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# Removed

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'Fall had been as close to a delight as Q'wen could imagine a 'Fall could be. WindFlight had flown the Cibola Tip, which has been blissfully uncomplicated; there were no shifts in wind patterns, which made the few minutes of 'Fall a quick, easy time. Better yet, a strong wind from the east pushed nearly all the Thread into the barrens on the far western side of Izmir, making the second half of the 'Fall even shorter than usual. There had only been one injury within StrongWind, a blue that had graduated from Weyrling Class #23 -- H'bayn and Kerrineth. The young man had been scored on his left shoulder when Kerrineth made a belated duck, but it wasn't serious in the least.

So after the Threadfall, there had been plenty of time to bathe and oil Tendrith, take a quick shower, and do a bit of lace-work before dinner. Upon entering his weyrcot, the brownrider sat on his bed, then pulled out his bone netting shuttles, skein of string, and the connected loops of already-finished lace. He set about sorting the loops of completed lace into a neat bundle, and then began to run the netting shuttles through his fingers and across the string. Tendrith had dozed off while Q'wen was taking a shower, and there was little to be heard from the sleeping brown.

The door burst open suddenly, and it was all Q'wen could do to stuff his lace and netting shuttles underneath him and (hopefully) out of sight. "You certainly look guilty!" X'tanis commented with a chuckle. He entered the room and immediately assumed a mock-serious façade. Olindia, Tess, and M'qua quickly followed him into the room. "Do you have a candidate hidden in here or something? I'm crushed, Q'wen—honestly! I can't believe you'd do something like that to me."

"How did you know?" the brownrider responded, hoping desperately that if he played along, X'tanis would stop inspecting the room. Certainly, the bluerider was joking, but if there was even a loop of lace peeking out... Or maybe X'tanis would see that his wingsecond was sitting in an odd position, which was actually resulting from Q'wen's desperate attempt to not put his full weight on his netting shuttles. "No, I just got back from a shower, and giving Tendrith a bath before that."

"We were all headed to the Weyrhall to grab something to eat," M'qua added. "Aren't you ready yet?"

Q'wen tried to breathe deeply and slow his heart, which felt like it was going as fast as an excited green firelizard. "Of course, almost," the wingsecond replied, hoping that M'qua wouldn't press the subject. He and M'qua made almost every trek to the Weyrhall together, and had been doing it for longer than Q'wen cared to think. Had it really been that long since they had graduated? "I'm going to change my tunic. I'll be along in just a few minutes."

"We'll be there," M'qua said, and the small group departed. The brownrider allowed himself a deep sigh of relief. Q'wen waited several seconds to make sure that they were truly gone before standing up and moving his lace to a drawer in his bedside table.

"That was a little too close," he mused aloud, then decided that he would have to fake a visit to his 'Auntie Yani' fairly soon. Before the Turn's End gather, at least—he could get a good price for the lace there. It was becoming more and more difficult to hide his lace-making from the rest of his wingmates, though. Q'wen could only hope that none of them would demand to see this aunt of his. After all, every time he claimed to visit 'Auntie Yani,' the brownrider only stuffed his pockets full of lace before the takeoff, then went to visit his family at the SeaCraft Hall. A few hours later, he could return and claim that his spinster aunt had given it all to him.

Some of his wingmates were already suspicious, Q'wen was sure. But none of them had ever insisted that his aunt come for a visit, or accused him of lying. He was their superior, after all, and as little as Q'wen liked to admit it, there was some security in that ranking.

But now he had to change his shirt, even though the one he had on was perfectly clean. 'Tess, at least, would notice if I didn't change,' Q'wen decided, and headed toward his chest of drawers to find something else.

Had it not been for the marks that paid for almost every stitch of clothing that he owned, making lace would be more trouble than it was worth.



2858.13.23

Most times, Q'wen would have rather enjoyed having an afternoon off from the rigorous StrongWind schedule. But, he decided, drills were preferable to laying in the infirmary in a vomit-streaked tunic, waiting for an apprentice healer to bring him a clean shirt from his cot.

"How is the Wing doing, Tendrith?" Q'wen asked his brown, hoping desperately that the dragon would have something interesting to report to put a stop to the monotony.

**Drills are over, and Ulaireth's rider comes to see how you are doing.** Ulaireth's rider was pleased with the drills, Tendrith announced, and Q'wen gave a small groan in reply. He couldn't think of any situation—outside of 'Fall—that he would like less than the present one. Unless the blonde-haired apprentice was nearly there, he was going to be

greeting his Wingleader with vomit down his shirt and a half-full bucket by the side of the bed, both of which he doubted Z'hon would appreciate.

Unfortunately, Z'hon was faster than the apprentice. "Hello, Q'wen." The bronzerider took in his wing second's appearance with a quick glance, wrinkling his nose slightly when his gaze fell on the bucket. "Not much better, I can see."

"No, sir, not much. Tendrith said that drills went well, though." He found it rather disconcerting to actually have to look up at his Wingleader, when he was so very used to looking down to see pretty much everyone. Q'wen pushed himself into a sitting position, which helped alleviate his discomfort at his Wingleader towering over him.

"I've spoken to the healers, and they say that you probably won't be in shape to participate in the Turn's End Games," Z'hon continued, ignoring the comment about the drills. Q'wen supposed that could only mean good things, though; if they had gone poorly, Z'hon would have complained.

At that moment, the apprentice reappeared, striding along the aisle of cots with a smile. "Hello, Wingleader, Wingsecond, sirs," she greeted them with a quick half-curtsy, apparently unaware of the heavy mood. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I brought back the clean shirt that you wanted, and something that I found in your cot that I thought might help you pass the time." Her voice was low and quiet, as if worried that she might offend one of them.

As she reached into her pocket, Q'wen froze. She had taken something from his weycot that would help him "pass the time"—something that would fit in her pocket. Something that had to be in plain view back at the cot. But his lace should have been in the drawer of his bedside table... Should have been. Instead, he realized, they'd been tossed to the foot of his bed when he'd run to the nearest privy. And Olindia had been in there, too, and had walked him immediately to the infirmary.

His fears were fully realized when, with a shy smile, the girl produced several inches of completed lace, his pair of bone netting shuttles, and a medium-sized ball of thread from the pocket of her skirt. "I-I'm sorry if it doesn't belong to you," she stammered, gaze darting from Q'wen's look of horror to Z'hon's contemptuous glare. "I just thought that it would help you take your mind off being sick."

"No, it's fine," the brownrider reassured the girl, wishing that he wasn't wearing a vomit-streaked shirt and laying in the infirmary, the very picture of weakness in front of his wingleader. "It was—" it would be so easy to lie, and say that some kitchen worker had spent the night and left it there. But Z'hon would know. Q'wen had never been able to lie convincingly, and Z'hon was suspicious enough to call his bluff. "It's mine. Thank you." He took the loops of lace and shoved them underneath the coverlet of the bed, hoping that Z'hon would be happier once it was out of sight.

The girl smiled more widely that time, although she seemed to be aware that something had gone wrong. Q'wen cringed despite his best intentions to keep a straight face.

"Q'wen?" Z'hon's voice was tight and clipped, and he didn't wait for recognition before continuing. "I'll need you to report to my office tomorrow, if you're feeling better by that time. I'll have Ulaireth tell Tendrith when I need you."

"Certainly, Wingleader."

Z'hon gave no sign of a goodbye before turning and stalking out of the room, leaving his wingsecond behind. "That was wonderful," Q'wen muttered under his breath, tossing his clean shirt to the foot of the bed and pulling the lace from underneath the coverlet. He stared at the complex loops that he knew would cause him plenty of pain and suffering.

It had been hard enough to keep the lace making a secret from his wingmates, and Z'hon certainly had no reason to keep his secret. Q'wen suspected that the bronzerider had no particular love of him anyways; Z'hon had never kept his dislike of men sleeping with other men a secret.

*You should not be so angry,* Tendrith commented. *He only asked to see you, and I do not mind telling you whenever Ulaireth's rider wants to talk to you. I will tell you when he does.*

Q'wen sighed deeply, and then shoved the lace back underneath the coverlet—he certainly didn't want Melita to come back in and see the lace, for even the most well-intentioned person could let something slip without realizing its harm. Not that it mattered, if Z'hon told...

The brownrider scowled when he realized that he was thinking in circles. *Something* was going to happen, but he could only hope that it would be small. Either way, he would make it through the whole ordeal.

His thoughts trailed off when he realized that his shirt still reeked of vomit. It was time to change.



2858.13.25

Having been released from the infirmary earlier that morning, Q'wen expected that Z'hon would want to speak to him that day. However, he hadn't expected the summons to come nearly immediately after he entered the weycot.

*Ulaireth's rider asks if you are here, and wishes to meet you in his office,* the brown relayed almost immediately after Q'wen had sat down on the edge of his bed. *He asked if you were feeling well enough to go.*

Q'wen groaned, wishing that he could lie and put the whole thing off. He didn't know exactly why Z'hon wanted to see him, but the brownrider wasn't dim enough to even begin to imagine that it could be for something positive. "Tell him I'm fine. I have to get it over with sooner or later, anyway, I guess. Just wish it was later." He paused, then groaned again. "You didn't tell him that last part, did you?"

*No,* Tendrith replied. *Did you want me to?*

The brownrider grimaced at the thought of what that could cause. "No. Don't." He waited a few seconds more,

basking in the fact that he was finally back 'home', then stood and headed out of his weyrcot towards WindHall.

Z'hon must have been waiting for him, because the bronzerider was empty-handed, arms crossed on the edge of his desk, and was the very image of impatience. He nodded toward the chair immediately in front of Q'wen. "Take a seat, Q'wen." The Wingleader's voice was completely level, and Q'wen couldn't help but wonder if Z'hon had the whole conversation already planned out in his mind.

"Thank you, sir," Q'wen replied, seating himself in the chair. He could see Z'hon flinch as it creaked loudly under the brownrider's massive bulk, and resolved not to shift his weight even slightly during whatever was to come.

The Wingleader cleared his throat loudly, dropping his arms from his desk and folding them across his stomach. "As you are aware, I have already made several changes to StrongWind since I was appointed Wingleader last Turn. Because of those changes, the entire morale of the wing has been changed. We have lost some of the less desirable wingriders and gained several who are well suited to the dedication that StrongWind calls for."

By this point, Q'wen had decided that the bronzerider was reciting a speech meant to change his attitude towards StrongWind. "I am dedicated to the Wing and its members," he interjected when Z'hon paused for a moment. "I want it to perform at its highest potential, and I believe that the rest of the Wing shares that attitude."

Z'hon's face tightened, and Q'wen suddenly realized that he'd said something horribly wrong. "I have reason to doubt that, brownrider," the wingleader snapped. "Reasons to doubt that you want what is best for my Wing."

"Your duties within StrongWind Wing are going to be changed," Z'hon continued, his words clipped and precise. "From this time forward, you are removed from your position as wingsecond, and are relieved of all duties associated to that position. Tomorrow you will be placed in a new position in drills. Assuming that you attend drills, of course, seeing that your health has prevented you from doing so."

Removed. The word rang in his ears, and the brownrider could do nothing but stare blankly at his superior. Z'hon's jab at his absence from drills didn't even register in his suddenly chaotic mind. Removed from his position because he made *lace*, shaffit! Removed not because he had slacked off or disrespected his Wingleader's orders and authority, but because Z'hon had problems with things that didn't even affect his ability as a dragonrider.

Removed.

"Sir, I must argue the reason for my demotion. I do not believe that it is just or fair." There was no anger in Q'wen's voice, just surprise and disbelief. He could hardly believe that he had just contested his Wingleader's authority, either.

"Nevertheless," Z'hon continued, his words becoming shorter and more forced, "you are no longer senior wingsecond of StrongWind. You will be replaced immediately. At tomorrow's drills, you will take the new

wingsecond's former position in all formations. Do you understand?"

Q'wen found it difficult to stare open-mouthed at his wingleader and reply at the same time. "Yes," he finally replied, fighting to keep his voice level. "I understand."

The bronzerider nodded curtly. "Good. I will see you at drills in the morning. You are dismissed, brownrider."

It was only after Q'wen had closed the door to Z'hon's office and began to stride out of the meeting hall that his anger began to rise. "Demoted," he muttered under his breath, repeatedly clenching and relaxing his fists, which hung limply at his sides.

***What has happened?*** Tendrith demanded suddenly, aware of his rider's mounting distress. ***Has Ulaireth's rider done something?***

"I am no longer wingsecond." The brownrider found it difficult to keep his voice level and low enough so as not to draw the attention of any passersby. "Z'hon has removed me from my position."

Q'wen was suddenly aware of the fact that he was still standing immediately outside Windhall, fists clenched tightly at his sides. Eager to get far away from Z'hon, he set off for his own weyrcot, huge strides making quick work of the short distance.

***I don't understand why you are upset about what Ulaireth's rider told you,*** Tendrith commented lazily, opening one eye as Q'wen approached his cot, much less concerned now that he understood the cause for all of the excitement. ***I did not like telling the greens what to do during Threadfall.***

"He had no right to do that!" the brownrider fumed as he strode up the steps. "No right at all! I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't disputed his authority, haven't slacked up on the members of the Wing. He can call it whatever he likes, but the only reason is the lace. The shaffing lace." He stopped before entering his cot and stared fiercely at the door, as if accusing it of all his difficulties.

Tendrith rumbled softly, annoyed that his rider was keeping him from a nap. ***We will still do the same job that we have always done. We will fly with the same dragons, and we will just be flying in a different spot. Nothing has changed.***

"Everything is different," Q'wen muttered, lowering his gaze from the door and swinging it open. "We'll be taking orders, and if someone does something wrong, we won't be able to correct them." He stepped into the cot,

***Someone else will correct them for us,*** the brown replied sleepily. ***And besides, you will not even have to worry about the mistakes that others are making. It will be easy.***

The brownrider couldn't help but think that Tendrith was right. As much as he would miss his position and being able to help those who were messing up, there would be less to do. He could concentrate only on himself and his dragon, and make sure that they were doing everything as well as they could. And Auntie Yani could pass out of his life, too—Z'hon would surely tell his new wingsecond why they

had been raised. And even though all StrongWind wingriders were well disciplined, the new wingsecond would probably let it slip, which meant everyone would know.

"You think that's a good thing?" Q'wen demanded of his brown. "We won't be in the running for top wingsecond at the Turn's End Games. You like showing off for the greens."

Tendrith rumbled in reply. ***We do not have to be a wingsecond to catch attention. Besides, they will like me no matter where we finish in the games.***

With a grudging chuckle, Q'wen sat on his bed and picked up the unfinished strand of lace, running his fingers over its length. 'Amazing how something completely unrelated to riding a dragon can be used to bump me back down to a wingrider.'

He knew that Z'hon certainly wouldn't report to the Weyrleader that he had removed his Senior wingsecond because he liked to make lace. It would instead be written down as 'a conflict of interests in the authority of StrongWind Wing', which wasn't entirely a lie. "My interests conflict with his authority," Q'wen mused, finding the subject oddly humorous. With a smile, he picked up his shuttles and began to twist and move the thread in patterns he had repeated time and time again.

The complex yet repetitive action failed to relax him as it usually did, and after a few loops of lace had been created, Q'wen tossed the shuttles aside with a scowl. He felt the urge to do something, anything, as long as it involved a physical effort. Cramming Z'hon into one of the privies seemed like it would provide entertainment and exertion, and the FireStormers would probably love it, but it didn't seem like an intelligent pastime to take up now.

Who was going to replace him? The thought pulled Q'wen out of his moping, and he tried to run through the list in his mind. 'Not the time to think of that,' the brownrider reminded himself. It would be best to relax, and not think of that at all. It had happened, and he would have to deal with the results of his demotion when they came.



"You wanted to speak with me, Z'hon?"

The StrongWind Wingleader did not respond to M'qua at once. He was writing on some papers on his desk, and his semi-scowl made it obvious that paperwork was not something he wanted to be working on right now. Finally, Z'hon motioned M'qua over to him and gestured at one of the chairs. Knowing well that Z'hon would speak when ready, M'qua took a seat and waited for the Wingleader to finish.

Z'hon scribbled something on the top-most paper and then hastily pushed the sheet aside. "Blasted paperwork," he grumbled. "There are plenty of other things I could be doing, but every little change to the Wing means I have to fill out paperwork to make it 'official'."

M'qua leaned forward, curious. "Changes to the Wing, sir?"

"That's why I've asked you here, brownrider. Those changes involve you." Z'hon may have expected a response from M'qua, but the dark-skinned man's silence and look of confusion led the Wingleader to continue. "I've dismissed one of the Wingseconds, and am promoting you to the position in his place."

The brownrider did a double take, not sure he had heard Z'hon correctly. "Promoted?"

"That's right - and as soon as I finish this useless paperwork, I want to go over some new flight drills I'd like the Wing to learn starting tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir..." M'qua didn't know what else to say. There were many who could have been picked for this position, but he had been chosen for the job. The dark-skinned man immediately, proudly, sat up straighter, ready to take the orders for his new position. However, after a few moments, it occurred to him that something - someone - was missing.

"Sir?"

"Yes, wingsecond?"

"Shouldn't Wingsecond Q'wen be here to learn of the new drill formations, as well?"

Z'hon looked up from his paperwork with a derisive laugh. "Wingsecond O'ris has already been briefed about the new drills. I demoted Q'wen earlier today."

For the second time in one sitting, M'qua was taken aback. "Q'wen was demoted? But why?"

"If a wingsecond can't follow his wingleader's instructions, it's time for him to step aside for someone who can." The wingleader had gone back to scribbling over his paperwork, still in a hurry to get it complete. His lackluster tone made it evident that the dismissal was a moot point.

M'qua, however, wasn't pleased with that answer. "Q'wen has been a competent wingsecond since he has been assigned to that position. I've never seen him counter one of your orders during a 'Fall.'"

"It had more to do with when we were on the ground. Wing morale can be affected by conflicts on the ground just as much, if not more so, than they can be by what takes place during a 'Fall.'"

M'qua lowered his eyebrows. "I never heard you and Q'wen argue."

Z'hon caught the brewing emotions in M'qua's clipped words and lifted his gaze to meet the brownrider's. "Those are private matters and aren't really any of your business."

M'qua accepted the challenge; he did not lower his gaze. "Anything that affects the Wing is my business - especially when I need to explain to the others why a competent wingsecond was demoted and I was promoted in his place."

"A wingleader has more than enough right to demote a wingsecond with whom he does not get along."

"Personal differences can be set aside for the good of the Wing."

Z'hon's frown deepened as M'qua stoically set his jaw. He leaned forward in his chair and looked as though he could jump from his seat - and down M'qua's throat - at any moment. "Do you disagree with my demotion of Q'wen? Perhaps I should reconsider your promotion, as well? I had thought you would be a more than suitable replacement for a wingsecond who was losing his backbone. Are you going to tell your wingleader that he isn't capable of making the right decision? You were my first choice for his replacement, brownrider, but T'noh can make an excellent replacement, too." He roughly grabbed the topmost paper from the pile on his desk and shook it at M'qua, crumpling it in the process. "The paperwork isn't finished, brownrider. If you want to keep your promotion, you'd best not say another word!"

M'qua kept his gaze locked on the man in front of him, but he was torn. He wanted this promotion, had dreamed of it for quite some time, but these were not the circumstances of his dreams. Z'hon had done this before - had bullied others with threats and verbal abuse until he'd gotten his way - M'qua had seen it happen. M'qua had turned the other way because it had not affected him. And now that he was on the receiving end of the manipulation, he realized what a miserable position he was in. He set his jaw. The corner of his mouth twitched defiantly. But in the end, he rose and said nothing as he left the room.

"You've made the right choice," Z'hon called out behind him in a rather smug tone. "Keep your personal feelings for the matter out of this, and you'll see that this was for the better of the Wing."



"We heard the news, M'qua - congratulations!" Tess called out as the wingsecond made his way away from Z'hon's office and headed back to his cot. M'qua, however, didn't turn to face the greenrider but acknowledged her compliment with a curt wave of his hand. Why did everyone know about this turn of events before he did? He failed to notice her offended expression as he entered his cot and practically slammed the door behind him.

A muzzy voice crept into his mind. Ursuth had obviously been asleep in his wallow behind the cot, and the noise M'qua had made upon his arrival had awakened him.

***What is the matter?*** the brown asked. Seconds after the dragon spoke, M'qua noticed an inquisitive, swirling eye staring into his opened window. ***Why are you so angry?***

M'qua had thrown himself down in his favorite chair and now rested his face against his clenched fist. He knew what was eating at his gut right now, but it took a staunch determination just to even admit to his dragon what was bothering him.

*I was wrong*, M'qua practically spat in his thoughts.

Ursuth was unfazed by the outburst. ***You were wrong about what?***

M'qua sighed as he tried to organize his thoughts. He had spent the better part of four Turns now thinking that

those wingriders who had transferred out of the wing when Z'hon had taken control had betrayed StrongWind. He ground his fist into his chin as he recalled the heated argument that he and Jallori had had when she had come to him and had announced she would be leaving the wing because she "knew what Z'hon was like." He had put the wing in front of any friendships that had been tarnished by the wing's leadership and had turned his back on anyone who doubted the words of his Wingleader. He had been willingly blind for so many turns, and had only just now seen how wrong he was.

Z'hon was not the man M'qua had made himself believe he was.

*I was wrong*, he angrily repeated to the brown.

Ursuth blinked the faceted eye that was focused on his bond. ***I do not like it when you do not make sense. If something is wrong, why can you not make it right?***

M'qua growled. *It's not that easy.* What was he going to tell Q'wen - that is, if Q'wen had not heard about who his replacement would be already.

Ursuth stared at him, awaiting an explanation. But M'qua could not bring himself to admit that his pride was wounded, and that he had willingly accepted the position that should still belong to his best friend. He knew he was good wingsecond material, but Q'wen was as well, and had Turns of experience to back that up.

***I am going back to sleep***, Ursuth sighed, and lowered his eye from the window. ***I hope you fix what is wrong soon. It is making my head hurt.***

M'qua grunted and stared, head still resting on his hand, at the now-empty window. 'Mine, too,' he thought to himself.



Time for the evening meal approached, and M'qua, as usual, made his way to meet Q'wen to go get their dinner. He passed another group of wingmates, who, like Tess had before, tried to give their new wingsecond congratulations. M'qua tried his best not to acknowledge their accolades. It made it all that much harder to go see his friend. And, given how quickly the word seemed to spread, he could only guess that Q'wen knew of his replacement already.

M'qua arrived at Q'wen's weycot and lifted his hand to knock on the door. However, he lowered it at the last minute. Becoming angry at his indecision, M'qua kicked at the dirt, growled, and raised his hand again. This time, he rapped loudly on the door, and set his jaw as he waited for the former wingsecond to respond.

"Who is it?" Q'wen called. M'qua did not answer, and he soon heard the approach of his friend's footsteps. When the door swung open, M'qua thought Q'wen seemed genuinely surprised - but not particularly pleased - to see M'qua standing there. "What is it?"

M'qua stared hard at the man who was head and shoulders taller than he was and ground his teeth. He had found the determination to come this far, but his pride was

still warring with his conscience. Q'wen raised an eyebrow when the usually outspoken brownrider stood, saying nothing. "Well?"

"It's time for dinner."

"I don't want to go to dinner today."

"Then I'll leave you alone."

"Is that all you wanted?"

M'qua clicked his lips and started to say something, then paused and cleared his throat. Finally, his eyes met Q'wen's and did not waver. "I'm sorry about what Z'hon did. I wanted you to know that I don't agree with his decision."

Q'wen folded his arms across his chest. "You're sorry, and yet I see you had no problems swooping down on the position once it was offered to you."

"What would you have done if you were in my shoes?"

M'qua asked, defensively.

"A good friend wouldn't use his best friend's misfortune to advance his own career."

"And what should I have done? Tell Z'hon no, I couldn't accept? The Wing needs a good wingsecond, Q'wen. If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else."

"You didn't have to accept."

M'qua was quickly becoming exasperated. "I told Z'hon I didn't agree with his decision. I told him I didn't think it was right to let you go. But I had to accept. It was my duty to accept. I have just as much experience with the Wing as you have. If it can't be you, at least the Wing can depend on that."

Q'wen said nothing, but waved his hand at M'qua to indicate that he didn't want to hear any more. Before M'qua could protest, the large brownrider had closed the door in his best friend's face.

"Let's leave it at this for now," M'qua said, raising his voice in hopes that Q'wen was still listening, "and figure out what to do about it when our minds are clear."

The new wingsecond, however, heard nothing from Q'wen's hut. A few awkward moments passed before he turned on his heel and walked away.



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