
The Way the World Ends

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"Ves, will you hurry up? The others have gone already!"

"I'm nearly done!" Vesoz ran a comb back through his black hair, distractedly noting that it needed to be cut again, and returned to looking under his bed for his missing boot. "I don't suppose you've seen --"

"Is this what you're looking for?" Bressa held up the elusive piece of footwear, shaking her head as her lover grinned at her and snatched it from her fingers. "You're hopeless, you know?"

"Hey, Ima uses up all my organisational ability in the stores," he told her, pulling on his boot and then leaning back to snag the belt he'd laid out earlier. "So you can't expect me to know where anything is in my quarters -- it's against the natural scheme of things."

"Sure it is," the greenrider said, amused. "Just hurry it up or Devereth and I are going without you!"

Ennie chirped and pounced on the end of the belt as it slipped past her nose, and Vesoz rolled his eyes as he tugged it out of the firelizard's grasp. There was a major gather at Fort Hold that day and it seemed that a goodly portion of Southern Weyr's population had already left to enjoy the festivities if the half-empty Weyrhall had been any indication at dinner. As a headsecond, Vesoz had found himself helping to supervise the meal, which meant that he was getting away from the Weyr a little later than he might have liked, although the time difference was in Southern's favour.... "You could have gone and come back for me, you know."

"Now *there* speaks a non-rider," Bressa said with a snort. "You should try rousing a dragon after they've curled up on the fire-heights with some new friends. Believe me, it's easier waiting for you here!"

Vesoz beamed at her. "Well, that's because I'm worth waiting for...."

The greenrider laughed. "Move it, loverboy, or you're walking."

Ennie winged across to perch on the top of the tall press in the corner of the room -- private quarters, albeit small, were one of the perks that came with being a headsecond -- and peered down at her owner as he checked the contents of

his belt pouch and then snagged his battered riding jacket from its hook. "Right! I'm ready!"

"About time! What you were wearing earlier would have been fine you know," the tall young woman said, starting down the hallway.

"Work clothes? Please," Vesoz said, jogging after her. "I have to have *some* pride in my appearance. I'm not about to show up at a major Gather in anything with grease-stains."

Bressa glanced at him, her brown eyes twinkling. "Ves, your breeding is showing."

"I should hope it is!" he said, a little haughtily, although his broad smile rather ruined the effect. He and Bressa had been sharing furs since the start of the month, a casual arrangement that neither really expected to last for long but which both were enjoying while it did. "Anyway, Jal would kill me if I turned up looking scruffy -- you never know who we might need to impress on the Weyr's behalf...."

"Right now, I think that the Weyrleader is more concerned with making V'harn suffer than worrying about your dress-sense," the greenrider noted. "Your brother doesn't take too well to being insulted to his face."

Vesoz snorted. "Now there's an understatement. Jal's been pretty cheerful since Vhauth caught Yashelth again, but he's *never* been one to stand for idiots. V'harn's a weird one anyway. Left his brains in the Eighth Pass if you ask me."

"Hey, that's a wingmate of mine you're insulting there!"

"You disagree?"

"Not really...."

Green Devereth was waiting for them outside, the tip of her tail flicking back and forth impatiently. She whuffed at her rider, nudging her gently with her dark nose, then raised her head to peer at her additional passenger. Vesoz just smiled at the green, too used to the massive Vhauth to be concerned by her regard. "Good evening, Devereth. Ready to help us go dance the night away at Fort? I bet there'll be a lot of nice males for you to snuggle up with...."

The green gave a soft rumble and crouched to allow the humans better access to her flying straps. Bressa laughed. "I think you've found her weakness."

"Good!" Vesoz climbed the green's shoulder with the ease of long practice and grinned down at his lover. "Come on then, slowpoke, let's get going before all the decent wine is gone!"



"You're late again, V'harn." The annoyance on C'senn's face was clear in the full moonlight.

"Not that late," V'harn replied as he climbed down blue Tengith's neck, careful not to jostle the cargo sack strapped there, or to land wrong on the narrow platform of what passed for a fire-heights at this sorry imitation of a Weyr. "You're just impatient to get to Fort before the gather ends."

"Where were you? You came in from *between*, not up from the Weyr."

"Never mind that. If you just give me your watch report you can be gone sooner. That's what you want, isn't it?" V'harn stared at the greenrider, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Were you at the gather? You're not drunk, are you?"

V'harn snorted. "You don't have the right to make demands of me just because those shaffing high-handed Bendeners exiled us loyalists down here. You weren't even born then, for Faranth's sake! What do you know?"

The other sighed; the roll of his eyes was plain to see in the bright moonlight. "I know I'm sick of you thinking anybody *cares* about that old history anymore. I don't give a shard about why you're down here, or who you're loyal to, just that you don't leave me stuck doing your watch!"

"Just give me the report and then you can go to your gather!" V'harn snapped back.

"Get to the gather you'd still be at if you hadn't mouthed off to the Weyrleaders? Why sure." C'senn paused, grinning. "But first tell me just what it was you said that got you assigned to this shift when you could have been off dancing?"

V'harn snorted. "Not that it's any business of yours, but if it gets you out of here faster I'll tell you. I said that compared to T'ron, J'hanos couldn't lead his way out of a rotten firestone sack. And I still believe it. You happy now?"

C'senn laughed. "You really are a relic of the Ancients, aren't you? Anyway, there's nothing much to report. A ship passed by heading west at the start of my watch and people have been heading off to the gather all evening. And now I'll go join them."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, the greenrider scrambled up the side of his dragon's neck and was gone before V'harn could snap at him for not following proper relief procedure. Well, he *had* wanted the young brat gone, he thought as he climbed Tengith's shoulder to retrieve the skin of distilled wine he'd hidden in the cargo sack. That vintner in Nabol drove a hard bargain, but made the strongest stuff; too bad no dragon was allowed to time it anymore, or he would have been able to enjoy a drink and still have been on time for duty.

He sat up on Tengith's neck, stroking the blue's hide idly with one hand as he looked at the wineskin. Finally he broke the seal and squirted a good belt straight into his mouth, relishing the burn as it went down his throat. It had been more than a day since his last, so with barely a pause he took another mouthful. The skin held enough to last him maybe a month if he were careful, and by then he should be able to raise the marks for another. He did not dare request what he needed from Weyr stores; distilled wine that strong was marked for medicinal use only. Back in the Old Time, the people of Pern had been glad to give dragonriders their due, but now he was reduced to scrambling for bitmarks in order to afford good stuff to drink. He couldn't even buy it at the gather; too many curious eyes and tattling tongues. Stowing the skin again, he asked, *Anything from the other watchriders?* Watchriders often shared news with their

counterparts at other Weyrs, to while away the long night shifts.

Nothing, Tengith replied. *Tonight is quiet.*

"Typical," his rider muttered, and settled down for a long, dull watch.



The Harvest Gather was in full swing as Alstan emerged from the meeting at the Harper Hall, music and light and colour filling the dusk as dragons wheeled against the deepening blue of the late summer sky. It had been some months since his last visit to Fort to report on developments in the South and he found that he had almost forgotten what it was like to be surrounded by the weight of cultured ages in this most ancient of Northern Holds, to walk in a place where nature had been so thoroughly bent to human will. The South was still wild and untamed, even its oldest settlements still shared with the creatures that had been there before humans returned to stake their claim. It was strange to think that he might actually be *missing* the treehoppers....

Rel chirped urgently on Alstan's shoulder and, with a smile and a mental admonition to *behave*, Southern's Weyrsinger let the little brown launch to join the fair dancing overhead. The firelizard had proved to be a worthwhile acquisition -- and one that the Fort Hall, needless to say, quite thoroughly approved of -- although Alstan still winced to think of how his egg had come into his possession. Rel had taken to his training well, however, and was now quite adept at delivering messages... something that the harper knew would never had happened if he had remained in Vivia's care.

"Ah, Fort," said Enril, coming up alongside the younger man as they paused outside the Hall to look up at the great Hold. "So much power, so much corruption, so much intrigue it just makes your mouth water to think of it..."

"No wonder they put the Hall here." Pelnas, the Barrier Mountain Weyrsinger, stopped on Alstan's other side. "There's enough politics in this place to keep a harper happy for life. Something tells me that the South won't be long catching up, though. So very much more space to hide dark secrets in."

"So very much more opportunity to get eaten by the wildlife," Enril added, watching as a pair of young men walked past in expensive finery and shoulder knots showing them to be of the Blood of Telgar. "Brats like that wouldn't last five minutes in the South -- they'd stand there in their sparklies wondering where Daddy's Guard had got to until some wildcat or slasher decided to turn them into dinner. And frankly, that might be doing the world a favour."

Alstan chuckled. "Diplomatic as ever, I see...."

"I can do diplomacy as well you know," the Southern Hold harper told him. "I just figure that I don't need to with you two." He took a deep breath, sniffing the evening air. "Hmm, roasted wherry, fresh bread, a hint of fried fish, some over-perfumed ladies, and more wine than you can

drown in. I think we may be in for a good night here, gentlemen."

"Us and half of the continent, looking at this crowd," Alstan noted as they started down the road to the great Gather Square, glancing curiously at the bright stalls that lined the path. "Sadly, I have things to do tomorrow that I need a clear head for, so I can't stay too late."

Enril snorted. "Call yourself a harper? I've arranged a room at the Hall for the night so I don't need to try getting on a dragon after a skin or three. They can come and get me tomorrow. I always have to stay sober at the Southern gathers, so I'm bloody well going to *enjoy* myself tonight!"

"Does Lord Cranky know about this?"

"Toric is a lot more understanding of the need to keep the Crafts sweet than most people give him credit for," Enril told them. "Which is why *I'm* here and *Cynestan* is going to that bloody meeting at Landing in the tiny hours. About time he got out of the Hold more -- that Steward spends far too much time trying to play politics as it is, so he might as well make himself useful."

Alstan and Pelnas both laughed. "I'm sure he'll be most appreciative of the opportunity," Alstan said, not bothering to hide his smile.

"Oh, I *hope* so...."

A wine stall proved the first stop of the night, yielding a rather fine Istan white that Alstan had barely gotten to taste before a hand closed on his shoulder and he found himself surrounded by a familiar looking pack of revellers. "Weyrsinger! There you are! We were starting to think that you'd forgotten us!"

"How could I *possibly* forget you, V'tor?" Alstan said with a long-suffering sigh, and the bluerider laughed and let him go as Vesoz snagged the harper's wineskin for a closer look.

"Hmm, not bad, not bad -- at least it's not a Benden...."

Alstan snorted. "J'hanos would have me thrown out of the Weyr for voluntarily buying Benden, I know." He took the skin back and tied the neck to his belt. "As it is, Benden is all they ever seem to have at the Hall, so I've already tried that today. What's the verdict on the gather? I've not been out of the Hall long."

"We're having a wonderful time," greenrider Bressa said with a smile, slipping on arm around Vesoz's waist. "Good food, good wine and good music. Will you be taking a turn later?"

"I don't think any harper is allowed to leave Fort without taking a turn on the entertainment tonight," Alstan told her. Southern had 'Fall the following day, but not all of the Wings were needed and a large number of riders and support staff were taking the opportunity to come North for Fort's harvest festivities. Southern wasn't the only Weyr represented either -- looking around, the Weyrsinger could see rider cords representing Telgar, Igen, High Reaches.... "So what are we doing?"

"Right now?" said L'dras, a brownrider in H'mar's Wing. "We're just browsing off the various stalls. There are some particularly nice fried sweetrolls just over by the

cobbler's table over there, and Timlin found a place doing these sticky fish balls that were... interesting."

"I liked them," Vesoz said, stealing a sip from Alstan's cup, then offering a taste of his own. "Of course, I think G'vasen is more interested in eating that Fort bluerider he found...."

"In front of the holders?" Alstan asked, surprised.

"Oh no -- they're both old enough to know better than that," greenrider N'dral grinned. "But they were flirting madly the last we saw of them and I doubt they'll be around here for much longer."

Shaking his head, Alstan took a sip of wine. "Well, it may be harvest here but it's spring in the South and I guess the sap is rising...."

"When *isn't* it, for greenriders?" L'dras asked and got an elbow in the ribs from J'ver.

"*Uncle Ves!*"

Alstan grabbed for Vesoz's cup, just managing to avoid spilling wine over both of them as a leggy youngster with short black hair and an expensive-looking tunic threw himself at the headsecond with an expression of delight on his face. "Uncle Ves! You came!"

"Hey, Jesh!" Vesoz caught the boy and scooped him up in a hug, returning the lad's beaming smile. "You're getting bigger every time I see you."

"I'm nearly *ten* now!" Jeshan told him proudly.

"Are you now?" Vesoz put his nephew down and ruffled his hair, making the boy giggle and squirm away. "You're looking quite the little Lord these days, aren't you?"

"Grandma says that 'the Blood must always look the part'."

"Yes, that sounds like Ghanassa. Now, where's your sister?"

"She's right here," came a new voice. "Go say hello to your uncle, Elhana." J'hanos released his seven Turn-old daughter's hand and steered her gently towards Vesoz. He looked up at the Southern Weyr group. "I trust that everybody is enjoying -- and behaving -- themselves here?"

"Yes, Weyrleader," came the cheerful chorus.

"It's good to see the children again," Alstan said as he watched Vesoz talking quietly to his young niece, Elhana evidently being much shyer than her brother. "They seem to be thriving at Tillek."

"They are," J'hanos said, coming to stand alongside his Weyrsinger. "I miss them but I think sending them there was the right decision. I couldn't have given them the attention they needed and their grandparents dote on them."

"Lord Olzaraj must be pleased that you retained the Weyrleadership."

J'hanos's smile turned somewhat self-satisfied. "Oh yes. He's here somewhere, speaking with Lord Higrone and the others, no doubt. Lords," he said, raising an amused eyebrow at Alstan, "are almost as bad as harpers for talking your ear off when they get together."

"But less fun, I hope?" Alstan said with a chuckle. "Where's the Weyrwoman?"

"Genna is with some of the other Weyrwomen and Weyrleaders -- I'll join her later but I wanted to make sure that these two found Vesoz before he got too far into the wine. Not," the bronzerider added, slightly acerbically, "that I'm going to be able to stay particularly late myself -- I'll have to head back to Southern after returning the children to Tillek."

"Ah yes, the Benden Weyr meeting tomorrow morning." Alstan winced sympathetically. "They could have timed that a little better, couldn't they?"

"And they know it," J'hanos muttered. "Bastards could have waited until *after* their Threadfall to hold a meeting, but no, it *has* to be at breakfast. And breakfast for Benden means the middle of the bloody night for everyone else. They do it deliberately, I *know* they do, and because they're Benden they get away with it. It's all right for Genna -- Weyrwomen aren't expected to attend, so I get to suffer alone."

"You're not taking your Weyrsecond?"

"Oh, I could do, but A'zelen has taken another bloody nightwatch on the Hold road, which definitely counts as an avoidance tactic if you ask me. Still," J'hanos sighed, "at least it means that someone will be getting even less sleep than I will."

Alstan chuckled and offered the bronzerider Vesoz's cup. "Well, Weyrleader, at least that's something..."



Corsan yawned as he made his way down the familiar tree-lined road from West, exhausted from what had proved to be a long, hard day with no good result. The dragonhealers had lost three patients from amongst those sent to Southern to recuperate -- not the worst day that they had ever had but certainly not one of the best. The first to die had been a Telgar green with broken ribs who had had a bone splinter slowly migrate into one of her hearts, causing an internal bleed that they had been unable to stop. The second was a Benden brown, a huge beast whose rider had chosen to take him *between* when it became clear that his blindness -- caused by a fish parasite, of all things -- was irreversible. And the third and last of the day's casualties had been a wingleader's bronze from the High Reaches, who had succumbed to an infection in his Threaded wing over the course of several agonised hours, the poison leaching into his bloodstream and killing him by agonised increments. Zyath had come to help control him and had been effective in doing so, but that had meant that the dragonhealers needed to deal with a weepy Vivia as well as an hysterical bronzerider, who had ended the night by cutting his own throat with his beltknife as his dragon died.

All in all, Corsan was in need of a good night's sleep. A stiff drink probably wouldn't go amiss either....

The Weyr was quiet as he walked through Main, those pairs flying 'Fall the following day already abed and much of the rest of the population off enjoying themselves at Fort. Several of the younger dragonhealers had caught rides North

at the end of their shift -- Ukalen, newly-made journeyman, taking some of the apprentices with him on his brothers' blues -- while others were simply content to hand over to the next shift and crawl away to bed. Corsan hadn't been willing or able to change his shift, but he had suggested to Dunia that she might want to leave Murgon with Ceresa and take herself and the girls off for a little fun. Nioranth was not yet so egg-heavy that she couldn't manage the trip and getting away from the Weyr for a while might just do them all the world of good.

Corsan was unsurprised, however, to find Nioranth sleeping soundly in her wallow as he reached the cot he shared with his weyrmate. He paused, looking at the pregnant queen for long moments and wishing that he could do something to make Dunia happy again. There had been a distance to his weyrmate in the past months, a sadness that she refused to discuss with him but which seemed to pervade her every mood. He found it unsettling, disturbing, but knew better than to try to push her for reasons. The goldrider was nothing if not skilled at avoiding questions she had no desire to answer.

At first he had thought it to be a passing thing, a touch of the melancholy that sometimes followed a child's birth -- Dunia had not suffered from it with the girls, but Jerisa had after Cejran's arrival and so Corsan was not entirely unfamiliar with the problem. As time passed, however, he had noted how she seemed almost to shy away from any conversation that turned towards the future, to Turn's End or beyond. After so many delays, it seemed that Dunia was once again turning her thoughts towards her distant home....

And that she had no desire to share those thoughts with her weyrmate.

Corsan closed his eyes and ran a hand down across his face. He was certain that he was worrying himself over nothing, that Dunia's increasingly haunted silences were just the result of the approaching tenth anniversary of her arrival at Southern, nothing more. People could be strange about such things, after all. But a part of him feared that Dunia intended to leave him behind when little Murgon was finally old enough to be carried *between*, feared that she would end their weyrmating in the most irrevocable way he could imagine. He was, in truth, in no great hurry to leave behind the world he had been born to... but he also knew that he would rather face a strange future with Dunia than a familiar one without her.

He took a deep breath and shook his head, dismissing such thoughts as the result of too much tragedy and too little rest in a single day. After all, it seemed unlikely that Dunia would risk going anywhere while Murgon was too young and Nioranth too egg-heavy to risk the journey, so it seemed unlikely that he would return one day to find them simply *gone*. No, one day the queenrider would be ready to share her troubled thoughts, and when that day came, Corsan would be there to help her come to terms with things and to make her smile again.

It was, after all, what he was best at.

The dragonhealer patted the great curve of Nioranth's golden neck as he passed her, feeling the solid muscles beneath the hide twitch minutely at the touch although the queen showed no sign of waking. He batted at the wind chimes that hung from the porch as he took the two stairs in one, smiling as he heard the brightly hollow tones of the chamberwood pieces, then pushed open the door and shoved all of his concerns aside as he pushed open the door and with determined cheer announced, "Hey, sweetie! I'm home!"

Dunia looked up from where she was feeding Murgon and tonight, at least, her smile reached her eyes. "Shhh," she said softly, "the girls have just gone to sleep."

"Oh, right." He crossed the room to drop a kiss on the top of her head. "How was your day?"

"Better than yours, I think," the goldrider said, looking down at their son. "I'm sorry about the ones who died. Do you want to talk about it?"

Corsan almost laughed. There were so many things unsaid between them... and he suddenly felt no desire to recount the day's messy tales of death and suicide in the great Infirmary. "Actually, love, I really don't."

Dunia nodded and they sat there in awkward silence until Murgon finished suckling and fell asleep.



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"All right," N'dral panted, "that's it -- I'm exhausted, I'm going home!"

"Oh, come on," Bressa teased her wingmate, "the night is still young! Don't tell me that you're worn out after half a dozen dances?"

"I was here earlier than you were," the other greenrider told her. "And the night might still be young *here* but it's past midnight at Southern and *that's* past my bedtime!"

"Some people just have no stamina," Vesoz noted cheerfully as they watched N'dral make his way from the dance floor and start across to the clear area that dragons had been using as a landing field all day. "Really, what's the point of leaving a gather before the end?"

"Well, that would rather depend on who you're leaving *with*, I'd say...."

Vesoz grinned and grabbed her hand, leading her into the next dance as the harpers started in on a new tune. It was full dark at Fort, both moons full and round in the sky above, and the ranks of those visiting from Southern Weyr had thinned considerably as the night had progressed. J'hanos had returned to his Weyrwoman's side after prising Jeshan and Elhana away from their uncle, but hadn't stayed at the gather for long, Bressa's Devereth reporting Yashelth and Vhauth's departure from her perch on the fire-heights. G'vasen had finally gone off to Fort Weyr with his new admirer and nobody expected to see him again until late the next day. Alstan had returned to Southern with L'vin and Ngoronth, although not before being made to play a few tunes for the dancers. Many still remained however -- V'tor

and E'darin, M'tin and Z'mos and T'sald, Timlin and his partner Fallahi, L'dras and his small family, others whom Vesoz had lost track of in the crowd -- and the headsecond was determined to try to outlast the harpers.

"So, greenrider, are you ready for a late night?" he murmured into Bressa's ear as the dance brought them close again.

She laughed, her cheeks flushed with wine and exertion. "I don't think they go on until dawn, Ves...."

"That depends on whether you're talking about dawn here or at Southern, surely?"

"Is that a challenge?"

He grinned at her, his hands straying across her body in time with the music. "Could be...."

Bressa matched his smile. "Well, in that case, let's just see what the night has in store for us, shall we?"



Just off the coast of Ista, something *shifted*. The fault that had birthed Smoking Mountain and its neighbouring peaks gave a brief geological twitch as rock slid against rock and found a new equilibrium. The old coastal volcano flared briefly at this new irritation, illuminating the night sky with its dull orange light before falling back to grumbling quiescence. On Ista itself, the ground trembled and crockery fell from shelves; as far away as Igen, Keroon and Southern Boll, people were roused from their sleep, briefly wondering what had awakened them before settling back into their dreams.

Smoking Mountain was uninhabited, as was its far larger southerly neighbour, Mallapa Point Island. Neither Ista Weyr, to the north, nor the Seahold on Bluefin Isle to the east were in any position to note more than the sound of sudden, angry thunder and a swell that swamped several quays as the entire southern face of Mallapa Point groaned... and then surrendered to gravity and collapsed into the ocean.

Several hundred cubic miles of rock struck the sea, instantly and violently displacing its own volume in water. The ocean churned ferociously as it swallowed this new offering from the land, roaring its triumph... and then finally subsided to the sound of a shrieking chorus of panicked whitewings.



Mivith at Ista says that the earth trembles.

V'harn sat up at Tengith's sudden report. It was probably nothing that concerned him, but it could be an interesting distraction, at least. *Is it their smoking mountain again?*

Yes, but Mivith says it does not glow, or smoke very much.

Damage to the Weyr?

None. The ground did not tremble very much and the noise went away quickly.

Anyone else say anything about it?

No. Most of the hold watchdragons are asleep.

Not a sign of a bigger shake anyplace else then, unless it was out at sea somewhere. He yawned. Nothing worth worrying about or reporting, then. V'harn climbed down again and turned the glowbaskets, although they were hardly needed tonight. He sat in Tengith's shadow and looked at the moons, Belior and Timor both full or nearly so. Fewer stars than usual could be seen, but he watched them anyway, idly running his fingers over the good-luck quartz stone in his belt pouch. He had never used to be interested in the stars back in the Old Time, but the journey forward, using the stars as guides, had awakened a fascination that still endured. He knew he should be watching the land and sea, not the sky, and should be up and about so he would stay awake, but tonight he was too comfortable to bother. It wasn't like anything was going to happen anyway.



South of Mallapa Point, the hidden plains and peaks of the ocean's floor caught the shockwave of the island's catastrophic collapse, reflecting and focusing its force even as it slammed against them, shattering promontories and scouring the seabed with the violence of its passing. Unstoppable in its speed and power, the shockwave raced out into the Southern Sea, its fury hidden by depth as the land was left behind and the sea floor fell away.



Bressa dropped on to the grass beside Collina and her younger sister, Siska, falling back with an exhausted laugh. "Oh, but my feet hurt..."

"I'm not surprised," Collina said with a chuckle, "given the way you've been dancing all night. Is Ves still out there?"

"I think he went to answer a call of nature," the greenrider told the older woman. "And to get more wine. I think the latter was the more important of the two."

Collina just shook her head. Bressa yawned, trying not to think of what the hour would be back at Southern, and watched the dancers for a few moments before glancing at Siska, finding the younger woman gazing up at the fire-heights and the dragons perched there. The bright points of their eyes were barely visible at this distance but Bressa didn't need vision to know which of the black-on-black forms was Devereth. The green was a constant warmth in Bressa's mind, the solid heart of her existence, and it was hard to recall what her life had been before Devereth had crossed the sands to find her, almost four Turns ago....

"What's it like?"

Bressa blinked and shook herself out of her sundreams, finding Siska looking at her with a sad smile. "I'm sorry?"

"Having a dragon. What's it like?" Siska said again. "You were looking up at the heights and the look on your face was just so... *happy*."

The greenrider looked down, feeling a little embarrassed. "It's... oh, you *must* have asked riders before!"

"Of course I have, but everybody gives a different answer," Siska said, toying with the hem of her gather skirt. "But they all get the same look on their face when they give it."

"It's *wonderful*," Bressa said. "It's like *home* and *family* and *love* and... you can't describe it, it's so, so...." She trailed off, embarrassed again and knowing that it was the wine talking. "Maybe you'll get to know what it's like yourself, one day."

"Doesn't seem likely," Collina said, "not with the end of the Pass coming up. Not going to be many queen eggs on offer in the coming Turns, I'd say, not at Southern, not with young Orylath still a weyrling."

"She could get a green, like me," Bressa pointed out.

"Yes, but the only way they'll even let girls onto the sands is if there's a gold egg there," Collina reminded her, then frowned. "Actually, thinking about weyrings, did I see some of Irineth's last clutch here earlier?"

Bressa laughed. "I didn't see them, but V'tor did. Said that G'teris came and chased them off back to Southern. I'm sure he's be devising all sorts of punishments for them but, you know, boys will be boys...."

Collina chuckled and Siska looked wistful. Vesoz suddenly reappeared and dropped himself down in the middle of them, holding up two wineskins triumphantly. "Right, this should keep us going a bit longer!"

"Only if I can bathe my feet in it," Bressa groaned.

Vesoz *looked* at her. "You should go wash your mouth out for saying that about good wine! And here was I bringing you a Tillek too...."

"Red or white?" Collina asked, suddenly interested.

"One of each!" the headsecond told her brightly. "See?" he shot at Bressa, "*Someone* will drink it even if you don't want to."

"Hey, I never said that I *didn't* want any!"

"Really?" Vesoz grinned tipsily at her. "I think that I might just have to ask for another dance to make up for that comment about your feet, you know...."

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?" Bressa moaned, but she didn't resist as Vesoz tossed the wineskins to Collina and dragged her back towards the dancers.



On the deck of the *Belarra's Hope*, bound for Southern Hold, the sailors on the nightwatch noted a sudden swell whose passing knocked the youngest of their number off his feet as the deck pushed up beneath him, almost sending him tumbling into an open cargo hatch. The men laughed uproariously at the embarrassed deckhand, finding more interest in his misfortune than in the burgeoning swell that had lifted their ship.

At the *Hope's* bow, a pod of dolphins appeared, chittering their distress and calling for the men aboard to listen to them. The watchman at the bowsprit saw them and

might have heard their piping words, but he was one who had no time for the nonsense of shipfish and instead went back to see what his fellows had found so funny.

Frustrated at the ignorance of humans, the dolphins dove, swimming to the north and safety, away from the devastation that their long history had taught them was to come.



Useless! Useless! Useless!

N'larion's grip failed him as he tried to fasten Mulujath's riding harness. The traitorous fingers of his right hand spasmed slightly, but refused to tighten properly on the strap.

The brownrider let his crippled right arm fall limply to his side with a sigh. He didn't have enough power and control to rely on his right hand, and everything was so blasted awkward if he relied on his left. Shaffit, but he hated feeling so bloody useless....

You are not useless! You are my rider! Mulujath's great brown head swung around, his soft nose stopping just short of butting N'larion in the chest, and multifaceted eyes swirled with anxiety in the darkness. N'larion's green firelizard, Fern, gave an anxious cheep from where she was perched high on Mulujath's neck.

Aye, I'm your rider, boy. He slapped the brown affectionately with his left hand, then ran his fingers over the scar tissue of Mulujath's wing shoulder – the scores where Thread had bitten deep and ensured that the dragon would never have the endurance to fight more than a fraction of a 'Fall again. *They'll retire us to be watchrider for the arse end of nowhere, anytime soon, y'know....*

As if Mulujath was too old and toothless to chew firestone any more....

I am a brown. The 'arse end of nowhere' only deserves a blue as watchdragon, Mulujath informed him with a hint of his usual acerbity. ***Or maybe a green if its holders do not get stupid about mating.***

So where would you have them send us, lad?

Mulujath cocked his great head to the side as if giving this matter great consideration. ***A Lord Holder would be worthy of us,*** he said decisively.

Unfortunately, Southern only has one Lord Holder, and he has all the dragons he needs right on his doorstep. In the light of the glows, N'larion glared balefully at the recalcitrant riding strap.

Then he should mate more often and have many clutches with many Lord Holders in them. The Weyr has many golds. Perhaps the Hold should have many Lords.

In spite of his mood, N'larion managed a grunt of a laugh. Cheered somewhat by his brown's ridiculous notion, he reached again for the buckle and strap. His weak right hand could at least pin the strap against Mulujath's neck whilst he attempted to thread the end through the buckle with his left. *I'll let you pass that notion on to Lord Toric*

yourself, lad – it would be more than my hide is worth to say *it to his face.*

You could tell that man, then. Mulujath's mental image conveyed a disdainful portrait of Steward Cynestan – the reason that they were up at this awful hour, when all sensible beings were still a-bed.

The brown did not like the man, and N'larion couldn't truthfully admit that he had any liking for Cynestan himself. The man must *have* some talent for what he did or he never would have survived as Southern's Steward. However, from N'larion's assessment of his character, the talents he usually displayed were an uncanny ability to land on his feet when trouble came and a propensity to take the credit for others' hard work.

Still, *this* morning – although morning was perhaps too generous a term, given that the sky was not even hinting at light yet – it seemed that Cynestan was having to do his own dirty work... or his Lord's at any rate. The reason that N'larion and Mulujath were up so early was to act as transport to take Cynestan to Landing Plateau to meet with various Holders and Crafters. And midday for Landing was before sunrise for Southern Hold....

There! The dratted strap was finally fastened. *C'mon, boy. We'd better go collect him before he starts kicking up a fuss.*

We will be early. He will make us wait.

Better that than him bending the Weyrwoman's ear about punctuality. N'larion climbed up and settled himself onto Mulujath's neck, and then the brown took off and winged his way to Southern Hold, a dark bulk just visible in the moonlight.



A'zelen swung his arms briskly, pacing back and forth in the cleared area between the watch shelter and the sea cliffs. The fresh night breeze had kicked up, coming off the sea and bringing cooler air with it that was chilly in the predawn darkness.

This was always the hardest part of the watch, the dark still hours before dawn when, no matter how well-rested a man was, his body wanted nothing more than to shut down, and go to sleep, along with all reasonable creatures in the world. At this time of the night even a steady diet of klah wasn't enough to combat that sense of fatigue; movement and restored circulation worked better.

A'zelen stared out over a sea well-lit by the rare double-full moons, and kept pacing, feeling a little more alert. There were hours yet to go before he and Gavrill would be relieved from the watch -- a duty that, as Weyrsecond, A'zelen could have avoided easily, if he'd wanted to. Yet here he was again, willingly.

Most of his wingriders said outright that they didn't know why he didn't use his rank to get out of the chore. He usually answered that being Weyrsecond made him more determined to set a good example for those under him -- that was an argument that he'd stolen directly from Gavrill,

several Turns ago, but it was no less true, for that. It *was* harder for the other riders to complain about a duty he assigned them, if it was one he performed along with them. That was simply good sense, a basic tenet of leadership.

Not that it induced J'hanos to either sit on the Hatching Ground peak as watchrider, or to stand through the Hold's nightwatch. There *were* limits. But wingleaders, and especially Weyrleaders, were busy men.

A'zelen walked out to a point where he could see around Toth's bulk, and looked towards the just-visible peak to the west. If his sense of time was correct, J'hanos and Vhauth would be leaving soon. That was another good reason, in his mind, for the Weyrsecond to be standing the nightwatch tonight. It gave him an excellent excuse for avoiding the meeting of Weyrleaders at Benden, about which J'hanos had been grumbling since winning Yashelth's latest mating flight some six days earlier -- mostly over the inconsiderate timing of it, requiring the western Weyrleaders to rouse themselves in the predawn. If it had been really important, of course, A'zelen would have had to go. As it was, J'hanos had eyed him suspiciously when he'd announced his intention to stand the nightwatch instead.

The truth was, the brownrider had promised Gavrill that he'd do it, before the Benden Weyr meeting was announced, before Yashelth had confirmed just who would be representing Southern at that meeting. It had become a kind of pact between them by now, a kind of tradition, that whenever the duty rotation came around to the Guard captain -- who always took it, if he wasn't away, because deep down he really did seem to believe that it set a good example for his men -- A'zelen would, if he could, stand it with him. They'd even shuffled it to get around A'zelen needing to fly Fall, on occasion.

A'zelen wondered if the Southern guardsmen thought this was as odd as his own wingmen did. He knew better than to think they hadn't noticed; of course they'd notice. He highly doubted that Gavrill ever said anything about it, explained it. He wondered what they thought of it, if they thought of it at all.

Maybe they didn't think it was that strange. No stranger than one of their Guard captains being friends with a dragonrider in the first place, that is.

The light of the moons was bright enough that he could see every detail of Toth's form, sitting alertly near the cliff's edge, gazing out over the sea. He could also see Gavrill, returning from walking out along the road to check on one of the torches, which had gone out. With the moons up like this, the torches were almost unnecessary.

"Where did you say you were going, again?" the brownrider asked, when the guardsman had come close enough that he didn't have to shout.

Gavrill scrubbed both hands across his face, rubbing his eyes and then using his fingers to rake back shaggy hair; he needed a hair-cut. He shook himself, briskly, and then blinked at A'zelen. "Um... Delta. The Lord wants to go over to Delta."

"And you get to go along this time. Lucky you," A'zelen observed dryly, and Gavrill made a face. They'd discussed this already. The Lord would be travelling by ship to Delta Seahold, and ship was not Gavrill's favorite means of travel.

"Yeah, lucky me," he agreed, with a sardonic smile. "Over to Delta, upriver to Riverbend and Three Rapids..."

"All the way to Drake?" asked the brownrider, and the guardsman shrugged, scratching his nose.

"I don't know. That'd be a long trip," he said, noncommittally. "And it's not up to me."

A'zelen nodded. Gavrill's family had settled the Hold down on Drake Lake, and though his duty in the Southern Guard took him there on occasion, it probably wasn't as often as the man would have liked. A'zelen knew that he saw the place more often than Gavrill did, flying over it regularly in Threadfall. He gave his friend regular updates, about new buildings and new cultivated fields or cleared pastures, the size of herds.

"I keep telling you, you only have to say the word, and Toth and I would fly you there," he said now, revisiting an old, old discussion. "Pick some restday, and we'll go."

Gavrill smiled slightly; it was a genuine smile, pleased but a little shy. "Yeah. I'm going to take you up on that, you know. One of these days."

"You should," A'zelen told him. He'd made the offer before, and Gavrill always said the same thing, but somehow, they never managed to put the intention into practice.



Silent and mindless and unstoppable, the shockwave sped onwards. Distance bled energy from its ferocious advance but its power was so fierce, so great, that such attrition made little difference. In the depths of the ocean the roiling energies were submerged, their force registering as little more than a fast-moving swell on the surface, a ripple that gleamed and shone in the moonlight for a thousand or more miles, rolling southwards, ever southwards...

The ocean floor was not eternally deep, however, and as one continent fell away behind the shockwave's advance, so another began to rise before it. Forced into shallower waters, the wave slowed, its savage energies becoming more concentrated, and it began to rise above the ocean's surface as its faster-moving tail caught up with its leading edge.



Revanne shrugged into her flight-jacket, but didn't fasten it. Instead she gathered the loops of Orylath's flight-harness in her arms, and made her way outside to where the young queen was waiting.

It was still full dark, and the light of the double full moons made the pale gold dragon look silvery. Around them in the Weyrling Complex there was a lot of similar

activity, young riders carrying their gear to waiting dragons. There wasn't a lot of talking amongst them, which was unusual. It might have been the shockingly early hour of the morning, and the effort to stay awake on the little sleep they'd had; or it might have been an attempt on most of their parts to lie low and to look properly contrite and industrious under the Weyrlingmaster's watchful and not-very-happy eye.

Revanne strode briskly to where Orylath sat, and the queen ducked her head through the loop that her rider held up for her. The dragon shrugged that into place as Revanne climbed up on her forearm, reaching to straighten the wide straps so that they would lay flat, adjusting them. Altogether, the harness was heavy, and she jerked at it roughly to get it into place.

"Does that feel too tight?" she asked, examining the set of the straps critically.

Orylath shrugged, her muscles and hide rippling. *No*, she said, after a pause. *It feels right*.

"Good," the young queenrider muttered, adjusting the length of the stirrup-straps. "The last thing we need is to give G'teris any more reason for complaint."

The queen canted her head, and turned a glowing, contentedly sleepy green eye on her rider. *You do not sound worried, you sound angry*, she observed.

"I am not angry," Revanne denied, although she knew that she certainly sounded it. She slid down to the ground, made sure that her braid had not come undone in the back, and began to tuck her black hair beneath her riding helmet. "I am irritated."

At the Weyrlingmaster? the dragon asked. Revanne snorted.

"No." Although he was certainly the most immediate reason why they were forced to be awake at this awful hour. He was the one sitting over there, already geared up and astride his dragon, watching their preparations. But... "Mostly, I'm irritated with myself," she admitted, if only to her dragon.

F'geres and V'shel had been the ringleaders of the evening's earlier escapade - a thoroughly unauthorized attempt by at least three-quarters of the class to attend the Fort Gather. Not a completely unsuccessful attempt, either, inasmuch as they had all arrived at Fort. Unfortunately, the Weyrlingmaster had caught wind of their plan - and how the Weyrlings had thought that the absence of most of their class from Southern Weyr could be kept a secret, Revanne didn't know - and taken himself and Hareth off to fetch all of them back.

What followed, for those of the class who had been too wise to go, or simply hadn't been interested, or both, was being roused out of their beds by a highly displeased Weyrlingmaster, to attend a blistering lecture delivered to the entire group - some blinking and yawning in hastily thrown-on clothes, and some dressed shame-facedly in gather-best.

G'teris had explained to them all, strongly, that although they had reached that stage in their training when they were

becoming used to going *between*, they were not yet at the point where they were cleared to go gallivanting around Pern in the small hours of the night, without adult supervision.

At that point in the lecture, Revanne had fancied the Weyrlingmaster's eyes rested on her briefly. She had not been one of the gallivanterers, having no interest in the Fort Gather and rather more interest in her bed. But she was several Turns older than the other Weyrlings; she *was* an adult, and G'teris had come to depend on her to act like one. What was more, she rode a queen, and within this Weyrling class at least there wasn't a dragon who wouldn't listen to Orylath's orders.

Of course they would listen to me, the queen interjected into her rider's thoughts.

"I know, dearest," Revanne agreed, with a sigh. It wasn't as if she hadn't used her adult status, and the air of authority that she'd learned to project as a journeywoman, with some in the class already - with mixed results sometimes, it was true, depending on the situation. But *this* ill-advised adventure, she could have stopped, because Orylath could have.

But she hadn't, even though she's known about it, thought it a poor idea, and told B'ral so - B'ral being a brownrider, not as old as the other two boys but a little steadier. And B'ral was allowing himself to be pulled along, for once, so he hadn't listened, and Revanne, who really, really ought to have known better, had let him go, let them all go. She'd thought only that at least there would be peace and quiet for a few hours around the Weyrling Complex.

Enduring G'teris's lecture, Revanne was ashamed of not having realized the danger - it wasn't surprising that the younger riders hadn't, but she could almost see in the Weyrlingmaster's eyes the disappointment that she too hadn't thought it through. That just because their class had learned to go *between* didn't mean they were experts at it, and they were nowhere near experienced enough yet to risk *betweening* in the wee hours at the end of long gather-day, when they'd be exhausted and perhaps the worse for drink.

She even wondered if G'teris thought she'd held back out of worry over how unpopular it would make her if she used her dragon's natural influence to squash her classmates' attempts to have a little fun. She was going to have to talk to him tomorrow, and put his mind at ease on that score, although really she thought he ought to know her well enough by now to know that wasn't the case.

Revanne didn't really care for her popularity with her classmates; she already knew that her age set her apart from them, and from her own perspective, she wouldn't have had it any other way. What's more, she was perfectly willing to be unpopular, if she thought it was important enough. It would pain her to admit to the Weyrlingmaster that it was truly that she hadn't realized the possible consequences of her classmates' high-spirited plans. She hadn't thought it important enough to bother, and that was her mistake.

G'teris had then decided to turn their punishment into a learning opportunity for everyone - some much needed (and

apparently, he'd remarked, looking around at them all, much desired) adult-supervised drills in jumping *between* in less than optimal conditions. Conditions such as, rousing them out of bed in the dark hours before dawn, so that they were yawning fit to crack their jaws, and their bodies and minds wanting nothing more than to return to their beds.

"It isn't as if Thread obligingly falls only during daylight hours!" he'd told them, almost cheerfully. They would have to get used to this, training their minds to become sharp and focused on the task no matter what. Clearly, he'd finished, this was a lesson they would do well to learn sooner rather than later.

So here was the entire class, now, assembling in the clearing of the Weyrling complex and readying their dragons for the drill. The few who hadn't taken part in the excursion were muttering resentfully in the direction of those who'd gone - but G'teris had been firm that the entire class should share this punishment-drill. After all, some of them hadn't gone, but they hadn't tried harder to stop their classmates either (and as he said that, Revanne was absolutely sure his eyes were on her). Besides, this was drilling that all of them needed, it wasn't only for punishment.

Accepting her fate, Revanne waited for the lesson to begin.



The continental shelf guided the shockwave now, lifting and slowing and building it into something that few men had ever seen... and fewer still had ever survived. The night covered its approach with the darkness of pre-dawn, but could not hide the rising roar as the waters were pulled into the growing wave, the tropical seas being transformed into something monstrous, something *deadly*...

The South slept on, oblivious to its approaching destiny.



Murgon was fussing again, his shrill bad-tempered cries cutting into her sleep. Dunia opened her eyes and stared into the darkness, hoping that the baby would settle after a moment or two. But it was not to be - after a minute of ever-louder wails from Murgon, four Turn-old Corsia was in the doorway, complaining that her baby brother had woken her up with his crying. Warily, Dunia got out of bed and scooped the baby up out of his cradle, rocking him in her arms.

Corsia gave her little brother a jealous glare at the attention he was getting from her mother and climbed into her parents' bed to snuggle up to her father. Corsan gave a groan and rolled over.

"Whose idea was it to have *all* the children staying here this senday?" he muttered.

"I believe that would have been you, dearest," Dunia told him. "Be nice to give my sister a rest, I think were your exact words."

"Remind me never to be so public spirited again," he said with a yawn. He cuddled Corsia close and settled down to try and return to sleep.

With a sad smile, Dunia left Corsan and her youngest daughter to sleep. The truth was that she had been relieved to get the children away from Ceresa and her brood, to be able to keep them close to her. The spring warnings of the half-remembered Ballad had been haunting her dreams for months and if she had to leave quickly she wanted all the children there with her....

Assuming that leaving quickly would even be an option, given Nioranth's advancing pregnancy. Once the queen clutched, Dunia knew, no amount of persuasion would ever be able to make her abandon her eggs.

Murgon didn't want to feed and did not need changing, so it appeared that he was just in one of his tetchy moods today... or tonight, as would be more accurate for the sky was still dark, with not a hint of predawn lightening. Time for a little moonlit walk, then. Dunia juggled her baby with one arm and scooped up a basket of glows with the other. It wouldn't do to trip and drop her beloved offspring after all.

Outside, in the gentle offshore breeze that so often developed just before dawn, Murgon started to settle down in his mother's arms, as he so often did. Scream his head off indoors, but fall asleep as soon as you took him outside and walked around. She gave a wry smile as she remembered her own mother recounting that Dunia had had the very same habit when she was a baby.

The goldrider walked around Nioranth's wallow a few times, humming to the fussing baby and greeting the sleepy queen as she yawned and stretched out her wings for a few vigorous flaps. ***We will fight Thread today?*** queried the gold.

Yes, dearest, but not for a while yet. The sweepriders will just be going out.

Yes, Kelbanth and Osserth prepare to go. Nioranth gave a sleepy rumble, closing her eyes, and Murgon began to wail again. ***Your children are very noisy,*** she observed without opening her eyelids again.

Yes, don't I know it, Dunia replied. Satisfied that Nioranth was settling back into sleep again, Dunia began to walk towards the cliffs to the north of Main, planning to circle back as soon as her son had fallen asleep. There was just the faintest hint of a brightening on the horizon now, but the Weyr was still asleep.

She stopped to gaze out over the ocean, turning away from hint of light to the east and instead looking at the patterns of light and shadow the moonlight cast on the Whitewing Islands - or the Wherry Arches as the Southern Weyrfolk called them. Murgon had finally fallen asleep and was drooling little baby dribbles onto her arm. Dunia looked down at him with motherly exasperation.

The ground trembled.

She bit back a cry of surprise. A tremor, nothing more. The plateau had them maybe once or twice a Turn - nothing to worry about. This was not Thornblaze Hold or Barrier Mountain --

The shrieks of alarmed wherries drew her eyes back to the Wherry Arches. The big sea arch, picked out in black and silver in the moonlight, was disintegrating. Huge blocks of rock split off and crashed down into the water.... And then the arch on the nearest island that gave the Wherry Arches their name was gone.

Recognition of the altered shape of the island hit her like a slap in the face. The Whitewing Islands! But the arch had just been destroyed by a local tremor. That *couldn't* be right. The Ballad of Southern said it was the tsunami that —

Dunia looked at the too-familiar shapes, then clutched Murgon to her and *ran*, without any conscious decision to do so. *Nioranth!* she screamed in her mind. *We have to leave! We have to leave NOW!*



Alstan woke with a start, not quite certain why he had done so. It took him a moment to register the fading tremor, and the distant sound of angry waters, and he frowned into the darkness, wondering if he should perhaps rouse himself to see what had happened. The Weyr remained quiet, however, the watchdragon silent, and so the Weyrsinger shook his head and rolled over to return to his sleep.



Mulujath returns, Toth announced.

"There's N'laron, back from dropping Cynestan off at Landing," A'zelen reported aloud, and Gavriil grimaced. But he'd run through all of his usual stock of snide comments about Southern's Steward earlier, when the brown dragon carrying the man to his meeting at Landing had departed.

Toth sat up, suddenly, and at the same moment, the ground trembled; and two of the torches on poles that lined the road fell over and went out. A'zelen staggered slightly, and Gavriil was caught off balance, catching himself on the ground with one hand, on his knees. After a moment of dense silence, it sounded as if every wherry in the jungle had taken off, screaming.

The tremor was over quickly. The guardsman picked himself up carefully, dusting off the knees of his trousers. The two men looked at each other, and Gavriil cocked his head at A'zelen, who in turn looked at Toth. The brown dragon was looking in the direction of the Weyr.

Tengith says that pieces of the islands are falling, he said, supplying a relayed picture of dimly-lit destruction amongst the Wherry Arches. The dragon paused, querying the Weyr's watchdragon. ***His rider gives a report from Ista. The islands shook there, too, but hours ago..***

"The Wherry Arches have been rearranging themselves," A'zelen told the guardsman. "There was a tremor at Ista earlier too."

"Huh," Gavriil said, looking in the direction of the offshore islet. "Lot of unhappy wherries out there tonight. Well, it gives us something to look forward too."

A'zelen frowned. "It does?"

"Sure. Seeing what the Arches look like when the sun comes up." Gavriil gestured vaguely at the western horizon. "We have to find what entertainment we can on the nightwatch, after all."



Corsan woke to find Dunia violently shaking his shoulder, her tearstained face desperate in the light of an opened glowbasket. "Wake up! *Please*, wake up, we have to go!"

"I... you... *what?*" He blinked at her, trying to shake his interrupted dreams from his mind. Beside him, little Corsia woke with a start, took one look at her mother, and burst into tears of her own. "Dunia, what are you talking about."

"We have to go, we have to go *now!*" The queenrider was struggling into clothes, her eyes wide and fearful. "I have to get Nioranth's straps on! *Please*, just get yourself and the children dressed, as fast as you can! *Please!*"

"What are you...?" Corsan was already moving, spurred to action by the sheer desperation in his weyrmate's voice. "Go get your sister," he told Corsia, and the child nodded and fled the room. Turning back to Dunia even as he reached for his own clothing, he said, "Love, what are you talking about? Where do you think we're going? It's the middle of the bloody night!"

"We have to go!" Dunia repeated, her tone pleading. "We have to, it's *coming*... oh, I should never have stayed, never this long, I should never have...." She paused, gasping for breath. "Get dressed, get the children dressed, get the bags. *We have to go!*"

"Go *where*," he all but shouted in his frustration, then realised what she had just said. "The bags? *Those* bags? Oh no. Are you *insane!*? We can't just --"

"We have to," Dunia told him, her voice suddenly calm as she caught his face in her hands. For a moment, he could see himself reflected in her desperate eyes. "*We have to. Now.* And if you don't, both you and the children will die. It's coming but, I swear, I couldn't tell you...."

And then she was gone towards Nioranth and he could do nothing but run to get the children ready and hope that his weyrmate might think to tell him the reason for her hurry later.



The seabed rose and with it the rolling shockwave, a vast, dark surge of water that built itself higher with each passing moment. It was slower now than it had been in the open ocean, but that counted for little -- in human terms it was still impossibly swift, eating the miles as it advanced, the rising shelf guiding and shaping its form. The calm waters ahead of the wave felt its influence before it truly reached them and were drawn, pulled, clawed back into its savage form, building, ever building....

Finally, however, there was no more water for it to claim and all that lay before it was the vulnerable, unsuspecting land of the Southern coastline.



"I don't know why the bastards couldn't just do this *later*," J'hanos muttered as he buckled the last of Vhauth's harness straps into place. "They have a short bloody 'Fall today, it would be just as easy for them to do it afterwards when everybody *else* isn't half-asleep..."

We have 'Fall today too, Vhauth pointed out.

"Southern does, but T'del is leading it today, remember?" J'hanos patted the bronze shoulder and smiled despite his mood -- Vhauth didn't like having to hand 'Falls over to T'del's Suloth or K'med's Lorth, still peripherally aware that the pair were Yashelth's long-preferred mates and therefore a possible threat. "They'll do us proud, don't you worry, and they'll report to *us* at the end of it."

Vhauth rumbled, not entirely mollified, and shook out his wings in the darkness. J'hanos sighed and grabbed his riding jacket from its peg beside the porch steps, wishing once again that Benden could have been a little more considerate in arranging this meeting. Benden's pre-eminence wasn't what it had been in the early days of the Ninth Pass, and few of the Weyrleaders currently in power had even been born during their glory days, but these subtle power-plays were, he knew, designed to remind the youngsters of who still called the shots on Pern.

The bronzerider hoped that An'zer, having to rouse himself in the chill pre-dawn of the continent's southern ranges, was feeling somewhat less than charitable towards his old masters. Meetings like this might *just* serve to build some form of solidarity between Toric's Weyrleaders....

J'hanos shrugged into his flight gear, careful not to crease the fine, dark green linen of his shirt, a new piece with delicate black and gold embroidery forming repeating abstract patterns at collar and cuffs. It had been a gift from his parents, received at the gather just hours before, and the bronzerider felt no qualms about wearing such an obviously expensive garment to Benden. He touched the silver signet ring, embossed with the badge of Tillek Hold, that he wore on the little finger of his right hand and smiled -- if Benden could play on its past glories, he didn't see why he couldn't remind them of his Blood.

Vhauth raised his head as a flock of pale, shrieking forms races overhead. ***The whitewings will not settle.***

I'm not surprised -- they're having an even worse morning than I am, J'hanos told the big bronze. The collapse of the Wherry Arches in the brief tremor of minutes earlier had displaced the roosting creatures and now they seemed unwilling to find a new perch, winging their way to the south in loudly-calling flocks. The bronzerider frowned at that -- whitewings were beasts of the rocky coast, not of the inland forests -- but pushed it from his mind as an irrelevance, a curiosity to investigate later. He had a meeting to attend.

Lan landed on Vhauth's neckridge as J'hanos buckled his riding straps into place, chirping happily and projecting images of panicked wherries and falling rock. J'hanos reached to stroke the firelizard, quirking a smile as the little bronze crooned and leaned into his touch. "You want come as well, Lan?"

The firelizard whistled and hopped across to paw at one of the harness bags, looking hopefully up at his owner. J'hanos sighed and reached back to unbuckle the flap. "You have got to be one of the laziest creatures I know," he told the smaller bronze as Lan crawled into the bag's dark interior, vanishing for a moment before poking his head out and peering around with bright eyes, his tiny mind happy.

J'hanos shook his head and finished checking his straps. *You ready?* he sent to Vhauth.

I am, the big bronze sent. ***The wherries are gone now***, he noted. ***It is very quiet.***

It is rather, isn't it? The pre-dawn was always quiet, by the standards of the tropical night, but now that J'hanos really listened, he realised that the darkness was unnaturally silent, as though the chirping crawlers were holding their breath. It was strange, uncomfortable, but there was nothing that he could place as a problem.... *Come on, Vhauth*, he sent, pushing his unformed concerns aside. *Let's get going.*

The bronze launched himself into the air, beating strongly upwards over the Hatching Grounds. Chaurdia's gold Leinath slept below, protectively close to the twenty-three eggs scattered across the sands, and J'hanos could see V'harn's blue Tengith sitting at the watchpost on the peak. For a moment he considered paying the loudmouthed Oldtimer a visit --

There was a subtle change in air pressure, a sense of *wrongness* that was hard to place....

And then the Weyrleader looked up and saw the sea.

Or, rather, *didn't* see the sea. The waters were drawing back before his eyes, rapidly vanishing into the darkness to leave the seabed exposed in the moonlight, revealing the usually-submerged bases of the Wherry Arch islands exposed to the air. A part of him briefly wondered why Tengith wasn't raising the alarm but his mind was not with the watchpair, was instead recalling the mariners' horror tales he had been told as a child at Tillek. The stories had been thrilling then, frightening and yet safe when both teller and listeners were curled before a roaring fire in the Lord's chambers....

Here, he knew with sudden, certain clarity, none were safe. The waters were drawing back but soon, he knew, soon they would return. And when they did --

"Wake them!" the Weyrleader screamed at his dragon with voice and mind, all thought of Benden forgotten. "Wake them and tell them to *get in the air*, as many as can make it!" Vhauth's bellow rang through the air as he swooped down over the Weyr, dragons jerking awake beneath him as they responded to the big bronze's urgent command. "Tell them to do it ***NOW!*** They have to get into the air! We have to --"

The bronzerider closed his eyes, knowing that whatever he did now would be too little, too late. But if they could only save *some*.... With a start, he realised that he had no idea where Vesoz was, whether his brother had returned from the gather already or had chosen to stay until the bitter end. The need to find Vesoz was almost overwhelming... but the need to rouse the Weyr was greater and so J'hanos simply clung to Vhauth's straps as the bronze relayed his warning and hoped against hope that his brother was safe.



Faryna was huddled on the corner of the weycot's porch, her eyes huge as she hugged her little brother to her. Corsan threw his eldest child an encouraging smile as he hurried out with the carefully packed bags that had been prepared, so long ago, for Dunia's eventual journey back to her own time. The dragonhealer had somehow always imagined that there would be goodbyes before this great journey, that there would be hugs, wine, tearful family....

Well, it looked as though he was getting the tearful family part, at least.

"Dunia, will you tell me just *what is going on here?*" he demanded as he dropped the bags next to Nioranth. The queen rumbled unhappily and turned her head to look at her rider as she pulled the last of the harness straps tight. "I don't know what's happening, the girls are upset, Murgon isn't even bloody old enough to go *between* --"

"I know, I know," Dunia said, not meeting his eyes. "I thought I might be able to...." She trailed off, then looked at him, her features drawn and exhausted. "I'm out of time, my love. We all are. I'm so, so sorry --"

The commanding bugle of a bronze screamed out from overhead and Dunia gasped, her eyes going wide and unfocused. "Vhauth? He says what? But he can't! He can't be -- the Ballad said that the Weyrleader --"

"Dunia, what are you talking about?" Corsan pleaded, looking up in an attempt to see where the bronze was. Other dragons were starting to sound off around the Weyr, their voices growing louder with each passing moment. Nioranth raised her head but made no sound as her rider leaned against her deep chest and sobbed out something that Corsan couldn't make out. "Dunia, please! Tell me what's happening?"

"It's changing," she whispered. "This isn't what was meant to.... It's changing. Unless we can...."

Corsan watched as fear and hope and confusion warred with one another on his weymate's face, her unfocused eyes shining with tears in the moonlight. "Help him," she whispered, and Nioranth reared back on her haunches, adding her voice to the chorus with a savage trumpet that left Corsan in no doubt that she was reflecting and reinforcing whatever command Vhauth was issuing from above. A hand caught his arm and he looked down at his weymate as she said, "Get the children. It's started."

This time, he didn't even try to argue, running for the weycot and pulling the girls back towards Nioranth with

him, Faryna still clutching her wailing brother as Corsia sobbed beside her. Dunia insisted that he mount the queen first, passing the children up to him with shaking hands and then following to fasten their straps and take her own place on Nioranth's golden neck. "What about the bags?" Corsan asked, but then the queen answered that question by plucking them up in her forepaws before launching herself into the air with a powerful kick and a fierce bellow.

Looking down at the Weyr, lit now by the scattered points of glowlit windows as people roused to discover the cause of all the commotion, Corsan felt nothing but a numb sickness. Something was happening, something bad, and his thoughts flicked from Ceresa to R'nesan to Jecissa to Cejran, to all of his nieces and nephews and --

The sea was gone. Somehow that fact seemed entirely fitting given the sheer surreality of everything else.

Corsan hugged his children to him and hoped that the world would soon begin to make sense once more.



"Uh, A'zelen?" There was a strange note in Gavrill's voice. "Take a look at this."

The brownrider tore his gaze away from his dragon, and shook the mental images of far-away destruction from his head, focusing on the guardsman. Gavrill had moved closer to the cliff edge, and was looking out to sea.

"What?" he said, something in the other man's posture and tone alerting him. He walked over to stand beside him. "That's..." the guardsman began, waving a hand at the view before them, and A'zelen said, "Odd," just as the other man finished, "...a little odd, don't you think?"

"Odd," the brownrider repeated, nodding.

Below them, glistening in the silvery light, the beach at the foot of the cliffs was wider than A'zelen had ever seen it. Wider than the lowest of low spring tides. The sea had drawn far, far back, exposing the downward-sloping seabed, dotted with rocks and -- he had to squint -- moving things, flopping things.

"Those are stranded fish," Gavrill observed beside him. He glanced at the brownrider, his face wearing a frown. "You ever seen anything like this?"

A'zelen shook his head. "No. Never." The sight made him uneasy, though he wasn't sure why.

"Well, I don't like it," Gavrill announced. "It's... weird." He spun on his heel, heading for the watch-shelter.

"What are you going to --" A'zelen began, and then he choked off his question abruptly as Toth's mind suddenly went from alert curiosity to outright alarm.

The brown rose from his sitting posture, his legs tensing and his wings half-spread. ***Vhauth calls!*** he said tersely. ***He warns -- we must go!***

"We have to go now," A'zelen echoed aloud, automatically. "Gavrill! We have to go!"

The guardsman threw a questioning look over his shoulder, not breaking stride. "What?"

"We have to go!" he repeated, consumed by Toth's urgency and a sense of imminent dread. Instinct screamed at him to climb onto the dragon immediately. "Come on!"

"I'm raising the alarm," the other man told him. He was heading for the iron ring, the warning bell that would relay to the men on watch at the Hold. A'zelen nearly choked, feeling Toth's increasing alarm, and he lurched after the other man. "No!"

Gavrill shot him an incredulous look. "What do you mean, no?"

"Something -- I don't know -- Toth says --" A'zelen stuttered, wishing there were any way to make the other man *feel* what he was feeling. There wasn't time to explain, scorch it. He reached out, grasping the guardsman's arm, trying to pull in the dragon's direction.

Gavrill shook off his grip. "If something's wrong, I have to sound the alarm!" he said, impatiently. A'zelen wanted scream his frustration.

Toth's mounting panic was an almost palpable force, trying to drag A'zelen back. The dragon was growling now, and his eyes were whirling with streaks of yellow and white; he wanted to be gone. So did A'zelen. He made himself reach for Gavrill again. "There isn't time for that, we have to --"

The guardsman twisted out of his grasp, one hand planted in the middle of A'zelen's chest, pushing him away. His expression, so clearly visible in the moonlight, looked puzzled but was rapidly shading towards anger. Once he'd gotten free of the brownrider's grip, he held up his hand, palm outward, sharply. "Look. You take off, if you have to. Go." He turned away again.

Nioranth orders! We must go NOW! Toth added, his urgency and fear reaching a new pitch, an almost painful buzz in A'zelen's mind. In moments the dragon would take off, compelled to do so, and snatch his rider up in his claws if he had to.

He was out of options as well as time. Drawing his beltknife, A'zelen ran after the other man, reversing the blade in his grip. He didn't call out this time, didn't try to argue, didn't want to give any warning. He simply reached out and snagged the guardsman's sword-belt where it angled across his back, and Gavrill had no more than half-turned when the rounded pommel of the brownrider's beltknife met the back of his head. He went down instantly.

A'zelen found that he was breathing heavily, and one clear thought intruded into the panicked chaos of his mind. 'Well, that was a lucky shot.' Sprawled on the ground at his feet, the guardsman didn't move, didn't make a sound.

Toth, who had seen his rider's intention, was already in motion. There was no question of wasting time trying to haul the other man's deadweight up the dragon's towering shoulder. A'zelen sprang for the riding straps, while the brown reached down with surprisingly deft claws to pick up the guardsman.

A'zelen was not even fully astride yet when Toth sprang aloft, wings beating frantically to gain height.

Below them, sounding tiny at this distance, he heard the clanging sound of a bell being rung at the Hold.



An ocean away from Southern Weyr, Vesoz yawned widely and rubbed at his eyes. "I don't know why they're...." Another yawn. "Why they're packing up so early...."

"Because even harpers need to sleep occasionally!" T'sald told him, helping an equally exhausted Collina up onto Kalth's blue shoulder. "Plus, I think that they may have run out of wine."

"Can't imagine why *that* might be," Bressa said with a chuckle, passing the riding straps back to her lover. "Anyway, I am *more* than ready for my bed."

Vesoz nuzzled the back of her neck. "Think I might be ready for your bed too," he purred in her ear.

The greenrider snorted softly. "Like either of us have the energy for *that* tonight."

The Fort Harvest Gather was finally winding down, the stallholders and the harpers packing away and the last of the revellers drifting off to whatever accommodation they had arranged for the night. Or, in the case of the Southern Weyr party, to their dragons, standing at the edge of the landing field as the great beasts winged down from the Hold fire-heights and then forcing tired -- and often somewhat uncoordinated -- limbs to propel them up the flight straps. Bressa felt as though she were ready to sleep for a week, the tiredness making her bones ache. Devereth crooned encouragingly to her rider and Bressa patted the dark neck fondly, letting her bond with the green leach away some of her exhaustion as the others mounted their dragons and checked that any passengers were firmly attached.

We go now? Devereth asked her rider.

Bressa looked around, seeing the others all mounted and ready to leave. *Yes, love -- I think we do....*

The green rumbled contentedly and sprang aloft, her movement swiftly followed by the others... and by a yelp of protest from Vesoz. "Hey! Some warning would have been nice!"

Bressa was still laughing as she gave Devereth the visual for Southern and they vanished *between*.



Alstan emerged from his cot to find the Weyr in a state of utter chaos. Dragons shrieked in the darkness, their voices rising of a desperate note that Rel reflected into the harper's mind. There were people emerging from the cots and the barracks of Main, some half-dressed and all looking sleep-mussed and confused. All that Alstan could get from his little brown was *fear-water-fly-fear*, a panicked sense of something bad, *very* bad that had to do with the sea.

"What's happening," he asked a man he thought he recognised as E'gar, a bluerider as he hurried past. "Why are they sounding off?"

"Something about the sea," the other man replied, his tone confused. "Vhauth is trying to get everyone aloft; Nioranth is telling them the same."

"The sea?"

"Apparently it's *gone*," the bluerider said with a helpless shrug. "It's gone but Vhauth is saying that it will come back and we must all be aloft when it does. I know -- it doesn't make any sense, but --"

A huge form dropped out of the darkness, settling a short distance away and crooning urgently at E'gar. The blue was already harnessed, Alstan noted -- the man must have been up early getting ready for 'Fall. Turning towards his dragon, E'gar hesitated a moment, then said, "Weyrsinger, come with us. I don't know what's going on here but you'll be safer with us."

Alstan shook his head, ignoring the waves of panic coming from the frantic Rel. "Thank you for the offer, but I think I can do more good down here -- nobody knows what's going on and it's a harper's duty to inform. I need to find out what I can about this!"

"Harper --"

"Go on, go to your dragon, E'gar!" Alstan smiled at the bluerider. "I'll be fine!"

He watched the bluerider mount up and launch, the dragon quickly rising above the glows that illuminated the Weyr's buildings. Taking a deep breath, the Weyrsinger turned and went in search of clothes and answers.



Not enough, not enough, J'hanos repeated to himself, over and over, as other winged forms joined Vhauth in the sky. The beach was still impossibly wide, stretching as far as the eye could see in the barely dawn-touched light and they just *weren't enough*, too many riders caught still abed and unwilling to mount without preparation. Yashelth was adding her voice to the chorus from below, but it was Nioranth, the only one of the adult queens to have made it aloft, who was providing the main reinforcement to J'hanos's desperate orders.

Vhauth relayed the names of those aloft with their riders as they launched and, while J'hanos felt a touch of relief at each silently spoken name, he knew that there were still far too many on the ground. Some of the names were more significant than others -- Suloth, Toth, Orylath, Hareth -- but all were important when considered in the context of what would follow with the sunrise....

J'hanos clung to the names of his fellow survivors-to-be and tried not to think of the names that Vhauth did not utter.

There was movement in the darkness, something black on black charging out of the north, a quiet roar coming from the distant horizon. J'hanos saw it and knew that they were out of time, that there would be no



more names to be spoken, that if escape were to be possible at all, it would need to be *now*....

Closing his eyes, he called the coordinates for Benden to his mind. If they wanted a bloody meeting, he'd give them something to talk about. *Vhauth, tell all those aloft that we have to go --*

No, the bronze replied, his thoughts suddenly distant as if listening to a voice other than his rider's. ***I cannot. Nioranth commands -- she tells us where she wishes us to be.***

She WHAT? J'hanos raged, his frustrations suddenly boiling over. *Tell her that she -- oh.* His head whipped around and he looked towards the sea, towards the ever-growing black wall that was swallowing the sea and the sky, and in that instant he *knew*, beyond any doubt, that this was not a surprise to all of their number.

Nioranth commands, Vhauth repeated. ***We all go at her order.***

J'hanos, feeling helpless and impotent in the face of nature and a queenrider's whim, said nothing and watched as the wave advanced on his Weyr.



The world returned in a wash of warmth and renewed sensation, banishing the cold nothing of *between* even in the cool air of pre-dawn. Vesoz had barely a moment in which to register their arrival at Southern before Bressa suddenly stiffened before him and Devereth bugled and banked sharply, making him yelp and feel grateful for the riding straps. "What's she doing?" he yelled over the windrush. "What's going on?"

"I don't know!" Bressa shouted back. There were other dragons in the air around them, bellowing and circling in yellow-eyed confusion as yet others sounded off from the ground. Ennie appeared alongside him, darting back and forth in her confusion, her shrieks interrupted each time she skipped *between* to keep up with Devereth's flight. There was an edge of fear in the little green's thoughts, a panic that grew stronger by the second and pushed its way insidiously into her owner's mind. Something was wrong, *very* wrong, and Vesoz couldn't work out --

"Hold on!" Bressa's shout of warning was barely audible above the wind and the bellowing of the dragons and the distant, growing roar of something that Vesoz couldn't recognise.

And then they were *between* and the frozen blackness swallowed the world once more.

Kadanzer Weyr

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