
The Long Way Home, Part 6

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Night had fallen, and the dwindling band of survivors had prepared for their 11th jump ahead. E'darin was one of the last dragonriders astride. He fumbled around the task of dousing their small campfire for as long as he could, and then found fault in Nyth's harness straps. Nyth fretted and twitched, moaning in soft, constant wheezes of protest.

I am tired, Nyth said, repeating the words in a droning mantra. **I am tired. I am tired. We should rest. I do not want to do this. I am tired.**

I know, dearheart. I know, love, E'darin told his green, trying to comfort her without allowing his own visceral terror to infect her. The last ten jumps forward had been terrifying, and his own nerves failed him as it drew time to buckle in for the eleventh. With each jump, it seemed, they lost a few more weyrling dragons *between*, but that had been something the older riders had all grimly expected. But then bluerider D'ben and Terth and their passenger Fallahi had been lost during their 8th jump, and R'yeran and A'renis and their greens had not made it through the band's 10th leap forward. It was no longer just the weyrings who were being lost, and E'darin was painfully aware that it was the weakest of the adult dragons who were failing now.

'We'll not make it. We'll not last through this one. If Hinth and Moranth failed to make the last jump, Nyth and I haven't a chance, not tonight, not this time...'

Those desperate thoughts chased him like a shadow. E'darin was rarely troubled by dark thoughts. He knew his own measure – and one of his rare strengths was his sunny disposition. He had always been the runt of the crèche and of the weyring pack, always the smallest and weakest, so his lifelong strength had always been his humor, a ready smile, and an amiable nature. E'darin had found that his bashful smile could win through most problems, but this... well, having both too much time and too little of it all at once wasn't something a friendly word and smile could overcome.

I am tired. I am tired! Nyth continued to protest. Her complaint gained in volume, then went absolutely silent as one of the other dragons silenced her. Nyth continued to wheeze and began now to tremble.

Footsteps scuffed the turf nearby, and E'darin looked around to see V'tor. The bluerider shouldered E'darin aside and took a look at Nyth's girth straps himself. "She's lost a

few notches, hasn't she?" he said, his tone conversational as he made sure the straps were snug.

"Haven't we all?" E'darin asked, leaning against Nyth's side and shivering himself. He heard the quaver in his own voice, and knew V'tor had heard it as well.

V'tor stepped back and gave Nyth a clout on the foreleg. "Your girl will be fine," he said, with his usual steady confidence. The bluerider turned and clasped E'darin's arm tightly. "You'll be fine, too," he said, with the threat of emotion in his voice. "Hear me, runt? You just stick close to Isalth, and Isalth and me'll see you through. Like always."

E'darin nodded, then impulsively gave the taller man a brief embrace. V'tor was two Turns his senior and had been his foster-brother before being his clutchmate, and later, wingmate. He couldn't imagine life without V'tor or the bluerider's sister, Bressa. V'tor was E'darin's opposite in so many ways. He was tall and powerfully built, handsome enough to always find company at a gather, and quick to launch into a fight. V'tor was fearless and possessed the same, easy arrogance that E'darin had always felt came naturally only lord holder's sons or bronzeriders. V'tor had always been E'darin's closest friend and willing protector, while it had always been E'darin's role to gentle V'tor's stubborn fits and volatile temper and keep him on an even keel. E'darin shied away from even imagining the what-might-have-beens of the great wave which had wiped Southern Weyr clean from the map, and how it might have robbed him of the two souls he had always been closest too. He could believe bad things might be in store for himself, but not for his vital foster-siblings. V'tor and Bressa always were, always had been, and always would be. They were family, and he knew he'd be lost in an even worse way that being stranded between if he were to lose them.

His friend grinned and shoved E'darin away. "Don't get weepy on me, brother," V'tor said. "Just get on your dragon and let's get this one over with. It's just one more jump. We jump it, and then we've got another restday to look forward to."

"Some restday," grumbled Bressa, from atop Devereth's dark bulk nearby. "Get your breeches up on the saddlepad, laze-a-beds!" she called, sounding for all the world as if she shared her brother V'tor's confidence.

Devereth's rider says this jump will not be half so bad as the last, Nyth said then, with a pulse of worry at the reminder that the last jump might not have been a good one. Featherhead that she was, Nyth hardly remembered yesterday's complaints when today's were so fresh and numerous.

"Tell Devereth's rider that she's a liar," E'darin countered aloud, summoning a weak grin for V'tor as he spoke. "And not even a good one."

V'tor chuckled and clapped E'darin's shoulder again, with the same easy strength that never failed to rock the slighter man. "That she is, the cunning bitch. You know where the real threat is. You'll make it through this jump, E'darin. So'll I. 'Cuz if we don't, that sister of mine will

hunt us down and *hurt* us.” V’tor rolled his shoulders beneath his flight jacket, then turned off to strike off for where blue Isalth waited for him. “Don’t forget,” he called back behind him. “Last one there gets to skin the wherry.”

An old joke between the three of them, so familiar and so well aged that E’darin couldn’t quite recall what had started it. It put a real smile on his lips, however briefly.

“Right,” he said, trying to tame the flameflies buzzing in his belly. E’darin took a deep breath, tried to absorb the confidence his foster-siblings had in the coming jump, and with a forced sense of determination, scaled up Nyth’s shoulder and clipped on his flight straps.

I’m tired, Nyth said, quietly and almost as though she hoped not to be overheard.

You are strong, E’darin answered. *We are all tired, but strong. Isalth will be right beside you on the left, and Devereth will be on your right, and we will make this one jump and then have a long rest.*

There will be oil? Nyth asked, reminded of another complaint. ***I itch. My skin flakes and cracks. Will there be oil where we jump?***

Soon, E’darin replied, *wanting* to sound convincing.

The lie seemed to work. As the Weyrleader sent orders for them all to rise, Nyth leaped up with a fresh determination of her own, with more vigor in her wingsweeps than E’darin fancied there had been the night before last. ***There will be oil there***, she thought with keen avarice.

E’darin didn’t disabuse her of that notion. He was grateful for anything that might give them an edge in getting through this jump.

The cold that followed was just as long and just as bitter as he had remembered it would be. Even in the depths of his growing fear, E’darin found a thread of morbid humor at their situation. Were he and Nyth lost *between*? And if so, just how or when, exactly, would he know it? Would he just left forever hanging in time here, unable to even feel his dragon beyond her quavering presence in his mind? Would his toes and balls freeze off first? Did the darkness just smother you, or were you left in the absolute black of your own head, to listen to your own stories and thoughts and memories, forever and evermore? Or did your lungs just eventually burst? Questions and questions and questions – and ashes, E’darin simply didn’t want to cease to be, not with questions left unanswered --

Then they were back, a starless night sky closing around them with a spit of rain and gust of wind. Yet for all of the storm-shrouded dark sky and the dark expanse of jungle beneath them, all of the shades of black of the living world seeming bright and beautiful after the long nothingness of *between*. E’darin couldn’t restrain a whoop of surprise and delight at finding Nyth and himself alive again, when he had almost been about to convince himself that they were dead dead dead --

For a heartbeat, E’darin continued to be jubilant for his own unexpected survival. But then a gust of wind whipped Nyth out of formation, and when E’darin automatically

glanced to one side to check their position against his wingmates’, to his horror he found the air beside them empty.

Bressa and Devereth had not made it out of *between*



The dark jungle changed with each jump; each jump, they had to find someplace new to land. The jungle grew larger and denser with the rapidly-passing Turns and, while the pale expanses always remained a familiar and convenient landing spot, the beaches were too exposed to the tide and the view of ships offshore. So it was up and over the plateau, in hopes of finding a clearing large enough for their dragons all to share.

Nyth landed as close to Isalth as she could; the green came down with a wavering moan, finding new aches and pains in her *between* cracked hide. E’darin saw the fierce orange glow of Isalth’s eyes and wished Nyth to silence, knowing in his gut that there could be more of a crisis here than his beloved’s physical complaints.

There was a spatter of rain as E’darin scrambled to dismount, but it was just a single moment’s worth. The ground beneath his feet sank under his weight; it had been raining, most likely, and the band of survivors had simply arrived in the storm’s denouement. He was grateful for that one little cosmic kindness as he heard young Dillon’s cries from the height of Isalth’s neck.

“V’tor! V’tor!”

E’darin raced around Isalth’s flank, nimbly vaulting the blue’s thick tail. V’tor was moving fast toward the center of the clearing. E’darin shouted his friend’s name and ran full out, dodging dragons and dismounting riders in his efforts to catch up.

The hard wind above them sent clouds scudding off of a round, low-hanging Timor, and in that sudden moonlight, E’darin saw the pale gleam of a gold hide ahead of them. “V’tor!” he shouted, and but on a fresh burst of speed.

“You *bitch!*” V’tor roared, hurtling along just ahead of him. “You killed her! You’ve killed my sister!”

A child shrieked in fear, and E’darin saw Dunia’s slender figure turning in surprise. He shouted V’tor’s name again, not sure which he feared more – V’tor’s reaching Dunia first, or her gold’s reaction to the threat. Dunia’s two girls were between Nioranth and V’tor’s headlong charge, E’darin realized with horror – the gold *would* react, certainly, and there would be more than the bluerider hurt when she did --

E’darin wasn’t close enough to stop V’tor, but someone else was. Another dragonrider was approaching Dunia from a different angle, and he leaped to intercept the bluerider. Dunia staggered away, scooping up a child from underfoot as the two men collided.

“I’ll kill you!” V’tor shouted. It was Weyrleader J’hanos who had him by the shoulders, and V’tor nearly dragged the other man off of his feet as he struggled to get free. “You bitch, you’re dead!”

A baby had begun to scream. Dunia was retreating well out of harm's way, her children fleeing with her, while V'tor threw a blow at J'hanos's head. The Weyrleader absorbed the punch against his shoulder and wrapped himself around V'tor, pinning the bluerider's arms to his sides. E'darin was in reach now; he leaped and flung himself at V'tor from behind, winding his arms around the man's neck and shoulders. V'tor staggered under the added weight.

"V'tor!" J'hanos snapped, as the other man continued to try to wrestle his way free. "Pull yourself together, bluerider. We can't afford a brawl every time one of us gets lost!"

"You cocksucker!" V'tor snarled back. "Let me go! Bressa is my *sister!*"

"V'tor, it's not Dunia's fault," E'darin pleaded, still hanging on for all he was worth. "It's not her fault!"

Nioranth reared back and fanned her wings, rumbling dangerously. V'tor seemed determined to ignore that warning. "Bressa's dead because of her!" he shouted. "My father, my mother, my baby girl--" He lunged again, almost breaking free of J'hanos and sending E'darin skidding in the mud. "That bitch saves her own children, but leaves ours die? That lying, deceitful she-wher deserves to pay for what she's done! You'd strangle her yourself if it were Vesoz who was dead *between* --"

There was the flat sound of a blow striking flesh. E'darin was pushing himself out of the mud, but found himself knocked back into it as V'tor staggered backwards and into him. The bluerider sank to his knees, gasping for breath, and J'hanos retreated a wary step, keeping himself between V'tor and the direction in which Dunia had fled.

"By the First Egg, you *will* listen to me, bluerider," J'hanos said, his voice calm but uncharacteristically rough. "Yes, the goldrider has a lot to own up for, but now is not the time for reckonings. Dunia and Nioranth are the only ones who can get us where we need to go. Do you understand that? Right now, we need her, so control that temper of yours, bluerider. You're upset? We're *all* upset. We've all lost family, and now is *not* the time to dispute the matter. You may just have your reckoning one day – but not until Dunia has taken us all to where we're going. But until that time, you *will* do as you're bloody well told. Because if you don't, believe me when I say that I *will* knock some more bloody sense into you."

E'darin staggered to his feet. V'tor had straightened but stood his ground, glaring at the bronzerider. Other men ringed them now – N'larion and Vesoz, R'banon and C'dan, A'zelen and his stray holder. E'darin inched forward and

reached for V'tor's shoulder.

"Come on, V'tor, let's go. Come on," he said, tugging experimentally on his friend's arm. V'tor shrugged him off. The bluerider stood steady for a long moment, glaring at the Weyrleader with his shoulders stiff in that attitude of controlled violence which E'darin recognized from Turns of long experience. V'tor had begun to tally the odds, but in no way believed the fight was over.

"Let's go," E'darin said urgently, grabbing V'tor's arm again and determined this time not to be brushed off. "The Weyrleader's right. Not now. Please, not now. C'mon, Isalth needs you, let's go."

"Go tend your dragon, bluerider," J'hanos said firmly. "And get some rest. I need you able to work tomorrow morning if we're going to provide everyone with enough to eat in the coming days. *Go.*"

To E'darin's relief, the bluerider turned stiffly and went. E'darin gave their Weyrleader a worried look, then followed after his friend.

Suddenly, the prospect of another half-dozen or so jumps to get them to Dunia's Pass didn't seem so daunting anymore. E'darin took a shaky breath, and swore to himself that he and Nyth would survive those next leaps forward, because he knew he had to be there when V'tor decided his reckoning was due.



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