt through his link to the brown dragon, and turned to his friend. He found himself the subject of a sharp scrutiny. The look of concern was still there on other man's face, but now it was directed at him. "Doesn't look that bad," Gavrill commented, not quite making it a question.

A'zelen gave him a reassuring smile. "It's not. We were lucky. It'll be fine."

Gavrill nodded, then cocked his head, his gaze still assessing. "And how about you?" he asked. His hand gestured briefly towards his own face, and then indicated A'zelen's. "You still look a little green around the gills, there. You all right?"

The brownrider didn't want to go into the worries still lurking at the back of his mind, the problems that might lie ahead for Toth that Corsan hadn't voiced but that he'd acknowledged implicitly. He thought about Suloth, and T'del, and how much worse this could have been. "I'm fine," he said. He saw the other man's unconvinced look, and shook his head. "No, really," he insisted, with a smile. "I really am." And he meant it.



J'hanos slid down from Vhauth's shoulder and rested his forehead against the smooth bronze hide for a few moments. T'del was gone, his body joining his dragon *between*, and the Weyrleader was now the only adult bronzerider in their party. Much as J'hanos would never admit to it, he had appreciated having the older man along on the journey, appreciated having another wingleader there to spread the load with. T'del had never tried to usurp J'hanos's authority, despite having vastly more experience as a Weyrleader, and the bronzerider wasn't about to underestimate how much T'del's calm confidence in his Weyrleader's judgment had influenced the others. The casualty rate could only increase, J'hanos knew, and from this point on he would be dealing with the group's crumbling morale almost single-handed.

It wasn't something that the bronzerider was looking forward to, even without the increasingly paranoid goldrider who was leading them on into an unknown future.

*I itch*, Vhauth said, lowering his head to nudge at his rider. J'hanos got a sense of itching turning to soreness in the seam where a hind leg met the body, in a concentrated

patch just behind and beneath the right wing-shoulder. *I wish to be oiled.*

*I know, I know.* He scratched at the bronze eyeridges lovingly. Vhauth hadn't yet started showing flaking or patching but the bronzerider knew that that was only a matter of time, and sooner rather than later. The extra trip *between* wouldn't have helped the dragon's condition, but J'hanos hadn't been prepared to let R'banon risk the smaller Narith on T'del's final flight.

And besides, he wasn't unaware of the need for the Weyrleader to be seen to be taking charge of matters.

"Hey, Jal!"

J'hanos turned to see Vesoz approaching and shook himself out of his introspection. "I trust that you and Captain Gavril managed to behave yourselves in my absence?" he said with a slightly forced smile.

"What? Oh, yeah, both still breathing." Vesoz paused. "Sorry to hear about T'del. He didn't deserve that."

"No, he didn't, but...." J'hanos shook his head. "His heart gave out from the shock. If it was that weak, I really don't know if he'd have made it to the Tenth Pass anyway. As it is, we're all lucky to still be here -- Dunia was all for making us jump again once the keening started."

His brother looked at him incredulously. "So soon? Is she *insane*?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" The bronzerider snorted and scratched at his scruffy growth of beard. "I talked her down. I'm not about to lose more weyrings to her whims. So," he said, "why don't you tell me what you found...."



Corsan tucked his new acquisitions into his small kit bag avariciously, trying to mentally calculate just how far each would go. 'Not far enough' seemed to be the answer each time but the dragonhealer refused to be disheartened by that -- something, no matter how small or dubious in quality, was *always* better than nothing where numbweed and redwort were concerned. The oil was precious too, but Corsan was in no doubt that it wouldn't last until the next jump, once people became aware of its existence. Only a few dragons had shown hide imperfections on their previous stop, but that had been before another long jump, made before they were fully rested and the dragonhealer wasn't about to fool himself as to what he would find when the sun rose.

Tucking the last of the medical supplies away, Corsan looked at the half-empty skin of distilled wine and then placed it in the bag as well. Straightening up, he looked to the sky, noting the first blue shadings of dawn to the east. Most of those sheltering in the ancient bowl of the Hatching Grounds were asleep, curled close to their dragons or to the fires that still crackled brightly in their midst. A few still sat and stared into the flames, however, and two of the greenriders, C'dan and D'loren, had been posted as watchriders at either end of the Grounds, to keep a wary watch on potential bandit movement. The dragonhealer

didn't expect there to be any trouble -- he couldn't imagine that any raider would be fool enough to attempt an attack after hearing the keening, even if they didn't know its significance.

Making his way back from the rocky wall where he had relieved himself, Corsan's attention was caught by a soft sobbing, a sound suddenly heart-rendingly familiar. Moving carefully along the edge of the Bowl, he followed the sound until he found Farnya curled into a small nook in the rock, weeping. She looked up at him with wide eyes. "Daddy?"

"What are you doing over here, sweetie?" Corsan spread his arms and Farnya threw herself into his embrace, wrapping her thin arms around him. "What's the matter? Why the tears?"

"I keep... I keep dreaming about the dragon who died," the girl snuffled against his chest. "About, about poor Wingleader T'del! They were just *there* and then he just... and Suloth...."

Corsan held his daughter tightly. "I know, sweetie, I know...." T'del's death, and with it, Suloth's, had come as a shock to him too. Despite all the silent deaths that occurred on the long cold jumps, despite all the hide defects that he knew were to come, Corsan had somehow never expected to have a dragon die in front of him on this journey. Deaths were never easy for any healer, but for a dragonhealer the worst were those that caught the rider suddenly, leaving those working on the dragon vulnerable to the beast's suicide throes. If he hadn't realized T'del's condition, at a moment when all eyes were fixed on Suloth, Farnya might very well be without a father.... "Come on, time to get you back to bed. Going to be a busy day tomorrow!"

"Don't want to go back," Farnya sniffled. "Mummy had a fight with the Weyrleader and I just *want to go home!*"

She dissolved into tears again and Corsan held her close, stroking her grubby hair. "We all do, love, we all do but we just have to hold on a little bit longer...."

"I want to see Terena and Fenni and Zerlen and Hali and Komal and, and, and...."

"I know you do, sweetie, but they're --"

There was a sound from behind him and Corsan half-turned, stopping dead as he saw Dunia standing there, her face all but hidden by the early morning shadows. It had been this time of day when the wave struck, he recalled, dark and silent and waiting for what the day would bring. He could suddenly feel a wave of another kind threatening to overwhelm him as he looked at his weyrmate, one comprised of all the anger and bitterness he'd been trying to push aside, trying to hide for his own sake and that of the children. Hugging Farnya close to him as a shield against his own feelings, he said, "I found her crying. She's upset about T'del."

"We all are," Dunia said quietly. "Farnya, are you all right?"

The girl nodded against her father's chest. "I couldn't sleep."

"I know, but there's tunnelsnakes and all sorts out here, love. And Corsia is missing you. Come on, just sleep a

little longer and then Vesoz will give you something fun to do. You like working for Vesoz, don't you?"

Farnya nodded silently and broke away from Corsan's embrace. She smiled solemnly at him and then ghosted away towards Nioranth's sleeping bulk, leaving her parents facing one another in the pre-dawn.

Corsan watched the goldrider warily for a few moments, then turned to return to Mulujath. He stopped as Dunia suddenly said, "I've missed you."

He looked at her. "I've hardly gone far."

"I know, but... I never see *you*. You always have J'hanos with you, or N'laron, and *shells*, Corsan, I want to try to explain --"

"Explain *what*?" he said sharply. "How you forgot to mention that my family was going to die horribly along with the entire Weyr?"

"I saved our children," Dunia started.

"No! You saved *your* children!" he exploded. Sounds of sleepy protest came from around the nearest campfire. "I had others, remember? I had a son, a daughter, a sister, brothers, more nephews and nieces than I could count! What about *them*?"

"I couldn't tell --"

"Yes, I know, you 'couldn't change history!' I hope that lets you sleep at night!" He clenched his jaw, caught between wanting to flee this conversation and wanting to let go of all the anger he'd been bottling up inside. "Do you have any idea what this is doing to us?" he hissed. "You can talk about the theory until you're blue in the bloody face, my love, but for some of us, Southern Weyr wasn't just a temporary stopover! That was our *world* and everything we cared about! Those people weren't just a note in some historical harper song!"

"I couldn't tell you! I couldn't risk changing everything!"

"You said it was changing anyway! Right before you threw me up on Nioranth. You went white as a Ruathan runt when Vhauth raised the alarm --"

"Because the Ballad said that the Weyrleader died!" she cried. "That's why I had to bring everyone with me, don't you see? I couldn't let him take everybody to Benden -- he was meant to die, to disappear!"

"Oh, so it's all J'hanos's fault now, is it? Have to say that he's looking remarkably bloody healthy for a dead man! And just as well -- he's all that's standing between us and you half the time, isn't he? You'd have dragged us all off again tonight, wouldn't you?"

"I thought that the keening --"

"Dragons only care about deaths in their own Weyr!" Corsan snapped. "You *know* that. Senior queens they'll keen for, but nobody else. And us -- look at us, we *are* our own Weyr, not Barrier Mountain, not Ista. Nobody in this time knows we're here and nobody cares!"

Dunia stared at him. "This was always out of my hands; you have to believe that! I can't risk changing history --"

"History? Have you actually *read* the history of this time? In detail?" he challenged. "No. You brought all

these people along on this insane trip because of some line in a stupid *song* that some harper probably embellished to make rhyme!" Corsan's heart was racing and he could feel his face flushing as he spat, "You know, I'm *sure* that G'teris will be *so* comforted to know that his weyrlings are dying for a good cause!"

"That's not fair!"

Corsan laughed in her face. "*Fair*? None of this is *fair*, goldrider! And do you want to know what the worst part is? The worst part is that I agreed to go with you, to flit off into your precious future and leave it all behind. But I always thought that I'd be leaving *something* behind, that life would go on without me." He heard his voice crack at the last and fought down the acid fury that was tying his gut into painful knots. "But life didn't go on, did it? And all I want to know...." He paused, took a deep breath. "All I want to know is, *when were you going to tell me*?"

Dunia took a step back, her eyes wide. "What?"

"When were you going to tell me about what happened to the Weyr?" He gestured around them, at the scrub-festooned walls of the abandoned Hatching Grounds. "I'll assume we were going to go somewhere nice and quiet to jump, somewhere that wasn't here, somewhere where I wouldn't notice that there *was* no Southern Weyr any more. So, when were you going to tell me, hmm? Twenty-five Turns in? A hundred? Or not until we landed back at *your* Weyr and 'oh, by the way, darling, remember all that family you left behind?'"

"I can't do this," the goldrider whispered, turning her tear-stained face away from him. "I can't...."

"You already have," he told her bitterly, then turned away and stalked back towards Mulujath and safety, scrubbing away his own tears on an ichor-stained sleeve as he went.



Timlin watched as the dragonhealer walked away from the goldrider, vanishing back into the pre-dawn gloom. He'd known of Dunia for Turns of course, and had exchanged a few words with her in the Weyrhall out of politeness, but there was little that an unselected candidate too old to stand or to apprentice had in common with a Weyrwoman-third. Fallahi, however, had less of his holdbred awe of rank and she uncurled herself from beside him to approach Dunia.

"It's not your fault," Fallahi said kindly, offering her hand to the goldrider as she stood staring after her estranged weyrmate. Timlin followed his lover, stopping beside her with a tentative smile.

Dunia turned her tear-filled gaze to them. "It is," she said brokenly. "I didn't mean for things to be this way, but that doesn't mean that I didn't make it happen."

Fallahi wrapped an awkward arm around Dunia's shoulders. "It just happened. It *had* to happen, for your history to work. We should feel lucky that we were in the right place to be part of this."

Dunia looked at her as if she'd grown horns. "Lucky? There's *nothing* lucky about this. Who even knows how many of us will make it to the end, or if we will at all? My history doesn't go anywhere from here -- for all I know this is a doomed ride!"

She sounded half-hysterical, and Fallahi soothed her with a noise and a pat on the shoulder while she cried, pulling her into a careful hug. Timlin felt like an interloper; what he knew about comfort was largely applicable only to large animals and drinking with friends after failed Hatchings. He tried to decide if he should flee and give them space, or stay and support Fallahi's assertions, even though he found himself disagreeing with them. He didn't want to start a fight with Fallahi, so he swallowed what he wanted to say: that it *was* Dunia's fault. She had not warned anyone in time, then given the order to flee too late to do anyone any real good. If anyone could have made a difference it was the goldrider, yet she had deliberately chosen not to.

But Dunia's tear-streaked, stricken face was enough to disarm him, and watching the woman blow her nose on the tail of her shirt for lack of a handkerchief was enough to make Timlin want to reassure her. "It's not all bad, goldrider," he lied hesitantly. "And no one thinks you really did it on purpose or anything. Well, not everyone, anyway."

"Corsan must," she said, her tone agonised.

"He'll understand," Fallahi promised, rubbing the goldrider's shoulders. "He's angry, of course he is, and he might well be angry for a long time, but he'll come around, I'm sure. He loves you, Dunia, that won't change because you didn't know that things would happen quite like this."

After a long moment, Dunia sniffed, and wiped her face. She took several long, deep breaths, and squeezed Fallahi's hand. "Well," she said with a voice that wasn't entirely steady. "I suppose I can't really avoid all of this. I've avoided enough for a lifetime, and paid for it in spades. I should go back to the girls, get ready for the day. The last thing I need is people thinking I'm shirking duties, too." She held up a hand when Fallahi would have protested that. "They might not, of course, but if I can do anything, I should." She left with her chin up, with whatever shreds of confidence she had left wrapped tightly around her.

"Poor Dunia," Fallahi said when she'd gone.

Timlin scuffed a toe in the dirt floor, not knowing what to say.

"You don't think she's to blame, do you?" Fallahi asked anxiously, and Timlin smelled a trap – this was one of those unsafe places where men would always get in trouble with women.

"Noooooo," he said hesitantly, not wanting to admit his real feelings. "But it's a lot to do with her."

Fallahi looked unsatisfied, but took his hand anyway, and Timlin was grateful for the respite.

The day proved hot and humid, with no wind off the sea to provide relief. The hunters came home empty-handed save for a few treehoppers and Vesoz's tethered marsh wherry, and efforts to gather for the day's evening meal were little more successful, the cooking pots taken from the raiders remaining nearly empty. The refugees gathered quietly around their separate campfires, with little to say to one another. Farnya and Corsia both cried from hunger, while Dillon struggled to be as stoic as the dragonriders he saw around him.

They spent another night in the Hatching Grounds, with watchriders keeping a restless watch for bandits they did not, in truth, believe would return. But there had been unwelcome surprises enough on the last two jumps. No one in the refugee camp had the heart to face another.

With dawn came the promise of a breeze. Everyone roused to meet the day with better success, and dinner that night proved an improvement, with wherry and orangegill enough to go around, and bland starchroots flavored with sealeaf and salt. They would at least meet the night's jump with full bellies.



"I'm glad I'm not a weyrling," Fallahi said softly into Timlin's shoulder. They sat close together a little way from the main group in the aftermath of their makeshift supper. Dread of the upcoming leap, their eighth, was heavy on everyone's shoulders.

At least, as Fallahi said, they weren't weyrings. Five of the unfortunate young men, and one young woman, all younger than Timlin, had been lost *between*. Seven, if you included the weyring lost in the very first, hasty jump. The remaining young dragons looked as if they had had their life drained out of them – they sprawled without energy where they landed, and slept late into the day. Their hides showed the strain even worse than most of the adults, and Corsan was grim-faced over the developing sores.

'Not even halfway there,' Timlin kept thinking to himself. 'Not even halfway through the jumps, and we all look like we've been dragged halfway across Pern on our faces.'

Even the adult dragons were showing signs – most were showing hide problems, and all of them were lacking peak color, as if they'd been bleached in the sun too long.

"What do you think the new Weyr will be like?" Timlin asked, to make conversation that did not involve the questionable health of the mounts they depended on.

"I... I don't know," Fallahi said. "It's so strange to think of it. It's strange to think of anything beyond this."

Timlin hated the exhaustion in her voice, and consoled himself that they would jump soon, and sleep soon after. It had been a hard two days and they had both had trouble sleeping after the first night's excitement. "Yes," he agreed. "But they'll have herdbeasts, so I'll have a place to work. And I'll have you safe with me, so I don't care beyond that." He tightened his arm around her shoulder.



Fallahi patted his face and smiled at him. "You aren't still worried over the other night, are you?" she asked. She'd been a passenger on Suloth when the big bronze had been hit by the arrow, and it still chilled Timlin's blood to think that the arrow might have found *her*.

"I always thought you'd be safe, up on the bronze," he confessed wryly. He had been pleased when J'hanos assigned Fallahi's transport to T'del, while he rode with T'mor on brown Kelbanth. Timlin had been sure that a larger bronze would be a safer mount than brown. But that bronze was dead now. If T'del's heart had given out before they reached the ground instead of after... Timlin shut that image out of his mind.

"You flitter, I was in no danger," Fallahi said fondly. "I'll probably work in the kitchens," she said thoughtfully, in reply to his earlier question. "I'd imagine every kitchen could use a few extra hands...."

"Will you weyrmate with me?" Timlin was as surprised at the question as she was. He'd meant to ask her later, at some better time. T'del's death had driven home the point that there was no such a thing as a good time, but he had still planned to spring the question more gracefully.

Fallahi drew back in surprise, her expression clear in the flickering light of the fire. "Of course," she said with a widening grin. "But I thought it would take you another Turn to ask me."

Timlin *had* to kiss her then, and was startled to receive a launched yellowfruit skin to the back of the head. "Quit being so sickeningly adorable," greenrider J'ver told them cheerfully from not far enough away. "If you two don't stop being so gooey with each other, we'll all die of sugar shock long before we reach Dunia's time. Come on, it's time to pack up."

The riders used the last of the dying day to secure and double-check all of their straps, and Timlin and Fallahi used that time to pack the meager supplies – now at least padded by the takings from the raider camp. He kissed her good bye and left her in the hands of D'bur and his big blue, Terth.

He paused on his trek to Kelbanth's side to talk briefly with J'ver. "She said she'd weyrmate," he had to tell his greenrider friend. He was too buoyed by her delight in the idea to dread the next jump *between*. "Do you think... do you think she'd marry me?"

"Ask her, not me," J'ver said with a grin. "But you start treating her like a holdwife and she'll probably leave you for a nicer man. Maybe a greenrider. With a stunning dragon like Tiath...."

He was only teasing, Timlin knew, and he had to grin back. "I don't know, J'ver," he said more seriously. "I'm thinking this whole mess has been for a reason. We were supposed to be together."

"Oh no," J'ver said with a laugh. "You've gone and turned all Vivia on me!"

Timlin shuddered for effect. "Oh shards, no. I'll shut up now," he promised. He couldn't resist turning as he

walked away anyway, and calling back: "She really is the one, though!"

J'ver groaned and covered his face.

Timlin was light-hearted and happy as he climbed onto Kelbanth behind T'mor. "Congrats, son," the older brownrider told him. Nothing was private in the close confines of the refugee group, it seemed. Timlin only grinned, and took a good hold of his makeshift straps.

The time *between* was spent trying not to gasp for air, and thinking about Fallahi's shining, smiling eyes, and it seemed shorter than the last jump, less cold.



"Where did Terth land?" he asked at once as Kelbanth settled to the ground. In the time it took to land, he'd decided – he'd ask Fallahi to marry him. The worst she would do was tell him he was a flitter for the idea, but maybe she'd say yes, and wouldn't that be worth it?

T'mor hadn't answered, so he turned and asked again, "Where did Terth land?"

"He didn't."

Timlin looked up, expecting to see the blue circling to land, but the sky was clear – they'd been one of the last down.

"I'm sorry, Timlin. He didn't come out of *between*."

Timlin looked at the brownrider without comprehension. "Where is he?" Even as he spoke the words, he knew. "You're lying," he cried, before T'mor could say more. "You're lying!" Without thinking, he stripped away the vines he'd been using as riding straps and turned to scramble from the dragon's back, determined to go and find where Terth had landed by himself. Kelbanth moved, startled by his passenger's sudden descent, and Timlin fell, too shocked and numb to even catch himself before he hit the sand.

He lay there, winded, and not certain why he would want to move.

There was commotion around him, as if he were in the dead center of a sea storm – winds all around, and noise, but nothing human, nothing warm – nothing like Fallahi.

Someone shook him gently, and turned him over. "T'mor's wrong," he told them. "T'mor's wrong," he begged.

Collina's face was streaked with tears, and she shook her head gently. "He wasn't wrong, Timlin, I'm so sorry."

He thrust her away, looking for someone, anyone, to deny it. "You're wrong," he whispered, but acceptance crept into him despite himself. He staggered to his feet. Dunia stood a little ways away, her oldest girl standing beside her, and he lurched towards her. "You did this," he told her, and was satisfied to see her flinch and cringe. "You took her away from me! You took everyone away, and now she's dead!"

He wasn't right in the head, he knew he wasn't – things were too loud, and too fast, and time... time was the only bloody thing marching on as if it dared to do so without her. The light was nearly gone, the moons muffled behind clouds

on the horizon. There was more to say, but Timlin wasn't sure how much of it he would regret, so he only staggered away, towards the jungle. "Let him go," someone said behind him, and someone else murmured, "Poor man."

He couldn't find the fellis tree they'd made love under, sevendays or centuries ago, when Vesoz had sent them in search of firewood on their third stopover. Maybe it had died, a hundred Turns before, or overgrown too much, or he had struck out in the wrong direction. He looked for it until the light in the sky told him dawn was near, and then he fell onto the forest floor and wept until he fell asleep.



"We're not going to make it," muttered V'harn the following afternoon. Eight of these leaps they had made so far, as many left to go.

"What?" said E'darin from nearby. The skinny greenrider had been inspecting one of the sores at the base of Nyth's tail, but now came closer to hear V'harn.

"I said, we're not all going to make it," the bluerider corrected himself, annoyed at E'darin for overhearing.

"Well, it's not that bad yet," E'darin countered hopefully. "Lots of patchy skin, a few sores, but that's it."

"That's plenty. With the extra time we spend *between* every jump, we're going to start seeing serious hide splits soon. Or rather we *won't* see them because those dragons won't be making it through the jumps."

"Well, we're halfway there, it can't be that bad. Sure we lost Terth, but that was just bad luck or something." E'darin's usual sunny confidence was plain on his face. V'harn imagined wiping it off with a fist.

"If it's showing up this much already, it's bad, all right. Trust me, we'll start losing more dragons soon, and not just the weyrings. Next it'll be the smaller and weaker ones." He gave a pointed glance at Nyth.

"But..." the greenrider's voice trailed off uncertainly.

"And you won't be able to blame it on bad luck. Your dragon gets too weak and she won't make it even if the coordinates are perfect. Now go away and leave me alone. I've got a dragon to take care of, in case you didn't notice."

E'darin turned back to Nyth and V'harn started carefully looking over Tengith's dull blue hide. His dragon lay on the ground, neck stretched out, greying jaw flat on the sand.

*How do you feel?* V'harn asked as he walked up beside Tengith's neck.

***I am very tired. I want to sleep.***

"Yes, good idea. I wouldn't mind a bit of that myself," V'harn said, crouching to scratch at Tengith's eye ridge.

***That feels good. I itch all over. Scratch under my straps next.***

*I can't scratch too hard there, or it'll hurt your skin, but I'll rub it down, at least.*

***I want oil.***

*I know. We don't have any, though.* V'harn thought again of making a raid on some cothold, but Tengith wouldn't be able to fly very far in his condition, even if they

knew where the nearest cothold was. He walked back to the weary blue shoulder and unbuckled the flying harness. He could not get it out from under the blue's neck but at least he could throw it over the top and give Tengith some relief. Seeing the empty cargo sack attached to the straps reminded him bitterly of the stolen wine. As he gently rubbed at the chafings on the blue neck, he tried to be careful of the sores -- some of them were starting to look infected, but shards if he was going to get that fool Corsan to look at them. The only thing that would help was sterilizing the sores, but the dragonhealer had already taken away the only sterilizing agent they had.

An idea occurred to him. As he inspected the rest of Tengith's hide, V'harn kept casting glances down onto the nearby beach until he spotted Corsan walking in the surf with Farnya and Corsia, carrying little Murgon. Corsan looked tired and even the children's high spirits, were muted today.

***Wait a bit, Tengith.*** He retrieved the sack and rolled it up, then stepped back towards the undergrowth as if looking for a place to relieve himself. Nobody seemed to pay him any attention. He could not see J'hanos anywhere. He made his way along the cliff towards Mulujath. If luck was with him, N'laron would have finished caring for his brown and gone to help G'teris check the remaining weyrings. Corsan's bag might be unguarded, and with it the stolen wineskin.

But no, N'laron was still there. "What are you doing, V'harn?" the stocky brownrider asked pointedly.

"Looking for some fruit." He gestured ahead with the rolled-up sack. "Thought I saw a grove of silverburrs a little further along."

N'laron grunted. "Good idea." He did not turn away, though, but rubbed at his weak right arm as he looked at V'harn. The bluerider had to walk on past, trying to look innocent, trying not to look for Corsan's dragonhealer bag.

Once amongst the trees and out of earshot, the bluerider cursed savagely to himself. It had been almost three days now without a drink. Tengith was too old for this, and going on felt like suicide, but there was no way he could stop, not with two queens to drive his poor old blue on until his hearts burst.

Maybe they could still make it, but the odds were looking too grim to bet on anymore. If he was going to go out, he did not want to miss his last drink. Sooner or later, his chance would come.



When Timlin finally awoke, he heard no sound but the steady beat of the ocean on the shore, and he wondered if perhaps the others had left him. It seemed a fitting end, wasting away here, caught between times like *she* was, but dogged stubbornness made him find his feet and head towards the plateau's edge, back in the direction he had come from the previous night.

They were still there, gathered in their thinning ranks, a motley crew of gaunt people and unhealthy-looking dragons. No one said a word to him as he staggered back into their midst, and he offered nothing in response to their pitying looks. They were a more somber bunch even than usual – even the children subdued, and Timlin knew why. Fallahi was not the cause; for them the worst of it was Terth. He had been a healthy dragon, as fit as any of them, and if he could fall...

It was not a thought he wanted to follow, but Timlin knew its truth. They were on borrowed time, and running out of even that.



# Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub

[www.kadanzer.org](http://www.kadanzer.org)