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# The Long Way Home, Part 7

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They emerged from *between* into the final throes of a rainstorm. By the time the dreaded but familiar routine of checking who had made it and of marshalling everyone to a useable landing site by the stream was completed, the rain had slackened off to nothing.

Everything in the landscape was wet, bringing relief and misery in equal quantities. There were jungle pools aplenty for the dragons to drink from and full pitcherleaves for waterskins to be filled from, without the hassle of negotiating the shifting sands of the shallow stream banks in the wet. But those collecting the water were soon sodden with mud, and only those who stuck to the beach avoiding getting their footwear soaked through.

Once again, the jump itself had not been without loss. Two more weyrings, bluerider D'lyn and bronzerider H'zik, had failed, somewhere in the cold dark of *between*, and with them brownrider T'mor and his young passenger, Timlin.

Of all those who had started on the long journey into the future, only twenty-two adult riders and their dragons, fourteen weyrings, and eleven passengers remained from the original survivors of Southern Weyr.



With the morning came an unexpected complication.

**This sand is not good.** Nioranth's announcement came as Dunia was trying to simultaneously assess the state of her dragon's hide and keep an eye on Corsia and Farnya, so that they didn't stray too far. The gold had her head down and was shoving the wet sand of the beach to and fro with her nose.

*What's wrong with it?* Dunia asked with a sinking feeling. Nioranth's body was noticeably egg heavy.

**It is too cold and it is too wet and it is no good for my eggs.** The gold's head rose and turned to regard her rider. Her eyes whirled slightly with anxiety. **My eggs will come soon and this sand is no good!**

Oh shards! *Soon? How soon?* she asked urgently. Nioranth couldn't lay here in transit from the Ninth to the Tenth Pass, regardless of whether the sand was good or not. A clutch with no candidates, in a location with no Weyr! How could that be hidden from the rest of Pern? Dunia had

visions of her gold laying her eggs here on the beach and then ordering the other dragons to go out on Search or calling out to the Weyr of the Long Interval for assistance....

**Soon**, repeated Nioranth unhelpfully.

*Today?*

The queen turned her head away and raked a forefoot through the offending sand. **No. Tomorrow perhaps. Soon.**

*Nioranth, you can't lay your eggs until we have reached Kadanzer! You need a Hatching Ground and candidates....* With an effort she stopped herself glancing up the cliffs in the direction of the eroded volcanic cone that had been Southern Weyr's Hatching Grounds. There was precious little sand there and tunnelsnakes aplenty, but if Nioranth remembered where she had always clutched before....

**I know. I need sand that is good and I need weyrings for my children.** The queen shifted her weight from foot to foot unhappily. **You must find me good sand.**

Dunia took a deep breath. *Nioranth... could you delay your eggs coming? Just for a while longer? Until I have found you some good sand?*

The gold rumbled unhappily. **I do not know. I will try. But my eggs will decide when they want to come.**

The queenrider wrapped her arms around the huge gold muzzle and gave her bondmate a fierce hug. *You must try very hard.* Then she ran across the beach in search of Weyrleader J'hanos.



**Hurts**, Vhauth sent, holding up his right wing to provide Corsan better access. J'hanos winced, both at the admission -- Vhauth was not a complainer and never had been -- and at the pain that had become a constant undertone to his dragon's thoughts over the past two stops. He leaned against the big bronze's shoulder, watching in growing unease as the dragonhealer went about his inspection.

"It's infected and it's gone deep," Corsan said carefully, probing at the sore that had developed beneath Vhauth's wing. Something pale and sickly-looking shifted beneath the dragonhealer's fingers and Corsan drew a cutting blade from his medical bag. "I'll need to keep this draining," he said, making a quick, careful incision, and J'hanos had to look away as he could. "I wish we still had some of that numbweed and redwort left," Corsan told the bronzerider as he worked, "but I'll do my best with what we have available."

J'hanos nodded, feeling helpless in the face of his dragon's growing weakness. The itchy spot of days before had gone to flaking and cracking with indecent speed and had been becoming more and more painful as time went on. "I know you'll do what you can," he told the dragonhealer, fighting down the fear that seemed to come from nowhere. He was the Weyrleader -- he couldn't afford to crack, not with everybody looking to him to lead them to safety....

"Ideally, I'd flush this out with redwort and numweed and insert a shunt to keep it draining," Corsan said as he worked, pulling a face of disgust as he hit a fresh pool of infection and foul-smelling greenish pus trickled down the bronze's side. "As it is, I'm going to try to manually drain it every few hours -- I can't really leave it open as we'll run the risk of just making everything worse if a fresh infection type sets in. Or if some opportunistic crawler comes along and tries to lay its --"

"*Thank you, dragonhealer,*" J'hanos said sharply, not wanting to hear more of that particular line of thought. Corsan stopped, threw him an apologetic look and kept working. "Is there anything else that you can do for him here?"

"I can flush it with a bit of V'harn's gutrot," the dragonhealer said, not taking his eyes from his work. "It'll sting and I'll need you to ask him to hold steady when I do it, but it may help a bit. Other than that... I'm sorry...."

"Of course." The bronzerider ran his hands down over his roughly bearded face, wishing, as he so often did, that he could just wake up from this nightmare. Watching the others sicken was bad enough without having to imagine his own dragon as one of those struggling to make each jump. Vhauth was a big, powerful bronze... but J'hanos didn't need Corsan's to tell him how dangerous that abscess was. Strong as he was, Vhauth was weakening, the same as all of the others.

*Not much longer now,* he sent to his dragon, forcing all the encouragement he could find into the thought. *\*Not much longer....*

Vhauth rumbled softly, but his rider's attention was dragged away from any response as a figure sprinted up the beach towards them.

"Weyrleader!" Dunia cried, coming to a breathless halt before him. "We've got another problem," she said, her drawn face taut with anxiety.

J'hanos rested his forehead against Vhauth's shoulder, feeling almost numb. "Tell me."



The council assembled quickly and quietly. J'hanos looked tiredly around the circle, seeing familiar faces gone filthy and unshaven and knowing that he was just as gaunt and unkempt as the rest of them. Once, he might have considered that an insult to his pride but now it was just another hardship to be borne, along with the ragged clothing and lack of food or decent shelter, with their inability to care for their dragons, or to simply get a good night's sleep.

Pushing his own feelings firmly aside, he turned to the goldrider. "Dunia, tell them what you've just told me."

"Nioranth wants to clutch," Dunia said in a dispirited voice. "We must hurry. She can't lay her eggs until we reach the Hatching Grounds and have the Weyr around us."

Weary faces in that tight ring around them fell and grew grimmer. "How soon?" Corsan asked, in his best professional tones.

"Tomorrow." Dunia was cradling her son defensively against her breasts. "Nioranth said not today, but maybe tomorrow. I don't think she'll last any longer than that."

"But we've got five jumps left to complete before we reach the Tenth Pass," N'larion argued. "With the necessary rests the dragons need, that means a minimum of ten days at our current pace -- you can't be suggesting that we go faster?"

"We *can't* push any faster!" Weyrleader G'teris snapped. "Not without risking lives! You're asking the impossible. I've already just half of the weyrings we started this madness of yours with, goldrider. I've no wish to lose the rest of them."

"And not just the weyrings," R'banon added. "We've lost almost half a dozen adult dragons over the last few jumps. They're simply too exhausted. Their hides are cracked and bleeding and developing infections --"

"Which are only going to get worse," A'zelen said, a little sharply. "We just don't have the supplies to treat them. But even if we did, even if we had all the time in the world -- nobody, including her rider, can argue with a queen who's ready to clutch. The time will come when it can't be stopped, and we're going to *have* to be at a Weyr before then. We might have a Hatching Ground right here, but we don't have candidates."

"I said from the start that we'd run out of time," Revanne agreed. "We haven't been going fast enough to outrun the problem -- and from here on out, it will only get worse. Even if Nioranth wasn't giving us an ultimatum, we would have to start pushing ahead faster."

"She's right," Corsan said. "Nioranth's not the only dragon who doesn't have another ten days to spare." He glanced bleakly towards J'hanos, who refused to meet his eyes.

"What other choice do we have?" asked Vesoz, who had been standing quietly with Gavril, listening to the dragonriders debate.

"None," J'hanos said evenly. "If the queen has to clutch, she won't wait. She can't. Nioranth says we don't have ten days. We don't even have five. Nioranth needs to clutch *now*."

"We can't do it!" G'teris argued. "We can't push the dragons like that! Not and survive."

"We have to." J'hanos said the words calmly, firmly, trying not to remember Corsan cutting into the abscess on Vhauth's side. "All of the dragons are weakening rapidly. Giving them what rest we can is no longer helping -- their conditions are worsening, not through lack of rest but because we simply do not have the basic supplies we need to keep them healthy. Even if we *had* another ten days to spare, we would only continue to see our dragons weaken, and we would continue to lose lives. We have no other choice left to us. We have to get medical help and that means that we have to make longer jumps, and we have to make them immediately."

There was a bleak silence at his words. The small council stared at their Weyrleader in mixed horror and

misery. "Flamed if we do, and scored if we don't," muttered Gavrill, scratching at his thick salt-and-pepper beard. "That sounds brutal enough, but on the bright side, there's hot klah, a hot bath, and a razor waiting at the end of it. I don't know about anyone else, but that almost makes the risk seem worth it." The look that he shot A'zelen, though, was worried, belying his flippant words.

A'zelen didn't pay him any attention. "If we're going to do this, we need to look at the problem rationally," the brownrider said, determinedly. "We know the consequences if we delay. Let's look at what we're facing."

"We have a little more than a century to go," Dunia said. "One hundred and nineteen Turns, to the Turn 2859."

"If we're going to do it, then let's get it over with!" R'banon said fiercely. "One long jump can do that."

"No," Corsan countered immediately. "In everyone's current condition, the strain of that would be too much. Even for Nioranth, it would be too much. Odds are, we'd lose everyone."

"Why don't we just jump as we've been jumping? Just, without the longer rests in between," Revanne suggested.

"The problem is that it isn't just a straight equation," A'zelen explained. "A jump of fifty Turns, in theory, isn't simply twice as hard as a jump of twenty-five. The strain involved isn't directly comparable. Every single longer jump is a major drain on weakening systems. So four jumps of twenty-five Turns, close together, might be just as bad, even worse, than two fifty-Turn jumps."

"But we know that they can manage jumps of twenty-five Turns," G'teris pressed. "I don't know that my weyrings have the strength for anything longer!"

"If we do it in four jumps," A'zelen told him, "that's four times that riders and dragons have to concentrate hard, and make an extra effort. That's four take-offs and landings, too. A fifty-Turn jump may be a longer sustained effort, but... but that's only asking for two bursts of energy and concentration, not four."

"Craftmaster?" J'hanos said, with a keen glance at Corsan. "What is your judgment?"

Corsan's sunburned face was anguished. He returned J'hanos's gaze for a long moment, then looked towards Dunia in despair.

"Three jumps," he agreed then. "Fifty Turns apiece for the first two, and nineteen Turns for the last. Half hour rests between each jump. And hope as hard as you can that you'll make it, because I can't promise that any of our dragons have the strength left for this."

"We have to do this, and we will," J'hanos said firmly, looking at each of his gaunt circle in turn. "But we need to take every precaution we can."

Corsan nodded. "We need to ensure that every rider has encouraged their dragon to drink as much as possible. No hunting -- they need to preserve their strength at this point, although if anybody catches any treehoppers today, they'll be of more use in the dragons than in the stewpot. And *everybody*, dragons and riders both, needs to rest as much as they can."

R'banon snorted. "I doubt anybody is going to get much sleep once we've told them what we're planning."

"You sure you can give us the correct coordinates?" N'laron asked Dunia, his arms folded across his broad chest.

Dunia nodded mutely.

"I'd like to review those with you, goldrider, if you don't mind," A'zelen said, sounding as if he welcomed the challenge as a distraction.

"Look, are you sure that this Weyr of yours will even take us in?" Gavrill asked. "Because, you know, we're not exactly invited guests here."

"They'll take us because they're a Weyr," J'hanos told him, a little sharply. "And it's not as though we have any other choices. Getting there is only our first challenge, though," he said. "Goldrider, we need to know *exactly* what we're going to find once we get to the Weyr. We're all going to be half-senseless with exhaustion, in desperate need of medical care for our dragons, and you'll probably be flitting off to the Hatching Grounds with Nioranth. What will we find, and who? We need to know everything you can give us."

Dunia nodded again, and silently offered Murgon to his father. When Corsan had accepted the boy, she knelt and began to sketch lines in the sand.

"The first thing, I suppose," she said in a flat, weary voice, "is that the Weyr is not called Southern."

"It's not? But they've rebuilt on Southern's site," Vesoz said, puzzled. "What *else* would they call it?"

"It's...." Dunia paused, then sighed. "In the Turn 2856, the caldera that housed Barrier Mountain Weyr became active again. Most of the Weyr escaped well before the eruption and were relocated to the former site of Southern Weyr following negotiations with the Lord of Windsong."

"*Windsong*?" G'teris asked incredulously. "What sort of a name is *that* for a Hold?"

"Never mind the Hold," Vesoz said with a soft snort, "I'm just trying to imagine planting a Weyr called 'Barrier Mountain' here, given the rather extreme lack of mountains in the area!"

"Actually," Dunia said, "it's no longer known as Barrier Mountain Weyr. It's... been called 'Kadanzer' since the end of the Ninth Pass and --"

"It's been called *what*?" J'hanos snapped, staring at her in disbelief as several of the others realized what had just been said and voiced their own protests. "You *can't* be telling me that --"

"Kadanzer?" A'zelen said, his brows knit above his blue-grey eyes. "Kadana and An'zer renamed the Weyr after *themselves*?"

"Why am I not surprised?" muttered G'teris.

"Nioranth and I are from Kadanzer Weyr," Dunia told them firmly. "I was born and Impressed at the old Weyr and transferred to the new site before Nioranth's first rising. Kadanzer is just the name of the Weyr in the Tenth Pass -- Kadana and An'zer are just names from history that nobody thinks about."

"Oh, we will," Vesoz promised. "Believe me, we will...."

"Look, it's a long story, but it's not one that's important right now," Dunia said dismissively, concentrating on the map she was drawing out. "What's important is that this is what Main will look like when we come out of *between*. The roofs are colored glazed tile; the Infirmary building here," she pointed to a rectangular shape in the sand, "and the Dragon Infirmary buildings here and here will have their respective craft badges picked out in darker tiles, but I'm going to be visualizing a night arrival using the moons and the Wher's Tooth comet as references, so those details may not be visible. The Weyrhall is here," she pointed to another shape in her makeshift cartography, "and this is the gather square -- you should be able to land all of the dragons here, on the square and in the open space between the Weyrhall and the Infirmaries. The whole area is kept well-lit at night, so don't worry about colliding with anything in the dark."

"I don't trust that any of us dragonriders will be too steady on our feet when we arrive," J'hanos said, rubbing at his temples, feeling the start of a headache threatening. "Corsan, I need you to *immediately* get their dragonhealers onto the job. Vesoz, Captain Gavrill, I want you to get hold of whoever is in charge -- tell them who we are, where we're from, and that we need medical help."

"Craftmaster Giselle is the senior Dragonhealer," Dunia put in quickly. "You won't have to wait long for her to show up, the woman just about lives in her Infirmary. She's short and slim with red shoulder-length hair. You'll know who she is when you see her."

"A *woman* is your Dragonhealer?" R'banon's tone spoke of surprise and disapproval.

"The Weyrhealer is female as well," Dunia replied, unapologetic. "Craftmaster Glynda. Our Weyrwoman is Lybelle -- she's tall, dark, more slender than Genna was. Her Ihyanith was close to rising when I left; if she hasn't risen, our Weyrleader is G'tin. He's a bit... young," she added, with a moment's hesitation, before hurrying on. "Raecliffe is Headwoman, she wears her hair in a braided knot or crown; she's got a way of not quite focusing on you when she looks at you, but she's every bit as capable as Ima was. Luka and Cassidoria are the junior goldriders, if Lybelle hasn't traded one of them off yet; Zherra and Faydra ride the two weyrwing queens, but Zherra may have graduated -- I can't remember exactly when her Velcroth hatched.... My mother Farny is the Head Cook, she'll want to feed us all..." Dunia's voice broke, and she looked down, wiping her sleeve across her eyes impatiently.

"Someone wanting to feed us -- music to my ears," Gavrill commented. "I'm *dreaming* of meals that don't feature tunnelsnake."

"I want every rider to stay close to their dragon," J'hanos said. "Having the whole stinking mob of us clamoring underfoot isn't going to help get the healers there, and each rider will have to be present when the dragonhealers arrive to assess their dragons, same as after a Fall. Corsan, Vesoz, Gavrill -- you don't have dragons

distracting you. Make sure the worst of us get the help they need."

"What about the women and children?" Gavrill asked.

"All of our remaining non-riders should dismount and get out of the way," J'hanos told him. "Dunia, where should they go?"

"Here," Dunia said quickly, pointing toward the Weyrhall on her map. "There are benches right here, in clear view of both Infirmaries, in the shelter of some trees. It's close enough and just far enough out of harm's way at the same time."

"Good enough," J'hanos said with a nod. "I'll put Mirelli in charge there; I want them safe but where we can see them and they can see us. Vesoz, Gavrill -- you're our representatives. I know you can do that. Find the Weyrleaders and tell them...." He paused, as though weighing the words to come. "Tell them that we ask for refuge."



"-- so, after discussion, we have decided to push on through to the Tenth Pass as quickly as possible," J'hanos finished, pitching his voice loud to be heard over the crackling bonfire and the angry muttering from the ring of refugees.

"Push on through?" V'harn wondered incredulously. They still had five jumps to go. With no rest between them, that pace would kill them all.

Stepping out to stand beside J'hanos, Dunia spoke up. "We're going to make two jumps of fifty Turns, and the last one only nineteen. Take your coordinates from Nioranth and Vhauth. The last set will be the Weyr as I remember it." Sounds of protest started up all around, but the goldrider ploughed on. "After the last jump, you'll see glowlight from the buildings around the Main Complex. You'll be landing in the open area between --"

Without even realizing his decision, V'harn took two long steps backwards, out of the ring of firelight. G'teris frowned at him, but shook his head and looked back at the gold and bronzerider. Nobody else seemed to notice V'harn as he backed away. He could hear Dunia going on about where the dragon infirmary was, and other things that he stopped listening to as he made his way back along the line of dragons. He stopped to pat Tengith's muzzle, but the exhausted blue was already sound asleep, his breath coming with a wheeze. That would not matter too much longer, one way or another.

Nobody was watching; now was his chance. He almost ran to Mulujath's side. There was Corsan's medical bag, tied securely to the straps where it wouldn't be mislaid. The big brown was sound asleep and hardly even twitched as V'harn climbed up high enough to fumble open the bag and reach inside. Yes, there was the skin! He snatched it out and backed away. Mulujath might call his lumbering ox of a rider yet, but V'harn would be long gone by the time N'larion could arrive.

He fumbled off the cap, losing it in the darkness as he trotted away. He didn't care -- the distilled wine felt too good going down his throat. His hands shook so hard that the second squirt splashed his cheek instead of going into his mouth, and so he stopped and took a third, much longer one, feeling his face stretch in a fierce grin. He knew it would mangle his chances of giving good coordinates, but his odds were piss-poor anyway. He would tell Tengith to just take Nioranth's coordinates and do his level best, but he knew that his poor old blue was too weak to survive this final insanity. If V'harn was going to freeze to death *between* on the back of a dead dragon, then, by Faranth, he was *not* going to do it sober!

So he drank, and watched the sky for a while, and drank some more, savoring the last beauty of the stars and the burn of each shot until the skin was empty.



Corsan pressed gently at the edges of Vhauth's abscess and was rewarded with a fresh stream of greenish pus. J'hanos watched for a few moments then turned away, closing his eyes and projecting all the love and comfort he could muster towards his dragon. *We'll be there soon*, he promised. *We'll be there soon and there will be all the numbweed you could wish for...*

The big bronze nudged at his rider with his nose. **Good**, he sent back. **Hurts**.

"I'm going to want to check this after each jump," Corsan said, wiping away the mess as best he could. "It's refilling fast but there's not much else I can do except keep it drained to reduce the internal pressure. It... well, it wouldn't be good if that ruptured midway through a jump. Once we've made the next few, though, they'll have supplies enough to make Vhauth here good as new again."

J'hanos nodded, feeling numb. "What is your assessment of the rest?" he asked.

The dragonhealer sighed. "I don't know. Nioranth is the strongest, egg-heavy or not. The infection in Toth's wing is spreading but still seems confined to the local membrane, which is good, though the affected portion will need to be cut away and allowed to re-grow once we get to the other side of this. The others -- some have infections, all are exhausted. I'm surprised Nyth has made it this far but she seems to be tougher than she looks. Tengith... I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know that I'd shift any of the passengers... no, I can't recommend that. I simply don't know. The next few jumps will be brutal whatever we do. We've done what we can to hydrate the dragons -- there's really nothing more I can recommend other than getting it over as quickly as possible."

Vhauth rumbled and J'hanos reached to stroke a peeling eyeridge. He had given his people until mid-morning to rest before the last, desperate leaps forward in time, a few hours in which to gather themselves for the final sprint. The camp had been quiet and subdued for in the hours since the announcement. There was no effort to gather food, and little

movement besides what was necessary to gather drinking water or care for the exhausted dragons. "Thank you," the Weyrleader said quietly, looking towards Corsan once more. "I know this isn't what you thought you were agreeing to with Dunia, but I'm grateful you were here on this trip. I don't know what we would have done without you here."

Corsan inclined his head in acknowledgement as he reached into his bag. "I'm just going to flush the abscess with --" He paused, frowning. "Now where has *that* gone to?"

"What --?" J'hanos started, but was interrupted by Vesoz, who came jogging up the beach towards them.

"We've got a problem."

J'hanos turned a weary, nonplussed stare on his brother. "Oh, what now?" he sighed.

"I've looked high and low for V'harn. No one in camp has seen him since before dawn."

The Weyrleader traded a bleak look with Corsan. "The wine," the dragonhealer said, gesturing at his bag.

"*Shit!*" J'hanos snapped, turning away from his dragon to kick a rock at the sea in frustration. He had sent Vesoz to find V'harn when he and Corsan had stopped to inspect Tengith on their way up the beach. The aged blue had been soundly asleep and oblivious, his gums anemic, but there had been no sign of V'harn, an oddity when every other dragonrider was sticking close to their dragons in pre-jump anxiety.

"I thought he might be out relieving himself, but if that's the case, then he needs a dose of oil more than the dragons do," Vesoz said with a helpless shrug.

"I'll bloody kill him..." J'hanos sent a firm summons for Lan, and the bronze firelizard crawled promptly out of the saddlebags which had become his refuge. The Weyrleader gave his pet a firm visual of V'harn, and sent the firelizard winging off in pursuit.

"He must have stolen the wineskin back while we were talking to the group," Corsan said, shaking his head. "I left the bag with Mulujath."

Lan circled once, then zipped into the jungle, caroling jubilantly. "Yes, I want you to get N'larion and Gavrill here," J'hanos ordered his brother. "We're going hunting."



Lan led them straight to V'harn. The Oldtimer had hidden deep in the forest, in the damp shelter of a fallen tree. And by the time they had found the bluerider, the wineskin was drained dry.

J'hanos shouldered past N'larion in a fury, hauling V'harn to his feet. The alcoholic fumes that rolled off the man were almost visible. J'hanos snarled in disgust and backhanded the older man hard across the face, raising distant bugles of complaint from the dragons. But V'harn was already nearly senseless from drink; he slumped to the ground bonelessly, unaware that his cheek was split open and bleeding from its encounter with the Weyrleader's signet ring.

"That won't do you any good," the bluerider slurred. "What's the use? You'll kill us all anyway, you overbred bag of shit."

J'hanos hit him a second time before N'laron and Gavrill pulled him away and got between him and his prey. Then he stood and glared at V'harn, wanting nothing more than to throttle the man. All of his frustrations and fears were suddenly screaming for release and the bluerider was just too tempting a target....

"He's too drunk to fly," N'laron muttered, pulling V'harn back up. Gavrill dragged the bluerider's other arm over his shoulder, keeping the Oldtimer on his feet. "We'll have to wait until he's sobered up again before we leave."

"Can we do that?" Gavrill said, shouldering most of V'harn's weight. "How long can we wait, with the gold ready to pop?"

"We can't." J'hanos struggled against the desperate need to take his frustrations out on the bluerider for stealing Vhauth's last hope of relief. "We can't afford to wait for this stupid fool to regain his senses. We'll cut some vines, tie him to Tengith's harness, and have Nioranth haul them through jump."

N'laron was frowning. "The chances of them surviving the first jump, much less three --"

"V'harn's made his choice. I won't let his stupidity endanger everyone else." J'hanos clenched his fists at his sides. "The best we can do for him is to strap him on tight, and hope Nioranth and Vhauth together can pull Tengith through."

That earned a sardonic laugh from Gavrill. "You never know. Maybe Tengith's chances are better now than they were before his rider got drunk."

"Whoreson had *better* survive this," J'hanos muttered, as they carried V'harn back to camp. "Because I want a piece of his sorry hide, once we get to the other side of this."



It was little before midday when the dragons rose into the sky again. J'hanos twisted on Vhauth's neck to watch the last remnants of his Weyr sweep into ragged formation behind the bronze and Nioranth.

***Nioranth has the visualization, Vhauth reported. I have it. They listen. We are ready.***

J'hanos took a deep breath, stealing another moment to count heads and wings. They were ready... or as ready as they would ever be, at least. He felt Vesoz against his back,

and patted his brother's leg with a reassuring confidence that he didn't truly feel.

"Here we go," he called back to Vesoz. "Three jumps, and then we're back to civilization. Klah, soapsand, and oil by the barrel."

"Clean undershorts, hot meals, and pretty girls," Vesoz agreed, his tone tired. "I can't wait...."

J'hanos was still watching the formation that flew behind him. Twenty-six dragon, thirty-seven people -- all that was left of Southern Weyr and *his* to guide and try to protect, if only for a little while longer. Whenever and wherever they landed at the end of these final jumps, whoever was left of their number would become someone else's concern and someone else's duty.

As would he.

J'hanos closed his eyes and pushed that thought aside as he imagined them all, fifty Turns into the future, adding that temporal detail to the image that Vhauth was carrying from Nioranth. Fifty then fifty and then....

*We are ready*, Vhauth reminded him solidly, ignoring the sharp spike of pain that came with each powerful downstroke of his wings. The bronze never wavered, only waited for his rider's command.

*Go.*



# Kadanzer Weyr

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