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# Flaming Dragons

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"It doesn't seem right, does it?"

A'zelen turned to the younger rider standing beside him. "Watching our Wing rise to 'Fall without us, you mean? No, it doesn't," he agreed.

He and D'loren stood just outside the FireFlight gather barn, watching as the Flight's three Wings took off one after another in the hazy morning light. All around them, dragons rose into the air and then wheeled south, heading for the firestone storage depot down near the Feeding Grounds. There, as their new wingmates had described it to them, the Flight's riders would pick up their firestone sacks before rising into formation.

Today's Threadfall would begin not far away, over the sea off the tip of what had once been the Southern peninsula, now called Windsong. 'Fall's path would actually pass over the Weyr and the fighting Wings would fly out to meet it offshore, following it over the land until Leading Edge passed over sea again, and the dragons enjoyed a short break before having to pick it up along the coast of Delta.

Delta at least was a familiar name. A'zelen could see maps and charts in his mind's eye. Thread had fallen on a path like this one in the Ninth Pass. He remembered flying it well.

The month spent journeying forward had been the first break in Threadfall that A'zelen had experienced in his entire life. It had been disorienting; hard to accept that the times they flew through were truly Thread-free. Even the dragons – who in a short time could not specifically remember flying 'Fall – had seemed uneasy about it, even if they didn't understand why.

But as strange as the month without fighting had seemed, as ready as A'zelen was to resume that routine – they couldn't, yet. None of them could. Even if Toth had been ready to fly, which the brown wasn't, they could not have risen to 'Fall today. Nor to the next 'Fall, nor the one after that. It did seem wrong to stand there and watch the fighting Wings depart without them. What was even worse was the fact that FireStorm did not feel like "their Wing" yet.

It was a Wing of strangers to both he and D'loren. He didn't know more than a handful of names of the riders in it – he, once a wingsecond who'd known the name of every dragon and rider and rider's weymate and children and all. That was the part he liked least about this, watching the dragons take off and disappear over the trees – the fact that he could put names and faces to so few of them.

*We will fly again soon,* Toth told him, with serene

confidence. The brown was still in the Infirmary, but he was alert to his rider's thoughts and watched along with A'zelen. *I have spoken to our wingmates. I will follow this 'Fall through Chobith's eyes. He is eager for us to join them. We will fit in well here.*

*I don't doubt it,* A'zelen replied. For one thing, Toth would have it no other way. He might not be able to remember being a Wing's senior wingsecond, but the dragon's sense of authority was innate and his self-assurance was unshakable.

"I saw you and Kireth flying back from the Feeding Grounds this morning," A'zelen said aloud to the younger man beside him, breaking the silence. "She looked well."

"She feels fine," D'loren confirmed, his expression easing from sour to pleased. "You'd never know there was ever anything wrong with her. She really doesn't understand why we didn't fly with the Wing today."

"No, I bet she doesn't."

The riders of the largely-healthy dragons would all be having a hard time explaining that today, even after yesterday's extensive meeting with the dragonhealers, where Master Giselle had explained to all of them in no uncertain terms the dangers of rushing their recoveries. Most of the dragons were now permitted short flights, but they were all on a conditioning program, and under the strictest orders not to go *between*. Thankfully, none of the riders were particularly eager to resume *betweening*\*, even if the dragons couldn't remember the reason for their reluctance.

"At least we get to fly in formation tomorrow," D'loren went on. He sounded a little bitter. "I hear R'banon is going to lead us, since you and the Weyrleader – um, I mean, bronzerider J'hanos, can't?"

"Yes," A'zelen replied evenly, not acknowledging the slip. They would all be doing that, he expected. It was fairly natural. "J'hanos and I will be there to observe, along with Weyrleader L'ars, while the rest of you give your demonstration."

The Tenth Pass riders wanted to see in action what Ninth Pass Threadfighting tactics and formations looked like. It would help them figure out how much work there was ahead of them, to retrain them all to fly with the Kadanzer Wings. Privately, A'zelen didn't think that it would be so hard to do. Threadfighting was Threadfighting, and he doubted that basic formations and tactics had changed that much. But it was only prudent to take it slowly and be sure.

Even back in the Ninth Pass, there had been slight variations in fighting strategy from Weyr to Weyr. Nothing drastic, but enough that the little details could throw a transferred rider off if he didn't take time to learn his new Wing's patterns. And even small differences, little miscommunications, could be deadly in Threadfall, especially when the weather became a distracting factor.

A'zelen also remembered reading that the Oldtimers from the Eighth Pass had brought with them new tactics and formations, and taught them to the riders of Benden. These riders of the Tenth Pass had had to recreate strategies for fighting Thread from the remnants of drills preserved in Spring and Turn's End Games, and from written records. It was a safe bet that they did a few things now differently from the way they'd done things four-hundred Turns ago.

And as usual, it was the small things that could lead to disaster.

D'loren kicked at the ground absently. "I don't like being treated like a weyrling again," he admitted, his tone resentful. "We fight Thread as well as they do!"

The brownrider looked at him in surprise. "Of course we do."

The younger man waved his hand in the air in a frustrated gesture. "Then why is it all about us learning from them, and not them learning from us? Maybe there's a thing or two that we could show *them*!"

"Maybe there is," A'zelen agreed. "They'll probably be watching for things like that in the drills you fly tomorrow. It isn't a matter of the Tenth Pass way being *right* while all of the Southerners were *wrong* -- at least, that's not the feeling I get from the Weyrleader, or some of the other leaders we've met. But when it gets right down to it, there's few of us, and at the end of the day, we're the ones who have to adapt to the Tenth Pass Wings -- not the other way around."

A'zelen approved of this Weyr's leaders taking care to observe, to try to anticipate problems. He knew that J'hanos appreciated it as well. Separating the adult riders out between the nine Wings, in ones and twos, surrounding them in drills with examples of modern tactics, would go a long way towards integrating them all successfully. But there was also a sense -- from the Weyrleader and his Flightleaders, at least -- of respecting the expertise of the Ninth Pass riders.

He was glad that L'ars was taking a diplomatic approach. He wondered if all of the wingleaders would be so sensitive to the issue. From the brief meeting he and J'hanos had had with Kadanzer's wingleaders... A'zelen somewhat doubted it. They were the usual mix of bronzeriders, you could find their like in any Weyr. They had to be good at what they did, or they wouldn't have been wingleaders in the first place. But their leadership styles were all different, and some would be... easier to adapt to, than others.

It was A'zelen's luck that had landed him in the Weyrleader's own Wing. He wasn't sure why he rated that honor, especially since Toth couldn't even fly yet. He spared a moment of worry for his old wingmate and friend. He didn't think that J'hanos was going to have an easy time of it, no matter what Wing he was assigned to. That was just... the way J'hanos was, and long Turns of friendship with the bronzerider hadn't blinded A'zelen to that point. He'd gotten no more than a glimpse of the wingleader to whom the ex-Weyrleader had been assigned. That brief glimpse of Z'hon had not exactly reassured the brownrider.

J'hanos was as strong and stubborn as they came. That, A'zelen thought, could be a problem, in this case. It also didn't help that he knew the bronzerider wasn't one to complain. Protest, yes, if something angered him. But not complain on his own behalf. He would have to keep an eye on his friend, and make sure to check in with him regularly. Even if J'hanos would never say anything, maybe he could spot potential problems before things went too far.

That, he realized, wasn't exactly giving his friend and former leader a great deal of credit. But friendship with J'hanos had never been based on illusions about the other

man's nature.

"I guess so." D'loren shrugged, grimacing. "No, I know so. I just -- it's frustrating, that's all."

"Oh yes, it is that." A'zelen smiled sympathetically.

"That's not until tomorrow, anyway," the younger man went on. "And our class with the Weyrharper doesn't meet until after the noon meal, right?"

"That's right. In the meantime, I'm off to the Dragon Infirmary."

"How's Toth doing?" the greenrider asked, a little awkwardly, as if he were unsure whether he was being over-familiar, or not.

A'zelen gave him a reassuring smile. "Much better. And he wants out. I really hope the dragonhealers can give us an idea soon of when he'll be allowed to settle into his own wallow."

*My wing feels much better*, the brown commented. This had become a familiar conversation over the past few days.

*Yes, I know it does. That's because the dragonhealers are putting numbweed on it*, A'zelen told him. *That doesn't mean it is better.*

A wave of discontent greeted that reasoning. *I do not see why I must stay here*, Toth grumbled. *This place smells of redwort. And I cannot feel the sun. Surely basking in the sun would help me recover more quickly.*

*I'll ask the dragonhealers about it*, promised A'zelen. There was a big open yard behind the Infirmary, out of the way of traffic. Maybe Toth and Vhauth would be allowed to sit out there for part of the day.

D'loren jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Kireth wants a bath. She was pretty messy about eating. Karlina and Tildy -- the two buxom greenriders were D'loren's closest neighbors -- told me it's Wing tradition that everybody bathes their dragons off the beach right down there, after 'Fall -- but I think we're going to be in the Weyrharper's class, then, and Kireth's whining, so I guess I'd better do it now."

"Do you need help?" A'zelen offered, politely, even though he didn't know the younger man very well. But then, neither he nor D'loren knew very many people here, that was the point.

The greenrider looked startled by the offer. "Oh, no, wingsec--brownrider. That's all right. Kireth's not that big, I've always been able to wash her myself. You don't want to keep your dragon waiting -- not if he's bored."

"You're probably right," he agreed, ruefully. "Wanting a full bath is another bone of contention, with Toth -- and I have no idea how long it will be before that's permitted. If he saw me bathing another dragon, he'd probably be mad at me for days. It's not the kind of thing he would enjoy vicariously."

*No*, Toth interjected sourly. *I would not.*



"So, I love what you've done with the place."

A'zelen looked up from the mass of straps spread across his lap and the floor around him, frowning. "What do you mean? All I did was unroll the rug and set up the screen, and -- oh. You're just being sarcastic, aren't you?"

"Who, me? Not at all." Gavrill was lying on his back on the big couch that A'zelen had been issued along with the rest of the cot's furnishings. The couch was long enough to accommodate even a tall man lying on it full-length. It was a substantial piece of furniture, and not the kind of thing that everyone had – A'zelen had gathered that from the admiring comments of his new wingmates when they'd showed up to help him rearrange things that first night. Like the sandtable – another non-standard item – Gavrill must have used his position on the Headwoman's crew to grab the couch for A'zelen's cot; probably with Vesoz's collusion, the brownrider thought.

The sandtable was a thoughtful gesture, even if this one did have a broken central section, and one of the sliding partitions that would usually cover and protect one of the sand-trays didn't work. Gavrill had poked at it and declared that he thought he could probably fix it. A'zelen was properly grateful, since he wasn't sure how hard it would have been for him to obtain one, otherwise. It had taken him a long series of favors to barter for the one he'd used to have, in his old cot at Southern.

The couch wasn't something he would have thought of getting, but from the way Gavrill had headed directly for it and flopped down on it immediately on arrival, A'zelen was guessing that that selection had more than a little self-interest behind it on the guardsman's part.

It was also, perhaps, an indication that Gavrill was thinking in terms of spending some of his free time over here – an idea that warmed A'zelen, though he wasn't going to say it out loud. They hadn't talked about it, A'zelen hadn't issued an invitation in so many words. He'd been trying to come up with a way to approach the subject, to tell his friend that he was more than welcome here, without it sounding awkward. Maybe he wouldn't have to.

"I like it," Gavrill went on. He had picked up one of the sponges used for harness-cleaning, and was tossing it up in the air and catching it, over and over. It took A'zelen a few moments to clear his head from his wool-gathering and remember what they were talking about. "Feels homey. Where'd you get the curtains?" He turned his head to glance at the brownrider, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, those. The goldrider brought them around – Luka. She's assigned to this Flight's complex, sort of helps oversee things. Not a bad system," added A'zelen, thoughtfully.

They hadn't done it that way at Southern, but then, the Wings hadn't been organized into flights in quite such a formal way, either. He could see the advantage of this arrangement, though. It would give some of the junior goldriders experience in the kind of domestic organization that a Weyrwoman needed to know. He wasn't sure what the other Flights were like, but Luka – a very pretty girl with bright blond hair, as pretty as Vivia had been, and a hundred times smarter – clearly had a wide domestic streak in her. He hadn't missed the flower plantings around many of the cots, and now he knew who was responsible for those, since the goldrider had offered to bring some to plant around his cot as well.

"Ah, that explains it," said Gavrill, turning his attention back to tossing the sponge towards the rafters.

"Explains what, dare I ask?"

"I was having trouble picturing you choosing between decorative prints, and settling on this one." When Gavrill glanced over at him again, it was definitely with a smirk on his face.

Well, it was true that the floral pattern probably wasn't something he would have chosen himself. He'd been a little taken aback by it when the goldrider and her sisters had swept in and set about putting them up, apologizing that they didn't all match but explaining that she'd originally considered some with lace edging before deciding that these were better-suited to a man's cot.

*'Better suited?'* he'd thought, somewhat incredulously. He was getting the feeling that the young goldrider was extremely flower-oriented. He couldn't wait to see what she'd done to some of his wingmates' cots. But then he thought about what Vivia would have done, put in charge of domestic arrangement for a Wing's cots, shuddered, and decided that Luka's tastes were very reasonable, in comparison. Flower-covered though they might be, at least the curtains weren't pink.

He might have protested, nonetheless, but by the time the three girls were done getting the curtains all in place, he'd looked around and realized they did indeed make the cot's interior look less stark, and more like a home.

His weyrmate Sharenne had been the one to decorate his old weyrcot, at Southern. Even after her death, he hadn't changed a thing about it. He hadn't often thought about it, at the time, but he realized that his friends – like Vesoz and Alstan, and even J'hanos – had often preferred to use his cot for socializing, sometimes to his own exasperation. Now he looked back on it and thought that it must have been due in part to the cot's atmosphere, that Sharenne had given it. And these curtains, that the goldrider had so kindly brought, weren't very different from what Sharenne might have chosen.

"Hey," Gavrill called, softly. He looked up to see the other man looking at him, wearing a look of concern. "You all right?"

"Yes," he said, with a quick, reassuring smile. Surprising how quickly his thoughts could turn melancholy. It wasn't just thoughts of Sharenne, though that was always bittersweet enough. It was thinking of Alstan that did it, and shells, even Vivia, and all of the little details of their lives at Southern, now lost.

It still hurt to think of it. He knew from experience that it would continue to hurt for a long time.

"I think I met this Luka," Gavrill remarked, clearly trying to change the subject and along with it A'zelen's mood. "Down at the Feeding Grounds – sounds as if she likes pitching in down there, when she has the chance."

"Luka? The goldrider?" A'zelen asked, frowning. That didn't really fit in with the very floral, feminine impression he'd gained of her.

"Yeah, that's the one," the other man confirmed. "Seems to know what she's doing, too," he admitted grudgingly. "Not what you expect from a goldrider, but..." He shrugged. "Nobody else bats an eye at it, and they don't act like they're indulging her just because of her rank, either. She and one of Marshall's herdsman are an item, I gather."

"Oh?" A'zelen had learned long ago that Gavrill had as keen a nose for gossip as any kitchen or laundry worker... or

harper, although he probably would have objected to the comparison, and tried to put a soldiery gloss on it by describing it as “scouting the lay of the land” or something instead.

“Yeah, Drayvin.” He craned his neck around to look at the brownrider. “Is that, uh... how often does that kind of thing happen? I mean, I thought queenriders usually had bronzeriders dripping off them...”

“Bronzeriders are often more hopeful than successful, outside of mating flights,” A’zelen said, dryly, “despite what the harper ballads would have you believe. And despite a few notable and obvious examples. It’s not that common for goldriders to take up with nonriders – but it’s not *that* unusual, either. Look at Dunia and Corsan.”

Gavrill grimaced, and A’zelen also winced. It wasn’t the best of examples, for a number of reasons. But the guardsman nodded reluctantly. “All right. But Corsan’s a master.”

“So?”

Gavrill shrugged again. “So, he’s a lot closer in rank to a goldrider than some unranked herdsman is.”

“Oh. You could look at it that way, I suppose. I think that matters to some people more than others, though, and inside a Weyr at least, goldriders can pretty much make their own rules,” A’zelen told him.

“That makes sense, I guess.” Gavrill caught the sponge, turning it around to inspect it closely. A’zelen had learned to identify that bit of misdirection as the guardsman’s habit when deep in thought, seeming to focus his attention on something trivial while thinking of something else. He didn’t think the other man was even conscious of it.

“What?” the brownrider prodded. Sometimes that worked, and sometimes it didn’t. Unlike A’zelen, Gavrill wasn’t usually one to think things through out loud.

“Nothing,” the other man responded automatically, which A’zelen knew from long experience didn’t mean he wouldn’t continue. Sure enough, after another pause, Gavrill went on, “I’m trying to picture the man seducing a queenrider. It’s not working.”

“No?” A’zelen was looking forward to putting a face to Drayvin’s name at some point. This was sounding interesting. “Maybe it was the other way around – maybe she seduced him,” he pointed out.

Gavrill’s eyebrows went up. “Huh. Yeah, maybe.” He smirked. “Of all the guys in the Weyr... well, interesting choice on her part, anyway.”

A’zelen could have said something philosophical about there being no accounting for the choices the heart could make – but that was too awkward a conversational path to start down, considering the way he felt about the man lying on the couch not six feet away. Instead, he said, “He can’t be that bad.”

“I didn’t say he was bad. He’s just...” The guardsman paused, and moved his free hand in a way that suggested groping for words. “Not exactly the kind of guy who stands out in a crowd. Self-effacing. Quiet type. Real quiet. Marshall seems to think well of him, though. He’s a reliable hand. Was pretty steady, out on groundcrew today.”

It took a moment for A’zelen to process that. When he did, he looked up again. “You were out on groundcrew? Today?”

That earned a look that plainly said that Gavrill was wondering if he was brain-damaged. “Well, yeah. What with ‘Fall going right over us, and all. Somebody’s got to be groundcrew, and I don’t see any holders around to do it for you. Except, you know, like me.” He waved a hand. “And Drayvin, and Frienin and Catrel. And don’t forget Vesoz. And some of the crafters. And some women – which was a little... odd.”

It wasn’t that A’zelen wasn’t well aware that the lower caverns men had provided groundcrew back at Southern. He just hadn’t thought about Gavrill and Vesoz being a part of that in this Weyr – but of course they would be. He was more disturbed that the thought simply hadn’t occurred to him. They’d been fighting Thread – or at least, they’d been ready to – even though he and the other riders had had to sit it out.

“Not that the women didn’t handle themselves just fine, you understand. It’s just that you didn’t see that much even back in Southern – and I don’t know, I kind of got the idea from the Weyrharper that people in this time were a lot less willing to let women do men’s work than we were back... then. All bets are off in a Weyr, I guess.” Gavrill shrugged.

“You’ll find that’s true of a lot of things,” A’zelen told him, with dry humor, and the other man snorted. Any further response the guardsman might have made was interrupted, however, by a knock on the frame of the weycot’s open door.

He had just started to say, “Come –” when the door was thrown open.

“New wingmate!” shouted A’rori in greeting, and in moments several other bodies had pushed their way into the cot, stepping carefully around the straps spread out on the floor, and quickly draping themselves over all the available furniture.

The younger windsecond, Z’haq, unceremoniously pushed Gavrill’s legs over to make room as he planted himself on one end of the couch. As the guardsman sat up, A’rori quickly moved to take the other end, generously offering his own mug to the older man in compensation. H’keo, M’scel, and a man whom A’zelen knew was a bluerider but whose name he couldn’t remember took up the other chairs and benches in the room. All of them were holding mugs, and Z’haq produced an extra that he filled from a skin slung over his shoulder, which was promptly passed to A’zelen. It was all done with whirlwind efficiency.

A’zelen took a cautious sniff and then a sip from the mug, to be polite. It seemed to be a hearty red wine cut with fruit juice and something else he couldn’t identify. It was chilled and refreshing, but seemed a little light-weight for the reputations that preceded FireStorm.

“What? I don’t get a mug of my own?” demanded Gavrill, who’d taken a longer drink and was holding out A’rori’s mug to the bronzerider on his left for a refill.

“Didn’t know you’d be here,” A’rori shot back. “But I don’t mind sharing, if you don’t.” The greenrider nudged the older man with his shoulder, and worked his eyebrows to match his suggestive tone. Gavrill rolled his eyes and didn’t give up the mug when he got it back from Z’haq.

“Um, hello,” said A’zelen, raising the mug vaguely around at them all, since some kind of response seemed to

be called for. He swiveled around to look at the bench against the wall behind him, where the strange bluerider had come to rest. "I'm sorry, it's going to take some time – I don't actually –"

"I'm R'san, brownrider," said the dark-haired man cheerfully.

A'zelen nodded. "R'san. I'll remember next time."

"It's a lot of new faces and names, brownrider. Don't hurt your brain trying to get 'em all at once," Z'haq advised him. "Everybody understands, they won't take offense."

No, FireStorm riders didn't seem the sort to take offense easily. A'zelen had gathered that already.

"So," said A'rori, sitting forward, "I'm sure you're wondering why we've called you all here..."

There were calls of "hear! hear!" and "I just got here myself, do tell" and "this ought to be good" from around the room. A'zelen raised his eyebrows, waiting, and took another drink, less to be polite this time than because it really was pretty good; even if Vesoz would probably have complained about ruining perfectly good wine. He wished he could figure out what they'd put in it to give it that rich bottom note below the tang of the fruit. He sipped again, trying to figure it out, having come to the conclusion that his new wingmates were on a roll and would keep rolling right along with his input or without it.

"We've just had the best kind of 'Fall – a casualty-free one! Though let us raise our mugs and have a moment of silence for our two tip-scored brethren in FireStar..." That done, and the moment of silence accomplished by everyone taking a long drink, the greenrider went on, "... We now have a different and very welcome duty before us. I refer, of course, to the traditional welcoming of two new riders to our Wing!"

The other men cheered, and A'zelen actually felt a warm kind of glow at their friendly generosity.

"And I think all of you know what that means!" A'rori concluded, putting his hand on Gavrill's knee and using it as leverage to push himself upright. "To the beach!"

Amidst the echoed shouts of "the beach!" and "to the beach!", A'zelen looked up to find A'rori and the dark young bluerider H'keo standing over him. "What?" he asked. "This isn't it?"

A'rori laughed. "Oh, brownrider – we've barely gotten started! Come on, up you go!"

He and H'keo put their hands underneath A'zelen's arms, and heaved him upright. "Hey! Don't spill –" he started, but in fact they were careful not to jostle the mug still in his hand, and it was no longer as full as it had been, anyway.

"This I've got to see," said Gavrill, standing up alongside Z'haq. He was regarding A'zelen with an amused half-smile, and an undeniably warm look in his dark eyes – exactly the kind of look that sent A'zelen's mind off in that very awkward direction once again. He recognized the danger of the combination of that train of thought and alcoholic beverages, and shut it down ruthlessly.

"I don't know – we don't usually let nonriders in on Wing initiations..." said M'scel doubtfully.

"Oh, come on – after that morning in B'nyu's cot –?" Z'haq threw his arm around the older man's shoulder.

"Hey, yeah." Gavrill pointed at A'rori. "You owe me

for that."

The greenrider laughed. "*We owe you?* I bet my memory of that morning is a little clearer than your's – and I sure don't remember anyone *forcing* you to drink. What I remember is you being willing to do practically *anything* if we would lead you to the beer. I really should have taken advantage of that," he said, thoughtfully, with a sly look at the guardsman.

"That's all right," said Z'haq, giving the older man a shake. "The stories about the Weyrleaders' meeting, even second-hand, more than made up for it. FireStorm strikes again!" More cheers greeted this pronouncement.

"Fine, then." Gavrill rolled his eyes. "And in return for providing you with such fine entertainment..."

"I'd say he's at least earned a place as a sort of Wing mascot," H'keo suggested with a broad grin.

"Wing mascot it is!" A'rori declared, mirroring the grin and yet somehow managing to make it look lascivious at the same time. Gavrill narrowed his eyes and gave the greenrider a smirk that plainly said it would take more than that to scare him away.

A'zelen was standing on his own by this time, feeling that it would probably be best to get whatever was coming over with. He thought back to some of the Wing traditions he'd known of at Southern, and hoped that whatever FireStorm had come up with, it wouldn't be too lastingly humiliating. D'ralt had not run that sort of Wing, nor of course had J'hanos once it became his. Their idea of welcoming new riders to the Wing involved good wine passed around a fire while the older wingmembers offered stories of current and departed wingmates. A'zelen had always liked that storytelling tradition. Somehow, he thought the FireStorm version was likely to be a little more... boisterous.

The cot's door opened again, unannounced, and the dark head of the Wing's senior wingsecond appeared. B'tai was one of A'zelen's near neighbors, along with the brewer-bluerider, B'nyu. "Don't you have him yet?" B'tai demanded. "We've got the other one..."

"Everything's in hand, sir!" Z'haq told him, sketching a salute with the hand holding his mug.

"Well, let's go! The night's not getting any younger."

With H'keo at one arm and A'rori at the other, A'zelen found the entire party moving out the door and down the short flight of steps, without even pausing to turn any of the glowbaskets. Oh well, he thought, taking another drink. At least it would make it easier to find his way home.



There was a wide, uneven path leading down the tall cliffs to a long beach that ran along the western side of the plateau. Someone had spaced glowbaskets out along its length. That made it easier to get *down*, in the dark, but Gavrill suspected the gesture was meant to help everyone get *back up* later. Scaling this cliff in the dark, drunk, would be a comedy... at best.

Down on the beach there was already a big bonfire roaring, set back above the tide-line. And, it was clear that a lot of the rest of the Wing had preceded them. A'zelen's two escorts steered him firmly over towards a couple of chairs



that had been set up at the head of a ring of open space. The young greenrider, D'loren, was already sitting there, with a couple of extremely buxom women draped around his shoulders. Gavrill thought he recognized them from that morning party, but the names wouldn't come to him.

There was another familiar figure whose name he *did* remember, and that was L'ars, the Weyrleader. It didn't look like he was there in an official capacity. Of course, he'd been wingleader of this Wing for far longer than he'd been Weyrleader. He clearly wasn't going to let being Weyrleader put a crimp in his style, either. He was dressed casually in cut-off trousers and a loose linen shirt with fine embroidery, unfastened in the front and gaping open so that the firelight glinted off the red-gold hair of his chest. His clothes were too fine to be those of a drudge or a seaman, but he sure as shells didn't look like a bronzerider, either. Not any bronzerider Gavrill had ever known, anyway.

The big man laughed loudly at something his older wingsecond called to him, and he hoisted a full, sweat-dewed pitcher of drink in each hand in response. Gavrill bet it was the same stuff as in the mug that A'rori had given him, and that he still had. He took another long drink of that once his feet were firmly on the beach sand. That was the last of it, and he decided right then that he'd better stop drinking it if he wanted to make it back up the path later. He wasn't sure what all was in it, but instinct told him it was a lot more dangerous than it tasted.

L'ars was busy over near a couple of tables and benches set up off to the side. Gavrill headed in that direction when he saw the other man standing there. B'nyu was not a man easily forgotten, either; nor was his beer. He couldn't think of a better plan than grabbing a seat near the bluerider and watching events unfold with that beer supply readily to hand.

When he got there, the Weyrleader beamed a huge smile at him. "More joy-juice, captain?" he called, holding up a pitcher.

"Ah, I think I'll play it safe and have whatever the good bluerider here is serving," Gavrill replied, with a respectful nod towards B'nyu. "I think that's a little more my speed."

B'nyu grinned, looking pleased, and L'ars laughed. "Suit yourself," said the big redhead happily. "That just leaves more for the rest of us!" He went back to mixing up a new pitcher from a collection of bottles and casks protected beneath the table.

"I've got stout, or sweetroot ale. What can I get for you, captain?" B'nyu offered generously.

"Which one will take longer to knock me on my ass?" he said, raising a knowing eyebrow, and the bluerider's grin widened.

"The ale's a *little* lighter," B'nyu admitted, holding up his thumb and forefinger to show that they really weren't talking about that much of a difference at all.

"Ale it is, then," said Gavrill promptly, holding out the mug. While the bluerider was filling it, he leaned over to look at what the Weyrleader was doing. "Should I even ask what all you're putting in that stuff?"

L'ars gave him a sly look and put his finger beside his nose. "Old family secret!" he said, with another laugh. He finished pouring the contents of a dark green bottle into the pitcher, and reached down to retrieve a skin of wine.

Gavrill grabbed the empty bottle and sniffed it; his head jerked back in surprise, and he sniffed more cautiously again. The flask was unmarked, but... "Whew! All right, *that's* brandy."

"Shh!" said L'ars, waving at him peremptorily. "That's the secret!"

"Just how much of this stuff do you *put* in there?" No wonder it had tasted dangerous. The fruit juice masked the bite of the spirits, so the strength of the resulting mixture was deceptive, and it was far too easy to drink in quantity.

"Just the right amount," the Weyrleader said innocently. Then he actually giggled, and picked up both full pitchers. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a couple of new wingmen whose mugs need topping up..."

Gavrill watched him move off confidently, his stride steady. He hadn't expected the Weyrleader to be such a big, *happy* drunk – though he probably should have guessed it based on the example of his wingriders. He'd never had a chance to observe a Weyrleader in such an informal situation before. But he somehow doubted that J'hanos *ever* became this loose and relaxed and happy, even at the best of times. No matter how much wine you poured down him.

"Here you go, captain." B'nyu nudged him with the mug, and he turned to take it.

The ale had a good head on it, but B'nyu had poured it to minimize that and maximize the drink. He took an appreciative sip under the bluerider's watchful eye. The sweetroot gave it a rich, fruity body, and there were spices in the mix that reminded him of the best harvest ales he'd ever tasted.

It reminded him, in fact, of a particular ale his wife used to brew, that'd always been popular around the hold. The Guard had always kept the bulk of it for themselves. Gavrill closed his eyes against the sudden image of Saressa, with her bright hair held back in a kerchief and wearing her favorite, patched apron, chasing him out of her kitchen, shouting that the next batch would be done when it was done and it wouldn't be any sooner no matter how often he asked.

Thinking of the good times inevitably made him think about what had ended them, and that wasn't a path of memory he wanted to go down tonight. Not with as much of L'ars's deadly "joy-juice" as he'd drunk already.

It was a small mercy at least that Saressa hadn't died in the wave, along with the rest of the Hold. That much he could be sure of. Her brother's cothold had been well inland, at least a sevenday's ride. They would have been safe, Saressa and Kawald both, from the wave at least. He could imagine that they'd lived out the rest of their lives there, long lives, filled with children – fosterlings, if not their own. That wasn't as painful a thought as it had once been. It was what he'd wanted for her, after all. And if that wasn't how her life had gone, maybe he never wanted to find out for sure.

"Is it all right, captain?" asked B'nyu anxiously, and Gavrill looked up to find the bluerider studying him. The concerned look on his face was clear despite the tattoos. Shards, how long had he stood there letting his thoughts run away with him?

He gave the big man a smile. "It's perfect. This a harvest brew from back at your hold?"

"It is. A bit early to be brewing it, but you can get sweetroot practically any time of the Turn here in Windsong." The bluerider clearly appreciated being able to talk to someone who knew something about the technical side of his craft. "Been a long time since I made it last, and I got the mix of spices wrong the last time."

"I'd say you've got it just right, now. I know what I'll be drinking for the rest of the night," Gavrill told him.

"Come back for a refill any time," the other man beamed.

The noise level from the circle around the bonfire suddenly increased, and Gavrill began to ease his way in that direction. He didn't want to miss whatever big thing was going to happen.

Yes, there was A'zelen, seated alongside D'loren now in what were obviously places of honor. The brownrider looked a little flushed, but maybe that was just from the heat of the bonfire and the effect of its ruddy light. He still had his hand curled around his mug, though, and as Gavrill watched, it was topped up from one of the Weyrleader's pitchers, making its way around the circle.

Gavrill smiled to himself. It had been a long time since he'd done any serious drinking with A'zelen, but he'd done enough to know what the brownrider's new wingmates were about to find out. A'zelen really didn't have much of a head for drink, when it came right down to it. If they didn't stop plying him with L'ars's heavy-duty concoction soon, he was going to pass out long before they got around to whatever big plans they had for this "welcoming ritual".

He found himself a place on a log not far from B'nyu and his beer supply, and settled in to watch this race against time and A'zelen's inebriation.

"Well, hello there," drawled a voice from above. Gavrill looked up to see one of the buxom greenriders – the one with the freckles and the light brown hair – looking down at him with an openly speculative look on her face.

No, still couldn't recall her name... he covered by saying, "And fair day to you, greenrider. Good to see you again."

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, settling herself onto the log beside him without waiting for an answer.

"Not at all," he said easily, smiling at the way she pressed against him, even though there was plenty of room on the log. Unlike many of her wingmates – too many for Gavrill's comfort, really – she looked like she was well out of her teens, at least.

She gave him a narrow look from hazel eyes, and her smile had a smirk to it. "You don't remember my name, do you?" she said shrewdly, giving him a friendly bump with her shoulder.

"Not at all," he repeated, with a grin, and she laughed.

"It's Tildy," she told him. She fluttered her eyelashes. "I'll just have to see what I can do to make sure you remember the next time."

He was about to reply – he could just imagine, from the way she was making sure to press her breasts against his arm, what her strategy for *that* would entail – when a solid weight hit him in the back and arms wrapped around his shoulders, while a high-pitched "Oh!" squealed in his ear. He just about avoided spilling his beer, and refrained from elbowing his assailant hard in the gut as it sank in that the

voice and the arms and the body belonged to someone female.

"Look! It's our guardsman!" The arms tightened in a hug and the dark head of the scantily-clad greenrider he remembered *very* well from the earlier party appeared over his shoulder. She had a short name, like Jenni or Jessi or Jeri or something, he thought. "You came back! We didn't scare you away! I told Bria we didn't!"

"Yes, that reminds me, Bria owes both of us a half-mark," said Tildy dryly.

The younger greenrider shifted around; his seat on the log didn't really make getting into his lap feasible, at least not without his cooperation, so she sat in the sand between his knees and wrapped her arm around one of his legs, shaking her braided hair out of her eyes and beaming up at him. He patted her bare shoulder tentatively. "It's nice to see you again, too."

"Only nice?" she asked, pouting. But she didn't hold the pout for long, instead reaching up to run her hand along his jaw. He was ready for that, and managed to keep from flinching. "And what happened to your beard? I liked the beard! L'ars has a beard," she added, as if that made sense.

Shellshards, how did she manage to survive as a dragonrider? She had the attention-span of a blurwing. "Sorry, it's not my usual look," Gavrill told her, hoping she would get tired of caressing his face before things started getting really embarrassing. She might be young enough to be his daughter – at least, if he was guessing her age correctly – but it was hard holding onto that thought with her sitting where she was, running her hands all over him.

"Oh, I definitely like *this* look better," Tildy purred.

"So do I!" A'rori chimed in as he passed by on his way to a refill. Gavrill looked up to see the greenrider give him a leer and an exaggerated wink.

He responded with a patient, insincere smile that made the other man laugh his head off as he headed on his way. The thing was, he could tell when someone was yanking his chain. He wasn't even willing to bet that Jeri's wherrybrained routine wasn't maybe a little more calculating than it seemed. And while he thought Tildy's flirtation was probably honest, there was a hint of a dare to it as well. He wasn't the one in the hot-seat tonight, but some of the FireStormers were having their fun testing him nonetheless.

Well, he wasn't the uptight holdbred idiot they seemed to think he might be. Even A'rori was going to have to try a lot harder than that, to get him to jump, now that Gavrill was onto them. It wasn't just that he was determined not to back down from the obvious challenge. He didn't want to embarrass himself – not in their eyes, and not in A'zelen's, either, which meant a lot more to him.

"But why didn't you bring your nice friend with you?" Jeri was demanding.

He had to stare at her for a long moment of confusion – but A'zelen was right over *there* -- before he realized that she must mean Vesoz. "I don't know," he admitted. "He wasn't around. He went off after dinner, I don't know where." Maybe the young man had gone off seeking his bronzerider brother. Maybe he was making better friends already amongst the Headwoman's staff.

"You should bring him along next time," said the young greenrider decisively. "He was fun."

"Oh yes, he's *loads* of fun," Gavrill agreed, dryly. His tone didn't register with her and she gave him a wide, white smile. "Don't worry, I'll be *sure* to tell him he's been missed."

The dark-skinned girl smiled happily to herself, trailing her hand down his neck and lingeringly over his chest, playing with the hair and bare skin accessible at his open collar – and *that*, Gavrill decided, was enough of that. He stood up quickly, relieved that he could still do so without *complete* embarrassment, but knowing that if he didn't put a stop to both women's fondling that wouldn't be possible much longer. "Oh, look at that – I need a refill," he announced, holding up the mug and hoping his voice sounded steadier than he felt.

Jeri pouted again, and Tildy looked up at him with a knowing smile. She held her mug out. "Then you can get me one, too."

"I'm drinking B'nyu's ale," he warned her, and she shrugged.

"That'll do."

B'nyu, A'rori and M'scel, along with another woman whose name he didn't remember and a man he hadn't seen before – a man with luxuriously wavy dark hair that fell past his waist; shards, put him in a gown and Gavrill wasn't sure he would have known the other was a man at all – were intent around something at the end of the table. He didn't try to interrupt them, but the big bluerider noticed him as he walked up and smoothly offered to pour. Then A'rori and the long-haired man were walking away *very carefully*, but the way the others crowded around, Gavrill couldn't see why. He had a feeling that the real show was about to start.

Thanking B'nyu, he made his way back to the edge of the circle, not sitting down again because he wanted a better look at what was happening. Tildy was waiting for him, too, so he passed the second mug to her and gave in to the inevitable as she stuck herself to his side once more. He rested his arm around her shoulder, and she gave him an approving look before redirecting her attention to the activity nearer the bonfire.

There was a slender blond girl standing on the other side of him. He realized after a second glance that it was the goldrider, Luka. She looked up at him when he came to a stop next to her, and gave him a distracted smile. He nodded back, inclining his head respectfully in place of a bow; she had already given him the impression, down at the Feeding Grounds, that she wasn't a stickler for rank or ceremony. He looked around surreptitiously, but didn't see Drayvin. That surprised him a little. Maybe the quiet herdsman found a FireStorm party like this too rowdy for his tastes.

The older wingsecond, B'tai, passed one of the pitchers off to someone else, and held up his hands. "Friends! Wingmates! Your attention, please!" Slowly, the murmur of conversation around the bonfire circle subsided. "I think all of you know why we're here tonight – not just to celebrate a 'Fall well flown –"

"And very well-flown it was!" shouted L'ars, from off to one side, setting off a few cheers. When B'tai shot him a quelling look, the Weyrleader waved a hand in apology for the interruption, but he didn't look very repentant.

"No, wingmates, tonight we have the rare pleasure of

welcoming not one, but *two* transfers into our Wing! And as everyone knows, that means –"

"FLAMING DRAGONS!" most of the circle roared along with him. Tildy's contribution was full-throated, startling Gavrill, and even the goldrider next to him was shouting it. Sitting in their chairs surrounded by happy, yelling wingmates, D'loren looked a little alarmed, but was easily distracted by the soothing attentions of the well-endowed redhead draped over his shoulder. A'zelen looked puzzled, like he was trying to figure out the answer to a tough question; or maybe, simply having trouble following what was being said.

Oh yes, thought Gavrill. Any moment now. They'd better hurry, or they were going to have a big heap of unconscious brownrider on their hands.

"That's right!" B'tai continued, clearly relishing his role as master of ceremonies. "Now, everyone knows our Wing is the best in the Weyr – best in the air, and the most fun on the ground. Eat, drink, be merry, and love your neighbor – because a dragonrider's life may be short and any one of us could die tomorrow!" That pronouncement, grim as it was, got a round of cheers as well. "It takes a special rider to fly with FireStorm. And we've got a *surefire* way –" the brownrider winked broadly at some of the audience, to general laughter "—to tell whether our new recruits are up to the challenge! A'rori, if you would..."

The short greenrider came forward, holding something carefully in his hands that Gavrill still couldn't quite make out.

"Greenrider D'loren!" B'tai commanded.

The redhead urged the young man to his feet. "Yes, sir?" he responded, loudly. There was tittering from around the circle.

B'tai put his hands on his hips and gave the greenrider an assessing look. "You've come a long, long way to be with us today, greenrider – and our good Weyrleader's chosen you for his own Wing. We know all this is strange to you, and that it must be hard sometimes – but your wingmates stand ready to help in any way you want... and probably in a few ways you don't! We have a favorite remedy for all life's troubles, in this Wing – and that's the good company of friends and a *lot* of good drink!"

The wingsecond gestured dramatically, and A'rori came forward. What he was holding turned out to be a shallow, earthenware dish. He was moving very slowly with it, as if afraid of spilling something.

"If you're going to fly with us, D'loren, you've got to learn how to drink like a FireStormer! So we've got a little test for you – a real dragonrider's drink – the *Flaming Dragon*!"

There were more cheers, while A'rori handed the dish to D'loren, who took it carefully. But when he started to raise it to drink from it, B'tai's hand on his arm stopped him. "Ah ah! Not yet – wait for it. There's a little matter of *the Rules*... What's Rule number ONE?" he asked the crowd.

This was apparently the cue the rest of the Wing had been waiting for. Immediately, and raggedly, they started chanting in unison. "Rule number ONE!" everyone shouted, "*BLOW IT OUT!*"

"Rule number TWO?" B'tai went on.

"*DON'T BREATHE!*" Gavrill noticed that the



Weyrleader was shouting as loudly and gleefully as the rest of them. D'loren looked even more alarmed than before.

"Rule number THREE?"

"*IT'S A SHOOTER!*"

"Annnnnnd... Rule number FOUR!" the wingsecond called, waving broadly.

"*DON'T FORGET THE FIRST THREE RULES!*" everyone roared, finishing it off with clapping and cheering and gales of laughter.

M'scel had come up beside the wingsecond, and now he held out something that B'tai took. It turned out to be a small taper that the brownrider shielded carefully in his hand. Quickly, he touched it to the edge of the shallow bowl – and the entire surface lit up with blue and orange flames, inspiring more cheers.

"Remember the Rules!" B'tai warned again, and then he stepped back.

D'loren took a deep breath, staring at the flames with determination. His first puff of breath disturbed them but didn't blow them out, and he had to blow again. That did it, and immediately the greenrider's eyes screwed shut as he braced himself. Then he brought the bowl to his lips – Gavriil wondered how hot it really was – and downed the contents with one big gulp. His throat worked, he swallowed... then he blew out his breath and started coughing, bending over to put his hands on his knees.

The entire Wing erupted in the biggest cheer yet, with various people whistling and clapping and shouting approbation. The redhead and A'rori and M'scel crowded around the greenrider, patting his back and holding him steady. When D'loren finally straightened up, his eyes were streaming, but he had a big smile on his face.

"Perfect the first time!" L'ars declared, beaming. "Welcome to FireStorm, greenrider!" The greeting was echoed around the circle.

Gavriil leaned close to Tildy. "So – what's in it?"

She took a drink of ale, and grinned up at him. "Lots of things. The base is a green herb liquor that comes from Igen, very rare, very expensive. The rest is whatever can be found that's as highly alcoholic as possible."

"And the whole... thing?" He rotated a hand to encompass the ceremony and the spectators.

"Just adding to the fun," she said. "We have a saying here in FireStorm. You can be entertaining or you can be entertainment..."

"And this tends to result in one or the other, huh?" Gavriil could imagine several ways for it to go wrong, and he bet he was missing a few – and most of them were bound to appeal to the sense of humor of a crowd like this one.

"Invariably," Tildy agreed, with a somewhat evil smile. "Oh, look – it's your friend's turn."

A'zelen had been leaning forward in his chair, studying D'loren's entire experience intently. Going second would give him an advantage, Gavriil hoped – depending on how close he was to his own personal limit. Surely he could make it through *one* more drink, though.

"Brownrider A'zelen!" called B'tai, and while A'zelen stood up promptly, Z'haq's steadying hand was required as he stepped forward.

"L'ars tells us you're a harper, brownrider –" the wingsecond began, interrupted by an outbreak of squeals

from a group of young women off to Gavriil's left. He looked over and saw Jeri amongst them. A'zelen was distracted by the sound, too, his head snapping sharply in their direction; Gavriil mentally labelled that expression as "spooked". "We'll be looking forward to hearing you play for us later," B'tai went on smoothly. "But for now, well – you heard the speech, you know the drill, so N'vez? If you would?"

This was the slender man with the unfeasibly long hair. Now *there* was what every holder thought of as a typical greenrider – typical *male* greenrider, that was. The man was wearing nothing but a brightly-patterned length of cloth around his hips, and he moved as gracefully as a high-born lady on a dance floor. Gavriil didn't want to be caught staring – for one thing, in this crowd, it might be taken entirely the wrong way – but he was reluctantly fascinated by the other man's movements as he presented another shallow dish to A'zelen.

The brownrider didn't even seem to notice the man handing him the dish. His attention was fixed on not spilling its contents.

"Everybody ready?" B'tai asked the crowd. "Rule number One..."

This time, everyone chanted the whole thing together, building volume as they went. "*BLOW IT OUT!*" Rule number TWO! *DON'T BREATHE!* Rule number THREE! *IT'S A SHOOTER!* Rule number FOUR!" they all reached a crescendo, "*DON'T FORGET THE FIRST THREE RULES!*"

A'zelen had waited, watching B'tai. He extended the dish slightly to make it easier for B'tai to light, and then, in his own little bit of theater, held it up carefully and turned from side to side as if presenting the flames to the spectators. That got a round of applause and laughter, along with shouts of "Drink it already!" Gavriil held his breath, merely hoping his friend wouldn't spill the entire flaming contents.

A'zelen nodded decisively, his expression perfectly serious. He blew the flames out with one puff, then raised the bowl with one hand in one last small toast to B'tai – who was grinning madly – and tossed back the contents with a flourish.

The crowd appreciated that performance – very loudly. A'zelen held his composure for a few seconds, then succumbed to his own coughing fit, with Z'haq and B'tai pounding him on the back. When the brownrider looked up, Gavriil saw he was wearing one of his rare, full smiles. That was good to see, he thought, not able to remember how long it had been since he'd seen his friend that relaxed and happy. He shared a smile of his own with Tildy as he clapped along with everyone else.

"Welcome to FireStorm!" several people shouted.

Then the crowd started to break up, with some moving forward to greet the new wingriders, and some moving towards the table of drinks still guarded by B'nyu. "Now what?" Gavriil asked Tildy. She laughed.

"Now the drinking *really* gets going," she told him. "We don't break out the fixings for Flaming Dragons that often, a lot of people will be wanting to do it – and it only gets more fun as the evening goes on."

"I'll just bet it does."

Gavriil made his way carefully through the crowd

towards the place he'd last seen A'zelen. He passed D'loren on the way. The young ex-guardsmen was surrounded by some of the wingriders closer to his age. He looked pretty pleased with himself, and why not? He had a girl under each arm and a glow to his cheeks that suggested the Wing's free-flowing drinking was agreeing with him. Gavrill gave him a friendly nod as he passed.

When he reached the two chairs, the brownrider was still near them, being congratulated by some of his new wingmates. From up close, his face was as flushed as Gavrill had suspected it would be. It lit up when he saw Gavrill approaching, in a way that was all the more touching because it was only when A'zelen got *this* drunk that he let down his guard this much.

"Gav! Where *were* you? Did you *see* that? They have this drink, you've *got* to try it —" Babbling, of course, was something that A'zelen did all the time, drunk or not. In fact, he talked faster when he was sober; but he was easier to distract when he was drunk.

"Sorry, nonrider here. No real-dragonrider drinks for me, tonight," Gavrill told him, hoping nobody would offer to make an exception for him. He'd had a long day working for the Weyrherder, and he could already feel the effects of the mug of L'ars's killer concoction he'd downed before thinking better of it. Avoiding a drinking contest involving high-proof spirits was probably the better part of valor. He really didn't want to wind up sleeping on this beach.

A'zelen had both hands wrapped around his mug of the Weyrleader's special-recipe brew. Gavrill tugged on it until the brownrider loosened his grasp, and then replaced it with his own half-full mug of beer. "Here, why don't you switch to this?"

"Why?" the brownrider asked, looking at the new mug suspiciously.

Because, Gavrill thought, B'nyu's beer might be potent, but it was probably half the strength of what L'ars was pouring. He wished he could have replaced it with water, actually. That might help lessen the size of the hangover that was going to be heading the brownrider's way. But A'zelen was no longer paying attention; he just shrugged and took a drink from it.

B'tai was standing nearby, looking quietly pleased with himself. From the foam on his tankard, he was sticking with B'nyu's beer as well. "If he passes out, I'll want help carrying him back up there," Gavrill told the wingsecond.

"How likely is that?" B'tai asked, eyebrows raised.

"Pretty likely." Out of the corner of his eye, Gavrill saw A'zelen sway as he attempted to focus on what D'loren's erstwhile redheaded companion was telling him; he shifted over to steady the brownrider with his shoulder.

"You don't say," B'tai mused, his expression thoughtful. "I'll have to make a note of that."

"Yeah, well, if you're planning on engaging his harperring skills, my advice is, keep him on the light stuff until after you've gotten him to play. Speaking from experience, that is," confided Gavrill. "I really wouldn't suggest you try it now, for example."

Repeats of the chant that accompanied the fiery drinking ritual had been sounding from various points in the crowd. When it erupted nearby, it caught A'zelen's attention. He

turned towards it too quickly, almost overbalancing. "Oh! Hey, who's that?"

"Whoa, there!" Gavrill kept him from tipping over. "You know, maybe you'd better sit down. There's this chair right here —"

"Looks like M'scel's having a go," B'tai told them, with a strange smile on his face.

"Half a mark, wingsecond?" said the redhead, coming up beside him.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Fool's bet, Karlina," he replied, with a grin.

"What's the bet?" Gavrill asked, against his better judgement.

Karlina gave him a raking look. "Why, do you want in?"

"No, just curious. Don't have a mark to my name." He realized that he hadn't thought about it until that moment, but it was true. The few marks he'd had, he'd left in a pouch back in his barracks room in Southern. It wasn't something he'd needed to worry about since getting here, either.

"I'm sure we could find a suitable alternative form of payment," the redhead said suggestively. Then B'tai nudged her, and she gave a dramatic sigh. "But it wouldn't be fair, since you don't know M'scel," she admitted, grudgingly.

"Don't know what about M'scel?"

"Just watch," the wingsecond told him, with a nod in the direction of the knot of riders near them.

"-- *THREE! It's a shooter!*" Z'haq was leading the chanting of the rules, surrounded mostly by young men and a couple of women, including Jeri. "Rule number *FOUR!* *Don't forget the first three rules!*"

M'scel was practically cross-eyed looking at the bowl in his hands, as Z'haq lit it. Then he took a gigantic breath, blew out the blue flames on a long exhale, opened his mouth in readiness — and promptly choked, sputtering and almost flinging the bowl's hot contents all over his companions, who danced out of the way. The brownrider wound up on his knees in the sand, groaning and heaving.

A young man with dark red hair leaned over him, patting him on the back tentatively. "Anybody have some water?" he asked. "Hey, M'scel, are you all right? You're not going to —"

The brownrider replied by throwing up all over the younger rider's feet.

Both Karlina and B'tai watched all of this with matching fond smiles. Gavrill raised an eyebrow at them. "All right, I assume he forgot one of the 'rules'..." He made quotes in the air with his fingers. A'zelen was looking queasy and sank down into the chair after all.

B'tai nodded. "He breathed. Happens every time." The young riders around M'scel were laughing, but more at the one named J'loo who hadn't gotten out of the way quickly enough than at M'scel himself, and they were kindly helping him get cleaned up. Someone brought water and rags, but they weren't as fast as the black-and-white dog that moved in and licked enthusiastically at the rider's face.

A'zelen looked up at them with wide eyes. "Wh—what happens if you breathe?" he asked, hesitantly.

The wingsecond held his own tankard under his nose, and waved a hand over it. "The fire warms up the spirits,

but it's also burning off the alcohol, right? So in the seconds after you blow it out, all those pure alcohol fumes are still rising off the hot surface. You breathe right then, you get a noseful of it – and it's straight past drunk to hangover, maybe with a stop at puking on the way."

Gavrill winced at the blunt description. "So *that* was the bet? That he'd screw it up?"

Karlina shrugged. "He might surprise us, one of these times. Of course, it's M'scel," she added, with a wry smile. "So it's long odds, but the payout would be pretty spectacular if you won."

"Stranger things have happened," B'tai agreed.

"Wow," said A'zelen, staring at the group around the kneeling brownrider with a sort of horrified fascination. "I didn't think of it that way. To be honest, I wasn't paying *that* much attention. That could've been *me*."

B'tai laughed and patted A'zelen on the shoulder. "Don't worry, brownrider. It's not whether you do it right that counts, it's *how* you cope with it, including how you cope if you do it wrong. As you can see, even veterans of the Wing aren't perfect."

A'zelen did not look comforted by that.

"Where is my *senior wingsecond*? B'TAI! Where have you got to?" That bellow belonged to the Weyrleader, heading in their direction.

"Right here, L'ars!" the wingsecond called.

L'ars wove his way through the crowd, avoiding M'scel and the mess on the ground at the last moment. He was followed by A'rori and Tildy, and several other people started following him as soon as they realized who it was and where he was heading. L'ars was carrying a flask in one hand and one of the shallow dishes in the other.

"Oh, here we go again," muttered B'tai. Then he summoned up a bright smile for his wingleader.

"All right!" L'ars challenged as soon as he arrived. "Who went first the last time?"

"I believe that was me," countered the brownrider.

L'ars narrowed his eyes. While he still had most of his motor skills, it was clear just from looking at his face that he was pretty far gone in his cups. He didn't look like he quite believed his wingsecond... but he didn't look like he could quite remember, either. "All right, then," he agreed grudgingly. "Me first. You do the honors."

Tildy came over to stand by A'zelen and Gavrill. "I'd get comfortable, if I were you," she advised. "This could go on for a while. Either of you need a refill?"

"I do," A'zelen piped up, and Gavrill leaned over and put his hand over the brownrider's mug.

"No, you don't," he told his friend. Then he shifted his attention to Tildy. "What's up with the two of them?" He inclined his head towards B'tai carefully filling one of the shallow bowls for the Weyrleader.

"Oh, this goes back to when L'ars first arrived and became our wingleader," the greenrider explained. "B'tai and the rest of us sort of '*welcomed*' him in a very... *public* way, shall we say. And while he forgave us for it, he hasn't forgotten it."

That might be, but Gavrill wasn't really sure what the Weyrleader expected to accomplish by challenging his wingsecond to a drinking contest, with flaming drinks no less. Not least because B'tai clearly hadn't had nearly as

much to drink as L'ars.

L'ars and B'tai proceeded to trade rounds of Flaming Dragons, supported by a growing crowd of wingriders who chanted the rules helpfully. To Gavrill's surprise, A'zelen also was chanting enthusiastically; but his friend was sinking lower and lower in his seat, as well. Gavrill wondered if he could get B'nyu's help to get A'zelen back to his weycot. Sleeping on the beach would have been easier – but the idea of sleeping rough really didn't appeal. Not now that they had things like beds and roofs to sleep under again.

Competitive though it might be, L'ars was clearly just enjoying himself immensely. He yelled the rules gleefully along with everyone else when it was B'tai's turn, and cheered loudly each time the brownrider downed a shot. It was becoming apparent, though, that the Weyrleader was slowing down. Gavrill wondered what they did if they needed to call it a draw. Or maybe it would be over when one or the other of them couldn't even hold the bowl up without spilling it.

B'tai finished off his fifth round to general applause, and passed the empty bowl over to A'rori, smiling confidently. The greenrider filled it from the flask – or maybe, it was over when they ran out of a supply of the drink, Gavrill thought. He didn't think flaming beer would work nearly as well. A'rori then passed the bowl to his wingleader. L'ars blinked heavily before giving himself a shake, straightening up, and taking it.

B'tai led the crowd in the chant once again. Gavrill marveled at the fact that everyone was still willing to do it as energetically as they had at the start. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd heard it repeated.

"—number *FOUR*! *Don't forget the first three rules!*" A'rori reached over, and lit the bowl.

L'ars closed his eyes, took a deep, bracing breath – and immediately raised the bowl to drink.

Pandemonium erupted as everyone shouted at the Weyrleader at once. Whether that alerted him, or whether it was the heat from the flames, it wasn't clear. His eyes flew open, but the bowl was already tipping towards his mouth. He looked *very* startled for a long moment, right before the still-flaming spirits poured down the front of his shirt. And his beard caught on fire.

L'ars bellowed – which didn't really help – as B'tai and A'rori leaped forward at the same time. They all went down in a heap, with the Weyrleader on the bottom, slapping at his face and shirt trying to put out the thin blue flames. Then A'rori had the presence of mind to start picking up handfuls of beach sand, throwing it onto the bronzerider. A second later and B'tai got the idea, scooping sand rapidly at his wingleader's face while L'ars sputtered under the onslaught. They didn't stop until they were sure all the flames had gone out.

There was a hush as the assembled Wing held its breath, and B'tai pushed the bronzerider's hands out of the way. "Here – let me see –" L'ars had his back to the bonfire, and B'tai had to encourage him to angle his head towards the light.

"*OW!* I'm all right!" the Weyrleader complained, and there was a collective sigh from the circling crowd.

"Does he still have his eyebrows?" Tildy called,

sounding moderately concerned.

"Yes, still there," A'rori called back cheerfully. "But I'm afraid the beard is a dead loss."

L'ars groaned, and flopped on his back on the sand. Then the Weyrleader started laughing, deep belly-laugh in between attempts to spit sand out of his mouth.

"So, I've got to ask," Gavrill said to Tildy. "Are FireStorm parties always this – what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Exciting?" the greenrider suggested.

He inclined his head in a half-shrug, wagging his hand in a so-so gesture. "Eventful? Hazardous?"

"Usually only on very *special* occasions," she assured him.

A'zelen jerked upright suddenly, looking alarmed. "Is L'ars all right?" he demanded. B'tai was calling for someone to fetch one of the healers, drowning out the Weyrleader's protest.

L'ars had struggled to his feet, and he was wagging a finger in front of B'tai's face. "I do *not* need a healer. Do you hear me? We will *NOT* be bothering the healers –"

"More like he doesn't want the Weyrwoman roused," commented N'vez, with a knowing smile.

A'rori looked up at the taller man. "She's going to find out come morning, anyway. I mean, *look* at him!"

"You're right," said Tildy brightly. "We've *got* to make sure we're at breakfast – I want to see her face when she first gets a look at him."

"Oh! Oh! I nominate B'tai to make sure he *goes* to breakfast, then!" Jeri chimed in.

None of the riders seemed all that concerned about the Weyrleader's health. The fact that the big man was still laughing as he waved off well-wishers doubtless contributed to that. In truth, it looked like he'd avoided being burned, though the remnants of the singed beard would have to be shaved off. Gavrill looked down at A'zelen, and rested a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "Sounds like he's fine. Maybe not cosmetically, but otherwise, yeah."

"Oh. G—" Whatever the brownrider was going to say next – it sounded like it might have been "good" – was interrupted by a huge yawn.

"All right, that's it. Sounds like this might be a good time to get you off to your own bed while you're still awake enough to walk." Gavrill put a hand under A'zelen's elbow. "You think you *can* walk?" he asked belatedly.

"Course I can," muttered A'zelen, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair to push up. He didn't get very far. Gavrill heaved him up the rest of the way and got a shoulder under his arm. The brownrider was, in fact, standing on his own, but he definitely sagged. He also wasn't a small man – not much shorter than Gavrill himself, and a little broader in the shoulder. Gavrill thought about the path up the cliff with increasing misgiving.

"Need a hand there, captain?" asked a familiar, deep voice, and he looked up to find B'nyu taking A'zelen's other arm.

"If I said no, I'd be lying," he admitted, grateful for the rescue. "But I don't want to drag you away –"

The big bluerider chuckled. "I can come back down. It's not a problem."

"Well, thank you very much, nonetheless," said

A'zelen, with as much dignity as he could muster and at least making the attempt to take some of his weight on his own feet. "It's very, very kind of you. Everyone's very, very kind," he said happily, eyes closing.

B'nyu grinned, a flash of white teeth in his broad dark face. "That's what wingmates are for, brownrider. FireStorm takes care of its own, and you're one of us now."

Gavrill didn't think the bluerider, or any of the other FireStormers, fully realized how much their open generosity meant to their new wingmates. Or to him, for that matter – not even a rider, not weyrfolk at all, but they'd made him feel included and wanted. Not because they had to. They genuinely seemed to *want* to, just like they genuinely seemed delighted to welcome D'loren and A'zelen into the fold.

"Right, FireStormer now..." A'zelen agreed, sleepily.

If you'd asked him, Gavrill wouldn't have thought his quiet, studious friend would be a good fit with a Wing that was clearly filled with rowdy, outgoing party-lovers. Now he had a feeling that FireStorm and its riders would be good for A'zelen, maybe good for D'loren, too. In A'zelen's case, his wingmates wouldn't *allow* him to retreat into his own shell. They'd drag him cheerfully into their own lives, kicking and screaming if they had to.

And that was maybe what A'zelen needed – what a lot of them needed, to tell the truth.

With B'nyu practically carrying A'zelen on his side, Gavrill shifted his grip on his friend's arm and around his waist, and they started up the path to the weycots to the sound of unabated celebration from the beach behind them.

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## 2859.02.23

A'zelen woke up once in the stillness of the middle of the night – both moons had set and the wide windows of his cot were squares only faintly brighter than the walls around them. He wasn't very awake, and from Toth's direction he received only a sense of smooth, deep sleep. His head felt oversized and delicate, and his limbs strangely weak, so he only dragged himself to the edge of his bed and with one arm groped for the chamber-pot kept underneath the frame. He just barely remembered to fumble the cover off before using it, and then to get it back on before he collapsed face-first into his pillow and gratefully allowed his eyes to close again.

The next time he surfaced, he could tell from the noise of wherries in the trees that it must be around dawn. He was lying on his stomach with the light blanket bunched up around his hips, and the dampness of the pillow beneath his cheek alerted him to the fact that he'd been sleeping mouth-open and drooling for quite some time. With a disgusted snort, he rolled over onto his back, clumsily tugging at the tangle of covers. His head was pounding and his mouth felt and tasted like it was lined with a treehopper's tail.

There had to be an explanation for that, but he couldn't immediately remember what it was.

An experimental probe in Toth's direction proved that the dragon was still asleep, so, no help there. Certainly, he remembered Gavrill coming by last night, and settling in to talk while A'zelen worked on Toth's flight-harness. He

remembered some of his new wingmates showing up and encouraging him down to the beach, where the rest of the Wing awaited. He did remember a lot of noise and some tasty drinks. What he didn't really remember was how things had ended, or getting back to his cot at all.

As he laid there, listening to the wherries and staring at the exposed rafters of the cot's ceiling, he gradually became aware of another sound. It was coming from just beyond the thin screen that partitioned off the weycot's sleeping area, that is, just beyond where his head was lying, and after a moment's concentration – an exercise complicated by the throbbing of his head – he identified it as the sound of someone or something moving around in the cot's living area.

He was still lying there trying to decide whether his curiosity was strong enough to overcome his vast reluctance to attempt getting out of bed – he didn't think that his head was going to like the process of being reoriented into an upright position – when the distinct smell of klah started coming to him past the screen, as well.

Even though his stomach felt unsettled and the thought of food was not a welcome one, A'zelen had never been in any condition in which the idea of klah was uninviting. He could happily lie there all day and just *smell* it, though he would much rather have a mug of it closer to hand, because he had an idea that it would feel good to breathe in the moist, warm steam of it. He could even imagine the taste of it so vividly that his mouth started to water.

He had two choices. He could call out and hope that whoever it was who he heard moving around in the cot, whoever it was who had the klah, would bring it in to him if he pleaded with them very nicely. Or he could get himself up and go find it for himself.

The first option was so much more attractive that it was hardly a contest, but the problem was that he had no idea who the person beyond the screen might be. It could be Gavrill, since the guardsman had certainly been there at the party on the beach last night, and if A'zelen couldn't remember getting back to his own weycot, then it probably wasn't a bad guess that his friend had something to do with it. Gavrill had always had a much higher tolerance for drinking than A'zelen, who had often thought how unfair that was. But if it *wasn't* Gav out there, then he was completely at a loss for who it could be. It was very inconvenient of Toth to still be sleeping right now.

If it *was* Gavrill, A'zelen could have swallowed his pride and called out and begged him to bring him some klah. Gav would have teased him about it, but he would have brought it, and the amusement on his face and the particular smile he would have worn as he did it would have been an additional reward that A'zelen would have secretly enjoyed even while he grumbled out loud. The smile would be fond and amused and genuine, and it wasn't a look that Gavrill gave many people, but A'zelen had noticed a long time ago that he was one of the few the guardsman would bestow it on. So that was all the more reason to enjoy it, besides the fact that he found it unbelievably attractive...

As he let his wandering thoughts dwell on that visualization, filling it out with more detail and drifting along in happy contemplation, he became aware just then that he could feel his pulse pounding not only in his

temples, but also in his groin – and as soon as he realized it he slapped a hand over his eyes and grabbed handfuls of blanket to pull across his lap, momentarily afraid that someone might just walk around the end of the screen at that awkward moment. He wasn't sure whether it would be worse if it turned out to be Gavrill himself, or some stranger. If it was Gav, then he wouldn't be able to keep from blushing, and that would get him a lot more ribald teasing that he really didn't want right now. And if it was a stranger...

A'zelen thought about the *friendliness* some of his new wingmates had exhibited so far, and didn't think he wanted to be giving some of them any ideas.

The smell of the klah was still tormenting him and gradually he got himself under control. Sitting upright brought with it the expected painful rushing sensation in his head, and thank the Egg, that helped deflate the remainder of the inconvenient hard-on to the point where he could think about standing up and walking into the other part of the weycot without embarrassment. Standing was enough of a challenge that A'zelen abandoned any idea of trying to find any of his clothing, let alone putting any of it on, so he just drew the blanket with him and wound it around his waist a few times.

Still, when he finally staggered around the end of the screen and took in the scene that greeted him in the cot's living area, he could only stand there with his moth open and stare.

His first thought was, '*Who ARE all these people?*' At first glance the floor of the cot seemed to be covered with sleeping bodies. A few moments of blinking resolved that into a pile of four, lying on the carpet in a heap of limbs and light coverings. At least one was a man, the rest appeared to be female. And there were two women on the long couch – one curled up asleep, one awake, both with short dark hair.

The one who was awake was clearly also responsible for the klah, because she held a mug in her hands and a pitcher that was steaming sat on the floor beside her. She was sitting cross-legged on the cushions, with a wax-tablet in her lap and a couple of scrolls beside her. She was looking at him with polite inquiry, as if she were perfectly at home and he were the interloper. He supposed he ought to know her name, but it wasn't coming to him.

"Good morning" he said automatically, but it came out more as a question than a greeting. He tried again. "Is there more of that klah?"

"Of course," said the woman, probably a greenrider – since the majority of the female riders in this era rode greens, that seemed like a reasonable guess. She poured klah and held it out to him, and A'zelen picked his way across the floor, over the sprawled limbs of his other... guests, holding his blanket up one-handed while he took the offered mug.

He sat himself down in the nearest chair, inhaling the steam gratefully – it felt every bit as good as he'd imagined it would. He could picture what he must look like, and it wasn't the way he would normally have wanted to present himself when sitting down with a stranger in his own cot – he was unshaven, not to mention naked underneath the blanket, and he was sure that his hair was probably stuck up in odd ways – but the woman was neither studying him

lasciviously nor looking amused, so he decided it didn't matter. It was his weyrcot, after all, and she was the one who had invited herself in. At least, he thought after a moment, slightly alarmed, he *hoped* she had invited herself in, rather than been invited by him and he just didn't remember.

It was hard to read her expression. She wasn't that pretty a woman, with a long, narrow face and a wide mouth, and she didn't look very friendly. She had also gone back to studying her wax-tablet, either ignoring him or simply allowing him to savor his klah in peace, it was hard to tell which. A'zelen was grateful for the pause, actually, sipping the hot drink and gathering his thoughts before he felt ready to start a conversation.

"There's no good way to say this," he began finally, and she looked up at him. "But I can't think of your name."

That brought a small smile to the corners of her mouth. "I'm Naralion," she told him, "green Spioth's rider. We hadn't formally met. That—" she pointed at the small dark-haired girl curled up on the other end of the couch.

"Chaya," A'zelen said quickly. It had just come to him. He had met her in the Weyrhall the other day, at dinner. Naralion nodded. "And the, uh, the rest?"

Her smile widened. "Our other newest recruit – your friend, D'loren. Along with Bria, Jeri, and Jandae, I believe."

A'zelen cleared his throat. "I assume there's a logical explanation for what they're doing here on the floor of my cot rather than in their own beds?"

The greenrider shrugged. "They probably thought it would be easier to have someone watching over the both of you at once." At his blank look, she elaborated, "It's a Wing tradition – if you get someone drunk enough that they pass out, you make sure someone stays with them, in case they get into trouble. Wouldn't want you to drown in your own vomit or fall and break your neck or anything."

Her tone was sardonic. "That's... very thoughtful," he said, at length. And it was, even if it was somewhat frightening as well.

She shrugged again, dismissively. "Wasn't me. Probably B'tai or B'nyu, they're good at that kind of thing. I was up early and B'nyu grabbed me on his way to the showers, to get me to spell him."

"Oh," he said, and then he added, "Thank you," because that seemed called for. It was no use asking her when Gavril had left, then, or if he'd slept here at all. She probably wouldn't know. B'nyu would.

"No problem, brownrider," she answered him. "It's all part of being a FireStormer."

Just as the party on the beach last night, the drinking and the laughter and the good-natured challenges, seemed to

be part of being a FireStormer, A'zelen thought. It wasn't the kind of company he would have sought out on his own. But he felt strangely warmed by their attention, their determination to include him, nonetheless.

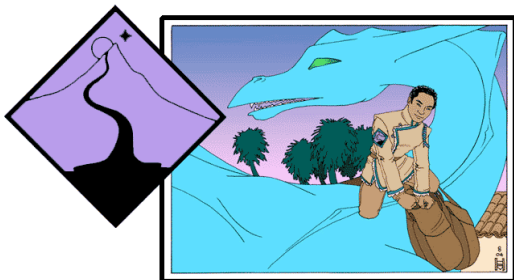
FireStorm was never going to feel like D'ralt's Wing had. It would never feel like the Wing that he and J'hanos had created between them, either. Slowly, though, the FireStorm riders were becoming familiar, and what was more, they seemed to have decided amongst themselves that he and D'loren were a part of them now, strangers no longer.

They couldn't forget what they'd lost. But they had to start living in the Tenth Pass. If they couldn't forget they were Southerners, and didn't want to, they still had to become Kadanfans. They didn't have any other choice. FireStorm's talent, it seemed, was making that task seem easy, even enjoyable.

He might have trouble admitting it out loud, but that made even the current hangover seem... worth it. It made him gaze benignly on the pile of youngsters snoring on his floor, because while he was usually a man who liked his privacy, they were *wingmates*, and though he didn't exactly want this sort of thing to happen every night, right now he recognized his acceptance of it for what it was. It was a feeling of *belonging*, it was the opposite of loneliness, and it felt good, he thought to himself. It felt right.

A'zelen slumped a little lower in the chair, stretched his legs out to the side to avoid hitting one of the girls in the head, and raised his klah mug to his lips again, drinking with contentment.

END



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