What Goes In, Must Come Out

by Whitney Ware
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“Does the pretty-boy have any clue what he’s getting himself into?” L’ward scoffed.

D’zan chuckled and shook his head ruefully. “Doubt it. They have a long tradition of huggy-kissy weyrlingmasters at Fort. Remember, B’loren came from there.” It was noontime, and weyrling classes and drills had been dismissed for the lunch hour. The two old friends headed for the Weyr Hall and promise of fresh klah and meatrolls that Resla always provided, leaving junior members of the staff to oversee the stampede of students to the Weyr Hall. “Man seems pretty soft to me, but he’s got a good blue. Raskath would be an asset. He’s about as dedicated a busybody as they come.” D’zan reached after the Weyr Hall door. “S’kan’s transfer has already been--”

A shriek ripped out from inside the Weyr Hall. D’zan limped past her to the sink and leaned to look out of the wide, open window. The windowsill was scarred from wher-claws, and he could see a pair of whitewings sailing overhead.

“Whitewing came through the window and stole Resla’s ring,” D’zan answered.

L’ward looked as if he’d been expecting the Riverman to say something more. “Sure you’re not worried? Rotten beasts,” he muttered sourly. “I’m just embarrassed that I screamed like that.”

“Just my pride,” Resla said. She laughed sheepishly and continued to rub the back of her neck. “You and L’ward needn’t worry about it, I’m just embarrassed that I screamed like that.”

“What happened?” asked L’ward, ducking back into the hall.

Resla’s face reddened. “It’s my ring,” she said. She laughed sheepishly and continued to rub the back of her neck. “What’s important is that the klah is safe, for the moment at least.” Resla gestured for them to sit for their meal, and perched on the edge of the table herself. 

“No damage done, and the ring never fit me anyway. What’s important is that the klah is safe, for the moment at least.” Resla continued. “S’kan’s transfer has already been approved--”

A shriek ripped out from inside the Weyr Hall. D’zan limped past her to the sink and leaned to look out of the open window. “Resla!” he shouted in alarm while L’ward raced past him.

The Headsecond’s back was to them; she stood at the stoneware sink, gazing out of the open window before her, where there was a departing flash of movement. L’ward hesitated for only a moment, then dashed past her out the far door, clearly hoping to intercept whatever trouble had caused Resla’s outcry. D’zan hurried to Resla as fast as his wooden leg would allow him. “What is it?” he demanded.

Resla turned toward him, her expression stricken. “It’s nothing,” she said, although the catch in her voice and the alarm in her face betrayed her words.

D’zan took Resla by the shoulders and hugged her, his eyes searching out of the window. He could see the backside of Resla’s own cottage, and K’bort’s empty weyr cot beyond. “What happened?” he asked again.

“Nothing. It was nothing.” Resla hugged him tightly, resting her forehead against his shoulder for a moment. Her body felt tense in his arms, contradicting her words.

“Which weyrling are you covering for this time?” D’zan asked her, tilting her chin to force her to meet his eyes.

Resla’s face reddened. “It wasn’t a weyrling,” she said. “It was one of those whitewings.”

D’zan looked at her, not comprehending her words. “A whitewing?”

Resla managed a wry smile, her composure returning. “It was a big one. It swooped down while I was washing the klah pot, and snatched away my ring.”

D’zan’s eyes flickered to Resla’s neck; the ring she spoke of had been her father’s, and she had worn it every day on a leather thong around her neck. Resla intercepted his glance and shrugged. “I was leaning over the sink, and the ring was hanging there. Maybe it caught the sunlight and glittered or something.” Resla chuckled self-consciously and rubbed the back of her neck. “The thing just snatched it and yanked, and that old bit of leather just snapped. If I’d been fast enough, I could have caught the beast and wrung its neck, but I was so startled I just sort of squealed instead.”

D’zan gave her another hug, conscious of the open doors and of L’ward’s likely return at any moment. Then he limped past her to the sink and leaned to look out of the wide, open window. The windowsill was scarred from wher-claws, and he could see a pair of whitewings sailing past overhead.

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“Don’t either of you worry yourselves over it,” Resla said, moving to serve them klah and meatrolls. “No damage done, and the ring never fit me anyway. What’s important is that the klah is safe, for the moment at least.” Resla gestured for them to sit for their meal, and perched on the edge of the table herself. “So tell me, what’s this I hear about another new transfer into the Weyr Wing?”

D’zan and L’ward shared a glance as they took their seats, recognizing a deliberate change in topic when they heard it. “Well, he’s from Fort, and he’s a nurturer--” L’ward began.

D’zan let his old friend do the talking. He sat and sipped his klah and watched Resla instead. The lost ring had been her father’s, and she had worn it every day on a leather thong around her neck. Resla intercepted his glance and shrugged. “I was leaning over the sink, and the ring was hanging there. Maybe it caught the sunlight and glittered or something.” Resla chuckled self-consciously and rubbed the back of her neck. “The thing just snatched it and yanked, and that old bit of leather just snapped. If I’d been fast enough, I could have caught the beast and wrung its neck, but I was so startled I just sort of squealed instead.”

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D’zan thought of how Resla’s face would glow when she spoke about her family, and her childhood back at the family’s tiny cothold back in Kadanzer Hold. He watched her expose a moment of the grief he knew she must be feeling over the loss of her father’s ring.

“She’s getting better at hiding her feelings,’ he thought, feeling over the loss of her father’s ring. “I was leaning over the sink, and the ring was hanging there. Maybe it caught the sunlight and glittered or something.” Resla chuckled self-consciously and rubbed the back of her neck. “The thing just snatched it and yanked, and that old bit of leather just snapped. If I’d been fast enough, I could have caught the beast and wrung its neck, but I was so startled I just sort of squealed instead.”

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D’zan thought of how Resla’s face would glow when she spoke about her family, and her childhood back at the family’s tiny cothold back in Kadanzer Hold. He watched his lover’s face closely during the next hour, but never saw her expose a moment of the grief he knew she must be feeling over the loss of her father’s ring.

“She’s getting better at hiding her feelings,’ he thought, surprised at the twinge of regret that came with the thought. “She’s learning.” He nursed the cup of klah to make it last, nodding occasionally when L’ward seemed to need some
reaction, and thought bitterly about the whitewing that had stolen something precious from the woman he loved.

‘Flying bastards deserve to pay for that,’ he thought sullenly. He wished he could recover that ring, and return it to his lover. But there was no way to do that, unless someone could tell one of the winged thieves from another.

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D’zan simply shrugged. “Let’s finish up before those hatchlings starve.”

Dinnertime for the hatchling barracks had arrived. They hung the carcass from the southern post of the Weyr Hall, near the hand pump. When there were young hatchlings to feed, it often proved easier for the Weyrling Wing staff to carve up a herdbeast themselves, giving the raw meat less time to spoil in the tropical heat.

K’bort and D’zan rolled up their sleeves and set to work, turning the still-warm steer into chunks of meat on a table of waiting feeding bowls. The whitewings, always quick to find their next meal, circled and quarreled overhead.

“Stinkin’ flying dung-bags,” K’bort muttered. He whistled for his golden firelizard, Prina, who arrived with a small fair of firelizards in attendance. “Keep those bastards from stealing us blind,” he ordered his queen, who immediately turned that command on her companions. Whitewings squealed and snarled as the air swooped to the battle.

“They’re breeding like Maori tunnelsnakes,” D’zan grumbled, keeping a wary eye on the flock of whitewings overhead. Despite their firelizard harassers, a couple of the winged wherries swooped low enough to make grabs after scraps of meant. D’zan flung out an arm, missing with his knife but still managing to scare a whitewing off. For the moment.

“Stinking plague is what they are,” K’bort agreed. “There was already too many of them when we moved here. Now that they’ve got all of the Weyr’s garbage to feed on, they’re getting to be insufferable.”

“Too bad the dragons don’t scare ’m off.”

K’bort growled and threw a bit of fat at one of the more daring whitewings. He hit the winged wherry square in the side, but the creature twisted in mid-air and snatched up K’bort’s makeshift missile as though it were a love offering.

“Shaffin’ theives,” K’bort muttered. “They’re getting bold enough to steal a dragonet’s dinner right out of its bowl. They’ll eat anything that’s not staked down. They scream like harlots every morning, waking us all up, and they shit all over the place. The Drill Square looks like some drunk painter’s been at it, even a hour or so after weyrlings have swept it clean. Shards, I can’t keep Jarvath’s wallow swept clean of it, some days.”

Another whitewing dived, almost brushing their heads with its wings. It raked a clawful of meat from the herdbeast’s flank and raced for cover in the jungle, followed both by its own kin and by a pair of chattering firelizards.

“Bastard,” K’bort growled, glaring after the thief.

D’zan eyed the wheeling flock of whitewings overhead, and smiled a narrow smile. “Tomorrow is a restday. Say, you bottling any of that beer of yours soon?”

K’bort turned and eyed the other brownrider. “Huh?”

D’zan simply shrugged. “Let’s finish up before those hatchlings starve.”

“C’mon, the man is enjoying a restday,” Ambri said. “Do you really have to bother him with that?”

“Make L’ward do it,” B’baer offered helpfully.

“The Weyrwomen said to get D’zan’s approval on it,” Farlow countered. “I’d rather have the Weyrlingmaster grumble at me now than the both of them after me later.”

“It’s your skin,” B’baer agreed, gesturing out of the Weyrlinghall window toward the north end of the Weyr Complex headlands.

The Glowmaster nodded a thanks and headed out of the doorway. The morning rain had lifted only within the past hour, and the heavy humidity was cut by the breeze off the sea. Farlow was eager to walk into that cooling breeze. Farlow stretched his legs and strode past the bare, sandy Drill Square. He could hear distant laughter to the east – wyrings and dragonets down on the Weyr Beach, no doubt enjoying their restday in the surf. Farlow could see D’zan now. The man was near the tip of the headlands, where the cliffs gave way to the pounding sea. He had his four youngest children with him -- Daran, Marna, Barton, and little Zanara. The crippled brownrider sat on a large boulder, bouncing Zanara on one knee as he directed the efforts of the other three. Daran, Marna and Barton each held soup ladles, and were scooping something drippy out from a bucket and flinging the contest of their ladles as far as they could across the grassy headlands. Hundreds of whitewings had gathered to feast on whatever it was the children were feeding them; the screams and shrieks of quarreling wherries was pierced now and then by the squeals of laughter from the eager children, who seemed to be competing alternately to see who could throw their ladle-worth of mess the farthest, and who could actually hit a whitewing with the stuff.

“Hello,” Farlow called cautiously, uncertain of how the Weyrlingmaster would respond to having his family time interrupted.

To the Glowmaster’s relief, D’zan seemed amiable enough. “Hi. What do you need?”

“There’s a blockage over at the Weyrwoman’s Complex. I need a skinny weyrling or two for a drain cleaning job, at the Weyrwoman’s request.”

D’zan grimaced at the thought. “One or two?”

“Two would be kindest. One, if you’ve got anyone who really deserves it.”
The Weyrlingmaster grinned. Farlow was not sure he’d ever seen the brownrider look so cheerful. “That’d be Bh’ruk, then. I’ll have Yoseth bespeak his bronze, and send him right over.”

“Thank you.” Farlow nodded, then gestured at the fermenty-scented muck in the bucket, which D’zan’s children were spreading so gleefully across the headlands. “What’s this stuff? Whitewing fertilizer?”

“You could say so,” D’zan countered pleasantly. “Some of the yeast sludge from K’bort’s abortive attempts at making beer. I figured it has to be good for something.”

The Glowmaster scratched at the back of his head. He waited for some further comment to explain that, but the Weyrlingmaster’s attention had already turned back to his children. “Got a couple coming to land over there!” the brownrider called, pointing; the children flashed up to the whitewings. Farlow shrugged, then turned back for Main. He had gotten what he’d come for, after all. He did not need more than that.

“It’s not fair,” N’kalo complained as the three of them walked through the darkening Weyrling Complex toward the Weyrlingmaster’s wallow. “We haven’t done anything.”

“Not so loud,” V’dalin shushed him. “If Old Stumpy hears us whining, he might send us off to clean pipes like Bh’ruk.”

That was threat enough to shut N’kalo up, but J’rald found himself thinking the same thing. It was not fair. The rest of the weyrlings were down on the beach, enjoying a driftwood bonfire and boiling a pot of spiderclaws they’d gathered. He, V’dalin and N’kalo hadn’t done anything wrong – there was no reason for the Weyrlingmaster to call them away from their well-earned restday celebration.

But the Weyrlingmaster did as he saw fit, and no weyrling had weight enough or rank enough to correct the situation. It was not fair, but what could a weyrling do about it?

“Hey!” N’kalo squawked as he stumbled. The youth fell into V’dalin, who steadied him on his feet. J’rald knelt and picked up the limp object N’kalo had tripped over in the darkness.

“It’s a whitewing,” he said, giving the thing a shake. “And it’s as dead as charred Thread.”

“Hey, there’s another one,” V’dalin bent over and picked up a second whitewing. “That’s strange.”

“There’s another,” said N’kalo, pointing out the still white form ahead of them.

J’rald felt Kelimath brush his mind. The whitewings have been falling from the sky since the afternoon, the dragonet told him.

“What?” J’rald said.

They have been dropping from the sky all afternoon. Their bellies have burst. Yoseth said not to worry about it, so we didn’t worry about it. Most don’t want them because they didn’t hunt them themselves, but Uayth says they taste good, so I ate one too. They taste fishy. I don’t like fish as much as Uayth does.

“You got some more over there?” called the Weyrlingmaster’s voice ahead of them. “Bring ‘em on over.”

The three weyrlings looked at one another warily, then followed the Weyrlingmaster’s voice to his cottage. The brownrider sat on the top step of his porch, a sprawling pile of whitewings in front of him. “Just throw them on the top and get out your belt knives,” D’zan said. “K’bort’s got a hand cart, and will be wheeling up with even more of the buggers.”

“What’s going on?” V’dalin asked, scratching his ear in confusion.

The Weyrlingmaster favored them with a brief shadow of a smile. “Simple. One of these bastards swallowed the Headsecond’s ring. We’re going to find it. Let me show you the quick way to get it done. Head pops off real easy, just like this. Take off the forefeet next. Wing joints snap real easy – see? Then cut the skin around the hock joints, then cut between here and here. Remove the tail and pull the skin down and forward – just like this. As easy as stripping off a glove. You’ve got to remove the viscera next. Make a cut here, from the dunghole up to the midpoint of the lowest rib. See how those intestines just fall out? Be sure to reach in after the lungs as well. Carve off the breast meat, then toss the rest over there in that cart for the dragonets’ breakfasts. Just like that. Pretty quick work, once you get to it.”

The three weyrlings traded grim looks. “All of them?” J’rald said, gesturing at the heap of whitewing carcasses before them.

“Each and every one,” the Weyrlingmaster answered, as if it were simply a stroll to the Weyrhall. “And there’s more on the way, so get to work.”

The three weyrlings set to the task before them, although none of them could make as quick work of a carcass as D’zan did. Apparently, the Weyrlingmaster had already been at work for some time, to judge from the number of skinned carcasses already cast aside in a handcart, and will be wheeling up with even more of the buggers.

“You think Headsecond Resla’s ring is in one of these?” N’kalo asked, looking at the pile of dead wherries in dismay.

“Better hope so,” the Weyrlingmaster replied, sounding almost cheerful about it. “Because the sooner you find that ring in the guts of one of these bastards, the sooner you’re done.”

The weyrlings got right to work.
The sun was threatening to rise. D’zan looked toward that thin, red line on the horizon and wished he could think of something else that might work.

The last of the whitewings had been skinned, and its yeast-bloated guts inspected. No ring. Some other odd things, maybe, but no sign of Resla’s heirloom ring.

“What do you think this is?” K’bort asked curiously, turning the acid-scarred mark in the glow light.

D’zan grunted again, not really caring. They had found enough wher-breast meat to feed the entire Weyr. But not enough to indicate a serious case of constipation.

D’zan ignored the bluerider. “We’ve got a new transfer coming in,” he said instead, hoping to distract them with business.

“Two marks says nice boy like that won’t last the month,” L’ward chuckled. “Or if he does, it'll be as B’baer's cabin girl.”

“Klah?” Jallori offered, pouring D’zan a cup. “How pretty do you say he is?” B’baer leered.

“Two marks says nice boy like that won't last the month,” L’ward chuckled. “Or if he does, it'll be as B’baer's cabin girl.”

“Sounds like you earned it last night,” E’zok grinned.

B’baer sniffed the air loudly and made a show of rocking his chair away as D’zan sat down next to him.

Heads were bent together around the klah pot, enjoying K’bort’s story. “… and then he reached on in, pulled out a steaming handful, and there it was, in all of its gleaming glory…”

D’zan limped close enough for his uneven step to be overheard; K’bort sat back, smiling at the Weyrlingmaster as he joined the table where several of the wyrlyngstaff were seated.

“Klah?” Jallori offered, pouring D’zan a cup.

D’zan traded a hopeful look with K’bort and pushed himself to his feet. “Take her out to the middens,” he told the wyrlyng. “And let’s see what’s on its way out.”

Resla seemed to hardly care.

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K’bort tossed the mark and caught it. “Well, I’m just glad we didn’t gurk some firelizard by mistake. That would have been a mess.”

D’zan grunted and shrugged. “Doesn’t matter how much of the brewing sludge a firelizard might eat. Firelizards can belch. Damn. I was sure we’d find it.”

There was a sleepy draconic wail from the wyrlyng barracks. K’bort and D’zan looked at one another wearily, and K’bort pocketed his coin.

“G’nan or E’zok’s class,” K’bort muttered, as both men walked for the barracks.

“The chain is very lovely, thank you,” Resla said. She expected joy, gratitude, maybe even happy tears; instead, Resla seemed to hardly care.

D’zan swallowed his klah and stood. He fished a silver chain from his pocket. He found himself grinning like a boy, and struggled to compose himself better.

“Found something of yours,” he said, offering her back her ring, on the silver chain he had bartered away from Tildy.

Resla took it from him and looked at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, seeming more struck by the chain than the ring itself. “Oh,” she said. “My ring. How nice.”

D’zan felt the words choke in his throat. “Nice?” he managed to say.

“The chain is very lovely, thank you,” Resla said. She looked up, saw his stricken expression, and realized her mistake. “Thank you very much for my ring,” she said too quickly. “Where did you find it?”

D’zan just shrugged, battling down his outrage. He had expected joy, gratitude, maybe even happy tears; instead, Resla seemed to hardly care.
“Some things a girl should never ask,” crowed B’baer cheerfully. “Don’t ask the man again, you don’t want to know!”

K’bort, however, had shared in a long night’s recovery effort, and was gaping at Resla. “’Nice? Is that all?’ he cried. “We busted our--”

“K’bort,” D’zan said, interrupting the other brownrider’s outrage. D’zan turned back to his seat, shooting a silencing look at the other brownrider. “Don’t worry about it,” he told Resla absently over one shoulder. “We just found it and thought you might want it back.”

“Yes, of course I do, thank you very much!” Resla said too quickly, her cheeks pink with embarrassment. “I’m very happy to have it back, thank you both very much!”

D’zan nodded absently, careful to keep his expression neutral. He was not about to let the rest of the staff witness his dismay, or the unreasoning sense that his gift had been rejected.

Resla bustled around the hearth, clearly flustered as she mixed a fresh cup of klah. “I brought meatrolls from the Weyrhall,” she offered. “White bulb, some of that hard, sharp Drake cheese, and sliced wherbreast. Absolutely delicious.”

There was a burst of laughter from the other staffers. Resla flushed at the teasing, not understanding its source but good-naturedly willing to suffer. D’zan took the opportunity to hide his own expression in his klah cup, still struggling with his own disappointment.

Ah well, he thought. It was not the first time he’d badly misunderstood a woman. Women being the creatures they were, he was certain it would not be the last.