
Wing Feud

by Sass Collard, Ellen Million, Chris Nagy, Ron Swartzendruber & Whitney Ware
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M'scel swaggered into the Weyrhall right when dinner was starting. Looking around, he saw that none of his victorious wingmates had gotten there before him. He was the first. His grin broadened a few more notches, and he got a mug of klah and sat himself down across from the first StormWind riders he saw.

K'nis rolled his eyes as M'scel grinned at him, but his quiet wingmate Jantha gave no sign of seeing the FireStorm brownrider. Two FireBlaze riders exchanged looks and took their trays elsewhere, leaving the three alone at their end of the table.

"So, how does it feel to be a loser?" M'scel laughed.

"Hey, we came in second!" K'nis retorted.

"Yeah, that's the best anyone else can do when FireStorm's around!"

"So what do you want?"

"Just to see what someone looks like after their butt's been kicked so hard their tailbone's sticking out their nose." M'scel was particularly proud of that line; he'd thought of it the day before.

K'nis's face darkened. "Hey!"

M'scel kept right on. "Only one score in the rope drill, no drops at all in the dragon toss-- if those lazybutts in FireBlaze and FireStar had done their part, we'd have top Flight too!"

Jantha wasn't paying him any attention, busy stirring one of the two drinks in front of her. K'nis, on the other hand, was glaring at him. "Well, WE got top Flight!" he snapped irritably.

"Only because A'nar did so well in the individuals. Drop him out and our Wing alone would've beaten your whole Flight!"

"Well, he sure did better than your wingleader! Phanth flew like he was sleeping!"

"But FireStorm still kicked your StormWinder butts! You call us a bunch of party-boys and we still mopped the privy floor with you!"

"Hey, M'scel," Jantha said softly. "Your klah is getting cold."

"Huh? Oh." It took M'scel a moment to realize what she had said. He picked up his mug and realized that it had cooled off, so he gulped down most of it.

His throat seized up. His tongue was on fire! He couldn't breathe! His vision swam with tears. He managed to take a breath, but it only left his throat feeling hotter. His nose felt like it had Thread up it. Then his chest exploded into a sneeze. His nose hurt even more now. Another. He was on the floor. He could barely see.

Rider! What is wrong? Why does your mouth hurt?

Pepper! She put pepper in my klah!

Someone was pounding on his back. He sneezed again. There was laughter, then an angry voice from behind him.

"What did you have to do that for, K'nis? Just because we beat you in the Games is no reason to--"

M'scel lost the next words in another sneeze. His nose and throat still burned, but it wasn't as bad now. He levered himself up from the floor and sat back onto the bench. Tiairi stood behind him.

K'nis said, "Then tell your wingmate not to come in here and act like such a sharding ass! He deserved it!"

M'scel took as deep a breath as he could stand and shot back, "Well, you deserve what's going to happen to you! I-- Ahhh--!" He managed to stop the sneeze that time.

"Come on," Tiairi said. "Let's get you a cup of water."

"Find him a brain while you're at it," Jantha said sweetly.

"And you can tell the rest of your Wing that you're not as good as you think!" K'nis said, still hot. "Just wait and see -- StormWind Wing can take on FireStorm, anytime, anywhere, in 'Fall, fire or fog!"

"You're on!" M'scel wheezed, wiping his sleeve across his eyes and running nose. "FireStorm will whup your ass, just wait and see! You don't know what you're getting into, challenging FireStorm Wing like that."

"M'scel, shut up," Tiairi said, tugging at his arm and pulling him away.

"Challenge taken and raised," K'nis retorted. "FireStorm can't take the worst StormWind can give. You just wait and see."

Tiairi had succeeded in pulling M'scel to his feet and away. It wasn't until M'scel was out of earshot that he realized he wasn't sure what, exactly, he'd just committed his Wing to...



Hours had passed since the challenge had been issued, and the warning spread through StormWind like skyfire.

"So what?" V'kam, obviously putting little merit into the dinner-table talk.

Wingsecond R'nen's expression had fallen. "Jays," he murmured. "Was that really necessary, K'nis?"

"Wing pride," the young brownrider replied, sheepish now. "I couldn't sit there and let that dimglow insult StormWind like that."

"And you shouldn't," V'kam agreed. "We've nothing to fear from FireStorm. They're an undisciplined lot of furbits who're more danger to themselves than Thread. The only reason they do so well in the Turn's End Games is because

they probably fear L'ars would ban them from being able to drink like sailors in retaliation for failure."

R'nen favored the Wing's newest wingsecond with a smirk. V'kam had transferred to Kadanzer too recently to be aware of how FireStorm had earned its reputation. "FireStorm takes its fun far too seriously," he agreed.

"And we're going to be *it!*" said greenrider Taine miserably. Beside her, young Jepetima nodded in enthusiastic agreement. "Can I transfer to FireStar for the duration? No one ever cares overmuch about FireStar."

"No, you can't," V'kam said sharply. "If you think you're a target, there's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" asked Taine, Jepetima, and K'nis at once.

V'kam smiled, a narrow, cat-like grin. "You hit them first."

R'nen winced. "Wingleader A'nar will not approve," he said.

V'kam shrugged. "Who said he has to know?"



Luka answered the door barefoot, wrapped in her robe and blinking with bleary-eyed bewilderment. "Wingsecond? What is it?"

"Hush!" B'tai hissed in warning. He shouldered the door open so that he could pass her into the dark weycot. "We need to hide a few things. This is of vital importance. You must help us."

The young goldrider retreated several steps and watched anxiously as R'san and B'nyu followed B'tai into her cot. All three were dressed in dark colors and carried medium-sized cask under each arm; both B'tai and R'san had smeared the pale skin of their necks and faces with soot, a precaution dark-skinned B'nyu hadn't needed. Luka shot a nervous glance out of the wallow-side window, finding Savukath sound asleep – as no doubt the rest of the complex was at this late hour of the night.

"What is going on?" Luka asked cautiously.

"Wing feud," B'nyu said. "StormWind's threatened us."

"We've got to get the precious party juice to safety," R'san added. "If you wanted to hurt FireStorm, *this* is what you'd strike."

"I know I would," B'tai said amiably. He'd already set the first of his two casks down in a corner, and was stacking the second on top of the first. He whipped a decorative quilt off the sitting room couch, and draped it over the two casks, concealing them neatly. "You're a goldrider and by all rules of the game, what rules there are, you're off limits for those sorry sods. They won't go sneaking into your quarters, just as we wouldn't go creeping into Dunia's."

"Well, most of us wouldn't," B'nyu amended helpfully.

R'san put his casks down beneath the wallows-side window, and gestured for B'nyu to do the same. "Everyone knows the rules. You mess with the rules, you're looking for a hiding and you forfeit the game. You can't do anything to physically harm another rider. Sure can't do anything to

harm their dragons. And don't even *think* of messing with anyone else's riding straps or flight harness."

"And keep the wingleader and the goldriders out of it," B'nyu added, setting his casks down. "They'll only spoil everyone's fun."

"So you'll be safe enough, Luka," B'tai said. He had commandeered a vase of flowers from the writing desk and set it on his quilt-draped "table". He stood back to admire his handiwork. "Or at least you *should* be. I'd be careful about using the showers or privies for the next sevenday or so. Most of us will hike over to Main or SkyFlight."

"If you really think StormWind will tamper with your beer, don't you think someone might think to look here for it?" Luka said. "And come in here despite the fact that I'm a goldrider?"

"It's a risk," B'tai said. He and Luka both turned at the sound of R'san and B'nyu dragging furniture; the blueriders were maneuvering the old leather couch back against the wall below the wallow-side window, concealing their horde behind it. "But we've left a cask or two back at B'nyu's. It's some of K'bort's brew – one swig would choke a whersport. Don't know why you traded some of your stout for that goat spit," he said with a pointed look at B'nyu.

The big, dark-skinned bluerider ducked his head apologetically. "I didn't want to hurt his feelings," he mumbled.

"Next time, let me do the dealing," R'san said, patting B'nyu's thick arm. "K'bort should have paid us to take it."

"Beer smells like beer, so it'll serve its purpose," B'tai said airily, gesturing the complaint off. "And I made sure to dose it well with something to give 'm a little surprise. Any StormWinder looking to hit us where it hurts has their decoy, and it'll leave them pissing red for a sevenday." The wingsecond turned back to Luka and smiled his most charming smile. "Thank you for your help. All of FireStorm thanks you. And we're a Wing that repays its debts."

Luka looked at her rearranged sitting room, then moved to cautiously adjust the carpet's positioning, shifting it off-center to mask the fact that the couch had been moved. "Just don't hurt anyone, or get hurt yourself," she said.

"Of course not!" B'tai grinned. "Those poor apprentices have some lessons to learn from FireStorm, and we're happy enough to teach them. B'nyu – care to see the way's clear?"

B'nyu soft-footed out of the cottage, and moments later, B'tai & R'san followed. "Favor points," B'tai grinned as they slipped out of the door. "Don't forget, FireStorm'll owe you."



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L'ars groaned and put his head in his hands. Breakfast had always been his favorite meal of the day. This one was now effectively ruined.

"—we've already taken the usual defensive actions," B'tai continued blithely. "I've reduced the risks of damage as far as I could."

"This all started yesterday?" L'ars said, not lifting his face from his hands.

"Yes," K'danag said, from the other side of the table. "So far there's been no pranks pulled by either side that we've heard about—"

"So far," B'tai stressed. "I saw some skulking around the Complex last night, however. StormWinders were definitely scouting for information."

"I spoke with Rasha this morning, to warn her of what was brewing," K'danag said. "She reported that some of her stocks of bluebait had been stolen last night."

L'ars groaned again. Bluebait was an herbal powder which Rasha regularly used in the Infirmary's herb garden to protect it from vermin. Tunnelsnakes found the sweet-salt taste of the toxic mixture irresistible. It was less harmful to humans – but anyone who handled the stuff with their bare hands was bound to suffer itching. Needless to say, bluebait was a favorite of weyrbrats looking to pull pranks on their fellows.

"Find out if it was one of ours who raided Rasha's stores," L'ars ordered, finally looking up at his wingseconds. K'danag and B'tai both nodded. FireStorm Wing tolerated a great deal in terms of behavior, but theft from other weyrfolk was one of their few taboos.

L'ars gathered himself out of his chair at the head of the FireStorm table. The FireStormers who were gathered for breakfast stopped their chatter and looked his way expectantly. He stared back at them levelly, knowing his disapproval was written on his face.

"You all know our Wing's rules," he said sternly. "Defend yourselves as necessary, but know that we have no room in our Wing for thieves. And flight straps or a dragon's hide are never, ever to be considered targets for a prank. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Daddy," came the sing-song chorus.

"I don't want to hear about this from Wingleader A'nar. The moment A'nar, or the Weyrleaders, or Raecliffe, or any of the goldriders get pulled into this, the game is over. If anyone goes to the Infirmary with an injury, it is over. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Daddy," came the cheerful chorus.

L'ars studied the gathered riders thoughtfully, making note who wasn't present.

"All right then. All of you, afternoon drills, as already planned. Meet an hour after lunch in the FireHall for pre-drills. Don't forget that WindFlight flies Thread over Maori and Cathay in two days, and that we're waiting on deck for that. Anyone who gets themselves disabled – or causes a StormWinder to be disabled – for that 'Fall will be reporting to me. And I promise I'll have you bent over the table and paddled like a holder's daughter. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Daddy," came the third and last chorus.

L'ars sat down again, knowing better than to be reassured by a too-easy compliance.

T'raff rubbed up against Kanubith's blue hide, but it was too smooth to be of any help. There was a tree nearby. He tried rubbing his back against the tree's rough bark and scratched vainly at already sore arms. It still wasn't enough to get the itch to go away. Looking over at his anxiously watching dragon, T'raff pleaded desperately, "Come on Kanny! I need your help!"

I will hurt you, the dragon stated, perplexed and alarmed.

"Just don't use your claws," T'raff told him, but already knew Kanubith wouldn't do it. Dancing around the slim tree trying to scratch as many areas as possible, T'raff closed his eyes and groaned. He was about ready to go throw himself in the ocean to end this madness.

"T'raff! What the shells are you doing? Got bugs in your pants or something?"

T'raff opened his eyes to find his wingmate T'vellen fast approaching. "I don't think so, I think it's itching powder," T'raff gritted out, then sighed, stopping only from exhaustion. He'd checked for bugs the second it'd started but hadn't found any, and although changing clothes had helped a bit, it hadn't been enough. "My skin is blue," he moaned.

T'vellen growled out an oath. "Bluebait, huh? Those shelling StormWind riders! We can't let this stand!" he stated angrily.

Resuming his rubbing against the thin scratching post, T'raff questioned, "Anything in mind?" For this, he'd gladly suffer a seven-day in the middens.

The other bluerider stood thinking for several minutes as T'raff continued to rub his way around the tree. A slow mischievous smile was growing on T'vellen's face and he mused, "It has to be something that will make them uncomfortable, something to make them squirm as badly as you are." He looked at T'raff with a frown, but T'raff just nodded, paying rapt attention. "And it needs to be something we can watch! Prank's not a prank without an audience!" T'vellen declared.

Personally, T'raff wasn't so ready to agree with that. An audience often meant you got caught, but he could see why T'vellen thought that way. He rubbed his back extra hard along an insistent itch and frowned, thinking about what they could do. Uncomfortable, squirmy, watchable... Kanubith grumbled with sympathy pains for his rider.

Invisible bugs are not good, the blue dragon mourned.

It's not bugs, T'raff sent back, then said out loud to T'vellen, "I found a prime site for trundlebugs the other day."

T'vellen's smile blossomed into a full-fledged conniving grin. "Perfect!"



"—those of you who abstained before 'Fall, thank you very much. The rest of who didn't – and I know who you are – have got an extra ration of shit duty as well as the usual mark due to the Wing pot, instead of the chance to

enjoy tomorrow's rest day." There was a many-voiced groan from across the crowded hall, and L'ars couldn't help up smile. "Don't whine like weyrings. You know the rules. Shells, you know the reasoning behind the rules. If you're thick-headed with a hangover, you're a danger to all of us in the air during Threadfall—"

Their Wingleader's lecture was interrupted by a very loud burst of flatulence from the back of FireHall. The rude sound was followed by an embarrassed silence as, in unison, everyone turned to see who was the source of the interruption.

If B'nyu had been pale skinned enough to blush, the man's face might have been a furious red. As it was, he was squirming in his seat, his expression mortified.

"Do you want to add to the conversation?" L'ars asked, deadpan.

"No, sir," B'nyu said, before breaking wind a second time. "Sorry sir," he added meekly, as the rest of FireStorm Wing began to howl with laughter.

L'ars fought not to smile, both amused and annoyed with the interruption. Sometimes working with this Wing was like trying to ride herd on a fair of firelizards.

There was a third, ripping blatt, and B'nyu all but sank in his seat, while his wingmates roared around him. Those who were closest had scooted away, and A'rori was making a show of racing to open windows. "I'm sorry," B'nyu said sheepishly. "I'm sorry. It must be something I ate."

"Ate?" B'tai laughed. "Sounds more like what you drank! Did you let someone dose you with sourjuice?"

"I didn't think so," B'nyu said earnestly. "Shyla's always been nice to me before. I didn't think she would..." B'nyu flinched as his own body gave a loud punctuation to those words.

"Just goes to prove a very important lesson to us all," B'tai said loftily. "Beware StormWinders bearing gifts."

"I'm sure there's more to this story," L'ars said dryly. "And if so, I'm sure I don't want to hear it. If you'll all be so kind as to listen to me and *not* B'nyu's bowels, here's the formation orders for today's drills..."

Heads were bent together at StormWind's table, where several riders had gathered for a night cap and to trade reports of the day's events. "V'kam, R'nen, K'nis and V'laric got the powder," Jantha was whispering to her closest tablemates. "They split the stuff and spread it in the cots of as many FireStormers as they could."

"I saw T'raff doing a jig, I'm sure he got hit!" giggled Kadja.

"Rhiada and Tadiara both had to report to the Infirmary for chamomile cream," Marta said with a grin. "They must have got it as well!"

"And I got B'nyu to drink a cup dosed with sourjuice powder," Shyla said proudly. "He's such an innocent, you can get him to fall for anything!"

"FireStorm hasn't even struck us yet," Kadja gloated. "We're getting the best of them this time around!"

"Don't get overconfident," Jantha warned, casting a glance toward a dark window. "It's night. You know how vermin always come out at night."

"Lock your doors tonight," Shyla agreed. "And warn your dragons to be alert! I'll bet you those FireStormers try to get them some paybacks tonight..."



It took them a while to collect the trundlebug families. A person couldn't just coax them into a container or they were likely to cause a stink and the prank was up. The one trick to trundlebugs was that they always walked in a straight line, over *everything*, be that a tree, flower, cot, or flat piece of driftwood. And once they were on it, the family would continue to trundle safely around it till they encountered something else in their path.

After a dunk in the ocean to rid himself of most of the itching, both T'raff and T'vellen spent the better part of their free time that evening collecting trundlebugs. With several families on board the driftwood they'd found, the riders quietly headed into StormWind's part of the complex. It was late, and the riders would likely be sleeping or at the Weyrhall for a late night cup of klah. The plan was to find two cots still unoccupied to leave the bugs in. With any luck, the occupants would find the bugs the hard way and end up covered in the obnoxious trundlebug stink, not an easy thing to be rid of.

"There's Taine's weycot, doesn't look like she's there. I don't see her green, either," T'vellen said with some eagerness as they crouched behind a line of greenery. T'raff was absently scratching the arm holding the driftwood his trundlebugs were circling while his eyes scanned the cottages in sight. Ladria's was a good target. It was close to the edge of the complex, and there was plenty of cover for him to make it across unnoticed. Then he noticed green Peleth fast asleep in her wallow. Most of the dragons were asleep now, but it didn't necessarily mean that their rider were back yet. "I'm going for Taine's weycot," T'vellen stated, interrupting T'raff's thoughts.

Looking over at the grinning man, T'raff nodded, and watched as his fellow bluerider expertly made his way over to unoccupied weycot. With a sigh, and a final scratch, T'raff also headed for his target. Keeping a careful eye on the sleeping dragon, T'raff slowly pushed open the door. It hadn't been latched shut, another good sign that Ladria was having a light night's cup of klah with her wingmates.

It was too dark inside to see much, but T'raff was light in foot and although he stopped to quietly scratch his legs from time to time, it didn't take him long to set the trundlebugs on their new courses around the floors and walls of the cot. The last he saved to set circling the bed itself, which was piled with mounds of quilts.

Creeping over to the edge of the bed, he placed the edge of the driftwood against it and waited for the trundlebug to

circle about, its two children in tow. That's when T'raff realized that the bed was actually occupied. For several long moments T'raff could only stare the pile uncomprehending, then the apparent occupant made a noise and rolled over.

Startled, T'raff jerked back. Had he been paying attention, he'd have realized the trundlebug family had just reached the edge of the driftwood and had already started their transfer to the bed. The little family, forcibly separated, went flying across the span of the cot.

A sudden stink filled the weycot from an entire family of trundlebug's panic. The rider shot straight up in bed, and the littlest trundlebug hit Ladria squarely in the forehead. There was a shriek of fear, outrage – or possibly both.

T'raff shot out of the weycot like a bronze after a queen, quickly leaving the screams resounding after him as he ran the full length back to his own weycot. Panting hard, he fell against Kanubith's soft hide, hoping T'vellen had already gotten away.

The blue dragon rumbled in great dislike and tried to shift away from his rider. *You stink!*

"I know," T'raff sighed. He stunk *and* he itched!

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Tiairi was not at her best in the morning. She rolled out of bed desperate for a cup of klah to clear her head, and put her clothing on blindly.

She was halfway to the Weyrhall before the itching began. It started under her left breast, and a discrete wiggle to relieve the sudden itch only aggravated the irritation. Before she knew it, her right breast was on fire, and she squirming despite herself, twisting and hopping in agony.

"New dance?" M'scel asked, leering at her suggestively. There were a handful of FireStorm riders emerging from their cots and trickling towards the Weyrhall for breakfast.

"Just an itch," Tiairi said, turning away from the bluerider before she had to attack her own chest with desperate scratching.

"You alright?" Greenrider Nevimna was eyeing her with wary concern as she came up alongside Tiairi.

"No..." Tiairi had to admit, tears streaming down her face, and even the presence of M'scel and the approach of K'danag and Y'su wasn't enough to keep her from tearing at her shirt, desperate to sooth the terrible itching of her chest. "StormWind..." she managed. "Itching powder..."

M'scel began to cheer at once. "I'll scratch those," he offered generously, trying to angle around for a better view.

That earned him a dirty look from Nevimna, but Tiairi was too busy trying to flap cooling air under her shirt without exposing herself completely. The younger greenrider stepped closer. "Bluebait," she said with authority. "Can't you smell it? You should take a shower before your skin gets more irritated. I've got a salve you can put over the rash you're going to have."

Tiairi whimpered and squirmed, and Nevimna took her by the elbow, clearly intent on seeing the greenrider to the showers herself.

"Best show of this whole damn feud," Y'su laughed.

M'scel was disappointed. "Would've been better if she'd lost the shirt completely."

Nevimna made a rude gesture behind her back towards him.

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"WindFlight will meet 'Fall over the sea off the tip of Rubicon; we'll leave the Weyr before dawn to meet it," A'nar said to his gathered Wing. The wingleader stood at the front of the WindHall, standing firm with his hands planted on his hips as he spoke. "SkySoaring flew patrol over the area this morning, and weather conditions were fair. Some light rain, mixed with ground-hugging fog..."

Headsecond Danissa appeared, along with two of her oldest fosterlings, each carrying serving trays. As always, the Wing was served fresh klah and sweetrolls along with their pre-Fall meeting. As was Danissa's habit, they began at the end of the hall nearest the doors, causing little distraction as they served the wingriders row by row.

"...primary concern will be for those flats above the mountain barriers," A'nar continued, while his wingriders enjoyed their mid-morning klah and sweets. "That late in the 'Fall, your dragons are going to be getting tired, and it'll be late enough in the day that rising warm air off those flats will be creating some chop. We all know that casualties are always heaviest late in the average 'Fall, and we all know why. It's because riders and their dragons have lost their edge. They're beginning to drag, and they're daydreaming about going home, instead of keeping on the alert. We've suffered too many avoidable injuries in the past few 'Falls, and I'm not going to tolerate any more laziness." A'nar gave his Wing a fierce stare, then gentled a bit to deal with young Dwayana as she approached him, having dutifully poured klah for the rest of the Wing. She offered the wingleader a tall glass of redfruit juice. Condensation beaded the sides of the glass, and the girl looked proud not to have spilled a drop.

"Thank you, child, but I'd prefer klah with the rest of the Wing," A'nar said.

The girl shook her head. "But this is special," she said.

"Special?" A'nar said, with a quizzical glance at Danissa. The headsecond looked equally puzzled, and was frowning at her fosterling's interruption of Wing business. "How is this special?"

The girl shook her head again, her chestnut runnertail swinging. "I dunno. But the pretty greenrider said it was 'specially for you, and I shouldn't let anyone else have it. She made me promise to be very careful, and so I've been very careful."

A dismayed silence fell on the room, and wingriders looked at one another, and then at their klah cups in consternation. "Oh dear," murmured someone.

Jantha's whisper to Kadja all but rang across the room. "Does the klah taste at all bitter to you?"

"No, not bitter," answered R'wan with deliberate confidence. "Not at all."

"Dwayana, did the pretty greenrider put anything in your klah pitcher?" asked V'kam with a grim gentleness.

The girl shook her head so that her long runnertail swayed, and many wingriders began to relax with relief. Then the girl spoke up again. "She didn't. But her friend did. He said it was special sweetening, but that it was for adults only, and that I mustn't drink a drop. I promised I wouldn't, and I didn't."

"Oh dear," someone moaned, while many others looked in dismay had the cups they had drank from.

Shyla took a cautious sip of her mug, and rolled her eyes. "Not sweet at all," she said with knowing dismay. "Tastes more sour to me."



Solar tanks on top of each bathhouse provided warm water for showers at the bathhouses in each Complex. If you wanted your wingmates to like you, you made sure that once you'd used your share of water, you exercised your arm muscles at the handpump before leaving. Jantha liked her wingmates; on the whole, the riders of StormWind were considerate souls and primed the tanks before leaving.

Jantha followed the sound of voices through the dusk, a towel slung around her neck and her basket of soapsoad and hair tonic flask in hand. She recognized R'nen's rich tenor before she'd reached the bathhouse. The wingsecond had a voice which the harpers might envy, and he'd learned to use it well.

"...he rode 'til he came to the holder's gate,
and leaped his gray, so's not to be late;
and at the door waited the holder's new bride
dressed in her best for a midnight ride..."

A second voice rose up in attempted harmony for the chorus. Jantha couldn't help but grin, recognizing K'nis's uncertain baritone. As she reached for the bathhouse door, one of the two men broke wind loudly enough to interrupt the song. Both R'nen and K'nis were laughing as she entered the bathhouse.

"That's some welcome!" she called, grateful to know someone else was still suffering from the afternoon's dosage of sourjuice.

"Don't blame me," R'nen said immediately, pointing over the dividing wall of his shower toward K'nis's stall.

"Hey! No fair!" K'nis protested.

"You two sound like weyrbrats," Jantha laughed. She selected one of the remaining two stalls, flanked on either side by her wingmates. There, she hung her basket from the

provided hook on the divider wall, then stepped back to strip off the loose shift she was wearing, dropping it on the bench near the door where K'nis and R'nen's clothing lay. She closed her eyes, lifted her face eagerly to the shower spout, and reached after the pull cord, looking forward to a cascade of soothing warm water. "If there was a weyrling around, you could always blame him. You know, I'd rather listen to your singing than to your—"

The spout spilled its awaited flood. At first, she was aware only of the delight of the warm water. Then she realized there a faint, medicinal scent. Jantha opened her eyes, and was blinded by blue water. Deep indigo blue water, which was already staining her bare skin.

Jantha wasn't sure if she shrieked, squealed, or outright screamed. But the response was immediate. R'nen and K'nis's worried faces both popped over the top of their respective stall walls on either side of hers to see what was wrong; Jantha yanked at the cord to end the shower; and there was a rattle of weight sliding down the bathhouse roof tiles above them. Something thumped to the ground outside, and there was a chorus of laughter from outside.

"Gotcha!" sang out a female voice.

"What are you boys going to do about it?" laughed another.

R'nen streaked out of his stall and snatched after the pile of clothing he'd left on the bench near the door. "That's Tildy!" he said as he yanked on his breeches. "And Karlina!"

"Let's catch them and soak them in a dye bath!" K'nis agreed eagerly, scrambling to follow.

Jantha stood dripping blue dye; she watched her two wingmates tear out of the bathhouse, then hurried out of her stall and into the one at the end of the row. She hesitated before pulling on the shower cord, realizing that that tank might be tampered with as well, then ducked back into the stall a soapy K'nis had just vacated. She yanked on the cord there, and let fresh water rinse over her. The skin of her chest and arms looked only a faint eggshell blue now; it would take a mirror to determine how much of the dye had taken to her face and hair.

Outside, there were squeals of laughter and shouts from R'nen and K'nis. Jantha listened avidly, imagining a wild chase. All too quickly, there was only silence, save for the nightsingers outside. Their song had been shocked to momentary silence by the disturbance, but it didn't take the little pests long to start singing again.

Then, to her surprise, R'nen and K'nis appeared again. Both men hurried into bathhouse, moving gingerly. Both stripped naked again. R'nen dropped his clothing and dived into his stall; K'nis saw Jantha had stolen his, and rushed to claim the stall at the end of the row.

R'nen groaned as he soaked; a moment later, K'nis moaned in harmony.

"What's wrong?" Jantha asked.

"We've been had," K'nis muttered. "Tildy and Karlina. And Adelis and Tiari."

"They used itching powder," R'nen echoed. "In our breeches."

"And it won't wash off!" K'nis groaned, scrubbing at his backside miserably.

"Oh dear," Jantha said sympathetically, trying not to smile. Suddenly, a blue face and blue hair didn't seem quite so bad...



2858.01.05

M'scel felt proud of himself as he closed the door to the privy. He'd remembered just in time not to use the facilities in their own complex.

He sighed in relief. His need had been urgent; luckily one of FireBlaze's privies was close to FireStorm's area. It seemed like it might take him a while, so he picked up the privy log from the bench. Nobody was sure who had started that little tradition, but one of the slates had shown up in the privy next to the Weyrhall, and within a month it seemed that every privy at the Weyr had one. FireStorm's were always funny to read, since they had a lot of clever people in their Wing.

'I wonder what sort of jokes these FireBlazers write in theirs,' he wondered.

Laboriously reading his way down the slate, he realized that most of it looked like the same sort of stuff he was used to seeing. He didn't think that these boring FireBlazers had it in them!

Wingsecond K'danag came in and seated himself at the next hole.

"Hey, K'danag, looks like the FireBlazers talk like we do in their log!"

"Give that here."

M'scel did. K'danag scanned it quickly and said "Nope, it's all us. Nothing from FireBlaze on here at all."

"Oh." M'scel felt foolish as he accepted the slate back. What should he write? He couldn't think of anything.

Finished, he stood up and grabbed a leaf from the bucket and wiped. K'danag did the same a moment later. M'scel kept reading. 'Ah, I know what to say!' he thought. 'I'll have to write it on the back.'

He turned over the slate and let out a groan. The back was filled with one word: "GOTCHA!"

"What?" K'danag asked, pausing on his way out the door.

"They did something to us!" He said as he handed back the slate. He looked around. What could -- Then he felt it.

Or rather, *didn't* feel it.

"Numbweed!" he groaned.

K'danag had an odd look on his face. "Oh, shards, you're right!" he swore, then laughed bitterly. "Numbweed leaves. It'll be a good couple of hours before we'll feel our asses again."



2858.01.06

The riders at the StormWind table went silent as Wingleader L'ars approached, brownrider M'scel in tow.

"This has gone far enough," L'ars snarled. "Which of you did it?"

M'scel was fidgeting, his expression distraught. The gathered StormWinders looked at him, and at the furious wingleader.

"I'm waiting," L'ars barked. "I want to know which of you did it!"

The StormWinders looked at one another. Which of them had done "it?" And which "it" was FireStorm's normally-mellow wingleader spitting flame over? No one wanted to claim ownership of "it", however successful "it" must have been.

L'ars's eyes were hard, and his big hands were clenched into tight fists that mauled his wide leather belt. "Nobody will fess up? I suppose I'll have to live with that. It's still time to end this stupid weyrbrat's game, and the person who started it will have to finish it." He turned on M'scel fiercely. "Brownrider, apologize!"

"But—" M'scel protested.

"Brownrider. Now."

Even the StormWind riders flinched at the crisp slap of L'ars's words.

M'scel flinched, then fixed an angry stare at the center of the StormWinder's table. "StormWind Wing isn't full of losers. StormWinders are just as good as FireStormers."

"And?" L'ars prompted.

M'scel grimaced and spoke as if his mouth were full of broken glass. "And we didn't wipe the privy floor with StormWinders," he muttered.

"Dismissed," L'ars snarled. M'scel slunk away. L'ars faced the table of StormWind wingriders, his expression still fierce.

"I want that apology accepted, and this shaffing feud over with. Agreed?"

Again, the gathered wingriders looked at each other cautiously.

"One grudging apology from a wingman will hardly settle the debt," Wingsecond V'kam drawled, clearly enjoying the situation. "M'scel meant that apology about as sincerely as a tunnelsnake's promise to stay out of the flour barrel."

L'ars's expression grew even more thunderous, if such a thing were possible. Then he nodded to himself.

"Wingsecond V'kam, brownrider K'nis — follow me."

L'ars turned on his heels and strode away. K'nis looked at V'kam questioningly. V'kam nodded and rose to his feet to follow.

Most of the dozen StormWind riders at the table followed L'ars from the Weyrhall. He led them south to the Fire Complex, where he strode straight to bluerider B'nyu's weyr cot. L'ars threw the door open without pausing to knock. The big, colorfully-tattooed man scrambled to his feet, scattering a collection of polished rocks across the floor. "Sir?" B'nyu asked, staring in dismay at L'ars and the gathering collection of grinning StormWind riders.

"Bring out the joy juice," L'ars ordered.

"Sir?" B'nyu repeated, clearly not believing his ears.

"It's over. StormWind wins. To the victors go the spoils: bring out your beer."

B'nyu scratched at the back of his neck, then shrugged in resignation. He moved aside the braided rag rug in the center of the room, exposing a trap door. Moments later, the giant bluerider had descended into his home-made cellar. He hefted a large keg up through the cellar door. "There you go, sir."

"B'nyu – all of it."

The gust of the big man's sigh was audible to everyone in the weycot. A second keg followed. B'nyu climbed back up the ladder, looking as miserable as an orphan.

L'ars slapped the first of the big kegs. "StormWind wins. FireStorm loses. End of story. Take your loot and go."

V'kam reached after a nearby mug that served as a flower vase. He cast aside the flowers and the flower water, then tapped the first keg. He poured a drink, then passed it to L'ars.

L'ars accepted the cup and the silent challenge with it. He up-ended the cup and drank it dry, without pausing for breath.

"StormWind wins," V'kam said, turning a triumphant grin on his wingmates. "Let's take our well-deserved winnings and celebrate this properly!"



A'nar found L'ars where Garath had promised – in the privy near the Weyrhall.

A'nar threw the door open and thundered in. "Shells and broken shards!" he roared. "This has got to end!! The Weyrhealer has just reported five of my riders have reported to the Infirmary, each of them pissing blood—"

He stopped midsentence, seeing the other wingleader's ruddy stream.

"Don't worry," L'ars said affably. "Won't hurt them a bit. Tingles a little, is all."

A'nar cursed and slammed the door shut behind them. "Don't tell me you've got anything to do with this!" he groaned.

"If I did, I'd be lying," L'ars replied.

"You'd sharding well best be joking!" A'nar snarled. "If you've sunk to the same childish level as those mannerless excuses for dragonriders you call a Wing, you're a shameful disgrace to the wingknots you wear!"

L'ars glanced over at the other man, a half-smile on his

face. He finished and adjusted himself back into his breeches. "No damage to a single one of them. Except maybe to their pride. I sent them running to the Weyrhealer like frightened children. That's got to sting a whole lot more than a little tingle with a piss."

"This stupid feud is over!" A'nar roared.

"If you say so," L'ars agreed amiably. "I'll make that order to my Wing if you're so determined to spoil the fun."

"It's over, and I'll skin the first wingrider to pull another shaffing idiot prank!" A'nar bellowed. "Your's *or* mine!"

"Agreed," L'ars smiled.

A'nar left the way he had come, flinging the door open and storming away. L'ars followed at a comfortable stroll, a smile still on his bearded face.

First round of the battle was won. Yet L'ars didn't delude himself. The war itself wasn't likely to be over...



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