
A Prodigal Son, Pt. 1

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2859.02.15

The Lord of Drake Hold was far too aware of the dignity of rank to bolt up the twisting stone stairs to the fireheights, but his heir wasn't so repressed. "Kelara!" Elrial yelled, racing up the irregular steps as fast as the boy's legs could carry him. "Kelara! You and Blareth have been away forever!"

The old greenrider pushed up her goggles and reached after riding strap clasps with joints gone stiff and thick with age. "Just two days, young sir," she called back. "Watch your step there, boy, don't you fall and break open that pretty head of yours."

"Why'd the Weyr call you back? Is there Thread falling out of pattern? Or raiders?" the boy demanded, having reached Blareth's side and nearly dancing in his excitement. "Are there sea raiders attacking? Does the Weyr need rescue?"

The boy's wild imagination earned a cackle of delight from the old watchrider. She stripped off her gloves, stuffed them in a pocket of her wherhide jacket, and winked knowingly at Gibran as Drake's lord arrived. "Lybelle called me off abruptly, aye," she said, not above teasing the boy. "But attack of raiders by sea and land is too grim a business for young ears."

"I knew it would be raiders!" Elrial exclaimed.

"Hush," Gibran said. He pulled up the mounting block they kept handy, and straightened to offer Kelara a hand.

The old woman was still strong enough to dismount on her own, but he knew she appreciated the gesture. "Elrial, go and see that the cooks have hot milk and anise waiting for us. I'm sure the watchrider would appreciate a warming cup, inside and down out of this wind."

There was a crisp wind up on the heights, in the setting light of the summer sun – but just the same, Elrial knew an excuse in that dismissal when he heard it. The boy sulked for a moment, delaying to watch his uncle assist Kelara down from her dragon, then turned and sprinted down the fireheight stairs. "Walk!" Gibran snapped the order; his nephew's headlong flight slowed to a safer pace, or at least it did for the measure of the stairs visible from the top of the fireheights.

"Ah, to be that young again, and not in despair of knees gone crotchety," Kelara sighed. The old woman looked as smug as a cat with a dish of cream. Gibran did not repress

his rueful smile, knowing that she had news to share, and that she would measure it out at her own pace.

"Surely Weyrwoman Lybelle did not call you away, back to the Weyr in the middle of our dinner hour, out of concern for your knees," Gibran said fondly. "Elrial has been unable to talk of anything else but your departure, and you knew I've been left pining in your absence."

Another happy cackle, and a wink of brilliant blue eyes. "Flattery will get you everywhere, my pretty boy," she grinned. "Help me get these old bones down onto a comfortable cushion, and I'll tell you a story even a harper won't believe."

"You tease," Gibran chuckled, offering the greenrider his arm. "Raiders by land and sea, you say?"

"Or by air," Kelara countered, the gleam of her smile gone wicked. "The lad was more right than you know. The Weyr did suffer an invasion of sorts, I suppose you could say. Let's get these old bones settled, and I'll tell you the whole sordid tale over dinner."



2859.02.17

Normally, the unanticipated arrival of a dragon out of *between* over the Weyrhall wasn't much of a cause for excitement. But after the unexpected arrival of Dunia and her companions from the Ninth Pass only two nights ago, the sudden unfurling of green wings overhead was cause for an interruption in any conversation, even a morning's debriefing between the Weyrwoman and her Dragonhealer.

"Who's that?" Giselle asked, shielding her eyes against the angle of the brilliant sun. Out of earshot behind her, dragonhealers were pausing in their work beneath the northern of the two Dragon Infirmary barns and looking up overhead in frank appraisal, as if fearing another round of visitors from another Pass to drop on them.

Lybelle had only a glimpse of a stout green body before her own queen was answering that question for her. *Blareth arrives from Drake. She carries a passenger, and wishes to land down at the western beach.*

Green Blareth. Drake's watchrider. The Weyrwoman had no question about who that passenger would be. *What half-assed stunt is that bastard Gibran pulling? Ihyanith, I don't care where Blareth thinks she's going – send her right back to Drake, right now.*

Above them, the elderly green had already dipped a wing and begun to descend toward the beaches of FireStorm Complex. A moment later, and the old green gave a surprised coughing rumble, jerked up two wingbeats in altitude, and then disappeared back *between*.

Blareth returns to Drake, Ihyanith replied. And she will not leave the Hold again until I give her leave to do so.

Lybelle snorted in a sour amusement at that, and found Giselle looking at her quizzically. "I'll wager Drake's lord thought he'd come make a family visit," she explained. "He's been dropping in for visits with that greenrider niece of his for Turns now; Valenne always appreciated that he

didn't make a big formal affair out of it, and Gibran's been overdue a drop-in since I became Weyrwoman. But eggs'll get you shells if I'm halfwit enough to think his visit today was innocent."

Craftmaster Giselle's strawberry brows were still knit in question, so the Weyrwoman continued. "Seems one of Dunia's tagalongs is the son of Drake Hold's founding family. Lord Gibran will be on that poor fellow like a seawher scenting blood. Talk about a prize to parade around at the next Gather!" Lybelle shook her head. "Scorch it, but I thought old Kelara had more sense. I told the other Weyrleaders not to make visits until invited; an old greynose like Kelara has to know that means I certainly don't want holders and crafters underfoot. Sharded old flirt; if a pretty boy like Drake's lord can probably talk her into just about anything, maybe I'm best off reassigning her to Dawn Sisters. Sour old Mendius shouldn't be able to tempt her." Lybelle shrugged the incident off with an additional silent command for her dragon. *Ground all of our watchriders, Craft and Hold alike. I don't want repeat performances of Drake's stunt. No visitations, not until formally invited. I don't care what clever excuse gets lobbed at us – last thing I want underfoot are gawkers. There's time enough for that at some gatherday, at the time and place of our orphans' own choosing.*

Ihyanith passed on that command, and the Weyrwoman smiled with satisfaction as she returned her attention to the task at hand. "So, craftmaster – back to where we were at before the interruption from Drake. You were saying about that brown's infection..."



On the Eighteenth day of the Second month in the Ninth Turn of this Tenth Pass of the Red Star

To the hands of our Weyrwoman--

My respects to your fairest gold. I understand, from the nature of our abrupt departure from the Weyr yesterday, that my timing for a family visit was unfortunate. My apologies for any misunderstandings. My nephew has been keen about his studies with his swordmaster, and the boy wishes to parade his successes before his tolerant sister, Greenrider Nasalion, at the next opportunity that our visit to the Weyr would be convenient for you and for my niece's Wing.

And, of course, there is a matter of what I understand to be distant kin of mine, who presently finds himself a guest of the Weyr. Of course, I would appreciate an introduction, again at your convenience.

My best to yourself and your dragon, and my fond congratulations to our new Weyrleader as well. Bronzerider L'ars has a keg of Drake's finest as a gift in appreciation from my holders, which I will, of course, be pleased to deliver upon my arrival.

Ever your servant— **Gibran of Drake**

L'ars chuckled as he read the note over Lybelle's shoulder. "I like the free beer touch," he said. "And how do you intend to respond?"

"Think he'll take kindly to being told to bugger off?" Lybelle snorted, reaching after her own quill.

"Only you if say it nicely," L'ars grinned on his way out the door.



2859.02.27

New faces were still always showing up in the evening hours, dragonriders and support staffers alike, curious to get to know the Oldtimers from the Ninth Pass. So when another new face turned up at the FireStorm table during dinner, Gavriil didn't take much notice. Not until the sun-weathered, wrinkled old face appeared at the end of their table, beamed beatifically at A'zelen, and announced, "Oh, they told me the harper-boy was a pretty one, but those are just the sweetest pair of big ol' blue eyes I've seen since before Red Star's return! You are Toth's rider, aren't you?"

A'zelen looked up at the old greenrider, eyebrows rising in confusion. He and Gavriil sat across from one another at FireStorm's table; none of the brownrider's new wingmates seemed to think twice of Gavriil inviting himself along wherever A'zelen went if the Wing wasn't strictly on Wing business. A'zelen looked up at the old woman with a befuddled look. "I'm A'zelen, yes, brown Toth's rider. Have we met?"

"Not yet, and that's a shame," she replied. M'scel sat between A'zelen and the table's end; the old greenrider gave M'scel's shoulder a friendly shove and said "You shoo, now, and give an old lady your seat. Fetch me a cup of klah while you're at it, child. My old bones get the chill of *between* in them and refuse to let go."

M'scel gave the old woman a foolish grin and slid off the bench as ordered. "You're in for it, A'zelen," he said as he headed off for the night hearth. "Granny's after you now."

The old woman swatted after M'scel's backside with her cane and slid onto his space on the bench with more agility than the presence of the cane would imply. She laughed and gave Gavriil a knowing up-and-down in turn. "I'm Kelara; my green Blareth and I are watchriders," she said to A'zelen. "Blareth and some of the other girls have been just atwitter over that big brown of yours. Blareth expects him to give her a good chase, you know!"

Gavriil took a moment to get the full import of that. He gave the old woman a second look, and saw from her bawdy smile that she was only half-teasing. A'zelen's eloquent eyebrows were working double-time as he worked his way around to the teasing portion of that invitation. "Glad to make your acquaintance," he said formally.

"Pish," Kelara said, waving that off. "You poor children are sick to death of being poked at and stared at by folks, that's as plain as a brewer's nose. Still, I wanted to

come and have a poke and prod for myself, just the same. I want to see those pretty blues for myself, before Blareth's next flight, of course. She always has favored the big browns."

The old woman was looking Gavriil again now, and he saw that her own merry eyes were a brilliant blue in a face that must have been handsome enough in younger Turns, before years of flying adragonback in all manner of wind and weather had leathered it. "I've always been fond of brownriders myself, you know," she said conspiratorially to Gavriil. "Generally more steady than blueriders, and far less full of themselves than bronzeriders. But given to dullness, you know. Straight and steady on the job, certainly, yet sometimes you have to hit them over the head with a stick to get their full attention."

"I've noticed that," Gavriil said dryly.

"Aye, but that stubbornness can come in handy in other ways," Kelara said, with a wicked gleam to those bright eyes as they turned away from Gavriil and back to A'zelen. "Were you really a harper back in your day?" she asked.

"I was," A'zelen replied, still sounding bemused.

"Well, old Robinton's standards must have been a good sight lower," Kelara said. "Because you're just about the quietest pretty-eyed harper I've ever met."

That was too much for Gavriil. He snorted with laughter and shook his head, amused by the thought of anyone taking A'zelen for the silent type. "Oh, just you wait, ma'am. Give him a chance to catch his breath. You won't be disappointed – he'll talk your ear off with the best of them."

That earned him a few laughs from farther down the table, a narrow-eyed look from his brownrider friend, and the old greenrider's wide, satisfied smile. "That's exactly what I want to hear. A man who doesn't disappoint. So rare to find them these days. Sad we had to import them from so very long away." The old greenrider's eyes cut back to Gavriil, and the satisfied smile widened as she gave him another slow, appreciative look. "So you must be Lord Toric's man. Captain Gavriil, right?"

"Was. Not anymore." Gavriil tapped his shoulder, bereft now of any guardsman rank-knots. "I suppose I'm my own man now."

"That's what I was hoping to hear," Kelara said. "So, then how would you like to join me for a day out and about?"

Gavriil had been enjoying the bawdy old woman's conversation, but her sudden shift in target set his hackles rising. "Me? Thought you wanted him and his really big brown..."

The old greenrider cackled in delight; M'scel showed up at that moment, with the cup of klah he had been set off to fetch. Kelara took the cup from him with an absent nod of thanks. "Oh, with pretty harper-eyes like his, I'll take you both if I can get you," she teased. "But I'm not asking entirely for my poor old self, nor for old Blareth. There's a certain boy I know who has stars in his eyes at the prospect of getting to meet a man who had the honor of serving the infamous Lord Toric."

Gavriil sat back, letting his dubious expression speak for him. A'zelen shifted closer on the bench, edging over to make room for M'scel. "Oh, so old Toric is still infamous?" A'zelen asked dryly.

"Yeah, he'd have liked that, wouldn't he?" Gavriil replied, taking up A'zelen's offered distraction.

Kelara laughed again. "Dears, I do enjoy spreading butter with fellows even older than I am. Can't tell you what a delight *that* is!" She winked at them, then cocked her head to one side and eyed Gavriil closely. "You look like the old Lord," Kelara mused. "Not Lord Novran, no. I mean his father, old Gilhran. Right fine old bastard he was, that twisty old tunnelsnake. But you've got the boy's eyes. Young Elrial, the current Heir. The little scamp has got your kind eyes."

Gavriil went silent. Images of his son Kessil rose unbidden; Kessil's eyes had been hazel-brown like his own, not sky blue as his mother Saressa's. Across from him, he could see A'zelen's sudden tension in the way the brownrider sat up and leaned forward.

"You're talking about Drake Hold?" A'zelen asked, his tone mildly curious. Gavriil knew his friend too well for that – A'zelen was never 'mildly' curious about anything.

"Of course I am," the old woman said. "Lord Gibran is as eager as his Heir to meet you, has been since he first heard you all had come forward with Dunia. Since the Weyrwoman hasn't let him make his invitation in person, he's asked me to present the offer for him and the boy."

"So – interested in a little more than just Toric's captain, huh?" Gavriil said; it was a deflection, a play for time as his gut clenched painfully in want for a child lost Turns ago and centuries out of memory of the rest of the world.

"And here I thought it was my beautiful blue eyes," added A'zelen, very dryly, with a quick, ironic smile.

"Oh, dearheart, don't think that!" Kelara beamed at them both, her own smile rueful. "Two handsome fellows such as you? Blareth wouldn't allow me a visit to the Weyr without at least making my hello and getting an eyeful." She put down the klah cup and dimpled at A'zelen. "You know you're just as welcome to come along. Gibran would have been a harper boy himself, if old Gilhran had let him. He and the ladies of the Hold would appreciate your making a visit."

"I... might take you up on that," A'zelen said slowly.

Gavriil knew his friend was watching his face, trying to gauge his reaction. So he took a deep breath and found an answer to A'zelen's unspoken question. "I guess I wouldn't mind seeing what they've done with the place," Gavriil said, deliberately casual. "And this Gibran sounds..." he hesitated, choosing his words carefully, "...like an interesting lord."

"Don't worry, dearie. You'll like the man." Kelara's smile was knowing. She reached across the table and patted Gavriil's hand fondly. "After all, he's family."



Sitting on a chair in the common space of Wingsecond B'tai's weyrcot, watching the controlled chaos around him, A'zelen had time to appreciate the tactics employed by the elderly green watchrider, Kelara.

Her performance at dinner earlier would have done any harper proud – a bit blunt, true, a bit obvious; not above going right on the attack when she had a mind to, and ready to resort to bald, outright flattery to get her way. The thing was, it was impossible to hold it against her; none of it felt insincere. It'd left A'zelen feeling breathless – not a condition he suffered often – and by the end of it his friend Gavrill's eyes had gone somewhat glassy from a kind of shock. If Kelara was any reflection of the lord she served, A'zelen thought, then they were in for an interesting time when they made their visit to Drake Hold.

A visit that was far more imminent than A'zelen had expected, at that. Before the dinner was out, and Kelara had taken herself off, cane thumping, to look up other old friends, she'd had Gavrill agreeing not just to accompany her to Drake, but to do so the very next day. The old greenrider had cunningly timed her return to the Weyr for the eve of a restday, no doubt with just that sort of agreement in mind. A'zelen admired the strategy; why wait, and possibly allow someone, Gavrill especially, to develop second thoughts?

The timing, however, presented a few challenges.

The weyrfolk of Kadanzer had done wonders for the refugees who'd descended on them a scant two sevendays ago – they'd welcomed them, found places for them, settled them in, and worked hard to provide them with all they needed, considering they'd landed in the Tenth Pass with only the clothes on their backs in most cases. Providing for an influx of over thirty new residents was no joke, A'zelen knew, and the staff and crafters of Kadanzer had done it without complaint.

But, there was only so much they could be expected to do in that short a time, and inevitably, some things had to wait. A'zelen and Gavrill both, like the others, had new clothes of their own now, clothes that fit. What they'd been given so far was the basics, though – not gather-best. Somehow, obtaining clothes fancy enough for a gather had not been high on anyone's list of priorities; there'd be time for that later, A'zelen thought, time when the Weyr's tanners and weavers weren't inundated with orders, and when the refugees themselves might start thinking about *wanting* to go to a gather again. Even the Hatching of Nioranth's clutch, sure to be a celebration that would draw curious onlookers from all over Pern, was at least a month away.

So what A'zelen had realized immediately, to Gavrill's wide-eyed dismay, was that while they had sturdy, clean work-clothes aplenty, neither he nor his guardsman friend had the sort of thing a man would be expected to wear when going to present himself to a lord.

"I have my tunic," Gavrill had said immediately, defensively.

The look A'zelen had given him in response was, he hoped, eloquent. From farther down the table, Vesoz had chimed in, "I hope you're joking."

"Put it this way," A'zelen said quickly, before the two started sniping at each other again, "would you wear that tunic to report to Lord Toric? In the condition it's in?" Gavrill's Southern Guard tunic was still intact, true, but after having it as his only protective garment on the month-long journey forward in time, it was no longer what you would call presentable.

The look on Gavrill's face had been rebellious. "It's pretty much all I've got," he'd snapped. "And if it's Lord Toric's captain they want so badly, then they can't complain if that's what they get." His tone had been sharply sardonic, and A'zelen knew he was still edgy over Kelara's sentimental attempt to use this young heir of Lord Gibran's to draw the guardsman's interest.

"Why not just borrow from somebody else?" The pragmatic suggestion had come from bluerider H'keo, a few seats down the table, drawing the attention of other riders nearby.

"That's a good idea! I bet between all of us we could trick them out fit for a Lord's wedding!" That enthusiastic agreement had come from Bennae, the cheerful younger sister of big, tattooed B'nyu.

A'rori had cocked his head to one side, holding out his hands as a frame while he squinted at the dubious-looking Gavrill. "That could work. I'd say he and B'tai are about of a size, what do you think?"

"I think you're right," Tildy had said, with a wide grin. "Z'haq, too. And R'san or M'scel's tunics might fit A'zelen's shoulders."

"That's settled, then." A'rori had looked as pleased as if he'd come up with the idea on his own. "Back to B'tai's cot, and we'll have the both of you outfitted in no time."

FireStorm was not the sort of Wing to take no for an answer, which was how A'zelen came to find himself steered to a chair in the wingsecond's cot while a steady parade of his wingmates – eventually, including the cot's owner himself – went in and out, taking rough measurements and then disappearing to look for the right pieces of clothing. B'tai had taken the volunteering of his wardrobe with surprisingly good grace.

A'zelen was more or less happy to sit back and let his wingmates do as they wanted. He hadn't been a part of the Wing long but he'd already learned that it was useless to try to divert them when they were in this sort of mood. Also typically of FireStorm, they had turned it into a social occasion. B'nyu had been prevailed on to fetch pitchers of his latest brew, and there were far more people clustered in the weyrcot than were strictly necessary for the task at hand.

It soon became clear that while both R'san and M'scel might be of the right size, the consensus in the room was that their wardrobe wouldn't do. R'san's taste even in gather clothes was too casual for the company of a Lord Holder. M'scel was the only one surprised, it appeared, to find that none of his tunics was in nice enough condition for use – one needed mending, another had stains he couldn't remember acquiring, and that was that.

Karlina snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute – L'ars has a wherhide jerkin that's Harper blue, doesn't he?"

Bria, lounging nearby, nodded. “Yes, I remember the one.”

Tiairi looked at A’zelen consideringly. “Same height, nearly the same shoulders...”

“Only one way to find out!” said Karlina, getting up and disappearing out the door.

“I don’t know,” A’zelen told them doubtfully. Bothering B’tai and his other wingmates was one thing. Appropriating a Weyrleader’s wardrobe, on the other hand...

“Oh, don’t worry,” Tildy called cheerfully. “We’re on deck for ‘Fall tomorrow anyway – it’s not like L’ars needs his best tunic for that!”

B’tai and Gavrill really were of a size, so that problem looked to be well in hand even if the guardsman looked less than comfortable with the way everyone was fussing over him. Or perhaps it was Vesoz’s unhelpful banter and A’rori’s ribald teasing that was getting to the man. A’zelen studied his friend thoughtfully, wondering if this was a bad sign of things to come. If Gavrill was this rattled by being mobbed by well-meaning dragonriders, then how was he going to react to being the center of attention for an entire hold?

More likely than not, given a night to mull things over and get control of himself again, his friend would probably be able to handle whatever Drake threw at him. A’zelen had little doubt of that. He’d known Gavrill for Turns now, seen him in all kinds of moods, public and private. If the past month and more had worn away some of the veneer of casual, easy authority that the guardsman had usually preferred to wear, well, there was nothing like this latest challenge to encourage him to find it again.

From the moment A’zelen had heard that the little herding hold that Gavrill’s father had founded for Toric down on the shores of Drake Lake had, apparently, survived and thrived and become the seat of a lord, he’d known this trip would be inevitable. Part of him – the larger, more generous part – wanted this visit to go well for his friend. Another part – deeper, less easily admitted – dreaded it, and hoped, shamefully, that it didn’t go *too* well.

A’zelen was too honest with himself not to understand why. The brownrider could admit to himself that he’d been drawn to his holder friend for a very long time. Gavrill was hardly conventionally charming – sometimes it seemed as if he was working hard *not* to be – but he had a presence, nonetheless, and he could be warm and caring if he wanted to be, flatteringly protective, deeply loyal. He was one of the few precious things that A’zelen had left of an entire life lost; and he was one of the few things, the brownrider knew, that A’zelen would have been devastated to lose. By some impossible chance, A’zelen *hadn’t* lost him. The great wave that had destroyed their old lives and washed them into the future had – from A’zelen’s viewpoint, anyway – changed the friendship they had once had, replaced it with something stronger.

It made it almost unbearable to think that they’d come so far together, and finally, A’zelen might lose him now.

There wasn’t a thing that he could possibly say about it, either. A’zelen might want his friend to stay at Kadanzer

Weyr, but he knew it wasn’t fair to ask that of him. Gavrill had risen to the rank of Guard captain, not an easy thing to do under a lord as demanding and mercurial as Toric had been. That was what Gavrill was best at, and his talents would be wasted as a herdsman in a Weyr. That this Lord of Drake was *family* to him, in some strange symbolic way, only made his being drawn there seem more like a foregone conclusion.

What could he do? Hope that Gavrill didn’t like the man, didn’t want to serve him? From the way Kelara, and indeed his own wingmates spoke of Lord Gibran, that hardly seemed likely to happen.

“All right, brownrider – try this on!” Karlina’s peremptory call broke through A’zelen’s depressing thoughts and brought him back to the task at hand. The buxom greenrider had reappeared, holding out a finely-made jerkin of deep blue wherhide, shades darker than Harper blue, but close enough.

A’zelen’s eyebrows went up at the quality of it. “And the Weyrleader agreed to this?”

“He not only agreed – he sent along the belt and beltknife as well!” she reported, grinning and holding out a well-tooled length of black leather and a pretty, silver-appointed beltknife in a matching scabbard. A’zelen sighed, gave in, and rose.

The jerkin fit; it helped that it was sleeveless, the brownrider suspected, though he always forgot that his shoulders were as broad as they were. He could wear the better of the two shirts that had been made for him under it, as well as the dark wherhide trous from his flight-gear; it would be much cooler in Drake than it was here on the coast.

When he was finished fastening the jerkin up the front, he stood with hands on hips, looking down critically at the way it covered his chest and fell to mid-thigh. Karlina whistled, while Bria and Tiairi applauded, drawing the attention of others who loudly demonstrated their approval. B’tai’s cot didn’t have a mirror big enough to see himself in, but A’zelen didn’t think he needed one, not if the expressions on the greenriders’ faces was anything to go by.

The commotion also made the knot of people standing around Gavrill pause to look over. Vesoz grinned at him, A’rori made an approving gesture, and B’tai nodded in a considering way. Only Gavrill – standing there distractingly shirtless, holding a dark-brown tunic in his hands – had an expression that was hard to read as his glance raked A’zelen from head to foot.

Then he finally met the brownrider’s eyes, and his face relaxed into one of those half-smiles that A’zelen secretly found attractive as fire. “You’ll look the part, at least,” the other man said, the short statement said warmly enough to be a compliment.

“So would you, if you wouldn’t keep refusing everything I try to give you,” retorted B’tai, with some exasperation, heading back around the screen that separated the weycot’s living area from its sleeping niche.

“Embroidery’s not my thing,” Gavrill shot back, looking irritated again.

“Oh please. A bit of fancy dress won’t kill you,” said Vesoz, kicking idly with the leg that was hooked over the

arm of one of B'tai's overstuffed chairs. "Besides, who's going to care? From everything I've heard, this Lord Gibran's got taste –"

"You can say that again!" Tiairi called out, and she was echoed by several others around the room.

"—and he's expecting to meet a kinsman, not a stablehand," the young dark-haired man finished, with a bright smile.

Gavrill snorted. "He's expecting to meet one of Lord Toric's guardsmen," he pointed out, and now the half-smile looked cynical.

"Just so," Naralion spoke up, crossing her arms over her chest and raising an eyebrow at the older man. She was Lord Gibran's niece, and she had been watching Gavrill warily, as if unsure she was ready yet to welcome him into the family herself. "And Lord Toric's Guard is the stuff of legend in this day and age. They're *expecting* to meet someone out of a Harper ballad – surely you don't mean to disappoint them?" she asked, with false sweetness.

Gavrill opened his mouth for a response that A'zelen was sure wouldn't help matters, when B'tai came back into the room, throwing something at the other man. Startled, Gavrill caught it. "It's the plainest one I have, that isn't work-wear," the wingsecond explained. "If that won't do, then I give up."

"It'll do," Gavrill said slowly, holding the shirt up to look at it. It was of a fine, close-woven fabric, perhaps wool, dyed a dark fellis-green. It suddenly occurred to A'zelen that B'tai might not even know what the colors of Southern Hold had been, but he couldn't have found a better match for them if he'd tried.

The guardsman lost no time pulling the shirt on over his head – to A'rori's vocal disappointment, with which A'zelen privately agreed – and then shrugging into the dark-brown wherhide tunic that the greenrider held out to him. He twisted, checking the fit, but it didn't pull across his shoulders or bunch anywhere. He held his arms out in front of him, checking the length of the sleeves, but those looked perfect too. "What are Drake's colors?" he asked suddenly, studying the subtle, well-made piping on the tunic's arms.

"Black and gold," answered Naralion promptly.

"Who uses green these days?" he went on. "Anyone?"

"Thornblaze, and Riverdance. Neither that dark, though."

"Any green along with brown?"

Naralion shook her head. "No one."

Gavrill nodded. "It'll do," he repeated, and A'zelen realized just then that if he wasn't allowed to wear his old Guard tunic of Southern green, then Gavrill was being careful not to look as if he was wearing any other Lord's livery, either; even that of the Hold he was going to visit. Maybe, especially not that.

"Yes," came a new voice, drawing the eye of everyone in the room to the door. "That *will* do – very nicely," said Lybelle approvingly, pausing with her hand on the doorframe before entering the cot.

The FireStorm riders greeted their Weyrwoman with loud good cheer – although A'zelen noticed that they were much more careful to give her her title respectfully than they

were when they interacted with L'ars. Tall, imposing Lybelle seemed to have that effect on people. A'zelen didn't blame them.

Wearing a cool, amused smile, the goldrider gave A'zelen a slow once-over. One of her eyebrows went up, and the smile widened. "I hadn't realized that you and L'ars were of a size," she commented, clearly having recognized what he was wearing. "I'll have to keep that in mind," she added, with a touch of ribald humor in her voice that caused laughter around the room.

A'zelen smiled at her in return, trying not to make it seem too inviting while at the same time trying not to be insulting, either. She seemed to notice his discomfort, and winked at him before turning her attention across the room.

Gavrill was watching her warily. Lybelle circled him once, then tugged at the shoulder of the brown tunic to settle it. "I did say that you cleaned up well," she told him, letting her hand run down the length of his arm in what was almost a caress before she stood back, looking at him. "Yes, very nice indeed."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Well. Can't ask for a better verdict than that," he said, after a pause.

The Weyrwoman glanced at B'tai. "You have a flight-jacket to loan him as well?"

B'tai looked surprised at the question. "Of course. One that I'm sure won't be too fancy for the captain's tastes," he added pointedly, with a smirk in Gavrill's direction. Most riders kept a second set of flight-gear that was less heavy than what they used for Threadfighting. It avoided unnecessary wear on the fighting gear, and kept a rider from having to show up at gathers in leathers that were scarred with char and that stank of firestone.

"Good, good." Lybelle glanced at A'zelen once more, her expression unreadable, before returning her attention to the guardsman. "So, it would seem you're well prepared, then."

Gavrill stared at her for a few long moments, until A'zelen started wondering if there was something wrong. Then he raised his chin a little, and finally said, "As ready as I'll ever be, I guess you could say."

"Good," the goldrider repeated. "I'm so pleased that FireStorm has made itself so helpful," she added, inspiring a round of cheers from the roomful of riders who had been watching the exchange with keen interest. "Carry on, then. And I'll look forward to hearing how this visit went when you return. Perhaps brownrider A'zelen will oblige me."

There was that sultry tone back in her voice again, sparking more laughter from the FireStormers. But A'zelen met Lybelle's dark eyes, and saw something serious there, beneath the flirtation. It made him realize, suddenly, why she was there, when he remembered Gavrill telling him how the Weyrwoman had offered to help him make contact with Drake if he wanted, and equally offered to shield him until he made the decision in his own time. She was checking to make sure that he was truly all right with this decision; perhaps she had some experience with how strongly greenrider Kelara tended to play her hand. And what was more, her last request to A'zelen was an invitation and an

order both. Lybelle had just charged him as her eyes and ears on this trip; just like a good harper.

“Of course. I’d be happy to, Weyrwoman,” he told her, keeping his voice as light as hers had been.

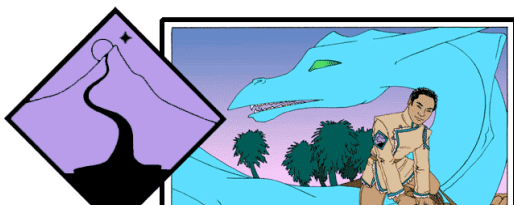
“You’d better have a few hours to spare, Weyrwoman!” Vesoz called, earning another round of laughter and some innuendo-laden advice.

Lybelle smiled. “I’ll count on that.” And then, with a wave, she left the weycot.

And A’zelen was left wondering if there was something about their visiting Drake Hold that had the Weyrwoman worried. Or maybe that was just his imagination, and his own worries and fears clouding his judgement. Maybe, like the good wingriders of FireStorm, she was just curious, and loved a good story.

He decided it wouldn’t hurt to take her words as a warning to stay sharp, and pay attention, all the same.

To be continued...



Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub