
Time & Place

by Smitty

Ninth Pass: 2431.04.21

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

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The skies were clear, both moons hanging full and heavy above the smudged silver streak of the Wher's Tooth comet on the late evening horizon as Corsan finished his rounds amongst the injured at West and started back towards the central Weyrhall, feeling the urge for company other than the injured and the Infirmary staff. Autumn was sliding inexorably into winter in the South, but the breeze off the ocean was warm and the faint sound of music from somewhere ahead inviting. Vivia's gold Zyath had risen in her virgin flight the day before and the Weyr was still in high spirits, the bright mood finally dispelling the gloom that had followed Trelanth's death in Threadfall some three months previous. The betting was heavy that either Zyath or the pregnant Yashelth would clutch a gold to replace the lost queen and, while Corsan was too experienced a dragonhealer to want to get involved with *that* particular wager, it was good to see things starting to get back to normal.

A pair of treehoppers ceased their squabbling over some small morsel and scurried from the path at Corsan's approach, their long, furred tails held high as they fled. The journeyman grinned as the creatures vanished between a pair of the storehouses that lined the road towards Main -- treehoppers were vermin, but he was perversely pleased that the hurricane of '29 hadn't wiped them out of the Weyr completely. Southern had had a hard few Turns, but if the 'hoppers were making a comeback, maybe things were starting to look up...

The Weyrhall was bustling as Corsan entered, the laughter and chatter of the assorted riders and weyrfolk almost drowning out Weyrsinger Enril's thundering rendition of some traditional harvest tune. Reaching the serving bench, the scent of food making him suddenly realise just how hungry he actually *was*, Corsan filled a plate with spiced bellclaw and watergrain before heading in search of a place to sit and eat. Narrowly avoiding tripping over a pair of giggling weyrbrats as they scuttled off with their arms filled with sweetrolls, he took a seat at the end of one of the long tables and nodded absently to those already there as he settled down to eat.

"-- I'm telling you!" Ch'son's amused voice said from across the table. "She's been following him around like a puppy all day!"

"Oh, come on!" bluerider L'vin laughed, "Y'kinal's twice her age!"

"I mean, at dinner last night, after the flight, fair enough --"

"He has a weyrmate!"

"But at breakfast this morning?"

"A *male* weyrmate!"

"And during Wingdrills?"

"You should just be grateful that we didn't have 'Fall today," K'gal chipped in, a wicked grin on his face. "I could just see Vivia trying to get Zyath up into the upper levels...."

J'nel snorted. "I can imagine what Genna would have to say about it too."

Somewhere in the background, Enril's performance came to an end and a pair of his journeymen, Alstan and Fedrek, started a much gentler ballad. "I can imagine what Master Renthic would have to say about it too, once we'd cleared up the mess," Corsan told the riders with a grin. "Doubt Y'kinal'll have too much to worry about, though -- given Vivia's attention span, she'll forget the flight ever happened in a seven-day or two."

"And believe me," Ch'son said dryly, "the entire Wing will be *so* grateful when she does...."

"Until the next flight, anyway," K'gal retorted, beaming at the greenrider.

"Please," said R'banon, glaring at his fellow brownrider, "some of us are trying to eat. And besides," he added, "what makes you think that Zyath will stick with old Herenth when there are so many fine young bronzes around whose riders would be *far* more suitable as Vivia-bait. K'lenyr, S'thal, M'jal, J'hanos --"

J'nel gave a bark of laughter. "J'hanos's weyrmate would kill Vivia if she made a move on him!"

"J'hanos's weyrmate hasn't got over not impressing Zyath herself," L'vin opined around a mouthful of bread. "Not much she can do 'bout a dragon's choice on the sands *or* in the air."

"And speaking of 'on the sands'," Ch'son said with a sigh, "I guess we'll be begging to the North for more candidates before long. Yashelth will be dropping her clutch before Zyath does and Irineth's last Hatching took a lot of those we had."

"Hardly our fault the holders aren't breeding fast enough down here to keep us supplied," J'nel muttered.

"Oh, they're breeding *plenty* fast enough," G'vasen told him, entering the conversation for the first time. "They're just not willing to send their brats to the Weyr, what with all that land to grab and all of it grubbed to the gunnels. Had one wave a crossbow at me the last time me and Linnath were out on Search -- ask V'geni, he was there too." The greenrider poked irritably at his food. "Ungrateful bastards, the lot of them."

"Hopefully the North will be a bit more gracious," Corsan said. "They've got the population and for the amount of work we do with their wounded, they owe us."

"Yeah, owe us all their troublemakers," L'vin said with a grin that indicated that he had once been a transferred

candidate himself. "Come on then, Corsan, you're a dragonhealer -- any particularly stupid or otherwise entertaining injuries in from our Northern friends recently?"

"Well..." Corsan looked thoughtful. "We had some youngster in from Ista the other day with two broken forelimbs and what seems like half a tree prickling his hide - twigs poking out in all directions, some of them with leaves still attached! Some breed of mating flight accident apparently, though the lad just turns scarlet if you ask him about it." His smile turned wicked. "We'll get it out of him yet...."

The others laughed. "Bronze?" J'nel enquired sweetly.

"Do you even need to ask?"

The greenrider opened his mouth to reply, but whatever he might have said died unborn as, at some silent cue, every rider in the Weyrhall froze, their unfocused eyes widening in shock or surprise and then --

Dragons sounded off outside, their voices ringing with urgency, and in that instant the gold and bronzeriders were in motion, their sudden sprint for the exits silencing the harpers and breaking the spell that had fallen over the others. Corsan didn't wait to hear answers to the questions that suddenly filled the air, instead pushing through the crowd in pursuit of answers of his own. He could see Renthic just ahead of him, shoving past a pair of blueriders, and he followed his craft senior out into the night air in time to see gold and bronze pinions flashing in the moonlight as they climbed beyond the reach of the glows to catch a tumbling, broken-winged form....

To catch, Corsan suddenly realised, a tumbling, broken-winged *queen*.

Glancing touches slowed and controlled the falling gold's descent until, finally, with Elnath's claws locked around her tail to support some of her weight, she draped limply across Yashelth's broad back. The other dragons wheeled away, bugling triumph and concern as Southern's senior and her second bore the crippled queen to earth in an awkwardly controlled glide that had Corsan's heart in his mouth. Then he was running again, making for the gather square as Yashelth set heavily down, rolling the newcomer onto the cobbles with a heaving shrug as Elnath skimmed overhead.

The injured queen moaned and shuddered weakly, her hide a sickly grey-gold in the glowlight. Her rider was slumped unmoving across her shoulders, a flamethrower of unfamiliar design strapped to her back, but Corsan's concern and expertise was with the dragon. Trusting that Reilen and his healers could deal with the woman, he ducked under Yashelth's wing, finding himself alongside Renthic and Tolomas as other dragonhealers pushed through the growing crowd. "Where did she...."

Corsan trailed off as he took in the queen's condition. She was pale, far too pale for the colour to be natural, and the greyish undertones of her hide did not bode well. Her left wing was a bloodied mess, the arm bones obviously broken in at least two places and both mainsail and foresail torn and burnt. The blistered hide continued along shoulder

and neck, charring the riding straps and the left side of her rider's jacket, searing away any insignia of Weyr or rank. All evidence spoke of a catch gone badly wrong, but Corsan couldn't think which Weyr was fighting 'Fall at this moment in time....

The queen hissed and heaved suddenly, feebly protesting as her rider was cut free of her seared neck. Yashelth rumbled and the stranger stilled, too weak to fight the elder gold's command. Renthic was barking orders, telling various bystanders what to fetch from the Infirmaries -- redwort, numbweed, splinting, cloth, the heaviest duty stitching kit on hand -- even as he and the others moved in to assess the damage more fully. There were no Threadscores, Corsan noted, at least not fresh ones, although the presence of the flamethrower and the faint phosphine scent of the burns told of a 'Fall accident. The pale hide was chill, almost frozen, to the touch, blisters fracturing at the slightest pressure to spill sluggish fluid against carefully probing fingers.

"Shards, something is *very* wrong here," Tolomas muttered, coming alongside Corsan. "How long was she *between*?"

"Too long, by the feel of her," Corsan replied, frowning at the burns, at the slowly increasing flow of ichor from the wing tears. "And nobody is flying 'Fall right now, I *know* they're not. You don't think she might have --?"

"Don't go there," the other man said quickly, his own mind having evidently reached the same possibility as Corsan's had. "We're going to have splint that wing before we can move her anywhere or even begin on that membrane, aren't we?" he asked rhetorically, then glanced back towards the healers gathered around the rider in concern. "I wish they'd give us some sign."

"Yeah." Corsan followed Tolomas's gaze. For all that Renthic was gathering equipment, work on the gold couldn't begin until they knew that her rider wasn't in immediate danger of death -- too many dragonhealers had been lost to the unheeding throes of suiciding patients. He caught brief glimpses of the goldrider as the healers moved around her, could see someone cutting away the ruined flight jacket to assess the burn damage beneath. He thought he could see the woman moving -- it was hard to tell in all the confusion but surely things *had* to be promising if they'd not given up on her yet....

Weyrhealer Reilen turned, giving a short, decisive nod as his gaze found Renthic. "Thank you," Corsan breathed, then turned his attention to Renthic as Southern's senior dragonhealer shouted his orders. Ukalen, one of the younger apprentices, dashed up with buckets of redwort and numbweed, trailed by a pair of brownriders carrying one of the trestle tables used to get to injuries too high for human reach. Others followed, bringing equipment from the Infirmaries at Main and at West -- bolts of cloth, bundles of sinew-thread, long lengths of the drilled chamberwood used for splinting and the blades for cutting it to size -- as Corsan and the other dragonhealers coated hands and arms with

redwort and set to work on the trembling gold as the Weyr looked on.

The burns looked to be shallow, at least, their fury expended on just the outermost layer of hide before being extinguished *between*. A layer of numbweed salve, refreshed as needed until the hide regrew, would deal with that injury, although Corsan couldn't help but wonder how long she had spent *between* to negate a searing from as close a range as this must have been. Leaving the burns to the apprentices, he moved to the broken wing, where Renthic was tying a length of rope around the lax thumbclaw, working the knots so that the vestigial digit would not be pulled from its seat when the bones were reset. The injured queen moaned softly, moving her head to look at her helpers with eyes that glistened violet and white, the colours slowly replacing the grey that had predominated at her arrival. Yashelth crooned and then raised her head as Kadana's Irineth appeared overhead, returning from her errand at Fort to aid in the effort and stilling the newcomer as she added her influence to Yashelth's.

Gold Elnath sat ready to pull the shattered wingbones back into place and Corsan found himself alongside her rider, Weyrwoman-second Teshea, as he took his place under the injured limb, bracing his hands against the cold, bruised flesh beneath the upper break. Nodding to the goldrider and trying to ignore the ichor that dripped onto his head from the torn membrane above, he asked, "Do we know who she is? Where she's from?"

Teshea looked at him, her expression tense. "Nioranth," she told him. "She says her name is Nioranth. And as for where she's from... all Elnath can get from her is *here*. As far as she can tell, our new friend thinks she's exactly where she should be."

"Exactly *where*?" Corsan pressed, the strange flamethrower the gold's rider had worn suddenly coming to mind. "But not exactly *when*?"

"That would seem to be the question," Teshea agreed tersely. "But it's likely one we'll not get an answer to until *she*," she nodded towards the near-comatose stranger now being laid gently onto a stretcher, "is back in the land of the living."

Corsan nodded, getting his first good look at the woman as she was carried past. With her helmet and goggles removed he could see that she was young, barely beyond her teens, with a plait of brown hair brushing limply against one linen-clad shoulder. She was as deathly pale as her dragon and, Corsan suddenly realised, she was *beautiful*...

"Do we know her name?" he asked, never taking his eyes from the stricken goldrider.

"No," Teshea replied, and Corsan turned to look at her then. "Nioranth becomes agitated if we ask about her rider - - understandable in the circumstances, I suppose. I suspect we'll need the girl to awaken and tell us herself."

Corsan nodded, and then Renthic was calling on everyone to take their positions, to feel for the bones clicking into place and to splint them tightly from above and below, stitching through the ravaged membrane where necessary. For now, Nioranth was their concern, and whatever her origin, she was in the right place to have her wounds tended. Southern had brought beasts back from worse than this and, so long as the queen's rider maintained her grip on life, they would get through this.

They had to get through this. Corsan *needed* to know the rider's name.



Kadanzer Weyr

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