When Nobody Knew
by hunters_retreat

Summary

“I could be a dragon rider, Jared,” and the wonder of being searched had finally crept into his voice, like he was just waiting for Jared to tell him it was okay first. “I could really do it, not just tell stories about it. Me, a holdless nobody.”

Notes

I began this ages ago and I decided it was time to pull it out. I'll post this story in installments. Just a little something to keep me writing regularly. I love Pern and haven't played in this world in ages. Forgive me if I'm a little rusty :P
He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Well, he could. It was all over the Hall and of course everyone was going crazy about it. It wasn’t like they’d never come before, but this was different. This was a search. All of Pern knew that the weyr had 32 eggs on the sands plus a gold egg. It wouldn’t be long now before the hatching and the candidates would be presented to the dragonets. The lucky would impress a dragon and begin the rigorous training to become a dragonrider; the men and women who rode dragons in burst of flame to protect all of Pern.

Jared ran up the steps of the outer walls until he found himself staring up at the most magnificent thing he’d ever seen; dragons. Even with his harper training Jared couldn’t find words to describe it. His fingers itched though to write the melody in his head, the pulsing beat of the bloodline, the fluttering of wings, the strong all encompassing melody of a dragon’s story. If he could only manage to write something like that, he might actually earn the status of journeyman someday. By the shards, if he could write a song worthy of a dragon he would be the Master Harper of all Pern.

Five dragons in all looked about the courtyard, one bronze and one brown, their riders talking softly together with the Master Harper who was motioning them inside. Beside that were two blues and the green that Jared was staring at. The green and blue dragonriders were talking to one another and smiling jovially at the people who had come to witness them.

“Think you’ll ever get a chance to touch one?”

Jared turned around, gasping at the very idea. “Jensen! You know better than that! If one of the dragons hears you they’ll… they’ll stake you out for thread!”

Jensen laughed at his scowl. The apprentices of the hall used to look down on Jensen when he was just a drudge. He’d been holdless until his mother had come to the MasterHarper and begged him to take her ten year old boy in. The holdless were the lowest of low in Pern and she wanted more for her child. The Harper had taken Jensen in and Jared, four years younger and a drudge of the Hall by birth, had shown him the ropes along with all his favorite places to visit.

They’d become inseparable right up until the night the MasterHarper had caught Jared picking
notes out of one of the string instruments he’d watched so closely as Jensen singing his mother’s lullaby out to the night sky. The Master Harper had taken them both straight out of their life of drudgery in the kitchens and into the Hall where they’d become apprentices.

Jensen had passed through to the rank of journeyman quicker than anyone in the Harper Hall’s history. What took others years had taken him months. Jared had never been prouder of anything, even if it did mean he got to spend less time with Jensen.

Jared did well himself but his inability to hold a tune had held him back until they’d come to see that his strength was in his dramatic readings and in his strong fingers on a string instrument. Given time, the Master Harper thought he’d be a composer to number among the greats.

It was far too great an aspiration for him, but he was happy. He had Jensen who still took the time to be with him even if he beneath his status and they had Dani, the girl from the kitchens who had been most likely to join in their escapades or cover for them when they were about to get caught.

“There’s a gold egg on the sands,” Dani whispered as she came up behind them, slipping a sweetroll into Jared’s hands. He saw the way Jensen shoved his own into his mouth and he followed his lead, making sure no one could catch them with the pilfered sweets. “S’why they got so many blues. They want to have a wide variety of candidates for the eggs when they hatch. They’re visiting every Hold and Hall in their territory.”

“Can you imagine it?” Jared asked through a mouthful.

Jensen laughed, but Dani gave a small sigh that seemed bigger than the whole of her. “Every night.”

“Girl?” One of the riders was calling over their way and they bowed respectfully while Dani fell into a startled but graceful curtsy. “We seem to have lost our wineskin. Can you fetch us a new one?”

She gasped slightly to be addressed by a dragonrider herself but scurried away quickly to see to their needs. Jared and Jensen stayed where they were, watching the dragons and riders but keeping a respectful distance.

When Dani came back she was carrying a tray with wine and some food for the riders to snack on. One of the blue dragon’s riders tried to get Dani to talk to him but she kept her eyes down, though she did smile a time or two.

“She should we rescue her?” Jensen asked Jared as they watched the blue riders engage her, trying to get her to smile and stop looking down at the floor.

Jared shrugged. “Least we can do is let her be close to a dragon. We’ll just … keep an eye out.”

Jensen didn’t seem happy about it but then he never was when someone else showed Dani any attention. There were far too many lords and holders that thought being a drudge meant they could take as they wanted. Dani was far too pretty for them not to keep an eye on. It wasn’t always easy but they did their best and they’d managed to keep her out of trouble so far. As much as she kept them out of it, anyway.

Dani’s eyes fell on Jensen twice as they talked and Jared didn’t like that anymore than Jensen liked the attention on Dani. Dani wasn’t the only one that caught a lord or lady’s eyes in the hold, though Jensen seemed far less away of it.

The Master Harper came out at that moment, the bronze and brown riders following in his wake to
stand by the others. Dani carried her tray away and sat it on the stone wall beside Jared and stood next to her friends.

“Have you had time to find what we’re looking for?” The bronzerider asked the other riders.

“We’ve found three possible candidates.”

One of the drummers was pulled up and Jared shook his head. They’d be weak in that section now. He was the strongest drummer in the hall even if he was just a journeyman.

“We’ll take these two as well,” the blue rider said, pointing over at Dani and Jensen.

“What?” Jensen asked, his eyes wide with shock.

“Well no one can say the Harper Hall doesn’t send it’s best to the weyr. You’re taking the most talented Journeyman I’ve had all these long turns,” the Master Harper said, giving Jensen a fond smile.

“Let’s hope he learned your lessons well, Master Harper. Some say the weyr could use a finer breed these days,” the bronzerider said.

Dani and Jensen stood still for a moment but the bluerider came to them and pulled them over to the others. Jared was too stunned to do anything more than move closer to hear what was being said.

“We leave in a candlemark. You have that time to gather your possessions. The weyr will provide everything else you need.”

All three of the candidates took off then to get their stuff and Jared felt bereft. The Master Harper must have seen it because he approached Jared with a kind smile. “Off now Jared. Go to Jensen and make your good-byes.”

He didn’t wait for anything else, not even to give a good-bye to the dragonriders before storming down into the Hall to find Jensen at his bunk. He didn’t have much and it was already sitting on his bed. A few nice tunics and a pair of pants that would go with them. A writing case that Jared and Dani had saved for a whole turn to get him, and a simple set of throwing stones that they had collected over the turns together.

“They’ll probably just send me right back,” Jensen said, his voice slightly panicked as he looked over at Jared.

Jared let out a snort. “You’ll impress a bronze dragon and be the Weyrleader in no time. Everyone knows you’re an overachiever,” Jared said confidently. “Just don’t forget to write. I know you have a good hand so you can’t use that excuse.”

Jensen took a deep breath but before he could say anything Jared pulled out a small bag and dropped all of Jensen’s belongings into it. “There you are. All ready to go.”

“Jared,” Jensen’s voice was soft as he sat heavily on the bed. “I can’t do this without you.”

Jared sat beside him and sighed. “Always knew a day would come and you’d have to leave the nest.”

Jensen shouldered him playfully and they were both smiling and that was all Jared could want from the moment. “You’re gonna go to the weyr and be the best rider they’ve ever seen. You’ll
do the Harper Hall proud, you and Dani.”

“I could be a dragon rider, Jared,” and the wonder of being searched had finally crept into his voice, like he was just waiting for Jared to tell him it was okay first. “I could really do it, not just tell stories about it. Me, a holdless nobody.”

“You, a Journeyman Harper,” Jared said softly. “You were never a nobody Jensen, even when nobody knew it yet.”

Jensen reached a hand out and pulled him close, letting their foreheads rest together for a moment.

When they rushed back out to the courtyard the riders were waiting to take them. Dani was already there and she gave him a tearful hug but promised to look after Jensen for him while they were gone.

The riders gave them instructions quickly about how to mount and about going between. Jared couldn’t even imagine between. Jensen and Dani would be at the weyr for their next meal, but it would take Jared a whole sevenday to travel the distance. Three seconds in the cold black of between, where only a dragon’s wings kept them safe, and they would travel that great distance. Again, Jared didn’t have the words for his awe of dragons.

When they finally mounted, Jensen looked like the little kid Jared had first met, his eyes wide and scared but a soft determination that so many people mistook. He’d give the weyr a good shaking, Jared just knew it.

Jensen was pulled up behind the brown rider and Dani and the other journeyman were pulled up on the back of the blue dragons. When the brown dragon rose to the sky, Jared screamed out his farewells. The Master Harper was standing at his side, staring out into the sky. They didn’t go back in until long after the dragons had gone between to the weyr but the Master Harper didn’t begrudge him the time to celebrate his friends luck, and to mourn their departure.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

It was the last thing he said before the bronze dragon took them into the air. Jared didn’t have time to look for his friends before they were between.

“Worried they’ll drop you between?”

Jared shook his head as he pushed his shoulder back against Jake’s. “Just hoping they’ll drop you.”

Jake smiled at Jared but before he could say anything, Alona grabbed them both by the elbow. “Behave or they’ll leave you both here at Fort Weyr and you’ll never see the hatching grounds of Ista.”

Jared looked at Jake over her head and smiled. Of all the candidates that were transferring from Fort Weyr to Ista Weyr, Jared was lucky he had this group to go with him. He’d been searched from the Harper Hall two turns before and he still hadn’t impressed a dragon. He wasn’t the oldest candidate and he hadn’t been on the sands the longest, but Jared wasn’t really known for his patience. Maybe that was why the Weyrlingmaster was ready to send him to a new Weyr.

“It’s just three seconds, right?”

Jared smiled at Alona. “Remember what they say?”

“Black, blacker, blackest. By the time I’m done, we’ll be flying high over Ista Weyr.”

“Exactly,” Jake took up the telling. “Only three seconds of cold and dark and we’ll get to be part of Ista’s new candidate group.”

Jared was nervous about flying between as well. He knew it was safe, that the only time a dragon had ever been lost between was when they were seriously injured or during the occasional training accident. The dragons and riders disappeared between and never came out again. He’d been between once before, when he’d come from the Harper Hall, but Alona was a Weyrbrat. Her parents were both riders and somehow she’d never traveled between.

“Here they are!” Osric came running up to join them with Colin in tow. Colin had just come to the Weyr from Fort Hold before the last hatching and he was already moving. Jared thought the kid just had itchy feet. Osric had been at the Healer Hall and ended up at the Weyr. Jared was fond of Osric but it was really Jake and Alona he was grateful for.

Above them, the sky filled with six dragons. Jared watched each as they appeared from between. The Weyrleader, Weyrwoman, and Weyrlingmaster of Fort Weyr were there to greet them and the candidates were rushed forward with water and wine skins for the new arrivals.

Jared found himself offering the two skins to the bronze rider who had come with them. “Wine please, Candidate,” the rider said with a friendly smile. Jared handed him the skin and watched as he drank deeply. “Your name?”

“Jared, Wingleader,” Jared replied quickly. Jared held his head up high and remembered to use his
harper-trained manners instead of fall apart like some of the candidates did.

“M’sha,” the wingleader said with a smile. “My friends call me M’sha.”

Jared’s eyes widened but the bronzerider looked closely at him. “You Harper trained?”

“Yes Sir, Journeyman Harper,” Jared said with pride. “Walked the tables last year under the Fort Weyr’s harper. Figure if I don’t impress a dragon, the least I can do is make a song or two to try to do it justice.”

M’sha smiled. “So you would be the Jared I’ve heard so much about. There is a weyrwoman at Ista who is looking forward to seeing you again Jared.”

“Dani?”

M’sha nodded. “I had to listen to that last letter you sent her five times before she stopped. It might have been that we were stuck on the hatching sands too. Not a lot to entertain you while you’re on the sands. Unless you’re the queen of course. I was trying to take a nap.”

Jared realized then that M’sha was the bronzerider who’d won Dani’s mating flight. Dani had sent him a letter about it, and about him.

“It’s been a long time. I’m sure the weyrwoman has more important things to do than to catch up with a candidate.”

“True, but don’t be surprised if she finds a way to sneak in a visit. Our junior weyrwoman is rather persistent when she sets her mind to something.”

Jared laughed at that but before he could say anything else, the wingleader was called forward to speak with the Weyrleaders of Fort.

“You know him?” Osric asked as he came up beside Jared.

The others congregated together again and Jared shook his head. “I knew a girl at Harper Hall once,” Jared said with a smile. “Three years ago she was found on search and she impressed a Queen.”

“What? You never said.”

He smiled fondly but there was a reason he didn’t speak of it. As much as he loved Dani and wanted to tell everyone about the sweet kitchen girl he knew that had become a Jr. Weyrwoman, it was still a bittersweet memory. The letters Dani sent never said anything about Jensen and Jared didn’t ask. He still didn’t know what had become of his best friend.

“Three people were searched from the Harper Hall for the Ista hatching a few turns back. The Jr. Weyrwoman was one of them. I wasn’t searched for Fort Weyr until a turn later. Now she’s a Weyrwoman and I’m a candidate. There isn’t much to say. It will be nice to see her again though. We write letters when we can but it’s not the same as seeing her and knowing that she’s okay.”

He tried not to think about it took much. He hoped to catch up with Dani and to find out what had happened to Jensen but he knew that once a rider had a dragon to care for and thread to fight, riders didn’t always have time for old friends. He tried not to get his hopes up.

“Alright candidates, time to fly,” M’sha said as he motioned Jared back to his side. “You know how to do this, right?”
Jared nodded because while he hadn’t been on dragonback in the two years he’d been a candidate, that didn’t mean he hadn’t climbed atop his fair share to help wash one in the weyr lake. He listened with the others as they were given their instructions, put on their protective gear, and then they each climbed in front of a rider onto one of the great dragons.

Jared felt M’sha behind him and he let out a deep breath. “One giant leap, a few flaps of his wings, and Donath will take us between,” the bronzerider said.

“Black, Blacker, Blackest,” Jared recited.

“Exactly.”

It was the last thing he said before the bronze dragon took them into the air. Jared didn’t have time to look for his friends before they were between.

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Jared didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until they popped out of the cold of between and into the warm Ista air.

“You alright, Jared?”

Jared nodded his head, unable to speak in the moment. His first sight of Ista Weyr was just as awe inspiring as he remembered his first vision of Fort Weyr being. Whereas Fort Weyr had been built in a smooth oval shaped crater, Ista’s Weyr had five spikes moving high into the sky around the crater. The large bowl in the center gave way to a corral at the end of the crater and then to a great plateau before it led off to the sea. Dotted along the walls of the crater were the individual weyrs of each dragon and rider. Unlike the other weyrs, Ista’s small size meant that there wasn’t enough room to house all of their dragon pairs in the weyr itself. Instead, the outside of the crater walls was spotted with what they called forest weyrs; weyrs built into the rock walls but that overlooked the island itself.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” The rider called out to Jared.

He nodded again but looked over his shoulder to smile at the bronzerider before he turned his attention back to the flight.

He watched as the other five dragons that had come with them landed and he was grateful for the extra time sitting on the back of the great bronze beast. He kept one hand firmly wrapped around the wherhide saddle – though he knew the rider wouldn’t let him fall – but with the other he gently patted the dragon’s hide.

He doubted the dragon could feel it through his thick skin but Jared felt it was appropriate to offer thanks in some way. He was always surprised by the warmth of a dragon’s scales. As a candidate they often had to help with the caring of dragons. Sometimes they worked with the dragon healers and sometimes they simply helped riders who had been injured in threadfall. The dragon healers of Fort had asked for him often due to his calming voice and the way he could tell stories for long periods of time. He’d talked many a rider and dragon to sleep while they endured treatment or waited for the fellis to kick in and help them sleep through the pain.

He felt the dragon’s angle change and then they were diving down to land in the great bowl of Ista Weyr. He refused to close his eyes or cry out when the dragon dove, but the great bronze snapped his wings out as they descended just in time to land cleanly.

“Show off,” the rider said with a firm pat to the dragon’s hide behind him. “Sorry about that.
Donath likes to surprise people and he believed you were up for the challenge.”

Jared laughed. “I appreciate the confidence, and the safe landing,” Jared said as he and M’sha dismounted. He turned to the great bronze and bowed deeply.

“Thank you, Donath, for the safe journey. It is greatly appreciated and it was indeed a great, if short, adventure.”

M’sha clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. “We like you, Candidate. Good luck on the sands.”

M’sha left with the other riders and Jared was left standing in the bowl with the other four candidates. None of them knew what to do but they clumped together as Jared pointed towards what he hoped was the weyr’s entrance.

“It’s not as big as Fort Weyr, is it?” Colin asked.

Jared sighed as he looked over at Colin. Colin had been a Lord Holder’s youngest son and while he’d always been fun to have around, he wasn’t always the best at remembering old affiliations had nothing to do with weyr politics. They were Ista candidates now and there was no need to compare the weyr with Fort.

“She might be smaller in size, but she still packs a punch when it counts,” a voice rang out behind them.

Jared turned around and looked at the older man that approached them. He noticed the knots on the rider’s shoulder that denoted his rank immediately. The Weyrlingmaster of Ista Weyr looked grumpy with a serious expression on his face, but there were laugh lines around his eyes and mouth. He watched them for a moment but didn’t make a further comment about what Colin had just said. Jared decided he might be disciplined, but not mean.

Reporting from Fort Weyr, Weyrlingmaster,” Jared said as the rider just stared at them. The man looked at Jared for a moment before he took them all in and nodded to each as he held their eyes.

“You all know we have a clutch on the sands. Fantith laid thirty two eggs, including a gold. We sent to each of the other weyrs to see if they had candidates they wanted to send along. Your former Weyrlingmaster assured me that you five were worth keeping around. See that you live up to his belief in you.”

Jared nodded and didn’t need to look to know his friends had done the same. None of them wished to dishonor the weyr they’d come from or make a bad impression with their new weyr.

“Normally I’d have you settle in and get to know the place, but Ista is a bit of a maze and we’ve all just accepted that everyone gets lost in the beginning. When you do get turned around, just ask for help. We’re all used to it around here. The other candidates are at the hatching grounds right now, so we’re going to head straight there. When we’re done we’ll get your things settled into the candidate’s quarters.”

The man turned and began to walk back out across the bowl of the weyr. He turned to walk backwards as he led them back out of the weyr. “I’m Weyrlingmaster J’mes. I’ll be in charge of you until you impress, or until you decided to pack it up and find something else. You lot don’t look like quitters to me, so it looks like we’ll be getting to know one another real well.”

“The current clutch was laid by Fantith. This was her first mating flight and Junior Weyrwoman Danneel doesn’t leave the hatching grounds at all. You’ll normally find Donath or Strith’s riders
at her side. Danneel is an excellent weyrwoman but she’s got a wildfire temper so I suggest you put your best foot forward. After we’re done, we’ll get you settled. Should be about time for lunch then and you can meet the other candidates.”

Jared wasn’t sure which he was more excited about; seeing the eggs or getting his first glimpse at Dani in three years. He wanted the chance to talk to her, catch up, and see how weyr life had been for her. Not that Jared expected he’d get a chance to talk to her; she was a weyrwoman now and he was a candidate with a never ending regiment of training and work. It was a nice thought though and even if he couldn’t talk to her, he could see with his own eyes that she was doing well.

The hatching grounds of Ista were much the same as those of Fort Weyr. The weyr opened into a large cavern where the Queen could sit and watch her eggs. Warm sand covered the floor of the grounds and across the wall were seats where the weyrfolk and invited guests would come at the time of the hatching to witness the impression of new dragons and their riders. The cavern had ledges higher up for other dragons to watch.

Among the thirty two eggs currently on the sand, Jared could see other candidates as they moved around the eggs. They touched softly, reverently, as they walked along. Jared looked at Alona and gave her an encouraging smile before they both stepped onto the sands together.

Jared moved away from the others and began to make his way around to all the eggs. He spoke softly as he moved, hands softly caressing each shell before he’d move to another. There would be other days to come back and visit, but Jared hoped to make a good impression the first time.

On more than the eggs.

Only girls were presented to the gold egg but all the boys were expected to pay their respects to the Queen. At the back of the cavern, Queen Fantith sat with her rider. Jared stopped before her and stared at the beautiful woman before him. Junior Weyrwoman Danneel was stunning, but she would always be Jared’s Dani, the kitchen girl who helped him sneak sweets to Jensen and who helped him keep on the good side of the Harper Hall’s kitchen staff. She smiled as she looked down at him and Jared couldn’t help but return it.

“Weyrwoman, the humblest of respect to you and your beautiful Queen,” he said as he bowed low. The cavern rung suddenly with the bellow of the queen and an answering bellow began outside the caverns. Jared looked up startled as the Queen bellowed a second time. Weyrlingmaster J’mes gathered them all up to lead them away, but the Queen bellowed a third time.

Jared was being led off the sands, but a dragonrider grabbed him by the arm. “Excuse me, J’mes, but the Queen wants this one still.”

“What the ever loving name of Faranth for?” the Weyrlingmaster asked.

“No clue, but Strith is insistent as well.”

Jared stared at the rider who had yet to look at him but when the Weyrlingmaster nodded, Jared was drug back onto the sands even though everyone else had been sent away. He was being led through the sands and towards the shelf where the Junior Weyrwoman stood watching. Jared had enough though and he pulled his arm out of the rider’s grasp.

“Jensen?” It only took a second to see the knots on his jacket to realize exactly who he was. “Wingleader J’sen?”

“Hey Jared,” Jensen… J’sen … said with a small smile. “Funny meeting you here.”
“Funny meeting …” Jared fumed. It was the worst possible time for him to lose his temper but he forgot about the hatching and the Queen and the dragons and everything. “I waited for three years and not one letter? Not a single note to let me know you were okay? That you impressed a dragon? That you were a wingleader already?”

J’sen sighed. “You said I’d do it quick. You were right. Strith found me on the sands that first hatching and I managed to make wingleader earlier this turn.”

“Jared,” he looked up at Dani and her smile was indulgent. “While I appreciate your need to berate J’sen for his terrible behavior, Fantith sent everyone away for some reason and she wants you on the sands. Please stop manhandling one of our wingleaders and get on the sands.”

J’sen stepped back and Jared looked up at the Queen.

“I am so sorry. I beg your pardon,” he said as he walked away from J’sen and onto the hatching sands. As much as he wanted to talk to J’sen, he wasn’t about to risk angering the Queen or risking his chances on the sands. No one knew why a dragon chose the rider they did. He had no idea why the gold dragon wanted him down there now either, so he moved around the eggs again and touched each one as he’d been doing before. He noticed the way Dani and J’sen watched him and whispered to one another but he tried not to let that take his focus from the task at hand.

“You missed one,” Danneel said softly when Jared made his way back to her and bowed again to Fantith.

“Dani,” J’sen called her name but Danneel shook her head to forestall him.

“You can’t mean … I’m not supposed to touch the gold egg,” Jared said.

“Fantith insists that you be allowed to attend all her daughters as well as her sons.”

It wasn’t allowed, but then again neither was disobeying a Weyrwoman. He let out a deep breath as he stepped forward and found the egg. It was larger than the others and Jared could have sworn it was warmer too. He wasn’t sure what to do so he approached it the same way he had the others.

He let his hand skim lightly over the egg. “Hello little dragon,” he said softly. “My name is Jared. I am a journeyman harper, at least I was and probably will be again soon. Not that I wouldn’t want to be a dragonrider but it’s been two years and I’m beginning to think my dragon isn’t on the sands. I’m not the type to give up hope, but I must say that I wouldn’t mind being a weyr harper if being a candidate didn’t work out.”

He kept up a steady stream of conversation with the egg until Danneel relented and told him the Queen was satisfied. Danneel disappeared and Jared was left with J’sen.

“Jared?”

“Yes?”

“That was … unusual. I’ve never seen Fantith that upset.”

“And the other dragon that bellowed with her? Was that her mate?”

J’sen shook his head. “No, that was Strith, my bronze. They agreed that you should be here.”

“What’s going on?” Jared asked.
“I have no idea. I think maybe they wanted you to have a chance to spend time with us. Dani and I.”

“You never wrote, J’sen.” He hated that he’d lost control of his voice, how small he sounded, but Jensen had been his best friend, his everything. He disappeared as if Jared had never meant anything and it still hurt.

J’sen looked down at his hands and shook his head. “How could I? The day I impressed Strith was the best and worst day of my life. I had just gained the most amazing thing, but in that moment, the person I wanted to tell the most? I’d just guaranteed that I’d never see him again. I didn’t know how to tell you all the things I was thinking and it was killing me. I wrote so many letters and none of them rang true. I just couldn’t do it. I just waited and hoped and every time someone went on search to the Harper Hall I hoped you’d come back with them.”

“So you were a coward?”

“Basically, yes,” J’sen admitted.

“And now?”

J’sen pulled him close before Jared could ask him anything else. “I missed you Jared. By the first egg, it’s good to see you again.”

Jared laughed to see J’sen smile at him and suddenly the world was okay again. He was sure it would come up between them, but Jared knew they’d find a way to deal with it.

“Not that I don’t appreciate a little time to catch up, but I’m pretty sure J’mes will have my hide if I don’t catch up with the candidates.”

J’sen smiled. “I’ll lead you to them. Strith said they’re just getting to the dining hall. I’ll make sure you get fed before I drop you off. Dani would have my hide if I let you go hungry. You still have a dragon’s 2 stomachs?” J’sen asked.

Jared patted his stomach and smiled. “I can’t help it J’sen. I’m a growing boy.”

They laughed together as J’sen began to show Jared around and it felt almost like old times.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

The humming of the dragons was unmistakable

Chapter Notes

Thank you to ferrous_wheeler and drgaellon on LJ for the beta on this chapter!

“J’sen, you have to stop this.”

Jared stopped before he rounded the corner when he heard the concern in the Weyrlingmaster’s voice. He’d been on his way to see J’sen in his weyr after he’d spent his afternoon – the first free one he’d had in the four sevendays he’d been a Candidate at Ista Weyr – bathing J’sen’s bronze in the Weyr Lake. He wasn’t the only Candidate that had been down there admiring the dragons. Like Jared, most of the candidates would take any excuse to get close to them. Alona and Jake had helped him scrub the behemoth of a bronze dragon while the Wingleaders were in a meeting.

Jared had cleaned and planned to steal a few minutes with J’sen for a few minutes before dinner but there was something in the Weyrlingmaster’s words that made it impossible for him to intrude. As curious as Jared was, it made it impossible for him to back away as well.

“There is nothing inappropriate going on, if that’s what you’re worried about, J’mes,” Jensen said quickly.

“I do not doubt your integrity, or your intentions, boy.”

There was a kindness in J’mes voice as he spoke to J’sen, and Jared realized that there was a stronger bond between the two than just Weyrlingmaster and former student.

“Then what?”

“I was there, J’sen, when you Impressed. I was there when you nearly lost it all, or did you forget that? You think I don’t know who you were talking about? You might not have put a name to it, but I’m not blind and I’ve always looked out for you.”

“I know, and I appreciate it, J’mes, but I’m fine.”

“You know what happened when you Impressed. Your emotional reaction almost killed Strith. Would you do that to him?”

“What? No! It wasn’t his fault. I don’t… I don’t want him to know. He can’t. He’s different from me, J’mes. He’s stronger. He would never… Please, what do I need to do?”
J'mes sighed heavily. When he spoke, there was a regret that Jared had never heard in his voice. “I don’t know, J’sen. But the way the Queen treats him, the way you and Dani do, I’m not the only one to notice. I’m not the only one concerned.”

Jared couldn’t move. He didn’t understand what just heard but he knew it had something to do with him. As much as he wanted to run in and check on J’sen, he couldn’t interrupt the moment. There were no more words spoken and Jared could envision the scene, J’sen sitting at the table in his weyr with his head bowed, and the Weyrlingmaster sitting close by in silent support.

When the dinner bell began to chime, Jared was relieved for the chance to disturb the broody silence. He stomped heavily as he rounded the rest of the steps to J’sen’s weyr and stopped abruptly when he entered. J’mes and J’sen were right where he’d pictured them and Jared forced a smile on his lips.

“Forgive my intrusion, Weyrlingmaster,” he said with a slight bow of his head. “I didn’t know you were here. I was trying to beat the dinner bell to see if you were well, Wingleader, but I guess I was late.”

J’mes gave J’sen a long look before he turned his eyes to Jared. “Did you spend your time well this afternoon, Candidate?”

“I did. Strith was at the Weyr lake with some of the other bronzes while their riders were in meetings. Some of the candidates went down to help bathe them.”

“I thank you,” J’sen said with a small smile. There was a far off look in his eyes that Jared had come to know meant he was talking to his bronze dragon. “As does Strith. He said that you and the other two did a fine job. And the attention you and your friends gave his wings while you oiled him was very welcomed.”

Jared bowed his head slightly because even if he and J’sen were very informal with one another, the idea that Strith thought well of him was something else entirely. “Please, tell him it was our honor to be of some service.”

“Alona and Jake?” The Weyrlingmaster asked Jared.

Jared nodded. “We wanted to have a closer look at the dragons so we went to the lake together. When Strith used his wings to soak us, we figured it meant he was in need of help.”

“Strith soaked you?” J’mes asked as he looked back at J’sen.

“Yes, then the other bronze dragons did much the same to the other Candidates that were already there.”

“It sounds like they were well cared for then, while we were in our meeting,” the Weyrlingmaster said. He stood and looked at J’sen. “We’ll talk later. I believe the Weyrwoman wanted a word with you after dinner in regards to our earlier discussion. I wanted to forewarn you.”

J’sen took a deep breath, but his eyes were downcast. “Thank you. You’ve been a good friend, J’mes,” the bronzerider said softly. “I appreciate it, especially now.”

The Weyrlingmaster gave Jared a small smile as he passed him on his way out of J’sen’s weyr. The man was kind, but strict with his charges, and Jared was thrown by the sadness he caught in the other man’s eyes. His gut twisted with foreboding but he had no idea what the two had been talking about. How could J’sen have almost lost Strith? And what did that have to do with him? He didn’t understand, but he also knew he couldn’t ask J’sen. Maybe Dani would be willing to answer his
questions - if he could get her alone. M’sha always seemed to turn up when they finally had some
time to spend together. He never asked Jared to leave, but there were some things he couldn’t speak
of in front of others.

“I’m sorry,” Jared said as he took a step closer to J’sen. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

J’sen looked at Jared and smiled. “You didn’t. J’mes is a good man outside of his outstanding
record as a Weyrlingmaster; I’m lucky to count him as a friend. He was just coming to check on
me.”

“Are you well?”

“I am,” J’sen said, but he frowned. “I’m the youngest Wingleader the Weyr has seen though. We
have lost too many good men this turn. While I would have done my best to gain my position
through years of hard work and dedication, I have achieved it young because of that loss. J’mes
likes to make sure I am not worked beyond my ability.”

“He doesn’t know you like I do then,” Jared said softly. No matter what else he’d heard, he had
absolute faith in his friend. “There is nothing you can’t do when you set your mind to it.”

J’sen shook his head. “Maybe. What do you say we skip the dining hall tonight? I can have
something sent up for us.”

They didn’t do it often, usually only after the Weyr had gone into a bad Threadfall. J’sen liked to
keep to himself then, and only Jared seemed to be welcome company. Jared reveled in the fact,
even if it saddened him to see his friend isolate himself. He knew J’sen though, and the silence was
so the Wingleader could relive the battle, to evaluate his wing, and see what he could have done
differently. On those nights, Jared was just there to keep him company, his own mind swimming
with the wounds he’d seen or the losses they’d faced.

After the last Threadfall, Jared had stayed with J’sen on the weyr ledge overlooking the forest until
sunrise. He didn’t know what J’sen had relived, but Jared had watched a rider die over and over in
his head. Jared had been in the infirmary calming the rider’s brown dragon while the rider was
treated for his wounds. The rider had succumbed to his injuries though, and Jared had watched as
the brown had lumbered away from the weyr, screaming into the sky before he took flight. Clumsy
as he was with his own Thread scars, the brown gained air and went between, never to return.

Jared couldn’t imagine a bond so strong that death was the better alternative to life without a
bondmate. When he looked at J’sen though, he sometimes thought maybe he could.

**

<<2 sevendays later>>

The closer the Hatching got, the harder J’mes pushed the Candidates. Their few free days were
now nonexistent and Jared was exhausted. Thread wasn’t scheduled to fall over Ista territory for
another sevenday, but J’mes had half of them scouring flamethrowers for the Queen’s wing, and
the other half off with the hall Healers to make the numbweed salve that was so necessary after
Threadfall.

As much as Jared hated the stench of numbweed, he’d almost rather be there than be in the middle
of the flamethrowers with lessons on how to take them apart and clean them. His mind wandered
about today and he kept stabbing himself as he tried to scrape away the grime and muck from the
older flamethrowers that didn’t see much use - they were less reliable but the Weyr wasn’t about to leave them to waste. At some point, the parts would be used for replacements but they still worked well enough, and in an emergency an old flamethrower was better than nothing.

“Well done, Candidates,” Junior Weyrwoman Danneel said as she walked around the circle of workers in the Weyr bowl. Jared was surprised to see her there while the eggs were so close to Hatching, but he figured even the Weyrwoman needed to get some air once in a while. The Hatching Grounds were always warm, and even though Jared cherished the time they got to visit the eggs on the sands, he’d have been bored to tears if he was stuck to watch a clutch the way the Weyrwomen were.

Danneel surprised them all when she took an old flamethrower and sat next to Jared. “Just because you ride a dragon doesn’t mean you get out of chores,” she said to the group as she began to strip the parts and clean it. “Taking care of your dragon takes a great deal of time, but there is always work to be done at the Weyr when that is done.”

“And who guards Fantith and her eggs while you’re doing chores?” Jared asked. The others looked askance at him but Jared had always been curious and Danneel full well knew it. If she’d wanted to keep a distance from the Candidates and not be seen as the woman she was, she wouldn’t have sat next to Jared.

“M’sha and his bronze are in the Hatching cavern. There are only so many days I can spend going through musty old records before I need a break and a little sun. I suppose I should be grateful to you, Jared. If you hadn’t taught me to read while I was at the Harper Hall, I wouldn’t even have that respite in the Hatching cavern. I love Fantith, but I am not a dragon that can stay inside stone walls and stare forever at a clutch of eggs.”

Jared laughed. Danneel was older than he was but as a kitchen drudge she hadn’t been given much education. She knew the teaching songs as well as anyone, but that was it. Her days were spent baking and cleaning and taking orders from the Harper Hall’s Headwoman. When they were still at the Crafthall, Jared had spent time in the evenings teaching her to read. He’d thought it remarkable how fast she’d picked up on the language, and over the turns her handwriting had become so clear and crisp that he’d thought to mention her to the scribes at the hall. She’d been searched before he did.

“Weyrwoman Danneel,” J’mes gave a small bow to her and she acknowledged him with a smile and a tilt of her head. “To all of you who think your past lives make you too good for cleaning and drudgery, just remember this:” he said as he pointed to Danneel, “the Weyr works because we all do our part, and when someone can’t do theirs, we pick up the slack.”

Danneel nodded appreciatively at the Weyrlingmaster’s words and Jared smiled at her. Alona and Jake sat close by Jared. He wasn’t surprised when they began to engage in small talk with the Weyrwoman. Jared had told them about her, about the girl he’d known, and though there was some stammering, they got over their fear of speaking to the Junior Weyrwoman. The afternoon was much brighter for her help and her laughter. She spoke of her experiences in the Weyr and brought J’mes into the conversation as well. More than once they had laughed at anecdotes they told about previous weyrlings and Candidates. Jared couldn’t remember a more enjoyable afternoon of chores.

**

<<2 days later>>
“What is that?” Colin asked as a humming noise surrounded them in the Candidate’s quarters.

Although he asked, Colin knew what it was. So did Jared and all the other Candidates who had witnessed a Hatching before. It might be their first Hatching at Ista but Jared had spent two turns at Fort Weyr as he waited to Impress. The humming of the dragons was unmistakable.

“It’s time,” Jared said as he looked over at Alona.

“Where are our robes?” Osric asked as he sat up in bed.

“Rise and shine, ladies and gentlemen,” the Weyrlingmaster called out as he entered the room. One of the women from the lower caverns came in with a stack of white robes and began to hand them out to the Candidates.

Behind them was T’moh, the Weyrlingmaster Second - his brown, Halth, was almost as big as a bronze, and Jared had spent more than a little time idolizing the rider. He was kind and patient and he usually came by the Candidate’s barracks just before lights out to see if there was anything about their day’s learning that the Candidates had questions about. Sometimes he just came to check on them, but he’d been known to spend hours talking about their day’s lessons when it was needed.

There was chaos as the Candidates tried to get ready, but Jared knew that it would be even worse out in the Weyr Caverns - riders would be scrambling to pick up the people who had been invited to attend the Hatching and the Lower Cavern workers would be cooking up a storm to prepare a feast for the Weyr to celebrate their numbers. It was a bigger event than usual since there was a gold egg on the sands.

Jared wanted to find J’sen and talk to him one more time, try to get some advice on what to do. Jared had been on the sands for two turns but J’sen had only been on the sands the one time. Surely he had some idea why he had been chosen so quickly. It was too late now though as Jared took his Candidate robe and pulled it over his head.

As they all finished, J’mes led them away from the barracks to the Hatching Grounds. The humming that had woken them had grown steadily as the dragons at the upper reaches of the cavern continued their song. Jared wondered if it was a welcome to the new dragonets or if there was something more to it. He thought that, try as hard as he might, he’d never be able to pen a song that would give credit to the magnificence of the moment.

J’mes stopped them outside the grounds and Jared took advantage of his height to peer into the other room. At ground level, the eggs were nestled safely in the sands, but beyond that were the stands full of people. Riders that weren’t needed to ferry visitors into the Weyr had already begun to take seats around the Hatching Sands. At the far edge was the ledge where Queen Fantith watched over her eggs. Beside her was her rider, along with the bronze who had fathered the clutch and his rider, M’sha.

The Weyrlingmaster called them together and Jared pulled his eyes away from the Hatching Grounds.

“You all know what to do,” J’mes said. “You know what to do if you are lucky enough to Impress today. Keep your wits about you out there and no one will get hurt. Remember, these dragonets will focus on their rider and will push everyone else out of the way. If you stand between them, they will use force. You are here to find your dragon, not stand between someone else and theirs.”

It was a scary speech, considering what they were about to face, but Danneel had told Jared some
of the horror stories about a past Hatching where a Lord Holder’s son thought to Impress a bronze that had clearly chosen someone else. They said the warning to keep it from happening again. Jared just felt grateful that most of the Candidates he’d trained with were fairly level-headed.

He felt a hand slip into his and he smiled at Alona. Katie, a Candidate from Ista Weyr, stood right beside her. Alona and Katie had become close friends and Jared was fond of her as well. Jake crowded next to them with Colin and Osric close by. Jared hoped they’d all find their dragons today, but he knew it was too much to hope. They all deserved it, though. They were good people; the sort of people you trusted when times were hard. If Jared could choose the people he went into Thread with, it would be those five.

“Good luck, Candidates,” T’moh said as J’mes stepped out of the entranceway.

They hurried onto the sands and began to make a loose circle around the eggs. The girls formed a circle around the gold egg. It wasn’t the only dragon they might Impress but the Weyr wanted to give the little Queen a wide variety to choose from.

Jared hopped from foot to foot on the hot sands and wondered once again why they weren’t allowed shoes. No one could answer that one for him. He could understand keeping with tradition but holding to tradition just for tradition’s sake seemed silly.

The humming seemed to reach a peak as the eggs around them began to move. They shifted from side to side as the dragonets inside began to try to break free from their shells. A few minutes passed as they looked from egg to egg before a large crack appeared in one of the larger ones in the center. The crack formed a circle all around the top of the egg before a dragon head burst through the top. As its wings stretched the shell cracked down the center in two, and a bronze dragon stepped free from the shards.

A cheer went up from the audience. It was good luck to have a bronze hatch first, and Jared smiled up into the stands where Danneel stood proudly with M’sha at her side. Another egg cracked and Jared’s eyes came back to the Hatching sands.

The bronze hobbled its way across the over-warm, gritty ground, quickly. It tripped over its wingtips and almost fell before Osric righted him. The dragon stared at Osric and then Osric let out a laugh. “His name is Cortanth,” he said in awe.

A green broke through next and soon the eggs were hatching too fast for Jared to see them all. Greens and blues, browns and bronzes cracked through their shells and found their waiting riders.

Jared looked up at the girls to see Katie get head butted in the knee by a little green. She fell onto her knees in the sand and turned in time to find the little green burrow its way into her arms.

Colin led a brown off the sands to where the meat that had been prepared waited for them to feed the hungry dragonets. A brown came stumbling over towards Jared, but when Jake took a step forward, Jared could see that the other boy had claim on the dragon.

He was so happy for his friends, but Jared couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret that he wasn’t going to find a dragon this time. There were a few eggs left on the sands, so Jared didn’t give up hope yet, but he couldn’t help but worry.

In the back of the Hatching sands, the gold egg began to rock, as if she had waited until she could have all the attention. The gold egg didn’t show any signs of cracks but suddenly exploded in a shower of shards. He saw one of the girls clutch her arm and hoped she hadn’t been hurt by the shell. They’d been warned not to step on the sharp edged remains as they made their way barefoot
The gold dragonet raised her head high. She seemed to possess a calm that had been missing in the other dragons as they stumbled to find their riders. She looked over the girls around her and took a step forward. The girls closest to the queen took a step back. Apparently J’mes’ story had been enough to cause them concern. The gold continued to walk until she was past the circle of female Candidates. Jared was so entranced by the perfect little queen that he almost missed the blue dragon that charged into Alona. Alona gave a cry of joy at the connection and Jared couldn’t help but give an encouraging whoop for his friend.

The gold dragon stared at the audience around her but his cry brought her eyes to him. He couldn’t help but wonder who would get to Impress the beauty. There was an almost red tint to the gold of her scales around her wingtips and along her wingsail. She was perfectly proportioned and she already had a regal bearing. She would be a strong queen, a good leader, Jared thought as he watched her.

Yes, we shall be.

“What?”

We shall be a strong pair, you and I.

Jared looked around like the voice in his head could possibly be directed at someone else. There was amusement in the back of his head and for the first time he felt the press of another consciousness in his mind.

“Me?” he asked in shock. It wasn’t possible. In all the history of the Weyr’s no man had ever Impressed a Queen.

Of course you. I am Aloqueth and you are mine.

You’re supposed to pick a girl!

Why?

Jared had no answer for that.

I see what you mean about the sands. They should let you wear shoes. Perhaps we should leave the sands and you can find me something to eat.

Jared stumbled forward then, horrified that he’d forgotten she would need food. He reached a hand out and touched Aloqueth’s eye-ridge. Her eyes began to whirl in blues and greens. “Alright, it’s just over this way,” Jared said as he led Aloqueth to the other newly Impressed weyrlings.

Jared didn’t look around to see anyone’s reaction to his Impression. He was too caught in her presence to notice.

When he left the sands, J’mes was there with a raised brow and a shake of his head. “I’m going to tell them to stop searching Harper Hall. They always send us trouble.”

Jared opened his mouth to speak but J’mes smiled at him then gave a nod to his dragon. His dragon. “What is her name?”

“Aloqueth.”
“She is a beauty, Jared. Welcome, Aloqueth.”

I like him, Aloqueth said as they were led to a seat and someone handed Jared a bucket of meat.

Good thing. We’ll be spending a lot of time with the Weyrlingmaster for the next turn and a half.

Why? She asked as she snatched some wherry meat from his hands.

Manners! Jared said and she looked up sheepishly at him. He’ll be training us. He’ll teach me how to take care of you.

I definitely like him.

Jared laughed as he continued to feed her chunks of meat until her belly was full. He scratched her eye ridge and remembered about the oiling before she could complain. He got a pot of oil and a paddle from T’moh and began to slather the oil over her freshly dried scales.

She was nearly asleep when Jared finished and he looked up to find the Weyrleaders standing over him.

“Weyrleaders,” he started to stand up but Aloqueth pushed him back down with her snout. She preferred to lie on his lap than on the cold floor.

“Jared, it seems like you are going to be troubling us a while longer,” J’frey, rider of bronze Esith said. His words were kind, though, and there was a light in his eyes that seemed to imply the Weyrleader actually liked troublemakers. Not that Jared tried to be one.

Samantha, Sr. Weyrwoman, stooped down to Jared’s level and smiled. “What’s her name?”

“Aloqueth,” he said softly as he looked down at her. “I’m sorry, she’s rather sleepy or I’d give you a proper introduction.”

You should wake up to meet them, Jared admonished.

I can meet them tomorrow. Are we going to sleep on the cold floor?

Jared let out a soft laugh then tried to straighten his expression. “I’m so sorry. She’s just…”

“We all understand, Jared,” Danneel said as she came over and sat next to him on the ground. “We all went through this too.”

“Is it always so… encompassing?”

The others laughed and Jared waited. “Yes,” Danneel said. “You’ll get used to it though; I promise.”

The Weyrleaders smiled again at him and J’frey gave him a small nod. “We will speak with you tomorrow, Jared. I would say welcome to our newest Weyrwoman, but we are obviously going to have to find a more suitable title for you. For now, I will simply say, welcome to our newest goldrider. If you have any needs, let us know.”

The Weyrleadership walked past him then and began to welcome the other new riders, but Danneel stayed.

“She wants to know if we’re sleeping on the floor.”
Danneel smiled fondly. “I’m sure J’mes has other arrangements made for you.”

“I do indeed,” J’mes said as he came up beside them, “which you already know from lessons, I’m sure.”

*Come on, Jared said to Aloqueth. Time to find our bed.*

*If we must,* she said sleepily. Jared smiled, but as he tried to stand she let him up. He followed J’mes to the Weyrling barracks and stumbled into the bed beside his beautiful gold. It was a fresh morning, but Jared was too tired to try to fight the need to sleep with his dragon.

When he closed his eyes, his only thought was how proud Danneel and J’sen would be of him, and how he was going to do right by his dragon.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

One of these days, everyone would stop watching him so closely. One of these days, they’ll all stop waiting for him to fail.

After their nap, Jared and the other new weyrlings spent time with their mates. Weyrlingmaster J’mes and his second, T’moh made the rounds to talk to each of them and see that their dragons had been properly fed and well oiled. The weyr didn’t suffer fools, J’mes had taught them quickly enough in candidate training, and it suffered foolish riders even less.

With their dragons well stuffed from a second meal, the newest weyrlings left their dragons sleeping to go out to join the feast that had begun in their honor. There were lords from all over the Northern Continent, not just those beholden to Ista Weyr. Jared recognized a few from his time in the Harper Hall, but he recognized the shoulder knots of five of the main Holds and a half dozen smaller ones.

At the head table, Jared saw the Weyrleaders from Fort, High Reaches, and Telgar had come to join in their festivities.

“Someday, you’ll be sitting at that table,” Alona said as she came to sit beside him at the weyrling tables. Jared looked down at his plate, grateful for her friendship. He’d been sitting alone, no one sure of what to make of him yet.

“I can’t get my head around that thought,” he admitted.

“Neither can we,” J’ke said as he sat across from Alona. “We get to say we knew him when he was a lowly candidate….”

Jared let out a laugh at that and his tension dissipated. He had no idea what was in store for him, but he knew not everyone would embrace him as a gold rider. He had a few friends, at least.

“I can’t believe we all impressed at the same time,” Jared confided. “Where are O’sric and C’lin?”

“They’re both still staring at their dragons, all goo-goo eyed,” Katie said as she approached the table. “Can I join you, um, what should I call you?”

“Jared?” he asked.

She let out a deep breath when he nodded and she took a seat next to J’ke. “Those two are so besotted with their dragons. I think J’mes is going to have to force them out of the weyrling barracks to go eat.”

“It’s kinda crazy, isn’t it?” he asked. He could feel Aloqueth in the back of his head, her gentle slumber soothing his nerves. “I’ve listened to all the stories, told more than a few myself, but nothing seems to do it justice, does it?”

Katie smiled at him and J’ke’s eyes took a faraway look that Jared thought might mean he was speaking with his dragon. Alona bumped his shoulder and nodded. “Guess you’ll have to try to
write your own songs about it now.”

“Right, because I’m sure J’mes and T’moh will leave us plenty of spare time for that.”

They ate their meal quickly after that as the excitement and newness wore off to the practicality of empty bellies. Riders stopped by to congratulate them and pass on bits of wisdom to them, or just to make themselves known. C’lin made it to the table while they were still eating but O’sric was actually led out by T’moh. The Weyrlingmaster 2nd led him firmly to the table and set food in front of him, but there was a fond smile on his face as he did so.

Harpers filled the hall with music and Jared listened as Master Richard led them through song after song about the weyrs and the majesty of their dragons. Master Richard was an adequate singer, but he was an amazing story teller and Jared had found himself captivated by the harper on more than one occasion. He was truly gifted.

“Jared, I’m afraid I need to borrow you for a moment,” Danneel broke him from his enjoyment of the harper with her words.

“Weyrwoman,” he said as he looked up at her. She smiled, but he could see that this wasn’t a personal visit. Her warmth was there, but her smile was forced. “Of course.”

She stepped back and he realized she wanted him to follow. As they stepped away from the table, she spoke quietly. “Some of the other weyr leaders wanted to meet you. Your Impression has left them … well … shocked is the best word for it I suppose.”

Jared had been too wrapped up in his own experience with Aloqueth but at her words he realized a hush had fallen on the people around them. The harpers tried their best to keep the music going, but all eyes in the cavern had fallen on Jared as he walked up to the Weyrleader’s table.

“Just be yourself, Jared. No one who knows you could possibly hate you,” She encouraged him with a small smile.

It was real and Jared couldn’t help but smile back at her. “Right. Just be me.”

Why wouldn’t you be? Aloqueth asked sleepily. She wasn’t truly awake. Jared wondered if she’d felt his concern and woke or if it was just a coincidence but it made him feel better to hear her voice in his head.

I’m going to meet the Weyrleaders of three other weyrs. It’s a bit intimidating, he informed her.

She huffed away his concern and he felt her drift back to sleep again. He laughed in spite of himself.

“Aloqueth?” Danneel asked.

He nodded, with a smile. “She was unimpressed with my worries about the weyrleaders.”

Danneel’s smile grew. “The good thing about dragons is they always remind you of what’s important.”

They were at the head table then and Danneel had brought him to stand directly in front of J’frey and Samantha. He’d spoke briefly with them after his Impression but it was different to see them in this setting. They’d always seemed kind to him, though they could be stern when needed.

“Weyrleaders,” he said with a bow of his head.
J’frey and Samantha both smiled at him and he relaxed a little more. “Jared, how fares Aloqueth?” J’frey asked.

“She’s very full and happily asleep at the moment,” Jared said, unable to respond without a smile when he was talking about his dragon.

“She is a beauty, Jared,” Samantha said, as if they were old friends. “Trust J’mes and T’moh to teach you the right way to care for her and I think she’ll be something special.”

“She would have to be, wouldn’t she?” One of the other weyrleaders said from down the table. “She has already proven to be unorthodox. A male rider when she had the choice of so many prime females?”

“T’mothy, do you doubt the dragon’s choice?” the Weyrwoman to his right asked.

“Never, my dear Gen, but it is something new and I can’t help but wonder what it portents.”

“Jared, may I introduce you to Weyrleader T’mothy and Weyrwoman Genevieve of Fort Weyr,” Danneel said.

“Not so formal, Danneel. Jared was a candidate with us for two turns,” T’mothy said as he directed a grisly smile at Jared. The man appeared a beast, with a glower that would make most turn and run in the other direction, but underneath that was a man with a kind heart and a truly gentle spirit.

“Nothing against your Impression, I am happy to have been here to witness it,” he continued, “but I’ll be honest and tell you I had hoped to see you reach your Mastery and return to Fort Weyr as a harper.”

“What would you do with Master Rob, then?” Jared asked.

“I could probably send him out to sing to the dragons. They seem as enthralled with him as he is with them,” T’mothy answered.

Jared laughed and it felt good. He’d almost forgotten how friendly T’mothy had been with him at Fort. He’d allowed Jared to continue working on his studies in his very limited spare time and he’d been able to walk the tables to become a Journeyman Harper at Fort Weyr. He’d never be a Master now, but he had enjoyed Fort Weyr.

“I’m afraid you’ll be stuck with him for a while longer then. My duties to Ista Weyr and Aloqueth will probably take up too much time to work on my harper training.”

“Jared, this is Weyrleader F’ed and Weyrwoman Amanda, from High Reaches. And this is S’ling and Ruth from Telgar Weyr.”

Jared nodded his head in greeting, “Thank you for your attendance today. You honor us.”

“Give Aloqueth our greetings, young rider,” Amanda said though Jared felt no warmth from her words. F’ed stared at him openly and Jared wondered if his Impression would cause a strain on the relationship between Ista and High Reaches Weyr.

S’ling seemed to stare at him with open curiosity and his weyrwoman, Ruth, smiled with amusement. He wasn’t sure what to think of that, but he looked back to J’frey and Samantha. “If you would excuse me, Weyrleaders, Aloqueth is waking and I feel the need to attend to her.”

He waited until he had their approval before he said his good byes to the other weyrleaders and
headed past the tables. Aloqueth was still sleeping but he doubted anyone would fault him for his need to leave.

He was at the last table when a rider stopped him with a hand to the wall. Jared had been so focused on walking calmly out of the room that he hadn’t seen the rider move to intercept him. He looked up at the brown rider who had stopped him.

He was an older rider, someone Jared had seen around Danneel from time to time. Danneel never seemed happy in his company but she’d never mentioned him to Jared before either.

“What did you do, boy? How did you get a Queen to choose you against her very nature?”

“What?”

“We all know you were allowed to go into the sands alone. What did you and that Goldrider do to get this to happen?”

Jared might have been worried about the man’s words, but the implication that Danneel would do anything to one of her eggs set his hackles to rise. “Danneel is a good Weyrwoman who would never do anything to jeopardize the dragons of her weyr. To say so is preposterous.”

“You aren’t a weyrwoman. No man can be. You aren’t a rider or your name would have changed. You’re just an imposter. And I’m going to find out what you did and fix it.”

A body came up behind Jared and as much as he hated the feeling of being boxed in, he didn’t dare turn his back on M’tch.

“Back off, M’tch. This isn’t the time or place.”

Jared nearly sagged in relief at J’sen’s voice behind him but he stood his ground as he watched M’tch. The man sneered at him as he looked him over, then walked away. Jared let out a shuttered breath but when he turned to say thank you to J’sen, the bronze rider was gone.

He looked back up towards the head table and saw that J’frey had been aware of the intense scene even if he hadn’t been able to hear the words spoken. Jared gave him a polite smile before he headed back to the barracks to take comfort in his queen.

**

The next day went by in a flurry of chores and classes. When the others got to take a break, Jared was pulled away for meetings with the Weyr leaders. A Queen was cherished by the Weyr, and her rider was always a leader among their kind. Jared didn’t fit in as a weyrwoman exactly but he was chosen by his little Queen, and the Weyr Leaders weren’t about to let anyone show any disrespect to an Ista Queen rider. There had apparently been some grumbling in the Hatching Cavern and more concerns at the feast that Jared had missed. The Weyr leaders were very supportive of Jared though and he felt lucky, once again, to be at Ista Weyr.

He was paraded around to every person of interest in the Weyr, and when that was done, he was finally allowed to seek the comfort of the Weyrling Barracks. He collapsed on top of his blankets and might have fallen asleep if he hadn’t had one last thought. He hadn’t talked to J’sen. Not all day long. They hadn’t exchanged words since before the hatching.
He tried to close his eyes and sleep but he couldn’t. Of all the people he had expected to see, J’sen would have been the first. He knew J’sen had duties, but he could have at least given Jared a moment at the feast, once M’tch had walked away. Jared tried not to let the hurt show, but J’sen was his best friend and he had no idea why the bronzerider hadn’t come to see him. It had been a busy day but most of the Weyr had made an excuse to see him at some point. Everyone wanted to pay their respects to the newest Queenrider, especially the wingleaders. So why was J’sen the exception?

*Why are you upset, Rider?* Aloqueth asked.

He sat up straight in his bed and Aloqueth looked up, her eyes slowly swirling yellow in annoyance.

*It’s nothing,* Jared said as he tried to placate her. It was something they’d been warned about. Young dragons were emotionally immature. Too strong an emotional reaction from their rider could cause trouble for the dragonet.

*No, it’s not nothing. It’s something. Why are you upset?*

She butted her head against his knee, and Jared sighed as he reached down and scratched at her eye ridge. *You’re going to get too big to do that, you know? You’ll try to knock into my knee and knock me down instead. But that’s okay, because we’re all we need, right? You and me?*

*Always,* the little Queen answered. Her eyes started to turn red and Jared could feel her confusion. *So why are you still upset?*

“Excuse me, Jared?”

Jared looked up from Aloqueth to find T’moh smiling down at him. It was a welcoming smile and Jared felt himself calmed by the other man’s presence. Jared wondered if J’mes had trained the man as a Weyrlingmaster Second because of that calming influence, or if his time working with weyrlings had given him that quality. Jared shook his head at the way his mind tried to shy away from his concerns about J’sen.

“What can I do for you, Weyrlingmaster T’moh?” Jared asked. He didn’t think he was in trouble. It wasn’t his fault that he’d been called away from his first day of weyrling training as often as he had been. Except for the part where it was, because the Weyr leaders wanted to make sure that everyone knew that Jared, even though he was male, had their full support as their newest Queen rider.

“Tough day?” T’moh asked as he sat in the empty bed across from Jared.

Jared let out a tired laugh. “I’ve hardly had time to think today until I finally found my bed.”

“And as soon as you did, Aloqueth began to swirl her eyes in alarm.”

“Annoyance I think, not really alarm.”

“She spoke to Halth and asked for help in calming you.”

Jared’s eyes widened. “Sir, I am so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I hope she does call again, if she needs help. It’s what we’re here for. We’re all worried about you Jared. Not that you won’t make a fine rider, because I’ve rarely seen a Candidate come into
these Barracks that had more of an intuitive understanding of the Weyr than you do. But Aloqueth’s choice has put you in a position we wouldn’t wish on anyone. You know there have been grumblings about your Impression to our queen. It will put more pressure on you than any of the others. Right now you are both vulnerable, and anything that upsets you can be damaging to Aloqueth.”

“How, exactly?” Jared asked. “I know we’ve heard it before, keeping an even head about us and all that, but how is my emotional reaction something that would hurt her? I’d never hurt her.”

“No one would willingly hurt their own dragon, Jared. It isn’t an intentional thing. You know we tell you in Candidate classes that dragonets don’t understand human emotions. While the bond is still young, they count on their riders to help them navigate those emotions. When they come across something particularly strong it confuses them and because their rider is compromised, they aren’t as good at calming them down.”

T’moh closed his eyes in thought and when he opened them, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “A while back we had a Candidate come into the Weyr. He was really smart and funny. He seemed to take his change in surroundings completely in stride. He’d never been to a Weyr before, but after a single day here he seemed to know the run of things better than a weyrbrat. I’ve never seen anyone learn the Ista tunnels quicker,” he said with a grin.

Jared laughed at that because there was no counting the number of times Jared and his friends had been lost in the caverns while they’d been Candidates. He still wasn’t sure he wouldn’t get lost again.

“The clutch Hatched on his third day as a Candidate. He was shuffled out onto the Sands with everyone else and he was the first rider picked that day. He came back, fed his dragonet and oiled him up. And as soon as he sat down with his dragonet, everything turned to chaos. He’d had someone special back home. You see, he never thought he’d actually Impress a dragon and he was suddenly faced with the fact that he was a dragonrider. He would never go back to the life he’d had before. To the person he’d left behind. He got so worked up that his dragon began to panic, also.”

“What happened?”

“His dragon tried to go between.”

“But, he couldn’t, right? They can’t fly this young.”

“A dragonet can’t carry a rider’s weight, but they are born with the instinct to fly. Who is to say what the dragonet would have done, if the Queen hadn’t been aware of his alarm? She calmed the dragonet before there was a disaster, but it took quite some time to calm the rider enough to understand what had happened. We were able to get him to calm down but it was two weeks before the Senior Queen stopped constantly monitoring the pair. It was a mess.”

“How could you be so upset when you’d just Impressed a dragon?” Jared asked.

“Why are you so upset that Aloqueth called to us?” T’moh turned the question around.

Jared let out a deep breath and thought about the Candidate T’moh had mentioned instead of his own feelings. He didn’t want to hurt his dragonet. “I just … I can’t imagine. I mean, I love Aloqueth. I can’t imagine leaving her behind for someone else.”

“Neither could he. His distress came from knowing he would never see that person again. That
the life he thought they’d have together was gone forever.”

“Surely, he could have talked to the girl and made her understand. If he loved her so much—”

“I don’t know what he did to come to terms with it in the end, but I want you to understand, Jared. What you feel affects her very deeply. And as a Queen, what she feels gets directed at the other dragonets as well. You above all others will have to keep your emotions in check.”

“Because she’s a Queen.”

“Yes.”

“And more so again because I’m male.”

“Yes. You will be judged harshly for everything you do because the more hidebound of us will not be able to understand why Aloqueth chose a male rider. Aloqueth may have made your path more difficult Jared, but do not fear. She chose well when she chose you.”

Jared gave T’moh a small smile. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“J’sen? Rider of Strith? We were friends. I know it’s been a crazy day, but I thought he’d at least stop by and…” he trailed off because he didn’t know how to finish the sentence anymore and he didn’t want to upset Aloqueth.

T’moh smiled. “There were many riders who stopped to say hello to the new Weyrlings while you were called away with the Weyrleader and the Weyrwoman. Perhaps J’sen stopped in while you were away and wasn’t able to return later? I know J’sen, and when he isn’t fighting Thread he’s drilling his Wing harder than any other wingleader I know.”

“Really?”

“He got his position when the previous wingleader was caught by Thread and went between. There might have been other riders with more experience, but J’sen knew his Wing and he knew how to make them fly. His first few Falls after his promotion were hard, and every time Thread scored a rider or dragon in his Wing it seemed a personal offense to him. He learned to handle the job quickly, but he still drills his men like no other. They hate him for it when they see the others come back candlemarks before they do, but they love him for it when Thread falls and they have the fewest casualties.”

“Thank you. I know it isn’t important but it just bothered me. Aloqueth picked up on that I guess.”

“It will take time for you and Aloqueth to learn how to be together, Jared. You have a strong bond with her already but that will continue to grow. Don’t worry. You won’t always have to be so guarded. As she grows older, she’ll get used to your emotions. She’ll hardly acknowledge them and when she does she’ll be better able to understand. For now, get some sleep. And let me know if there is anything else you need, Queenrider.”

Jared watched T’moh leave and finally let out a deep breath. Aloqueth must have decided he was fine because she was asleep now and Jared let himself relax against her warm hide. He fell asleep instantly.
Jared fell into the routine of weyrling life quickly enough. His schedule was a little different than the others since he had to learn other things as well. Samantha and Danneel pulled him aside to talk about things like diplomacy and record keeping. He sat in with J'frey and learned about Threadfall charts and the importance of the different members of the weyr.

It kept him busy and most nights he didn’t have time to wonder about J’sen. He saw the rider around the weyr, but it never seemed to be at a time when Jared could speak with him. On the occasion when Jared tried to follow him after a wingleader meeting, J’frey or Samantha always seemed to need his help or had somewhere else they needed him to be. He’d think it was a conspiracy if he didn’t know just how busy everyone was.

Running a weyr was no easy feat and with Threadfall it was even harder.

So Jared continued to wonder about J’sen but he never had the time to do anything about. Except late at night, when he finally found his sleeping furs, and he thought back to that last encounter. J’sen never denounced M’tch’s words. He never said that Jared hadn’t done anything to influence the hatching. While he had stopped M’tch from making a scene in front of the weyr and the visiting Weyrleaders, he’d never actually defended Jared.

That kept him awake more nights than he wanted to admit.

Jared stared around the infirmary to see if there was anything out of place. He was assigned to be with the dragonhealers during Threadfall. Whether it was because he’d always helped there as a candidate, or because they wanted to keep Aloqueth close to the healers in case anything happened he didn’t know, but Jared was grateful for the familiarity of it. His first Fall since he’d Impressed Aloqueth was daunting, and in his head he kept thinking that someday soon it would be them in the skies.

That someday wasn’t for more than another Turn but it was their future.

“Everything looks in order,” Kim, the Master Dragonhealer said to Jared as he caught her eye.

He nodded. “If there is anything Aloqueth can help with, she’s ready.”

Kim nodded. “Just make sure you take care of her if you need to, Jared. You’ve always been a boon to us during Threadfall, but if it becomes too much, you take care of your dragonet.”

Jared nodded. “I will.”

Kim nodded but was called away a moment later by one of the journeymen, and Jared decided to run to the back to grab another handful of towels. They’d need more before it was all done. He was in the back storeroom when he heard his name called.

“Back here!” he called out. His arms were full as he turned around to the door and nearly dropped them in surprise.
“J’sen?”

J’sen bowed his head quickly. “Queenrider,” he said the title with a stiffness that Jared hadn’t seen since they’d first met at the Harper Hall.

“My name is still Jared,” he said shortly.

J’sen stared at him for a moment, and Jared had no idea what to say.

“I just … before Fall starts, I needed … I’m happy for you, Jared. I know the circumstances are hard, but you’re going to do amazing things for the Weyr and … I’m proud of you.”

“Was that really so hard that it took you three weeks to say?”

Jared wanted the words back as soon as he said them and J’sen flinched. “Jared, I don’t have an excuse. I just … take care of her. She’s beautiful. You deserve her.” He looked away and Jared knew it was Strith. “I have to go. I’m sorry, I should have come sooner but I need to get to my Wing.”

“Of course. Be safe, Wingleader.”

“You too, Queenrider.”

J’sen left as abruptly as he’d shown up and Jared wasn’t sure what to think of the exchange.

**

It was bad. The winds were strong above Ista Hold and Thread fell without pattern or form. Three riders had been sent to the infirmary with nasty threadburns but as usual, they’d refused to leave the dragon infirmary until their dragons had been cared for. They were through the majority of fall and they’d managed so far without any deaths. There were never enough dragons and each and every one was needed during Threadfall.

“Doing alright, Queenrider?” M’sha asked. He’d flown one of his wingmates into the weyr. The wingsail had been hit by a huge clump of Thread. Aloqueth was already talking to bronze Proth to keep him calm.

“Find me after Fall and ask, M’sha,” Jared said tersely, “then ask me. I’m too busy for coddling.”

M’sha laughed and Jared gave him a small smile. M’sha was allowed a little leeway since his Donath had sired Aloqueth but Jared was really tired of answering that question.

“You heard him, flyboy,” Kim, the Master Dragonhealer said. “Make way for people who actually need some help.”

It was kindly said, but no one gainsaid Kim in her infirmary. Or anywhere else for that matter. “Call us if you need us,” M’sha said, then he was out the front of the cavern to join Donath in the battle with Thread.

Jared noticed M’rk then as Kim pushed him out of her way to get a better look at his Bronze’s injuries.

“Are you well, Bronzerider?” Jared said as he turned to the rider of Proth. Proth’s rider was older but he had a very reserved bearing. He’d transferred from High Reaches long before Jared had
been searched and while M’rk never spoke ill of his former weyr, it was obvious that he was happy in Ista.

“I’m not hurt.”

Jared gave the rider a skin of water that had some fellis in it. It wasn’t enough to knock him out, but it would help the nerves if nothing else. “Aloqueth said Proth is a hero.”

“Proth tipped to the side to keep me from getting hit. If he hadn’t, that Thread would have been the end of me.”

“Glad to have you both with us still,” Jared said as he grinned at the Bronzerider.

“Jared, come help me,” Kim called out.

M’rk followed him and they began the delicate work of helping to care for Proth’s wingsail.

It was hard work and made worse by the continued interruptions as needed hands were drawn to other places. Aloqueth kept a steady dialogue with Proth to keep the dragon still and Jared commended her for her efforts throughout. She, in turn, complemented his ability to keep working when everyone kept asking him how he was doing. She could feel his annoyance turn to frustration as everyone continued to check up on them. Like Jared wasn’t strong enough to help out in the infirmary. Like Aloqueth wasn’t strong enough to help. Like he’d fail and lose something as precious as Aloqueth to the stress of Threadfall.

When Proth was properly slathered with numbweed, sewn up, and bandaged to the best of their ability, she was sent to sleep, with M’rk at her side.

Jared envied them the ability to sleep but it wasn’t time for them to quit yet. Kim smiled at him over a bowl of water where they washed their hands together. “Still up for more?” She asked.

It wasn’t patronizing coming from Kim. Working with the Dragon healers during Threadfall was exhausting and she’d asked everyone if they needed breaks throughout the Fall. She always did, even before he’d Impressed. Not that she’d take one herself.

Jared smiled his best, tired smile at her. “As long as they’re still coming, we’re still ready,” he said.

*Bring ‘em to me*, Aloqueth agreed. His Queen might be too little to take to the skies yet, but her hatred of Thread was as fierce as her full grown brethren and she was ready to do whatever she could.

“Aloqueth is ready too.”

“She’s a good girl, Jared,” Kim said with a smile before they heard a racket at the front of the weyr. “Oh, shard it all. Let’s see what that was.”

**

Thread Fall ended and Jared kept working. He knew the weyrlings who had been helping with the other areas of the weyr would be back in the barracks already but Jared wouldn’t leave, not while
he could be of help. C’lin showed up after Fall had ended to lend a hand as well. He’d apparently been apprenticed to a healer and could at least apply numbweed properly and was able to run and grab supplies as needed.

Two candlemarks after Fall, the dragon infirmary was finally quiet.

Jared sat with his back on the wall, too tired to get up just yet. Kim had handed him a skin of water and he’d slid down, took a few drinks, and not gotten up. Aloqueth ambled up alongside him and sat with him, her head pillowed on his lap.

I’m too tired to go back to the barracks to sleep, she declared. She’d let me sleep here.

Jared let out a tired laugh. She might let you sleep here, but she’d kick me out. You going to stay here by yourself?

He could feel Aloqueth’s pout. No. Everyone would ask questions and you are already too upset about everyone’s questions.

She’d gotten over some of her fussiness about Jared’s reaction to things but his Queen picked up on too much of his irritation with the weyr. It wasn’t that he thought everyone wanted them to fail, but they were watched constantly. M’tch wasn’t the only one to imply that Jared had forced Aloqueth to choose him and Jared wasn’t sure he’d ever hear the end of it. Some people were just too hidebound to allow new ideas and Jared now represented anything new.

He dropped his head back to the wall and closed his eyes. You were amazing today. I know everyone was concerned about how you’d hold up under Fall in the dragon infirmary, but you proved to them that you can handle anything.

I know.

Jared laughed again but it sounded off even to his own ear.

One of these days everyone would stop asking how he was doing. One of these days, everyone would stop watching him so closely. One of these days, they’ll all stop waiting for him to fail.

**

Jared let out a deep breath as he tried to reel in his temper. He didn’t get angry often but he was frustrated with the way half the weyr was right in his face, ready to see him fail. And J’sen had sent his wing second, once again, in his place at the Wingleader meeting. He was still avoiding Jared.

“Shard it all!” Jared said as he grabbed the Threadfall chart off the table and started to roll it up.

“That bad a meeting?”

Jared turned sharply and nearly dropped the chart as the Weyrleader walked into the room. In the month since his Impression of Aloqueth he still hadn’t gotten used to the visits from the Weyrleader or the Weyrwoman.

“J’frey,” he tripped over his own tongue to say the name, but he’d been admonished enough times
to stop saying Weyrleader every time they spoke. “No, it wasn’t a bad meeting, really.”

“Which one?”

“What?”

“Which wingleader bothered you?”

“No one,” Jared answered. “No one said anything or did anything inappropriate.”

“But-“

“But even though I’m just here to observe the meetings and learn from them, I feel like everyone is waiting for me to do something wrong. To prove that I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Jared, you know that Samantha and I believe in you.”

“Thank you,” Jared said with a deep breath. It was true, and he knew it. Samantha and J’frey had spent more than enough time with Jared to convince him that they saw his worth to the Weyr. Danneel had been there every step of the way too. It was the rest of the Weyr that judged him. It was a certain Wingleader who kept finding legitimate reasons to send his Wing Second to meetings instead of being in the same room with Jared for more than perfunctory congratulations and a hasty retreat.

“I was already aware of how lucky I was to come to Ista Weyr before I Impressed Aloqueth. The support you and Samantha have given me has been incredible. I’m not sure I’d have survived this long without it.”

“Nonsense. Ista Queens don’t choose weak riders,” J’frey said with a smile. “Which is part of what I wanted to speak with you about, actually.”

“So this wasn’t a social call.”

“Did I need to say that?”

Jared laughed. “No. I’ve learned well enough that the Weyrleader and Weyrwoman are too busy for social visits very often. Especially during a Pass.”

J’frey nodded. “Have you heard the latest rumors?”

Jared sighed. “You mean the one circulating the Lower Caverns that says the only reason Aloqueth chose me was because Dani convinced Fantith to force her to?”

“That would be the one.”

“I’ve tried to ignore it.”

“You should.”

“Really? I’m not so sure.”

“Jared-“

“You remember how Fantith kicked the other candidates out of the cavern the first time I visited? How she made me visit with Aloqueth’s egg before she’d hatched?”
“Jared, no one can make a dragon choose someone. We don’t know how a dragon chooses, but if exposure were the only thing that mattered every Candidate would Impress at some point. This isn’t the first time a dragonet has turned a nose up at the offered Candidates and gone outside of the offerings. Bluerider S’bast was a Lower Cavern boy on an errand who got tackled by a dragonet when he dashed into the Hatching Cavern to deliver a message. Dragons know who their rider is and no one can change that. No matter how much people want to cast aspersions on the relationship you had with our junior weyrwoman. Or Wingleader J’sen.”

Jared had purposely left out J’sen when he mentioned the rumors. J’frey wasn’t an idiot, though, even if he was kind enough to be discrete. “Sorry. I know that. I just can’t help but worry and then…”

“The Wingleader.”

“Yeah,” Jared said with a sigh.

“Is J’sen becoming an issue?”

“No. When I see him he treats me with complete respect. He just never seems to come to meetings if he knows I’m here. We used to be friends so it’s been a difficult transition. He has never treated me with disrespect though.”

J’frey sighed. “Jared, I’m going to be really clear on this. If anyone gives you grief, I want you to tell me. You might want to turn a blind eye to it, but I will not have a member of our Weyr leadership treated poorly. A slight to you is the same as one to myself or Samantha or Danneel. I know J’mes and T’moh will make certain you are treated fairly under their eyes, but you have other duties that call you away as a Weyr … Queen rider.”

“You’re going to slip up one of these days and say it,” Jared teased.

“We’re going to have to find something to call you since Weyrwoman doesn’t fit. What is it T’moh calls you? Queenrider?”

“He does.”

“I like it. It describes you well enough. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Queenrider, I have a Weyrwoman to reassure about your well-being, and you have some records to clean up.”

“Thank you, Weyrleader.”

J’frey left and Jared felt his spirits rise. It didn’t make the other’s reactions to him any better, or the sting of J’sen’s avoidance any less, but he had J’frey’s support. There wasn’t much the Weyrleader wasn’t capable of and he was firmly on Jared’s side.

Even if Jared had to wear down the hide-bound members of the Weyr, at least he had J’frey, Samantha, and Danneel on his side.

**

Jared squinted as he stared up at the sky to see the Weyr leaders come out of between. They were back from their meeting at Igen Weyr and Aloqueth hadn’t sensed any alarm at their return. Instead, the Queen continued to glide across the waters of the bathing pool. In a few months she’d be strong enough to fly her way down to the ocean shallows. Until then, Jared was just glad the
pools were close by.

Jared sat at the edge of the pool lake and watched Aloqueth as she sunned herself. The pool was more like a large pond than a bathing pool. Aloqueth was one of three dragons using it but Jared had plenty of space to keep to himself.

It was his first free day since he’d Impressed his dragonet. His first task of the day had been to bathe and oil her. His morning was half over already but she was well cared for, and Jared planned to relax right where he was until his stomach forced him into the kitchen. If it happened after lunch, Jared wasn’t worried. The Headwoman, Julie, was kind and Jared knew she’d let him steal a tray of whatever was available when he showed up.

You are happy today, Aloqueth said lazily.

Guess I am. It’s nice to relax for a change. I might just stay right here all day and do nothing at all.

He got a mental snort from Aloqueth in response.

What? I could use the relaxation.

Yes, which means you won’t do it for long.

You’ve gotten cynical at the ripe old age of three months.

You’re already thinking about the hides you saw in the store rooms.

Jared laughed because he couldn’t deny it. As much as he enjoyed the time off, he’d had a project in mind since he’d seen a handful of the Weyr’s records. Ista had good records, but some of the oldest hides were beginning to fade and crack beyond use. Jared had a fair hand from his days at the Harper Hall, and he wanted to convince Dani to help him as well. He knew she’d see the need to store them well, and she had a beautiful hand.

Maybe later, Jared confessed. I was thinking about a swim, actually.

That would be good. There are many riders around the Weyr that would appreciate that.

Aloqueth!

What? You didn’t want to know that?

No!

I am just telling you what I hear from the dragons.

Well… stop.

He heard a laugh and looked up to find Danneel smiling at him. He felt his cheeks flush, but Dani just smiled brighter. “So, Aloqueth is trying to get you to turn red, be it sunburn or embarrassment today,” she teased.

Jared shook his head. “Apparently.”

“She should. You need some time to relax and enjoy yourself. We don’t get that often enough, as weyrlings or as part of the Weyr leadership.”
“And what are you doing out and about today?”

“Saw you two stretched out here, and I wanted to check in on my favorite weyrlings. Don’t tell anyone I said that though. There are enough rumors about us to begin with,” she said with a smile.

“Free day for you, too?”

“I have some duties to attend to later, but I have a free morning. How are you and Aloqueth fairing?”

“I know the healers and dragonhealers report to the Weyr Leaders about us constantly, as well as J’mes and T’moh.”

“I wasn’t asking about that. I meant, how are you doing? I’m your friend, Jared, not just a fellow queen rider. You looked out for me when I was a lowly drudge. Don’t think I’m not going to keep an eye on you now.”

He smiled then, because it was Dani and she was right. They’d always looked after one another, and of all the things he was grateful about once he Impressed Aloqueth, being able to spend more time with Dani was certainly one of them.

“I’m well. Happy, as Aloqueth informed me this morning. Some of the rumors over my Impression seem to have died down here, and the routine is settled in enough that I’m not dead tired every night.”

“Might need to talk to J’mes if he’s getting soft…”

“Don’t you dare!” Jared laughed. “I’m still plenty tired. And I was told we’d be starting firestone drills tomorrow.” Firestone was necessary to the dragons to fight thread. They chewed it up and it allowed them to breathe fire. The drills were necessary to the weyrlings to build up the strength they’d need to handle firestone during thread to keep their dragons properly stoked. The bags were heavy though and Jared had no doubt he’d be exhausted and sore after the first day. “I think it’s the only reason he gave us a freeday today. Lure us in with a false sense of security.”

Dani laughed at that. Jared lay back on his elbows on the sandy beach edge of the pool as he watched her. She let out a deep breath, and her smile faded.

“What did you actually come to talk to me about?”

“I can’t just come check on you?”

“You can. And you do. But I can see there’s something you need to talk about. If it was something personal, you’d have started off with it. Which means you wanted to check on me as a friend before you talked to me about Weyr business.”

“I hate that you know me so well,” Dani muttered.

“So, what new rumor has cropped up that they think you need to talk to me about?” Jared asked. Normally J’frey or Samantha would come to him themselves if they thought there was an issue, but they weren’t above using his friendship with Danneel if they felt it was something a little too personal.

Dani sighed. “We received a request from Igen Weyr.”

“Samantha and J’frey have been back and forth a few times this sevenday. We have a strong
relationship with them. It’s good to see they can come to us in need,” Jared said when she paused.

“They’ve had discipline issues with one of their wingleaders. They’ve asked us to send someone over who can replace their current wingleader and get his Wing in shape for Threadfall as quickly as possible.”

“Why not replace him with one of their own?”

“They’re making an example of him. The Weyrleader is slightly hidebound but more flexible than most of his Weyr. He wants new blood to make them see that the old ways aren’t always the best ways.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Have they thought about who they’ll ask to go?”

“It’s already been decided. J’sen.”

“He asked to move to Igen?” Jared asked. He was too shocked to say anything else. Their few meetings had been rough, but he never thought J’sen would actually ask to leave the Weyr because of him. He knew how J’sen felt about the Weyr, about his Wing.

“He’s being transferred, Jared. He wasn’t asked. We felt he was the best candidate for the position.”

“What? You agreed to it?”

Danneel nodded. “He’s young and strong and proud, Jared. He’s a hard worker, and he’ll be able to get his new Wing up to speed before their next Fall. They need someone like him.”

“You’re sending him away because of me.”

“No,” Dani said as she looked at Jared. There was anger in her eyes and a hint of tears as well, but Jared ignored it. He felt betrayed and lost at the thought of losing J’sen once again, even if his former friend barely acknowledged him. “I’m doing it for him. It’s my duty to do what is best for the Weyr and all its Riders.”

She got up and left before Jared could think of anything else to say.

_Fantith says her rider is very upset about the transfer. She is still very close to Strith’s rider. She is concerned about him though and thought he would be better off to spend some time away from the weyr._

Jared let out a deep breath as he listened to Aloqueth. He hadn’t meant to accuse Dani of anything but his strained relationship with J’sen had been eating away at him. What little he said to Jared was always polite but there were too many times J’sen had walked away from snide comments or rumors without saying a word in Jared’s defense. Just because he was polite to the goldrider didn’t mean he supported Jared. It hurt because of all the people in the weyr he’d expected the support from, J’sen was on the top of his list.

_Aloqueth, ask Fantith when Strith’s rider is leaving._

A moment later his dragon butted her head against Jared’s side, and he wrapped his arms around her neck.

_They are already gone._
Chapter Summary

Strith huffed out his annoyance but J’sen could feel his acceptance.

Chapter Notes

Written for the December Drabble Days

J’sen looked down over the ridge of the weyr and said good-bye to Ista.

*We could have stayed,* Strith said. *We didn’t have to go.*

J’sen let out a long sigh. *I do have to. I can’t make him go through what we did.*

*He’s not you.*

*No, but I’m still me. I tried to keep my distance but before you, Jared was all I had. And now? He needs to focus on his queen. I’m not sure I can let him.*

Strith huffed out his annoyance but J’sen could feel his acceptance. *Then let us be gone to Igen.*
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Aloqueth’s first flight and a meeting of the WeyrLeaders.

Chapter Notes

I am still alive and writing! Not as long an update as I planned to write, but i’m hoping to get another one out soon.

If Jared went into a bout of moodiness after that day, no one noticed. What they did see was Jared’s ever steady presence, his persistence, and his ability to calm others just by being there. His words were a boon to the injured in Threadfall and Aloqueth was becoming an expert in how to calm other dragons as well.

He spent his spare time on a project of his own, one that Jr. Weyrwoman Dannielle took to as well. They had made a fair dent in the hides that were about to be lost to time. They were often caught up late into the night, a glow basket between them in Dannielle’s outer chambers as they copied them onto new skins, preserving the history and knowledge of those who had gone before.

If Jared noticed the Weyrleaders frowning at his lack of personal time, he ignored it. Just as he ignored the pain he felt every time M’rk came to a Wingleader meeting. Not that J’sen had ever come to them if he could send someone else in his place, but it was the fact that M’rk had replaced him that rankled. Still, he had a good relationship with the bronzerider, ever since he’d helped Proth after a nasty hit during Fall and the older rider was a strong, steady head when things got heated in meetings. Or when people pushed Jared too far.

That’s why it was a comfort to see the Wingleader across the bowl as Jared sat nervously atop Aloqueth, staring down across the bowl for the first time.

Aloqueth had been making flights on her own for some time now, but as with the other Weyrlings in her class, they had finally been deemed physically strong enough to bear a rider on their backs. Aloqueth had been saying she was ready for some time, and though Jared thought she was probably right, he knew that they needed to wait for the rest of their friends to mature. If he and Aloqueth pushed to attempt a flight before the others, someone was bound to try it on their own.

Are you ready, love? Jared asked the Queen.

She gave a little huff. The entire weyr is watching. I’d better be.

Jared patted her shoulder, then adjusted his riding straps one more time. They can’t help but come to admire your beauty.
I am beautiful, the Gold said. They all say so. Even the dragons from other weyrs.

Jared gave a snort at that. There was more than one foreign dragon on their island today. Jared would like to say that it was a coincidence that they’d shown, but he didn’t have that kind of confidence in coincidence. It must have gotten out somehow.

Let’s give them a good show then, shall we?

He saluted to the WeyrlingMaster and his 2nd to let them know he was ready and got their response in return. If anything looked like it was going wrong, J’mes and T’moh would be there to help them.

Jared let out a deep breath as he felt Aloqueth’s muscles tense under him. Then she jumped from the ledge and they were in the air. It was supposed to be a short jump down to the weyr floor, but Aloqueth snapped her wings open and took a leisurely glide around the weyr bowl. It was a perfectly executed circle and she landed right where she was supposed to.

Jared should have had words with her, but as soon as they were in the open air he’d been caught in the sensation of flying. The air against his face, the feel of his own dragon underneath him, the thrill of being able to go anywhere they wanted. They hadn’t learned how to go between just yet, but the whole of Pern was theirs when they did.

When he landed he let out a hoot of laughter and smiled as he pulled the goggles from his face. It wasn’t a long enough flight to demand them, but J’mes said they needed to get used to them from the get go. J’mes smiled widely at Jared and T’moh came up beside him and clapped him on his shoulder.

“Nice landing, Jared. Pass on my compliments to Aloqueth,” the WeyrlingMaster 2nd said.

“Sorry about the extra flight time, J’mes. Aloqueth didn’t give me any warning.”

J’mes nodded but he was smiling instead of frowning. “Considering the audience, I didn’t think she would do any less. That Queen of yours feels the need to prove something, sorta like her rider.”

Jared reached across the bond to Aloqueth and looked up when he realized she wasn’t paying any attention to him. Aloqueth?

There was a bronze on the ridge. He got here right before we took off. He just left.

Was he bothering you?

Congratulating me.

Why are you bothered then, Jared asked.

Just curious why he and his rider don’t stay for the evening meal. They never do, though I always ask when I see them.

It was news to Jared and sounded far too much like someone from another weyr was checking up on them when he hadn’t noticed. Who is it? What weyr?

Igen. But Strith never stays.

J’sen was here?
J’sen is always here when the others come.

Jared frowned at the news. J’sen couldn’t have bothered to check up on him when he was in the same weyr, but now he was reporting to Igen about his performance? He shook his head of the black mood it put him in but Aloqueth was poking him with her nose, nearly knocking him down.

The others are excited about their first flight. Are you not?

I am, Aloqueth. You were amazing!

He let the Queen talk him away from his mood and he followed his fellow weyrlings into the weyr to celebrate, forgetting for a moment, his feelings of betrayal and hurt.

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“Things are going to get tough,” the Weyrleader of High Reaches said to the table. Jared was ready for this meeting to end. He was there as a witness, nothing more. He was in good company though. The Weyrleaders of all six weyrs didn’t meet often so there were Junior Weyrwomen from each weyr present. Dannielle wasn’t beside him, but she was across the room, speaking softly from time to time with Igen’s Junior, Kathryn. He’d tried to ingratiate himself to the other Juniors as well, but he’d found a hard time speaking to the riders of High Reaches and Telgar. He’d given it up when Kathryn had barely been able to look him in the eye. It didn’t say much about what the Igen leadership thought of his role as a Queenrider.

“The holds won’t be able to keep the tithes if the pass continues as hard as it’s been,” F’ed continued. Jared disliked the man and the warning M’rk had given him didn’t help any. M’rk had asked to transfer from the weyr because of the man’s hidebound ways. Jared appreciated the silent support M’rk had always given him and he had taken the warning to heart. F’ed and his Weyrwoman, Amanda, had no love for Jared and the way he’d upset things at Ista Weyr.

“Things always get tight during a Pass,” J’lian was quick to answer. The Benden Weyrleader was the oldest among them, but he was surprisingly young at heart. It had surprised everyone when his bronze continued to catch his Weyrwoman Lindsey’s Queen, but no one in Benden seemed surprised that the man was able to keep up with his Weyrwoman. A fond look passed between them as she entwined their fingers together. “If it was easy, the planet wouldn’t need us. The weyrs will make do with the tithes that are sent and the Holds will do their best to keep us strong. It is a cycle that was long set up and has sustained us for all the Passes and Intervals between. Or do you doubt your own ability to keep up, F’ed?”

There was no love between Benden and High Reaches, though Jared knew from his time in the Harper Hall that there used to be much stronger ties there.

“Who’s to say what will happen in a Pass when men ride Queens?” S’ling from Telgar intervened. The dark skinned Weyrleader wasn’t a fan of Jared’s. His weyrwoman Ruth seemed to go between doting mother and bane of his existence each time Jared saw her.

“I haven’t noticed Ista having any problems with Fall, or their tithing,” T’mothy of Fort said quickly. There was no doubt that T’mothy approved of Jared. In fact, he had come to Ista himself after hearing about Jared’s impression and laughed himself to tears when he made Jared recount the story. His Weyrwoman, Genevieve had shaken her head at the antics of her Weyrmate and
“A weyr will never falter, so long as it has a strong Queenrider to guide it,” Genevieve said as she smiled. She looked at Samantha, Dannielle, and finally Jared. “Ista has three. I doubt you will hear them complain about a lack of leadership any time soon.”

“A truth we can hope holds true in all our Weyrs and Holds over this Pass,” J’frey stepped up as usual to keep the peace between the others. Jared wished he’d held his tongue a little longer, as it looked like S’ven of Igen was about to say something. Jared didn’t have any dealing with the other Weyrwoman. He had dark skin and a deep voice, no nonsense when he did speak at meetings. His Weyrwoman Briana was almost his complete opposite with a warm smile for all who looked. Jared didn’t know what the pair thought of him and Aloqueth. They had never, in the few times he’d seen them, offered their support or condemned him. It bothered him that he didn’t know his place with Igen Weyr.

“Be that as you may,” Amanda began. “The Weyrleader of High Reaches isn’t wrong. The Weyrs are going to suffer if something isn’t done about tithing this Pass. We can’t continue to fight thread, especially in these horrid conditions, without increased supplies.”

None of the weyrs were having an easy Pass. High temperatures made sure that less thread froze in the skies above them and more fell. Less rain fall had stinted some of the crops which left tithes light. It all left tempers high.

“Too bad we don’t still have the South,” Jared said into the silence.

He hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but he looked at Dannielle and she nodded in agreement.

“What about the South?” Benden’s Weyrwoman asked.

Jared realized he’d said it aloud then and looked at Samantha for guidance. She smiled and nodded her head for him to continue. “I’m sorry. Jr. Weyrwoman Dannielle and myself were copying old records to keep them from being lost and there were mentions of the Southern Continent. It was a half written song in one of our oldest ledgers. It spoke of supplies from the Southern Continent.”

“No one has been to the South in… “ S’ven trailed off because no one in their right minds travelled to a land with no weyr for protection.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m sorry,” Jared added hastily. “It was a fancy. If the South had ever sent supplies to the weyrs I’m sure there would be other records. The Harper of the record had a fondness for collecting local superstitions and songs made to pass them along. It was surely just a legend.”

“If we’re done telling fairytales, perhaps we can get back to business,” S’ling said.

Jared sighed as he tried to step back even further into the wall. When he looked up, Briana of Igen was watching him closely. When S’ven whispered into her ear, her smile grew wider but her eyes never left Jared.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Jared was in the lower caverns when it happened. He’d been down there in what little free time he had, going through the old archives when the roar of dragons filled the air. He’d never herd such commotion and he was nearly bowled over by the anguish and distress Aloqueth pushed out to him.

“Can you explain to me how your dragon being a light skirt is in any way my fault?”

Jared dropped down into a chair next to Dani and ignored the laughter in the room. It was a weyrleaders meeting for Ista and Jared was the last to arrive but only because he’d been fuming about the latest gossip that Aloqueth had just passed on.

J’frey and Samantha were smiling and Dannielle just laughed at him. “What happened this time?” she asked.

T’moh had entered behind Jared after he’d actually gone on search for him since he’d been so late to the meeting. “You didn’t hear the latest news?”

When Dani shook her head T’moh sighed. “Apparently, Donath only caught Fantith because his rider searched Jared and you wouldn’t let any other bronze catch her.”

“What?”

“So it goes to follow…”

J’frey continued the gossip, “that Halth only caught her because you favor T’moh since he has been working with Jared as a weyrling.”

“That makes no sense. If that were true I’d have let Terth fly her,” Danielle said in exasperation.

“Watch out, Jared, or next time Fantith is about to rise, you’ll have a whole new set of friends trying to get her attention,” Samantha teased.

“I’m so glad you can take humor from my reputation,” Jared groused.

“I’m pretty sure it’s my reputation that’s being sullied,” Dani whispered.

He rolled his eyes. “Is this ever going to end?”

J’frey sighed as he seemed to realize that Jared was actually upset about the whole thing. “Jared, you’re a harper by training and you know how gossip is. People need something to talk about that isn’t thread and fear of a tight pass. I am sorry that your unusual impression gives continued grounds for it, but it will fade in time. Someone will do something and you will be out of the light and no one will want to remember you until they need something from you, just like the rest of us.”

Danielle wrapped her arm around Jared’s shoulder and smiled. “At least this one is more about me
and my poor handling of my dragon than it is about you.”

Jared scowled and T’moh took a seat next to Jared. “Dani, that might be what has him more upset.”

She looked at him and he could see the moment she realized just how true that was. Jared had been taking the hits about gossip since he was at the Harper Hall and he had run Jensen into the ground to make sure the new boy knew his way around the hall. Gossip and rumor had followed the two everywhere, especially since they tended to get into trouble wherever they went. Jared had never taken it well when someone spoke poorly of his friends though.

Dani smiled then and he could see the affection in it. “Just for that I’m starting my own rumors that Fantith has decided Aloqueth gets to fly her next.”

“Danielle!” J’frey looked aghast but Samantha threw her head back and laughed.

“I can imagine the talk now!”

Jared couldn’t help but laugh at that one and as he looked around the table at the faces smiling back at him, he realized he couldn’t find a better place to be, or more supportive people to be with.

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Jared, you are needed.

Jared sat up in his bed in their weyrling weyr and looked at Aloqueth. Her eyes were calm and she didn’t appear agitated or upset.

_**Fantith’s rider is asking for you to join her in the hatching grounds.**_

“Oh, shard it all, where are my clothes?”

He didn’t feel like he’d slept more than three hours but a goldrider’s work was never done. He tripped into his clothes and was hopping through the cavern to get his shoes on. Aloqueth flew him down from their weyrling weyr to the cavern.

“Jared?” WeyrlingMaster J’mes was always alerted when one of the weyrlings was up and Jared wasn’t surprised to see him outside of the barracks. Or he wouldn’t have been if he wasn’t half sleep deprived.

“Dani called me to the grounds,” he said in answer.

“On your way then. We’ve all been anxious to hear the news.”

Fantith had gone into the hatching grounds three days ago and no one except Dani had been allowed in. When he got to the doorway he saw Samantha up towards the top of the cavern where Dani stood proudly.

He made his way up to the two of them and looked down at the Queen in the sands with her eggs.
“Twenty six,” Dani said before Jared could ask.

“That’s amazing,” Jared said as he hugged her. Samantha was beaming as well. There was always hope for a Gold egg but there had been little belief that Fantith would lay a second one this hatching.

Send Fantith our love and respect, Aloqueth. It is a remarkable clutch, he sent to his Queen.

“Where is T’moh?” Jared asked. He’d expected to find the brown rider there.

“Fantith isn’t letting anyone else in. I convinced her that you two could be trusted but she’s been very nervous. In the morning, she said he’s allowed in.”

“Guess we get the good seats then,” Jared teased.

You are very excited about this, rider.

I was a nervous wreck when I met you. It will be fun to see another group of candidates and watch their hatching. Especially since I get good seats this time.

“When will the Search begin?” Jared asked.

Samantha smiled. “We’ll be sending riders out in the next sevenday in our territory. I planned to speak to J’mes about letting some of our weyrlings go in attendance. It would do them well to see a search before they’re asked to perform one themselves.”

Jared smiled. “And the sight of young dragonriders returning to their holds to bring back more candidates gives the impression that the weyr is someplace everyone should want to go.”

“It does help soothe ruffled feathers sometimes.”

Jared smiled as he leaned forward and braced his arms against a rail to look over at the eggs. Twenty six and all as beautiful as the next. It was going to be a great hatching and Jared couldn’t be happier to be a dragonrider.

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Jared was in the lower caverns when it happened. He’d been down there in what little free time he had, going through the old archives when the roar of dragons filled the air. He’d never herd such commotion and he was nearly bowled over by the anguish and distress Aloqueth pushed out to him.

Aloqueth? What’s wrong? Jared demanded as he ran from the archive rooms to the weyr bowl. The queen was in the hatching cavern but he didn’t know why.

Fantith! Her eggs!

What?

She went to feed and Halth and Doneth were set to guard the eggs. Unknown dragons came and they warned us as they flew off to send them away, but someone else came! Someone came into the caverns!
Aloqueth, what happened?

They took her eggs, rider! They were interrupted but they took 7 of her eggs. Santeth is calming Fantith but it is taking us both. You need to come!

Jared had already been running with the first alarm but he broke into his fastest pace and let his long legs carry him as quick as possible.

The entrance to the hatching cavern was guarded and he could see that there was a healer there with two riders injured.

“What happened?” he asked.

Master Healer Ty was there and he nodded to Jared in respect. “Queenrider, these men went in to try to protect the grounds but Fantith attacked them when they entered.”

“Take care of them as best you can,” Jared said as he looked past to the rest of the riders who were beginning to gather. He saw M’rk in the group and he grabbed the older rider by the arm. “Set up a guard here. Don’t let anyone else approach the cavern until one of us says otherwise.”

“Jared, what happened?”

“I don’t know yet, but Fantith is upset enough to attack riders. We need to keep everyone else out until we can get her calmed.”

“And the men who were injured?"

Jared knew they were both thinking the same thing. Innocent bystanders who happened to come to help? Or people who had caused trouble and been caught? “Find someone else who we can trust to keep an eye on them as well. Use the pretense that your Queenrider wants to be updated if there is any change in their conditions.”

“As you wish, Queenrider,” M’rk said as his eyes took a far off look that Jared knew meant he was speaking with his bronze, Proth.

He moved in towards the hatching grounds and he wasn’t afraid of Fantith, though he knew he had to keep the others out. He was a Goldrider and he had to hope she knew he could never be part of anything like this. As he entered the room, Fantith roared but he held his hands up and he heard Aloqueth.

No! He is mine!

The other queen seemed to recognize him then and he moved carefully away from the dragon. She had pulled the remaining 19 eggs towards her and had them hidden behind her body and tail. No one could get to them and she watched him with seething red eyes.

He moved swiftly up the stands and further away to reinforce the idea that he wasn’t there as a part of any plan to steal the eggs. He made it up to the ledge where the Weyrwoman was already with Danielle.

“Dani,” he said her name softly and the Jr. pulled away from Samantha and threw her arms around Jared’s neck. She sobbed quietly and he looked at Samantha, unsure of what to do.

“Fantith warned Santeth that there were strange dragons around the sands. Doneth and Halth gave chase but before we could get to the caverns someone disappeared with 7 eggs.”
“How could this happen? What about the watch whers? The night patrols?”

Samantha frowned. “We’re checking with the watch whers now. The patrols reported nothing out of the ordinary.”

“How’s been keeping track of our movements. Or knew them well enough to be able to anticipate when it would be safe to come into our weyr unnoticed.”

“That’s what we’re afraid of.”

“But why?”

“Something we need to figure out.”

Jared nodded. “The two men who were hurting trying to get into the cavern were taken to the infirmary. They might be what they seem, but they might have been part of it. I’ve asked Proth’s rider to have a guard set on them until we can question them about what happened. Just to make sure it’s just what it seems.”

“If they had something to do with this,” Danielle said as she looked up from his shoulder. Her eyes were red rimmed but there was something almost feral as she looked at him. “I will tear them to shreds. I will find out what they did with my eggs and I will make them regret they’d ever set foot on Ista sands!”

She crumpled down onto the floor then, her strength gone as fast as he anger had come. Samantha looked up when J’frey arrived a moment later. The hissing of the Queen let them know of his arrival but a junior queen would obey the orders of the Weyrleader’s bronze.

“J’frey?” Samantha asked.

He shook his head and there was a dark glower that Jared had never seen there before. “Someone killed the watch whers. All of them that were on the heights are dead and the two men who were supposed to be with them have disappeared.”

“They could have been with them, or they could have been killed and tossed off the edge of the weyr,” Jared said quietly.

J’frey nodded. “I’ve got the wings out, except M’rk’s wing who have taken to protecting the eggs and the men injured trying to come into the cavern, on your orders Jared?”

“Yes.”

“Good thinking, Queenrider.”

“Donath and Halth lost their chase when the dragons went between. We don’t know if anyone saw the people who entered the hatching grounds or the dragons that must have landed at least long enough to have the eggs loaded.”

“Who would do this?” Samantha asked.

J’frey sighed. “No one I would want to have 7 eggs.”

“What do we need to do?” Jared asked. Never in all the histories that he knew, not from the archives or his time in the Harper Hall, had Jared ever heard of eggs being stolen from the sands. He had no idea how to handle this. He looked at J’frey and he realized the Weyrleader didn’t
either. None of them had ever faced anything like this.

J’frey took a deep breath and looked at them. “Samantha, I need you and Santeth to stay with Dani and Fantith. We need to keep them as level headed as possible. If she can get Fantith calmed down enough to make sense, see if she can get a clear story from Fantith.

Jared, the Harpers are well known for being able to pick apart rumor and gossip and find the truth behind it. I want you to work with me. We need to interview the two men in the infirmary. We need to interview the water wher handlers as well. Even if they had no part of this, they might have seen someone around.”

Jared sighed. “With the eggs on the sands and the new candidates arriving, it’s going to be hard to notice if someone was hanging around more than usual.”

“I know, but we have to work with it. For now, we need to put off further searches until we can clear the people we have in the weyr.”

“Of course. Do you need Aloqueth to do anything?”

“Have her listen in. She’s the youngest queen and the most likely for someone to slip around. They underestimate you because of your unorthodox impression. Let’s see if that works to our advantage somehow.”

“Do you think that has anything to do with it?” Jared asked.

J’frey let out a deep sigh. “I wish I could say no Jared, but I think the fact that we accepted you as a Queenrider has given some people the idea that we do things peculiarly at Ista. A lot of people have trouble with that. I would never have thought it would be enough to cause something like this, but I can’t rule it out at this point either. Having said that, no matter what, it isn’t your fault.”

Jared nodded, but couldn’t help the doubt that filled his thoughts. He didn’t want to be what caused Dani and Fantith such pain.

“Come on, Jared,” J’frey said with a hand to his shoulder. “Let’s get this started. I’ll speak with M’rk and his men. Do me a favor and speak to Master Richard. See what he can find out around the weyr. See who saw something and didn’t know it or who he’s been keeping an eye on.”

They walked out of the hatching cavern but before they got to M’rk, Jared stopped him. “I don’t know if it means anything, but there is a rider whose been coming to the weyr to keep an eye on us. I don’t want to throw out accusations, but he’s never accepted Aloqueth and I. Enough that you felt he needed to leave the weyr.”

“Jared, that isn’t what happened.”

“Maybe it isn’t, but J’frey, you can’t say he doesn’t know our routines and patterns. He knows the people and he could easily get in and out without anyone thinking too much about it. And he’s been visiting off and on since he left.”

J’frey sighed. “Jared, it isn’t what you think. J’sen would never betray us like that, but I will keep your concern in mind. Those are all valid points and we should question around the weyr to see if anyone else has noticed others that have been popping in and out regularly.”

“That sounds like a good job for Richard.”

“That it does. See him, then join me in the healer’s chambers. We’ll interview the men there.”
“And then?”

“Hopefully by then we’ll have something more to go on.”

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The men interviewed didn’t have anything to add to the investigation. They hadn’t seen anyone near the cavern. They’d just been the unlucky firsts to try to enter the cavern after the eggs had been stolen. The patrol came back negative. M’tch’s wing didn’t see anything out of the ordinary but J’frey pressed him hard about his wing and about their formations.

Jared didn’t forget that M’tch had been one of the first to stir the pot over his impression. It seemed neither did J’frey.

The Bronze rider answered their questions without pause but as he walked out, J’frey looked at Jared. “Do you know what was missing in all that?”

“His usual disdain for me?”

“Exactly. Like he wants us to forget how much trouble he’s given you since you became a Queenrider.”

“He hasn’t been especially problematic. He just doesn’t like me. He’s not required to, just so long as he does what I say.”

J’frey smiled at him. “Now that sounds like the future leader of a weyr.”

“That sounds like someone exhausted and in need of klah,” Jared said with a smirk. “I’m going to get the kitchens to send something up for us, and something up to the Weyrwomen as well.”

As he went to call down to the kitchen, he saw M’sha and T’moh enter the meeting cavern. Neither looked like they had good news, which probably meant no news at all.

He called down the request and knew that food and drink would be sent to them as soon as possible. He’d also sent a message through Aloqueth to Samantha that food was arriving.

“Where do we go now?” T’moh was asking as Jared slipped back in.

“You spoke to Richard?” J’frey asked Jared, though he already knew the answer. Jared knew it was for the benefit of the two men with them.

“Yes. He’s seen a few people at the weyr off and on but he doesn’t have names or anything like that. He thinks he can probably get them though with a little work. And while he’s doing that, he’ll also gather up any rumors that he hears in the next few days and let us know if anything stands out.”

“How is Fantith?” J’frey asked.

“Santeth holds her calm for now. She ranges from anger to despair and it’s taking a toll on both her and Dani. I would have ordered Fellis in her wine if I wasn’t afraid of what Fantith would do if her rider was drugged.”
They all nodded.

“We’re doing what we can. In the morning, I want riders to scour the weyr around the heights. I want to know if the handlers were killed with the watch weyrs and hidden or if they ran off as part of this.”

“I’ll see to it myself,” M’sha answered.

“Who do we see as the biggest possible offenders?” T’moh asked.

Jared was impressed with how level headed he was, but then, as the WeyrlingMaster 2nd T’moh had to be. He’d helped Jared out of more than one stressful situation since he’d impressed over a turn ago. No one would have known that his own dragon had sired the eggs that had been stolen. Only those that knew him well would be able to see the slight slouch in his shoulders or the way his brow furrowed unnaturally.

“High Reaches has been hostile to Jared since he impressed,” M’sha pointed out.

“As has Telgar,” T’moh commented.

“Do you really think that’s what this is about?”

J’frey took a seat at the table and Jared followed him. M’sha came back a second later to reveal a tray with bread, cheese, and fruit as well as a pitcher of klah. He poured a mug for each of them and took a seat as well.

“I hate to believe it, but I can’t imagine why we would be targeted otherwise,” J’frey answered. “Samantha and I have never been worried about keeping the old ways. Traditions have their part in our world, but sometimes being old doesn’t make it right. Not everyone agrees. But again, the weyrs that have fought the hardest with us about that are Telgar and High Reaches.”

“And Igen,” Jared supplied.

J’frey frowned at that but he nodded. “S’ven has been slowly becoming more progressive. The man will fight you tooth and nail about something, but once you prove a point he accepts it.”

“Are we going to inform the other weyrs?” T’moh asked.

“Jared, please have Aloqueth pass along word to the other weyr Queens. Santeth is still caught up in calming Fantith and we shouldn’t wait any longer. We aren’t the only weyr with eggs on the sands. We can assume that we were targeted specifically but we don’t know anything for certain at this point.” J’frey said.

Jared nodded, though he hated the idea of it. He got along well with Genevieve of Fort and Lindsey of Benden. Amanda of High Reached scoffed at any comment he added to a conversation though and Ruth of Telgar swung between treating him like a monster to an imbecilic child. Brianna of Igen was a complete mystery. Whatever he said she seemed to smile at him like she knew something he didn’t. It made all his conversations with her unsettling. Especially since her weyrmate S’ven stared at him and Jared could never tell if he was angry or just always looked that way.

He excused himself from the conversation for a moment and spoke with Aloqueth. The gold did as he asked and contacted each of the dragons. It was what he expected it to be. They all seemed shocked at the events, all claimed that they’re weyrs would help them find whoever was responsible, and they’d be there in the morning to offer whatever assistance was needed.
He relayed their messages dutifully and took a long drink of Klan to settle his nerves.

“Jared?”

“Why? I keep coming back to that. Why would someone want to steal the eggs? It isn’t like you could hide them once they hatch. What did someone expect to get from this?”

T’moh looked at Jared and his eyes tightened. “You would need a large area to train a dragon if you intended to do it outside of a weyr. We haven’t had any trouble with holders, have we?” he asked J’frey.

“No, we haven’t. But that doesn’t mean the others weyrs haven’t. We’ll ask in the morning. We could be the target, or it could just be that we’re only one of two weyrs with eggs on the sands right now and Fantith’s eggs have hardened first.”

*Riders are coming,* Aloqueth warned Jared. He passed the message along and it was only a few moments more before J’frey stood up.

“We have visitors from Igen.”

He barely had the words out before S’ven of Igen walked into the meeting room like he owned the place. Jared would have bristled at the impertinence but the man stopped him with a single word.

“Southern.”

“What?” M’sha asked.

S’ven was looking at Jared though. “At our last meeting you mentioned the Southern Continent. I’ve had riders looking over it ever since and we noticed something. There are people moving around over there. Not a lot, but someone is putting people on Southern. There are no boats going back and forth or we’d have seen them.”


“Southern. No one would be looking there if your idea hadn’t caught my fancy,” he said to Jared. “It’s the perfect place to hide eggs. Or full grown dragons. No one who wasn’t a weyrleader was in that meeting.”

“Which would mean it was one of us,” J’frey said. “One of our own.”

S’ven nodded. “It does look like.”

Jared wanted to bury his head in his hands but he refused. “What can you tell us of Southern then?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

J’sen nodded but Jared saw the determination in his eyes. “Alright. We’ll talk later, but Jared, know that it was never about hating you or not being able to accept you as Aloqueth’s rider.”

J’sen left and Jared just sat up and stared at the space he’d departed.

The meeting lasted through the night as they spoke about Southern and the information they had about the other continent. Jared told them what he recalled and he grabbed the scrolls that he remembered had mentions of the abandoned continent.

Danneel was still too upset to be of any help, and Samantha eventually reported that both Queen and rider had fallen into exhausted sleep. Samantha was staying where she was and Jared could feel Aloqueth still with them as well.

“The question is,” Jared said softly as breakfast food was passed among them all. “with the other weyrs coming soon, how much can we say?”

“What?” asked M’sha.

“We all agree that the people in Southern have to be coming from a weyr. S’ven, you said Ista riders would have seen boat traffic but there was none. Could they have realized you were interested in Southern and hidden from you?”

“I have a very discreet wing looking into Southern. They won’t have been seen. I’ll have the Wingleader report to you when he can. He’ll be able to verify what he’s seen and we can make more plans,” S’ven answered.

“So, what do we tell the other Weyrs, was the question Jared posed. What is your thought, S’ven?” J’frey asked.

“If you trust me, I think we need to keep this between us. If you trust anyone else, we can bring them in quietly. There are too many people who could be acting on their own interest, especially as it was brought up in that last meeting that we are all looking at tight belts this winter. Anyone else could have been looking at Southern and hatched this plan.”

“I think we can bring T’mothy and Genevieve from Fort,” J’frey said. “Any objections?” No one objected and J’frey looked at Jared. “Jared?”

“T’mothy has never been anything but supportive,” Jared said. “I was a candidate at his weyr for two years before I came here. I can’t believe he would do anything like this. He’s trustworthy.”

“All right then, Jared, I want you to talk to him when the meeting is over. Find a reason to get him alone and bring him up to speed so that we can make plans when the other weyrs have left.”

“That will cause some friction with the other weyrs when this is all done,” S’ven said.
“It will, but until I know who was behind this, I won’t bring anyone else in unless I can be entirely sure. Besides, we are assuming this is about how Jared was accepted. It could be something else entirely. I would still trust T’mothy and Genevieve.”

They come, Aloqueth warned Jared.

“Aloqueth just informed me the other weyrs are arriving.” Jared took a deep breath. “I’ll see to the welcome,” he said to J’frey.

“Thank you, Jared. I know Samantha and Dani are both grateful that you’re here to represent the Queenriders in this,” J’frey said.

Jared just smiled as he moved out of the room and towards the inner workings of the weyr where he would be able to meet with the other Weyrleaders as they came.

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Jared had their current map of Southern stretched out in front of him but it didn’t help a bit. No one had an updated map of Southern, except for S’ven’s wing that had been mapping it. The old map gave Jared an idea of the land but they didn’t know anything about how time had changed it. Were there earthquakes? Fires? Was there even anything left to search in a land without weyrs?

S’ven’s scouts said there was. In fact, S’ven said there was more than just a broken land. It was a land of plenty. And there were enough people there to cause notice when S’ven’s scouts flew at a distance.

“They won’t get any more complete if you keep staring at them,” J’frey said as he entered the inner chamber where the Weyrleaders conducted most of the weyr’s business.

A full day had passed and they weren’t any closer to finding the 7 missing eggs. The other weyrleaders had helped plan a search of each hold. In a moment of lull, Jared had pulled T’mothy aside and given him a quick run down of the situation and asked him to stay after the others had left.

The Weyrleader of Fort had agreed to help search Southern as well, seeing the need, and he’d remembered old writing about Southern in the Fort Weyr’s archives. He promised to return once he’d found them and T’moh had offered to help him search, allowing the Weyrleader to go about weyr business without anyone noticing an interest in the other continent.

“How is she?” Jared asked, thinking of his friend.

“Inconsolable,” J’frey said. “Samantha and Santeth will stay with them but Fantith still won’t let anyone in the hatching cavern. I’m sure you know that, since Aloqueth hasn’t left the cavern either.”

“I know, but I haven’t seen them since we started the meetings.”

“You can take a break and visit.”

“I will,” Jared said with a sigh. “S’ven’s scout should be here soon with the map. I wanted to be ready.”
“And when he leaves, I expect you to make a visit, then get some sleep. We can’t search Southern
in the dark.”

Jared smile. “Yeah, I got it. You getting some sleep?”

“Heading to my weyr now. I figure I’ll let you get a crack at the map and by the time I get a few
hours of shut eye, you’ll be ready for a fresh set of eyes. T’moh will be back after he gets the rest
of the charts that T’mothy mentioned from Fort. I sent M’sha back to his weyr so at least two of us
would have some sleep before we start tomorrow.”

Jared nodded. “Alright. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“I’ll send some klah up. You’ll need it before long.”

J’frey left and Jared sat down and rested his head in his hands for a moment. He was tired but he
needed to be able to think clearly. The klah from the kitchens came up a moment later along with a
tray of food. He wasn’t hungry but they’d all been going on little food and not enough sleep. He’d
have to thank J’frey in the morning for his thoughtfulness.

He set the tray on the table edge to keep the space clear for the map. He refilled his mug and took
a long drink to try to get his wits about him. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath.

“Queenrider?”

His eyes opened suddenly and he turned to the entryway to see the Wingleader from Igen. “J’sen?”

He bowed his head slightly, “Queenrider, I was told to report with the records of our journeys to
the Southern Continent.”

“S’ven said he was sending his main scout.”

“Yes. When the Weyrleader mentioned scouting the South, I started the work. When I realized
something was happening there, my wing and I began to not just map the continent but to try to
keep an eye on movement and possible settlements.” He handed a long scroll to Jared. “This is
the most accurate map we have of the South right now.”

“Thank you,” Jared said as he began to spread it out. As awkward as it was to be with J’sen, Jared
pushed past it. They needed answers. They needed to know if the South was really their
destination. “S’ven said you know the South better than anyone.”

“He’s right,” J’sen answered. “I’ve spent more time there.”

J’sen helped him place weights on the edges of the map to keep it in place and Jared looked down
at it.

“There’s a large river,” J’sen pointed to a point at the tip of the continent, “here, where they seem
to meet. However they get there, someone is taking them from that point, traveling up river, and
then taking them elsewhere. We haven’t scouted out a direct line because it’s hard to follow them
from the skies and not be seen.”

“Is that really a possibility?”

“It’s dense forest, Jared. To be able to see their movements, we’d have to be on top of them.”

“But how can that be, with threadfall?”
“We haven’t been able to figure that out yet. I’ve been trying to create a threadfall chart for the area to see if I can be there to catch it happening. Maybe there are riders protecting them, but that doesn’t make sense. Until I see it, I can’t even begin to guess.”

“But there’s no sign of a Holding?”

“None.”

“So somehow we have to get into Southern to search it through the treeline, but staying far enough away to avoid detection.”

“That sums it up well.”

Jared reached for his mug of klah but J’sen pushed it back.

“Jared, you’d be better served with food.”

He stared at J’sen for a moment and he wanted to laugh. “Really, J’sen? This? After all this time, this is what you’re worried about? This is the care you give?”

“Queenrider … Jared.”

“I’m taking a break. I’m going to go check on my friend, since I’m one of only three people who can see her. When I’m done, maybe the great Wingleader will have divined a way to take care of all this. Have some food if you need it. I’ll be back.”

Rider?

I’m fine, Aloqueth.

You’re not.

Jared let out a bitter laugh. No, I’m probably not. But I’m coming to the cavern now so please make sure that Fantith doesn’t eat me before she sees who I am.

Does it bother you so much, that Strith’s rider cares for you?

It would bother me less if he had cared when it mattered.

He has always cared. Too much, Strith says.

Strith is not an unbiased observer. I’m here.

He walked into the cavern and Fantith let him in, thought she watched him carefully until he was in the sands and away from her eggs. As Jared reached the stands where the others watched, Danneel threw herself into his arms and Jared held her tight.

He didn’t have long before he needed to return to J’sen, but already he felt the warmth of Danneel’s presence soothing him. She had become his rock, his consistency since he’d come to the weyr. He could be that for her now, even if his own heart felt shredded by Strith’s rider.

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When he was ready, he returned to the chamber. J’sen had spread a set of threadfall charts over the table and he was working diligently on something. When Jared approached, the bronzerider stepped back.

“These are the charts you’re working on for the Southern Continent?” he asked.

J’sen nodded. “I think with the information we got in the last pass through Southern that we’ve finally established the effects of the air currents around the areas we’ve scouted. It wouldn’t be good to head to Southern in search of the eggs to find ourselves in threadfall.”

“Good thinking, Wingleader,” Jared said as he looked at the charts. “The settlements have to be somewhere in this area,” he said, pointing to the area that had been marked as being travelled. “But I have a hard time imagining that this many people would know about a plot to steal Fantith’s eggs. So, it’s not likely that the eggs would be taken to that area.”

“Even if they aren’t involved, they are there illegally. We need to do something about that,” J’sen said.

“We could send people over? We could speak with the Masterharper. I think Masters Rob or Richard would work well to gather intelligence. They might be able to find out who these people are and how they got there.”

“And the Weyrleaders are trusted so they wouldn’t ask questions about why their Masters had been reassigned. And Master Rob has a firelizard to send word back and forth.”

“That would at least give us a heads up on what is happening with the people who are entering Southern. But how do we find the eggs and are they even on Southern?” Jared felt defeated with the task in front of them. There was so much space to search.

What if they didn’t find them in time? What if the eggs hatched and their candidates weren’t there? What if the people who had them didn’t know how to care for them? What if they did? What if this was really the work of a Weyrleader who truly despised Jared enough to do something like this?

“Jared?” J’sen’s hand was on his shoulder and Jared took a deep breath.

“Jared, it’s going to be okay. We’re going to find who did this. We’re going to get to the eggs in time. Listen, the weyrs are going to search the Northern Continent. If there is anything to turn up, they will. And we’re going to handle this search on Southern. My instinct tells me Southern is where we’ll find them. We will get them back and Dani and Fantith will be fine.”

Jared let out a breath and closed his eyes. “Thank you,” he said softly. He hated that J’sen still knew him well enough to calm him, but he needed to keep a level head. “Maybe I should have taken J’frey’s advice and gotten some sleep.”

J’sen smiled kindly. “You’re holding it together really well, Jared, especially considering the Weyrwoman and her Junior are both unable to help right now. Strith says Aloqueth is handling the situation very well too. You can be proud of that, if nothing else, until we get the eggs back.”

“Alright,” Jared said as he looked back at the table. “If they aren’t moving the eggs towards their camps, where would be a good place to take them?”

“So, assuming that the people who took the eggs know what they’re doing, what do they need?”

“Access to water and food. Shelter. Heat for the eggs.”
“Heat,” J’sen said as he leaned over the map.

“What is it?”

J’sen pointed to the northern most tips of the Southern Continent. “There’s a volcano here. The other people are being deposited to this river to the east, but it would be easy enough for a rider to go straight to this volcano. They’d have the heat and shelter they needed. It would be hard to get to without a dragon, so not much chance of anyone snooping around.”

“You looked that closely at the area?” Jared asked.

“You mentioned the South as a place that we might be able to get resources. S’ven asked me to look into it when I could. It would make a good weyr location. There’s no weyr caves like we have, but Ista makes do with its forest weyrs. I imagine the South could find another way to shelter their dragons if we were needed there.”

J’sen looked back at the map then, as if he was embarrassed. Jared couldn’t help but smile.

“Dragons always seem to make do.”

“I think we should start our search there, then move down the coasts and inland,” J’sen said.

Jared nodded. “Alright, hold on, let me get something to start plotting this out.”

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By the time J’frey and M’sha joined them, Jared and J’sen had a search grid figured out.

T’moh joined them with a sour expression on his usually unshakable demeanor. “They found the men who were on duty with the watch wher the night the eggs disappeared. They were hidden in a supply room near the wher kennels. Someone killed them and dragged them down there.”

“So there is no doubt someone betrayed us,” J’sen said.

Jared wanted to call him out on the ‘us’ part of that statement, but he didn’t have the heart to. J’sen might not be a part of Ista Weyr now, but that wasn’t his choice and he was obviously still close to Dani.

“Yes,” J’frey said as he sat heavily in one of the chairs. “Jared, I think it’s time we put a watch on the people we’ve talked about.”

“I’ve already taken care of it,” M’sha said. “As soon as this happened. I asked a trusted Wingleader to look after this matter.”

“What people?” J’sen asked.

“Anyone that’s made comments, or ignored disparaging comments, about Jared’s impression of Aloqueth.” J’frey said. “We’ve kept a list in case anything happened.”

“Was it really so bad that you thought someone would dare to disrespect a Queenrider?” J’sen asked.
Jared let out a bitter huff and closed his eyes at that, rubbing his forehead with his hand. He could feel J’sen’s eyes on him but he was saved from answering as someone came into the room.

“M’rk, it’s good to see you,” J’sen crossed the room to where Wingleader M’rk had just entered. “I hear you and Proth are doing well in our absence.”

M’rk smiled. “We have our moments.” He looked over at M’sha then. “Proth said you needed me here?”

“Young have been making discrete talk over the people we mentioned, correct?” M’sha asked.

“All but one name on that list,” M’rk agreed.

“One?” J’sen asked.

“He’s no longer in our weyr and beyond our jurisdiction to watch.”

Jared could see the way it hit J’sen, the whitening of his knuckles as he clenched them against the table, the tightness of his shoulders as he leaned forward.

“There is only one who was unaccounted for at the time of the incident,” M’rk continued before J’sen could say anything. “The worst bastard of the bunch.”

“M’tch,” Jared guessed.

M’rk nodded. “Everyone else was accounted for that night.”

“Where is he right now?” J’rey asked.

“We don’t know. When we started to ask around, he was missing. We’ve continued to look, but we did our best to be discrete just in case.”

J’rey’s eyes went distance and a second later he shook his head. “Fith isn’t in the weyr.”

Aloqueth, when is the last time we saw Fith in the weyr? Don’t ask around, but when do you last remember seeing the brown?

He could feel the Gold searching her memory. I don’t like Fith. I usually ignore him. He is as mean spirited as his rider.

Why do you say that?

He says I picked the wrong rider. I told him I only had one choice, because you have always been mine. He should know better. We are dragon. We do not choose the wrong riders.

Thank you, Aloqueth. How are Fantith and Santeth?

They hold strong together. Find her eggs soon, Rider.

We’re working on it.

“We need to find M’tch,” Jared said to the group as he finished his conversation with Aloqueth.

“What happened?” T’moh asked.

“Aloqueth said Fith told her she’d picked the wrong rider. What is going on in M’tch’s head that
he could convince his dragon that such a thing was even possible?"

“Jared,” J’frey moved to stand in front of him. “Go get a little sleep. I’ll wake you before the others get here to start the search.”

“J’frey.”

“That’s an order, Queenrider.” Jared thought about fighting him, but J’frey must have seen something on his face. “Don’t make me get Santeth involved.”

Jared let out a small laugh and moved away from the others. He didn’t bother to say good night. He was too tired to be worried about the niceties and his head was reeling with the latest news.

He made it to his weyr, thankful that it wasn’t far from the Weyrleader’s chambers. He stripped out of his clothes and left them in a trail across the floor of his weyr. He wanted to curl up around Aloqueth but she was needed in the hatching caverns. He could feel her sleepy presence in the back of his head and he decided that if she could take a nap, he wouldn’t feel guilty about getting a couple hours.

He was almost asleep when he heard noise in his weyr. He opened bleary eyes to see J’sen as he picked up Jared’s clothes and left them in a pile by his closet.

“J’sen? What are you doing here?”

“Is that what you really thought?” he asked.

Jared closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. “Think. Not thought.”

“What?”

“Until tonight you haven’t been able to stomach the sight of me for more than a few minutes. You made an excuse to leave every meeting that I was present at. You left the damn weyr because of me. In the two turns since I impressed Aloqueth, you have had one conversation with me, besides tonight. You never once defended me from anyone’s words. You came to every milestone Aloqueth had and spied on us, without ever saying a word to me. I don’t know why my impression caused this, but after two turns I got the message.”

He looked up then and watched J’sen sit in a chair across from his bed. He elbows were on his knees and he stared down at his hands.

“Jared, I didn’t leave because I hated you. I could never hate you.”

“Jared, I didn’t leave because I hated you. I could never hate you.”

“I’m too tired for this J’sen.”

“Jared.”

There was so much anguish in his voice but Jared couldn’t do it. Not tonight. “Jensen. Please. I just … I need to sleep. I can’t deal with this tonight. You were my best friend, my everything, and you were just gone, twice, and I can’t tonight.”

J’sen nodded but Jared saw the determination in his eyes. “Alright. We’ll talk later, but Jared, know that it was never about hating you or not being able to accept you as Aloqueth’s rider.”

J’sen left and Jared just sat up and stared at the space he’d departed.

_Told you._
Shut up, Aloqueth. The youngest Gold gave a sleepy snort in response and Jared smiled a little at the warmth of her in the back of his head. He fell asleep, exhausted, and with the knowledge that he would probably wake feeling even worse.
Chapter Nine

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They came out of between into the brilliant sun over the Southern Sea. Jared was momentarily blinded but his sight came back quick enough and he looked over to see Strith and his rider to his right. They flew down towards a large lagoon, though they didn’t land. Above them, the rest of J’sen’s wing came out of between in perfect formation.

Chapter Nine

The morning came too soon, but Jared grit his teeth and dressed quickly in his riding gear. He wasn’t sure he could face J’sen this soon after the bronzerider’s whispered confession last night - whatever his words had meant - but duty always came first. Jared wouldn’t allow any other rider to let their personal feelings interfere with the running of the weyr, and he refused to let his own dictate his actions. If he did, he’d still be in his furs, head buried in the comfort of his bed with sleep dulling the pain.

Instead, he ate a quick meal in his weyr before he walked down to the meeting room with a mug of klah still in hand. He found J’frey there, alongside S’ven and J’sen.

“Good morning, Queenrider,” S’ven said in greeting.

Jared smiled at the Igen Weyrleader. “Good morning, Weyrleader.”

“You’re looking better for some shuteye.” J’frey came up and placed a hand on Jared’s shoulder. “Are you up for this?” he asked. “We can always have someone else fly in your place.”

It was an honest offer, and Jared appreciated it. “Sam and Santith have Dani and Fantith calm. If I don’t go, I’ll spend the entire time wondering and useless. And if we do find something, having a Junior Queenrider is still better than not having one, even if it is me.”

“I’m more worried that it is you,” J’frey said. “If this happened because of someone’s opinions about your hatching and how we supported you, then it could place you in danger.”

“I would never let anything happen to Jared and Aloqueth,” J’sen stepped in. “My entire wing would defend them if need be.”

“And that is the only reason I’m allowing this, so mark your words, Wingleader.”

Jared scowled. “We can take care of ourselves. We aren’t weyrlings any longer.”

“No, you’re a Queen and her Rider,” J’frey reminded him. “If something happens, you fly back and report to us immediately. So long as you’re in danger J’sen and his wing won’t be able to get out of there either.”

Jared let out a deep breath and nodded.
They’re worried you’ll act rashly because it’s Fantith’s eggs.

And J’sen would be any better? As much as J’sen’s part in all this bothered Jared, it was obvious he and Dani were still as close as ever.

He’ll protect you before anything else. No one doubts that except you.

Jared let the argument go because there was a finality in Aloqueth’s words that made him realize further conversation would just end in the Gold’s continued insistence. He had other matters to attend to.

“Jared, are you ready to go?” J’sen asked, addressing him for the first time that morning.

He nodded in response. “Your wing will meet us there?”

“They’re just waiting for Strith’s word to go between to the rendezvous spot. No one will think anything of them meeting me there, so it won’t raise suspicions if anyone is watching us.”

“We just have to worry about M’tch having left someone here to relay messages to him.”

“And he wouldn’t think anything of me convincing you to fly away from the weyr with me,” Jensen said.

“He won’t?” Jared didn’t know why M’tch would think that was a possibility.

“He was behind a lot of the rumors about Strith and Fantith influencing Aloqueth to choose you. He still believes that I’m putting undue pressure on Dani on your behalf.”

“Does he?” J’frey asked.

“We met at the last gather at Igen Hold. It surprised me to see him there, and we had words.”

“Nothing good I’m assuming.”

“Even before Jared impressed M’tch, and I rarely had favorable words to exchange.”

“How much bad blood is there between you two?” S’ven asked.

“He didn’t like that a holdless boy had become a Journeyman Harper and had impressed on his first time on the sands, a bronze, nonetheless. When everyone realized how close Dani and I were, it got worse. I think he assumed Fantith would favor Strith when she rose. Even when that didn’t happen, he blamed me for the fact that Fith never caught her.”

“You be careful, J’sen,” S’ven said. “If this is the rider that took the eggs, he’s got a vendetta against you and he won’t back down easily. Take care of the Queenrider, but yourself as well.”

J’sen nodded before he turned to Jared. “Shall we? Strith is willing to carry you down to the bowl, if you’d allow.”

It would save them time, so he ignored his pride and agreed. The great bronze flew to the opening of the weyrleaders meeting place and after J’sen climbed onto him, Jared settled behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist to hold on more securely. It was unnecessary as the ride to the bowl was smooth and flawless.

He dismounted the bronze and patted his hide. “Thank you, Strith.”
The bronze huffed and Jared smiled before he crossed the slight distance to where Aloqueth waited for him. “Are you ready, Aloqueth?”

Yes, Fantith waits impatiently for us to find her eggs, Rider.

“Do you have the rendezvous clear enough?” J’sen asked Jared.

Jared finished putting on his protective gear and pulled his gloves on. “Aloqueth has a clear image from Strith. We’re good to go on your mark, Wingleader.”

Jared climbed up onto the back of his gold dragon and saw the way J’sen gave a small nod in approval. It wasn’t meant for him, he knew, just J’sen making certain Jared was in proper form. A wingleader checking his riders before flight.

“Let’s fly,” J’sen said.

Jared watched Strith take off for the skies, and then Aloqueth followed them into the air above the weyr. J’sen flashed him a hand signal, and then he and Strith disappeared. Let’s go, Aloqueth.

The thought was barely in his head before they left blue skies behind them and were in the nothingness of between. Jared wasn’t sure he’d ever grow used to the feeling of between, no matter how often they did this. There was nothing to see in the blackest of places, nothing but cold and dark and the fear of being lost beyond finding. Aloqueth knew her way though; the dragons always did.

They came out of between into the brilliant sun over the Southern Sea. Jared was momentarily blinded but his sight came back quick enough and he looked over to see Strith and his rider to his right. They flew down towards a large lagoon, though they didn’t land. Above them, the rest of J’sen’s wing came out of between in perfect formation.

Aloqueth, send my regard to the wing.

He might not know what to do about J’sen, but no one could fault his wing’s performance.

J’sen had chosen a spot away from the possible weyr location or where the people were being brought to the southern continent. He’d been told they used the lagoon below them not just because it was distant, but also because it was easy to remember. Jared understood that. The area was beautiful. Blue waters lapped against beach shores and beyond that lay thick groves of trees and forests beyond. It was indescribable. How had this happened? How could such a land grow when thread was sure to devour every living thing it touched?

Aloqueth, can you sense any dragons outside of J’sen’s wing?

No. There are no dragons nearby, the Queen reassured him.

Let Strith know and continue monitoring the skies in case anyone pays a surprise visit.

J’sen flashed a hand motion beside him, and the entire wing formed up behind them. As they were about to fly towards the destination, Aloqueth stopped the entire wing.

Someone is coming. Land!

Who is it? Jared asked, even as the Gold was landing on the sands of the lagoon. The wing was grounded before Aloqueth turned her yellow-swirling eyes towards Jared. Fith. He came out from between. We are too far for him to sense us, but I can feel him flying the other way.
Jared dismounted and walked over towards J’sen. “Aloqueth says Fith came out from between, but he’s moving in the other direction.”

“We’re in the right place then,” J’sen commented. “Try to follow from a distance?” J’sen asked him.

As much as Jared wanted to get to the eggs, he wasn’t sure what M’tch would do if he saw them following. “At this point, I wouldn’t put it past him to damage the eggs, rather than let us take them back. I think we need to wait until Aloqueth feels him leave.”

“I hate to wait, but I think you’re right.”

They passed word on to the others that they’d wait, but the dragons had already dug themselves into the warm sand.

*I would like a good oiling when we are done,* Aloqueth informed him as she followed Strith’s lead and dug herself in. Her yellow eyes had settled though. *I will let you know when Fith leaves.*

Jared couldn’t help but laugh at the contentment in her voice. “Let’s hope he doesn’t plan to stay too long,” Jared said out loud. “All this sun might make Aloqueth forget her duty and fall asleep.”

The wing laughed at his teasing and J’sen smiled. “We’ve rested a few times in this lagoon when we were mapping. If my calculations are right, this area should experience threadfall in four days. I was hoping to be here to witness it from the ground.”

They moved away from the shoreline where the dragons rested, towards the trees to relax in the shade as they waited. J’sen’s men gave them privacy, which Jared appreciated even if he didn’t want to be alone with him. He just needed to keep to topics of the weyr. They had been fine on those topics the day before.

“How is this possible, J’sen? When S’ven said the southern continent was flourishing, I couldn’t conceive of anything like this.”

“We don’t know. But we flew inland towards a mountain range, over vast fields of numbweed, marshes, and forestland. We followed the range east to a great river far east of where the people are landing.” J’sen leaped up and grabbed a leaf off the tree above them and held it out for Jared.

Jared took the leaf and listened as J’sen pointed to browned edges that had long been healed. “You’ll find that all over the place. Thread fell. For some reason though, it didn’t burrow and destroy the trees.”

“This makes no sense at all.”

“I know. That’s why we keep coming back. This place is a treasure trove of resources if we can just figure out if it’s safe and how it stays this way.”

“No theories?”

“None,” Jensen said. “And with us keeping our search secret we haven’t been able to ask Holders or CraftMasters to check their records or come up with theories to support what we’re seeing.”

“So, we’re going at this blind?”

“Pretty much.”
Silence fell between them as they waited, but there was peace in the sound of the sea on the shore and the wind in the trees.

“I’m glad you’re here, Jared. Not the circumstances, but I wanted to show this to you as soon as I saw it. S’ven said this was your idea, bringing up some arcane text that no one else would have ever read, let alone remember. When he asked for volunteers, I knew I had to be the one to explore it. I… owed you.”

Jared didn’t want to respond, but there wasn’t any place to escape this conversation and he knew it. “You didn’t owe me anything.”

“I left without saying anything. I never … I couldn’t find a way to talk to you after you impressed. I thought, just maybe, if I did this, it might somehow balance things between us. I know it doesn’t, but it was the only thing I could do.”

“The only thing you could have done?” Jared asked. “A letter would have been enough. A single sharding letter. Or maybe a conversation one of those times you spied on us. Or even a message passed between our dragons. A single moment where you thought of me would have been enough, J’sen.”

He got up then, needing to put distance between them. He walked out across the scorching sands towards Aloqueth. Any news?

*Fantith asks for constant updates, but I have none to give. Santith and Esith both keep a constant watch on her. Her rider isn’t much better, but they fear to give her fellis and upset Fantith.*

*Send my love to Dani. Tell her J’sen and I will figure it out. She has both of us here. We’ll bring her eggs back, somehow.*

Aloqueth didn’t answer, but Jared didn’t need her to. He sat against her side, shadowed by her bulk from the unforgiving sun. The breeze was pleasant though, and the sand was warm. He wondered if the waters were warm or cold here.

“We’ll have to come back sometime when we can enjoy the view without worry,” Jared said to his dragon. It was spectacular and he could almost imagine a life like this, living on the beach, catching fish and setting up fields of crops. It would be a magnificent place for a holding if someone were bold enough to take to the southern continent. It must be what the others were thinking as they agreed to come without the help of weyr or hold.

But to be out in the open during threadfall? He shivered to think about it. He’d seen too many injuries from the back of a dragon, treated too many in the infirmary to take it lightly. How were the people being moved to Southern surviving?

His thoughts continued to tumble around and around until one of the wing members came over and handed Jared water and food. He stayed with Aloqueth, though a part of him knew it would be better for weyr relations if he got to know the members of Igen Weyr a little better. He didn’t know if they understood the distance between Jared and J’sen, but they seemed to respect him and no one tried to pressure him to join them.

The afternoon sun had climbed high in the sky before Aloqueth stirred from her resting spot. *He is moving.*

Aloqueth must have passed the message along to the rest of the wing as well because their riders were scrambling to get into their saddles. Jared looked back at J’sen just in time to watch him leap
up onto Strith’s back. He was everything a dragonrider should be - brave and intelligent, handsome and fearless.

As he settled onto Aloqueth, he turned back to J’sen for orders. Even though he was the ranking dragonrider there, he wasn’t about to step into a foreign wing on such an occasion and try to lead them. J’sen waited for his nod though, and once Aloqueth confirmed that Fith had gone between, he gave them the signal to fly.

They reached formation quickly and J’sen took the lead with Jared next to him. The distance between them wasn’t small but Jared figured M’tch must be afraid of being followed so he wasn’t going directly between to the eggs. It gave them more land to search if their hunch was wrong, but J’sen’s logic was sound. Not only was the location J’sen pointed out the perfect location for hatching eggs, but M’tch wasn’t creative enough to look at something less traditional to hide the eggs. An old volcano crater, like every other weyr on Pern, had too many advantages. The only disadvantage was the ease of discovery, but Jared had never counted M’tch a smart man.

When they got closer, Aloqueth told them there were no other dragons in the area. It was too quiet for Jared’s liking, but if M’tch had other dragon riders in on this, they weren’t in the area at the moment. It made him question if the eggs were there, but they continued. They couldn’t stop and second guess themselves. They had a plan for searching the southern continent if they were wrong.

They came in from the south of the crater, over a river that led to a wide plateau with a small lake. The crater was on the east side, smaller than the crater of the weyrs in the north. It looked too small for a proper weyr, but it would do just fine for seven eggs.

*We’re going to land on the edge of the crater and see what happens,* Aloqueth informed Jared. They had agreed to that if there were no other signs of dragons. They didn’t want to land in the crater's bowl without seeing inside.

Jared looked down into the bowl and was startled by the lean-to structures constructed there. There was a single large cavern at one end, but it was the only opening that looked big enough to hold the eggs.

J’sen motioned them down before Jared could worry any further.

The dragons let their riders dismount, but there was plenty of room for them to space out and wait for them as they crept closer to the structures. It was empty as well, though a fire was going in an open pit. Pots hung over it for cooking.

“Where is everyone?” Jared whispered to J’sen. The bronzerider shook his head, but Jared could see he was worried as well. They had obviously found something, but there was no saying for certain that this was about the eggs. Whatever it was though, M’tch was a part of it and that meant danger to Jared.

There was another lean-to that was constructed long and deep enough to hold blankets for eighteen people. Another building, more solidly constructed, held a single bed, and another held a bunk for three.

They walked closer to the cavern, creeping between the buildings when someone walked into their view. J’sen moved quicker than Jared believed possible, but the man screamed, “Riders!” before J’sen punched him hard enough to put him on the ground.

It was too late for worry now, so they ran towards the cavern. It was hotter inside the cavern and
dim, but there was enough light coming in through an opening over the roof of the cavern that they
could see a group of people huddled towards the back. Two men came forward, both pulling
knives from their belts as they did. J’sen pushed Jared behind him, but before he could take the
challenge, two of his wingmates stepped up instead.

J’sen’s shoulders tensed and his fists clenched, his knife pulled and at the ready, but he stood
between Jared and anything that might come for him instead. Jared trusted J’sen to keep him safe
and turned his eyes away from the fight and to the back of the cavern.

He heard sniffles and quiet sobs and when he looked, there was nothing but frightened youths
before him. They were huddled together, surrounding seven dragon eggs. From where he stood,
there was nothing wrong with the eggs. These must have been candidates. They wore filthy
clothes and most looked exhausted and terrified. He could see bruises and abrasions openly on a
few of the older boys.

“They’re terrified. By Faranth’s first egg, what have they don’t to them?” Jared asked.

Jared started to move towards them, but J’sen stepped to the side and blocked him from moving by
placing his body between them. “Jared, wait!”

He turned his eyes back to the fight, but there were only two men here in this camp. A few of
J’sen’s riders had stayed behind with the man J’sen had knocked down and were guarding the
cavern entrance, but the rest were ready to come to the aid of their people if they needed it.

Jared didn’t have time to see what was happening before the fights were over. One man tried to
fight his way into a break, but the other man was smart enough to run. Neither man was a match
for the men of Igen Weyr. There were few on Pern who could match the strength, speed, and
stamina of a dragonrider.

A handful more of J’sen’s riders left the cavern as they shoved both men out of the cavern to join
his fellow conspirator. Jared agreed with J’sen choice without needing his reasoning. These
candidates were terrified and having a large group of strange dragon riders wasn’t going to help
that.

If M’tch had been the one keeping them here, he didn’t figure his own name would help the scared
figures either.

“Can you talk to them while I check the eggs?”

J’sen nodded. “Guess all that harper training still comes in handy from time to time,” he teased.

Jared had no doubt that J’sen would have the candidates - some barely looked old enough to be
called that - eating out of his hand in no time. As Jared circled to the side, the candidates moved
away from him and J’sen had created a path that allowed them to stay clear of the riders and give
Jared space.

The temperature of the grounds was good and Jared went from egg to egg to make certain there
was no damage. He wasn’t a dragonhealer, but he did his best. He ran his hands over the surfaces
that weren’t covered in sand, and he murmured words of comfort as he did. He could feel
Aloqueth’s quiet, calming hum behind him. It wasn’t a sound of hatching, but the other dragons
picked up her voice and carried it with them as well. He saw the way J’sen’s eyes widened when
he looked over at Jared, but no one voiced an opinion about it. He’d have to ask Aloqueth who she
was calming; the eggs, the candidates, or the riders waiting for Jared’s news?
When he was done, he looked back towards the Wingleader. “I can’t see any damage here. We need to find a way to get them back to the weyr though. How did M’tch manage to get them here?”

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Jared looked over to one of the older boys. He had bruises on his arms and face as well as raised abrasions on his forearm. “They brought a few of us here before the eggs came. The rider carried the eggs in something that looked like a giant saddlebag. He kept it in the storeroom, in case we needed to move again, he said.”

One of J’sen’s men came forward. “Can you take me to it?” he asked. The boy agreed and with a swift nod, the rider took the boy away and left Jared and J’sen to speak alone while the other candidates were being taken outside.

“The eggs?”

“As I said, I don’t see anything wrong with them and Aloqueth says they’re fine. The boys?”

J’sen clenched his jaw before he ran a hand through his hair. “Some were collected from small holds that no one visits. Some were holdless. Some were given a choice to come, but it sounds like once M’tch got the eggs here they just started grabbing kids whether they wanted to come or not. And they’ve suffered for it. They haven’t been cared for, nor given enough food or sleep. Seventeen candidates. M’tch seemed to have a few other riders, but they were careful not to use their names where his candidates could hear them. We need to get them back to the weyr also. Clean them up and feed them. Give ‘em a good night’s sleep before they return home.”

“It’s the least we can do. Let’s just hope M’tch’s saddlebags can be used again.”

“Let’s hope we can take them between. I don’t fancy trying to fly the long way to Ista with a bronze on our trail.”

“And whoever else is in on this plot,” Jared said. “I can’t believe whoever made plans to bring people to the southern continent didn’t know what was happening here.”

“I agree. For now, though, let’s work on this problem first. I’ve got dragons on the watch to make sure we know if M’tch shows up, but I’d rather be gone before that.”

“I think we all would.”