The day's Threadfall began with a big cross-over with Eastern Weyr. L'ars had contacted Eastern's Weyrleader, D'on, the night before, to assure him that Kadanzer's new Leader would be overseeing that tricky maneuver with FireFlight from their end. With the hand-over complete, the rest of the 'Fall was relatively short, as Thread came down over the south-eastern hills of Rubicon and the Cathay mountain barrens. Turbulence off the heights had kept it from being an easy 'Fall, however, and two FireStormers, a greenrider from FireStar, and a FireBlaze bluerider all went back to the Weyr with scorings. Another trio of FireStormers dropped out early from what L'ars strongly suspected were hangovers.

Half of the wingleaders and their wingseconds who filed into the Council Room for the meeting L'ars called after the 'Fall looked to be suffering similarly. Kadanzer's new Weyrleader kept his smile hidden, having already requested that Raelcliffe provide plenty of strong klah.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," L'ars started, sitting comfortably in the Weyrleader's high backed chair at the long, oval table. "Let me start by recognizing Bronzerider G'tin's efforts to ensure a smooth transition of power. Thank you, G'tin." He nodded at the youth, who sat stiff-shouldered and straight-spined in a seat at the far end of the table, with both of the chairs flanking him empty. G'tin looked stone-faced – the boy had certainly perfected his airey wave at the room in general. "I don't require the standard formalities we've seen in the past few Turns —"

"That's a relief," muttered B'raniz, shooting a dark look in G'tin's direction. One of G'tin's first actions as a Weyrleader had been to demote the man and promote A'nar over him as StormWind's Wingleader, and B'raniz was clearly still bitter over it.

"-- nor do I want to sit and talk at you all afternoon," L'ars said drolly. "Let's keep it short and sweet. I'm your new Weyrleader, or so Phanth and Ihyanith have determined it. I know you're all waiting to hear who I'll be promoting over G'tin to become SkyTamer's Wingleader. Sorry, G'tin," he glanced down the table at the young man once more, "but you just don't have the age, the combat experience, or the leadership skills to keep SkyTamer. B'raniz, S'kash and Tjalden, you've all led Wings before now; Tjalden, I'll be giving you the job, since you've got twice your rivals' Turns of experience." The decision was clearly not unexpected and there were congratulations from all around the table, including from S'kash and B'raniz. G'tin alone remained stone-fasted and unmoved, his eyes as flat as the expression on his face.

L'ars watched the youth a moment longer, letting the others react as they would. "That's not the only change I intend to make," he continued when the congratulations had died down. "I want to normalize the Weyrleadership of Kadanzer Weyr, take it back to what it should be. When A'nar took on the Weyrleadership in 2856, he had his little experiment." A'nar glowered and stirred in his chair; L'ars ignored him and went on. "That experiment has run its course. I was raised in a Weyr where the Weyrleader served his community on the wing, not from an office. I intend to lead this Weyr as my father led Ista before me -- not from behind some stack of petty paperwork, but from the air and from the front. Generations of dragonmen before us found it to be a way that worked, and I'm returning to that model. Let the Weyrwoman worry about the domestic issues and whether or not the Records Room has been dusted recently - - the Weyrleader of the Weyr concerns himself with the combat Wings, and in making sure that the Weyr rises to 'Fall and protects its lands. I will stay at the head of FireStorm Wing --"

"-- you'd have to, no one else would want it!" Z'hon noted with a smirk.

"Maybe so, but we still beat StrongWind's sorry ass during the four Games," L'ars smiled back, "so whether or not anyone else wants FireStorm, I'm keeping my Wing. And I'll also remain as head of FireFlight. I'll ask R'mal and B'deras to stay on as the respective leaders of their Flights, and further, R'mal, I'd like to ask you to serve as my Weyrsecond."

"It would be an honor, dear," R'mal replied, with a flutter of golden lashes.

"And finally," L'ars leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table as he looked at the other men, "I think we've all seen the central weakness in our current Wings -- our young bronzeriders are not acquiring enough leadership experience, or acquiring it early enough. It's time for that to change. Wingleaders, I intend to meet with each of you privately in the next two days, and we will review the training being received by the young bronzeriders in your Wing. We've too many over the age of twenty Turns who are lazing about as wingriders while browns are promoted over them, and that's a mistake we can ill afford. An experienced brown wingsecond is invaluable to a Wing's continuity, but two?" The Weyrleader shook his head. "In two days time, I expect each Wing to have at least one bronze wingsecond, promoting younger bronzeriders where
necessary, though none -- I'm sorry, G'tin -- under the age of twenty-two Turns or with less than three Turns in the Wings. If you don't have any suitable then I'll see that one is transferred to you. Yes," he said, with a glance towards where SkyTamer's B'kuto was sitting and grumbling a private comment to his fellow wingsecond D'glis, "that means that some qualified brownriders are going to find themselves demoted, and that's a pity. But we've got to make sure that we've enough experienced bronzeriders to carry us through the next four decades of the Pass. The Poisoning and its aftermath left Kadanzer needing to adapt as best she could, but that's a decade past now and it's time for us to start looking ahead. We can't keep running to the other Weyrs to provide experienced bronzeriders whenever we need a new wingleader. Too many of us at this table have come to the Weyr that way."

L'ars nodded at B'tai and K'danag and his own wingseconds rose and began handing out sheets of parchment to each of the wingleaders. "I've already reviewed the Wings and you're receiving my recommendations," he told them. "Obviously these are open for discussion and I'll expect your responses over the next couple of days."

There were a few moments of soft muttering as Wingleaders and their 'seconds looked over the lists. L'ars observed them a moment, pleased that they appeared to be giving his suggestions more respect than they ever had G'tin's, and pushed himself to his feet. "That's all for now, gentlemen. Shall we head for supper? I know the Weyrwoman has things that she intends to address to us all during dinner."

The other bronzeriders rose and began to file from the Council Room in what the Weyrleader chose to interpret as a general atmosphere of relief. L'ars was confident that he could provide what most of them wanted from their Weyrleader -- a known quantity, a return to familiar traditions... and someone who wasn't young enough to be their son.

"Got some unhappy brownriders," murmured B'tai, falling into place at L'ars's shoulder.

"Don't worry, I know better than to demote you," L'ars told him, clapping his senior 'second on the shoulder. "Let the rumors about new Wings begin doing the rounds and we'll see how fast those frowns fade. C'mon," he said, heading for the door himself. "Let's see how our injured are doing and then go hear what our charming Weyrwoman has to say over dinner. I'm not the only one wanting to make some changes around here."

Drayvin listened patiently to what Luka had to tell him, and only when she was done with her halting story did he speak again.

"How long have you known?" he asked, his voice as quiet as always, but with a raw edge of anger to his words.

Luka sighed and hugged her knees to her chest. They sat side-by-side on the top step of her weyrco't's porch, the sudden silence between them filled by the buzz of nightsingers calling from the thick profusion of trees between the edge of FireFlight Complex and Main. "Lybelle mentioned it first in a meeting at the start of the month," she confessed. "But she didn't decide that it would be me she'd transfer out until, not until Dunia --" The grief of that loss was still too fresh, and Luka choked on the words. "She told me for certain at the wake, before Ihyanith's flight."

The nightsingers continued their buzzing harmonies as the couple sat in fresh silence. Uncomfortable, Luka glanced at the herder who sat beside her, wishing that he would say something to her. Drayvin sat with his legs extended, his worn drover's hat in his hands. His long, nimble fingers played with the brim, and he was frowning as he gazed down at the multi-colored braided horsehair of his hatband.

"I didn't want to say anything before now," Luka continued. "I didn't want to worry you needlessly. After all, Lybelle might have decided to send Cassidoria, or even Zherra when she graduates."

"But the Weyrwoman didn't," the herder replied, still fiddling with his hat. "She's chosen to send you. Do you know where yet?"

Luka shook her head. "Not yet. And it could be months before they pick which goldrider to replace me with. It took months to work out Lybelle for Kielani."

Drayvin did look up then, returning her gaze. His eyes were angry and hard. "You have no choice in the matter?"

The goldrider shook her head. "I really don't. The Weyrwoman could tell me to go jump in the sea, if she wanted -- and through her gold and Savukath, I'd have to do it. I don't like this. I don't want to go. But Lybelle is right. I can't be her Weyrwoman-second."

"Why not?" Drayvin seldom held her eyes for long, as shy as he was. But he held her gaze solidly now, and his blue eyes were intense with feeling. Luka could not help but feel a small thrill at that, always grateful for his rare expressions of emotion.

"Because I just... can't. Savukath and I have only been flying in the combat Wings for a little over two Turns. There's so much I don't know about leading a Weyr. If something awful were to happen to Lybelle tomorrow, I'd be Weyrwoman. That would just be terrible for everyone."

"Would it?" Drayvin continued, his voice suddenly as hard and bitter as his gaze. "Weyrwoman Tanara was hardly any older than you are today when she became Weyrwoman. And they allowed G'tin to serve as Weyrleader. You could be Weyrwoman."

"Just because I could doesn't mean I ever should," Luka replied, wishing that she could make him understand. She shivered at the thought of finding herself in control of Kadanzer. "I just don't know enough. And it was different
with G'tin. He was Weyrleader – but with the Flightleaders directing the Wings during 'Falls, it was just a title. He tried hard to learn and earn respect, but he was never really the Weyrleader in everyone's eyes. And being Weyrleader is only about combat and Threadfall. Being Weyrwoman is navigating the Weyr through... everything else. It's dealing with the Lords and the Mastercrafters, it's juggling the Weyr's own personnel, it's keeping tabs on everything the Weyr needs and does today, and looking ahead and knowing what'll be needed tomorrow and next month and next Turn. There are so many mistakes a Weyrwoman can make... and I just don't know enough to avoid them.

"Tanara managed," Drayvin said.

"Yes," Luka allowed, "but she made so many mistakes that an older, more mature goldrider would not have made. No. Lybelle is right. She needs someone else to be her Weyrwoman-second. Someone other that me or Cassidoria or Zherra. I can only hope that maybe another Weyr won't want me. I don't think any of the other Weyrs have goldriders to spare, so there'll need to be a swap, but still, maybe when Lybelle goes to talk to the other Weyrwomen, they'll want me left here." She sighed and plucked at her new rank cords, hating the complexity of the unfamiliar knots. "It's all going to be announced at dinner but I wanted you to know first. You deserve to know first."

Drayvin was looking back at the hat in his hands, and his expression was fiercely unhappy. "I don't accept this," he said. "I won't."

"You can go with me," Luka said hopefully. "Lybelle says that when she makes the transfer arrangements, she can make arrangements for two. I'd like that. Where ever I have to go, I'd like to see at least one friendly face."

Drayvin shoved himself to his feet. He set his hat firmly on his head, nodded at her without quite glancing her way, then walked off without a reply, leaving her to stare after him in dismay.

The Weyrhall was crowded with diners, and the general atmosphere was gather-day jubilant. Lybelle surveyed the bustling hall with satisfaction, noting that Raecliffe had dispatched candidates and the older children to clear away the dinner plates. Usually wingriders would be responsible for taking their own things to the dirty bins, but not tonight, not when everyone was waiting expectantly for their new Weyrleaders to speak.

"I wouldn't fool myself," L'ars said from her elbow. "My spies tell me there's a spectacular berries and cream pastry for dessert."

"Humor me, L'ars." Lybelle gave her new Weyrleader a glance of amusement, wondering if her thoughts had been so easily readable. "Anyway, I know about the dessert -- a Weyrwoman shouldn't need to resort to bribery to keep them all here, but a little incentive never hurts. The kitchen staff are outdoing themselves tonight," she added to Raecliffe as the Headwoman came to oversee the clearing of the Weyrleaders' table herself. "Please, pass my compliments to the ladies on a job well done."

"Thank you, I'll be honored to do so, Weyrwoman," Raecliffe replied, gesturing for one of the candidates to refill the table's wine glasses. "Farny rejoined us this afternoon," she added sadly. "The work eases her heart somewhat, I do hope." Dunia, lost to Threadfall with her gold Nioranth three nights before, had been Headcook Farny's daughter. Lybelle nodded, glad to hear that the woman was emerging from her grief. She would have commented on Farny's return to work, but the Headwoman didn't give her the opportunity. "Dear," Raecliffe said, stopping a candidate before she could snatch away Luka's plate, "you've hardly touched your meal. Are you finished?"

"Yes," the young goldrider replied apologetically, ducking her head. "I haven't much of an appetite tonight."

Raecliffe motioned to the candidate to finish, patting Luka's shoulder with a gentle hand before sweeping the dais with another keen glance. "Weyrwoman," she said, turning back to Lybelle. "When you're ready..."

Lybelle nodded. "Serve the dessert after the speeches -- we need them to pay attention to what's being said, not on feeding their faces. Set a few out on the serving tables though, as a reminder of what they'll get for sitting through the official business."

"Very well, Weyrwoman," Raecliffe said with a soft chuckle, then slipped away to organise her staff. As she left the dais, L'ars rose and tapped his knife against the wineglass he held. The ringing sound didn't carry far in the great hall but it didn't need to, the silence spreading from those closest to the Weyrleaders' dais outwards until the entire Weyr waited expectantly for the new Leaders to speak.

"Good evening, Kadanzer," L'ars said, smiling confidently at the crowded Weyrhall as he pitched his voice to carry. "I'm as eager as you are to get at the treat that Farny and her staff have made for us tonight, but tradition dictates that your new Weyrleader and his Weyrwoman speakify a little on a night like this. So I'll be brief. My first act as Weyrleader is to return us to tradition." He paused a moment to let the whoops of approval die down. "The Weyrleader will continue to lead his own Wing. R'mal and B'deras will remain Flightleaders of their respective Flights, and I have promoted Tjalden to the Wingleadership of SkyTamer. In addition, some personnel shuffling will occur in the coming sevenday, in order to ensure that those young bronzeriders who are ready to learn to be leaders get the training that they need. As I told my wingleaders earlier today -- I intend to return this Weyr and its Weyrleadership to their traditional roles. Like most of you, I'm weary of our being the laughing stock of our peers. Kadanzer has had enough of experimentation, and enough of unwelcome surprises. I intend to lead this Weyr from the wing and from the front!" There was another rowdy cheer at that announcement, starting from the FireStorm table but quickly...
"Kadanzer Weyr protects a larger territory than any other on Pern. We rise to 'Fall more often than the other Weyrs, and -- make no mistake -- our casualty rates reflect that. Earlier Weyrwomen have chosen to take risks during Threadfall, risks which have cost us dearly. Starting immediately, the Queens' Wing will no longer perform catches during Threadfall. While I deeply regret any loss of life that may result, the truth is that few dragons or riders who require such a desperate maneuver can be saved by the healers anyway, and we simply cannot afford to lose another gold pair as we have lost Dunia and Nioranth and, less directly, Tanara and Renorath before them.

"Dunia's loss further underscores another concern. This Weyr is again in familiar straits. I transferred to Kadanzer from Telgar, less than a Turn ago, because Valenne did not have a junior goldrider mature or experienced enough to reasonably serve as her Weyrwoman-second. With Valenne gone, Kadanzer again faces the same problem. Furthermore, of our current queens, only my Ihyanith and her daughter, Yttrith, do not carry Renorath's genes and the majority of clutches laid on Kadanzer's sands in this Pass may be traced back to Tanara's gold."

Lybelle paused, glancing sadly at Luka. "I have already discussed this situation with my junior weyrwomen, and have come to the difficult decision that, once again, this Weyr must request a transfer of another mature queenrider from one of our sister Weyrs. Negotiations have not yet begun and it may yet be many months before a transfer can be finalised, but before this Turn is out Kadanzer will have a new Weyrwoman-second, most likely in exchange for Luka and Savukath."

Lifting her glass, Lybelle looked around the hall, seeing hundreds of attentive faces all turned towards her. "A toast," she said. "To Kadanzer, to her Leadership, and to her future. May we all learn from the mistakes of her past!"

"To Kadanzer!" The toast rang around the Weyrhall and Lybelle found L'ars standing at her side as both drank. "Nice touch," the bronzerider murmured as he lowered his cup.

"It doesn't hurt to make them feel more involved in this," she replied, just as softly, before turning her attention back to their audience. "And on that note," Lybelle said, raising her voice once more, "I will let you return to your meals. Headwoman, if you would...?"

Raecliffe nodded from the side of the hall and ushered her servers forward to begin distributing the promised sweet to the eager masses. Luka slipped from her seat as the dessert drew attention away from the dais, escaping through the nearest door without a word. Lybelle frowned and moved to go after her young 'second, only to be stopped by L'ars's hand on her arm. "I don't think she's in the mood for company right now."

The Weyrwoman gave him a hard look but then nodded and settled back in her chair as Raecliffe set a large plate of the cream-coated confection before her -- it would not do to insult the cooks after they had put so much effort into this meal. But there were things that she still needed to discuss with Luka, and the sooner those things were dealt with, the happier Lybelle would be.
above them suddenly crowded with huge bodies and translucent wings, all far too low for any normal jump --

"Who in the --" the Weyrwoman started, feeling Ihyanith's own reaction erupt in her mind, sharp and keen with a suddenly territorial curiosity. One of the dragons above them shrieked and peeled out of the ragged formation as others descended to all but collapse on the cobbles of Main. Lybelle's gaze was for the flying beast alone, however; was for the brief glimpse she had of an egg-swollen belly skimming just over the roof of the Weyrhall, of a conformation too heart-stoppingly, impossibly familiar....

"Sweet Faranth," she breathed, recognising the queen a bare instant before Ihyanith gave her the name. "That's Nioranth!"

to be continued...