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# Wearing the Sword, Pt. 1

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Gavrill tried to be nonchalant about it, but the fact was, bringing his sword into the Weyrhall was the kind of thing that was going to draw attention. He propped it against the wall, under one of the windows, and turned to the table nearby where A'zelen and his wingmates and Vesoz were already sitting – and staring.

He tapped the brownrider on the shoulder as he went past. “Watch that for me,” Gavrill said over his shoulder, as he headed off to get some food. The smirk he kept hidden until he'd turned away, although he could just imagine the frowning, open-mouthed look on A'zelen's face behind him. And it wasn't as if he was really worried that anyone would try to walk off with the sword. Not in the middle of the Weyrhall, anyway, at the height of the evening meal.

When he returned, Vesoz was leaning across the table, gesturing broadly to underscore some point, but he quickly cut off whatever he'd been saying. Gavrill slid into the vacant seat at the end, waved a greeting to the familiar faces there, and started in on the mash of tuber and meatroll immediately. Soon enough, a tankard of beer appeared in front of his plate, and he smiled, as he took a long, grateful drink. He appreciated the FireStormers' sense of priorities.

Lowering the mug, he finally acknowledged the narrow-eyed look that A'zelen was giving him with a bland one of his own. The question was, was A'zelen going to break down and start asking questions before one of his wingmates beat him to it? Once, it would have taken about as long as it took Gavrill to get through the first verse of the “Alarm Chorus” in his head, for his brownrider friend's curiosity to overcome him. Over the Turns, though, A'zelen had gotten a little wiser to the game. These days, they might have gotten almost all the way through the meal before he cracked. But the FireStormers were just as nosy, and not nearly that patient.

“Hard day down at the Feeding Grounds?” inquired A'rori, sweetly solicitous, over on Vesoz's other side.

“Busy,” Gavrill agreed shortly, continuing to attack the mound of food on his plate. Because yes, whether the smirking young greenrider knew it or not, they'd all been run off their feet today, and he felt like he could eat a whole herdbeast. Pity that herdbeast wasn't one of the Weyrkitchen's offerings tonight. “Had a big tithe-herd come in – mid-sized wherries. Fast, squawky little bastards, and they don't like the smell of dragon, even out in the farthest paddock we've got.”

That earned some sympathetic groans, although he bet they weren't groans of wherry-wrangling experience. Except

maybe, vicariously, through their dragons – if those wherries were anywhere near as hard for the dragons to hunt and catch as they were for the herders to corral them. Come to think of it, that made for a satisfying mental image. For once, he thought with grim amusement, there was a bunch of animals that he wouldn't mind seeing become dragonfodder.

“So you thought you'd try putting the fear of the Guard into them?” asked B'tai, with a nod in the direction of the sword against the wall. “How'd that work out for you?”

That surprised a laugh out of him, and he raised his mug in the wingsecond's direction. “Didn't occur to me. But I'll keep it in mind for next time, maybe.”

“Be sure to let us know – we'll want front row seats for that!” Tildy called down the table, and he sketched a salute at her in reply, which made her smile.

“Let me guess,” Vesoz said, “your visit to Drake reminded you of how much you like wearing that thing around?” His sarcasm had a definite edged undertone of distaste to it. But then, Gavrill thought with a snort, his sword and Vesoz had not gotten off on the right foot.

“Not exactly,” he replied, being vague on purpose just to provoke a rolled-eyes response from the younger man.

Glancing across the table, Gavrill met A'zelen's eyes briefly. The brownrider looked thoughtful, and a little troubled. Only he had been there with Gavrill on the visit to Drake Hold. That visit had given the ex-guardsmen more to think about than he'd yet been able to process.

He'd worn the sword for the visit, because no matter what he was now, no matter if that was still an unanswered question, the sword was still a part of him. The weyrfolk might forget it, and he'd more or less let them forget it. But that didn't make it not so. The trip to the Hold his father and brother had built had brought that into focus for him, even if it hadn't conveniently settled other questions in his head. He'd worn the sword, and they'd reacted to him as he'd expected them to – as none of the weyrfolk did.

Gavrill found that he didn't care how the weyrfolk reacted to him, or treated him. He didn't care if they didn't know what to make of him. A few still gave him the title of captain, a title that wasn't his any more. Most seemed to forget that he wasn't weyrfolk – or maybe it was that his new title, “Oldtimer”, eclipsed everything else. That didn't bother him either, though he'd expected it to take longer than it had, to get used to that hated term applying to himself. No, it wasn't the weyrfolk's regard he was worried about.

It had been a shock to go to Drake, to be surrounded by holders again, to interact with a Lord and his people. The shock was how much of a shock it really had been. Part of it could be that Gibran was like no other Lord that Gavrill had ever met. But the larger part was knowing how natural it should have felt – and hadn't. The weight of the sword at his side *had* felt right – but not as right as it should have. The holders had reacted to it and to him as they should have, too – but that hadn't felt right, at all.

In a way, he'd felt like an imposter – less entitled to be called “captain” than ever. He'd stood there in front of a Lord, and in front of the Lord's men, and had done what he'd always done. He'd sized them up, he'd assessed them – he'd wondered, in that idle way that all soldiers did, whether he was the others' equal. It was the first time in

Turns, since he'd first received a guardsecond's rank, that he'd been unsure that the answer was "yes".

Gavrill hated -- *hated* -- the idea that the sword he wore was just there for show. Even if nobody else might think that, yet... he hated even starting to suspect it, himself. The sword he'd worn, the rank-knots that he hadn't, they were symbols. He hated nothing more than when what was behind the symbols was empty, unworthy of them.

He'd seen that often enough in others, men who wore the symbols but couldn't back them up. Lord Toric had always despised that, and Gavrill had come to despise it, too. Some of the hate he'd had for the Oldtimers who had ruined his family's first hold, in the High Reaches, had been grounded in that feeling. There had been little substance, no solid worth behind the honor they were supposed to be due, as dragonriders. It had taken him a long time to overcome that, to meet weyrfolk who earned and merited the symbols of rank that they wore, and accept that.

Lord Gibran and his men had looked at Gavrill with respect, had *shown* him that respect. That was all based on his name, his family, and a few symbols he still had of a past that was long dead, now. But symbols of rank hadn't meant much in Lord Toric's Guard. You didn't wear them if your actions and your abilities didn't merit them. You didn't wear them pretending to be something you weren't.

"Don't wear the sword unless you can draw it," that's what the saying had been in the Guard. What they meant of course was, *unless you can hold your own, unless you can fight with it*. Most often said in reference to pretentious lordlings, or sometimes pretentious bronzeriders, with their showy, useless dress-swords.

Gavrill was not a captain in any Guard, not any more. At most he was a herdsman in a Weyr. And... well, he was an Oldtimer, but who really knew what that meant? That wasn't substance; that was an accident. The rest... it scared him to realize that he was months out of training, months since he'd even *thought* about it. Too busy surviving, yes, and too busy working hard to earn his place in this Weyr. It still shook him to realize that a routine he'd had for twenty Turns, a routine so well-known that it was unthinking, had been broken. And he didn't think he'd gotten soft -- working with the herders, he wasn't in danger of that -- but he was out of training, just the same.

He could still draw the sword, but for the first time in a long time, he'd had to wonder if he'd make a fool of himself doing so, against Lord Gibran's men. That he had to question it was as frightening as anything.

Yes, the visit to Drake Hold had given him a lot to think about. One conclusion he'd come to quickly, though. He wasn't going to let anyone call him "captain" any longer, not until he'd earned that title back -- if he ever did. And he wasn't going to wear the sword if he couldn't draw it.

"Well, fair warning then," Vesoz was going on. "Whatever you're up to, I'm reserving the right to mock you if it has anything to do with that sharded sword."

Gavrill shook himself -- probably only A'zelen would have noticed that, or noticed that he had to pull himself back into the here and now from his mind's wandering -- and raised an eyebrow at the younger man. "And that'd be different from your usual mocking... how?"

He knew how it was different, though. Vesoz had never forgotten or forgiven the sight of Gavrill drawing that sword against Southern's ex-Weyrleader. Gavrill would never stop thinking that it wasn't any of Vesoz's business. To forestall a return of that old, tedious argument, he went on quickly before the younger man could answer: "Speaking of mocking... I saw your brother down at the Feeding Grounds again today, shovelling shit as usual. What's that, the third sevenaday in a row?"

He said it with an amusement that masked the slight bit of actual sympathy that he had for bronzerider J'hanos. No matter what else you could say about the ex-Weyrleader's faults -- and Gavrill could say plenty -- it sure looked like J'hanos had gotten a raw deal in his new wingleader. Not that Gavrill didn't think that was a nice bit of ironic justice. Not that he didn't suspect that J'hanos brought half of his troubles on himself, either. But even Gavrill was starting to feel like enough was enough. Even that stiff-necked bronzerider deserved a break -- one that it didn't look like he'd be getting any time soon.

It was a successful gambit for changing the subject at the table, though. Vesoz spat out an irritated curse, and A'zelen's eyebrows went up. "Again?" said the brownrider -- which suggested that J'hanos might be trying to hide just how hard a time he was having from his oldest friends. "That can't be right -- at least, that can't be normal."

"Hah! Want to bet on that, my friend?" laughed B'tai, sardonically.

"Normal for StrongWind isn't anyone else's breed of normal," Tildy agreed, her tone disparaging.

The rest of FireStorm was only too willing to launch into a detailed consideration of the other Wing's shortcomings. And that took their attention away from Gavrill, and let him finish his meal in peace.



After the meal was over, Gavrill retrieved the sword. He slung the belt over one shoulder, but not in the proper way it should be worn. Acknowledging A'zelen's victory in having refrained from the dozen questions that were no doubt brimming behind those blue eyes, he said, "I'm heading down to the smithy -- want to come with?"

The brownrider, managing not to look eager, nodded. "All right."

"The smithy," snorted Vesoz. "Now *there's* an evening's entertainment." Somehow, a girl had appeared under his arm.

"Did I invite you?" Gavrill asked pointedly, but the young man and the girl had already turned away, Vesoz waving dismissively over his shoulder.

The FireStormers appeared to have better things to do with their evening as well, which wasn't a surprise. It was only A'zelen who accompanied him on the walk to the southern edge of Main, where the Weyr's smiths were located. Sounds of industry from within indicated that at least a few of the smiths were still at work. Gavrill had been counting on that.

Inside, they found a stocky young journeyman, who looked up at their entrance and then did a double-take --

maybe because he'd recognized them, or maybe because of the sword. Maybe both.

"Journeyman Kason," said A'zelen in greeting. "You're working late, aren't you?" Well, trust A'zelen to have memorized the names and faces of the Weyr's crafters, Gavrill thought.

"I usually am, brownrider," the young man said, in a friendly enough way but with a hint of wariness behind it. "It's the only time I get for some of my own projects."

"I know how that is," A'zelen replied, with a smile.

Gavrill moved forward, holding out his hand. "Journeyman. I know we haven't met yet, but –"

"Oh, I know who you are," Kason interrupted, with a shrug and then a return arm-clasp that showed off a strong grip. "Kild thought you might come and work with us – before Marshall snatched you away, that is."

"Oh." That was something of a surprise. Not being known by a stranger, that Gavrill had gotten used to. There were only a few handfuls of Oldtimers, and the notoriety hadn't worn off yet. No, it was a surprise to think that any of the other Weyrcrafters had wanted him to come work, the way Marshall had. Nobody else had approached him or said anything like that to him before. Marshall had been quick to grab him, and apparently the others respected that territorial claim.

"No harm done, uh... captain," the young man went on, with an awkward smile.

He shook his head, putting the vow into practice. "It's just Gavrill now, journeyman."

The other man nodded. "Well then, it's just Kason – unless you're here to ask for a really *big* favor," he said shrewdly, guessing that that must have been what brought them to the smithy.

"Well..." Gavrill dragged the word out as he unslung the sword from his shoulder, and put it on the workbench nearby. "I don't know how big a favor it is. You'll have to tell me. But I'm willing to pay – well, I'm willing to work something out, anyway."

The smith eyed the sword with an interested look on his face. A'zelen crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned against a support beam, watching. "Tell me what you have in mind," Kason said.

"I need to make some practice equipment," Gavrill told them both. "So what I need is some wood – scrap's fine – and nails and tools. And leather bindings, too – but I guess I'll have to go to the tanners for that. I need to make a couple of pells –" At a pair of blank looks, he amended, "Kind of man-high, practice targets." His hands moved unconsciously, sketching out with gestures the ideas he described. "One stationary, so I'll have to figure out how to mount it. The other I can hang from a tree. So materials, for a start. But what I really need help with is making a waster – uh, a practice sword. The rest, I can probably put together myself. That, I'm not so sure about."

As soon as he'd gotten this idea, he'd realized how much he'd come to take the supplies of a rich Lord's Guard for granted. He'd assisted in training new guardsmen over the Turns, so he knew about these things, and about how to make some of it with what was lying around. But he'd never had to make the practice swords, any more than he'd

had to make a real sword by himself. He knew how to care for them, but making them was a smith's work.

Gavrill wasn't ready yet to go begging to some Lord's Guard in this Pass, asking to trade for their equipment. That would put him more into an outsider's debt than he was willing to be right now – even to Lord Gibran, who probably wouldn't have blinked at the request. It would also be an admission that he didn't want to make to any outsider. He wasn't sure that a Weyr's smiths would know how to make these things, but it was worth trying here first.

"To tell you the truth," Kason admitted, "I'm not so sure about that, either. They taught us a bit about weapons when I was an apprentice, but real weapon-smithing is a specialized skill. That wasn't the direction I chose."

"Well, a waster isn't a real weapon, that's the point." Gavrill picked up his own sword, and unsheathed it. It had surprised him, how squat and clumsy it had looked, next to the ones that Gibran's men carried. "It has to look like this, and feel like it, and be weighted like it. But it'll be wood, not steel – or better yet, cane-wood, if you have it."

He rested the blade on his forearm, at the balance point, and offered the hilt to the smith. Kason took it after a moment's hesitation, lifting the sword and then hefting it, turning it this way and that. "We do have cane-wood," the journeyman said, his attention still on the weapon in his hand. "It gets tithed from most of the tropical lordships. We use it for chairs and farm-tool handles and such."

"Why cane-wood?" A'zelen spoke up. "Why not hardwood? Wouldn't that be more like a real sword?" The brownrider had never seemed all that interested in talking weaponry before. But Gavrill had learned a long time ago that A'zelen's curiosity could be aroused by just about anything you put in front of him.

"Depends," he explained. "On what you're using it for, for one thing. Hardwood is good for some kinds of wasters, but only the kind you use to practice with a sparring partner. It isn't that good for hitting things – too hard, too easy to break. Cane-wood's flexible, even the thick kind." He held up his thumb and forefinger in a circle that was a little smaller than his own wrist. "And it's tough. It doesn't splinter easily – but when it does break, it doesn't fly off in shards."

"You want something you can pound away at that practice target with," Kason guessed.

Gavrill nodded. "Right. That's what a pell is for, to take blows."

"What good is a standing target, though?" A'zelen had a thinking frown on his face – not unhappy, but puzzled, and trying to work it out.

Gavrill paused, trying to think of an example that would make sense to a dragonrider. "What good are formation drills?" he finally said. "It makes you do something so many times that you don't have to *think* about doing it any more, you just *know*. Right?" The brownrider nodded. "That's what drilling with a pell is for. Getting the blows settled into your arms until you don't have to think about what or how. You just... do it."

"That's why you need something the same length and weight as your real sword." Kason hefted the sword above his head, in what he probably thought was a ready stance.

“A little heavier than the real sword, ideally,” Gavrill corrected.

The young smithcrafter nodded. “So your arm would feel a little freer, with the real thing. Like picking up a lighter hammer after working all day with the heavier one.”

“That’s about right.” He didn’t want to go into training-level detail. He’d always found it easier to *show* Guard recruits, and let them get a feel for it themselves, than to explain things to them. Between a standing pell, and a swinging one, even by himself a soldier could work on a repetitive pattern that would turn both the movement and the force of the blows into a kind of reflex, at the same time that it toned and strengthened the muscles needed.

Gavrill bet that he hadn’t lost the reflexes – but he’d started losing those muscles. His work down at the Feeding Grounds would keep him fit and hard, but it wasn’t the same. It worked his body differently. Soon after returning from Drake Hold, he’d gone off into one of the far barns by himself. There, carefully, with his sword unsheathed, he’d put himself through what drills he could. His arm had weakened far more quickly than it should, and his shoulders and back ached well into the next day. That wasn’t good.

“And if you’re coming to me,” Kason was saying, “then I’m guessing that making one of these practice swords is a little more complicated than just picking up a piece of cane-wood of the right length.”

“A little,” Gavrill agreed. “The problem’s the weight.”

“Making it as heavy as the sword – or, a little heavier.”

“Yeah, but not just that.” Gavrill pointed at his sword in the young smith’s hands. “It’s the balance. You can feel the balance in that, can’t you?”

Kason got a look of concentration on his face. “I think so. It’s heavy. But it doesn’t feel as heavy as just holding a metal bar this length would.”

“Here.” Gavrill took the sword back, and then he balanced it on his forearm as he’d done before. Kason leaned down, with his hands on his knees, studying it. The flat of the blade rested on Gavrill’s arm, at a point near the crossguard of the hilt.

“Now,” he explained, “this isn’t the ideal balance for a sword. But then, this isn’t the best sword ever made, either. It’s pretty much standard issue for Toric’s Guard, though, and it’s good enough. And I’m used to it by now.”

The journeyman pointed at the balance-point. “It would be even better if this was closer to the hilt, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah. Take it back.” The smith did as instructed, hefting the sword again with a thoughtful look. “You can feel that slight drag from the tip, I bet,” Gavrill said. After a moment’s hesitation, Kason nodded. “If that were a perfect sword, you wouldn’t feel that drag at all.” Some men said they liked a little drag at the tip. They said it helped add weight to a blow, helped with the follow-through. Gavrill wasn’t sure he had an opinion on it. This was the sword he was used to. He’d never used a better one. He’d held a fine one, once, so he knew what it felt like in the hand. But he’d never gotten to fight with it, or even practice.

“So... just the right length of cane-wood wouldn’t be the right weight, and it wouldn’t have this kind of balance, either,” Kason mused.

“Exactly. It’d be a staff, not a sword. Which is fine, if you want to practice fighting with a staff. But that’s not what I’m after. Not right now, anyway.”

“Hmm. So, piece of cane-wood the right size, have to get the weight, have to add weight back near the grip...” Kason was thinking aloud, warming to the challenge.

“The ones we used to use back at Southern had metal cross-guards on them – open basket-guards, actually,” Gavrill offered. “Didn’t really need them for the hand protection – I’m guessing it might have been for weight?”

The smith nodded. “Open ironwork?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“That’s easy enough to make, then. We have the scraps for it.” Laying the sword down carefully on the workbench, Kason crossed the smithy to another work-area, nearer the forge.

“Is it?” Gavrill asked. “Easy?”

“Easy enough for me,” the young man said. “Once we find a piece of cane-wood, all I’d have to do is bend some rod stock into rings, and do a little welding. You want a full basket around the hand?”

“I don’t care, as long as the balance is right.” Gavrill thought for a moment, then added, “But it did make it easier to practice punching.”

A’zelen gave him a strange look. “Punching?” he repeated.

“Well, yeah. With the cross-guard, or with the pommel.” He demonstrated the motions, though his hand was empty.

“Ouch,” the brownrider commented, after a moment. His stare was a little incredulous, though Gavrill couldn’t think why. In a real fight, if you could get past the other man’s guard, your sword’s blade wasn’t that useful – neither was his – and a punch in the face with the heavy hilt was sometimes the most effective thing you could do.

Eventually, Kason returned, with some iron bars of the right thickness in one hand, and a man-length pole of thick cane-wood in the other. “I think that between the iron hand-guard and some more iron rings on the pommel end, we can probably get the weight and the balance right. But we can weigh your sword to make sure.” He put everything down on a nearby workbench, and looked over it. “I can show you where the scrap-wood is kept, I’m sure you can find what you need from the pile. And you can borrow what tools you need, so long as you’re careful with them and bring them back soon.”

“Sounds good,” Gavrill said, nodding. “How long do you think the ironwork will take you?”

“Oh, the blacksmithing won’t take that long at all,” said the journeyman confidently. “If no disasters come up that we have to deal with, I’ll probably have it done by tomorrow evening. Getting the balance right will take some experimenting, but that’s all right.”

That was fast work, Gavrill thought. “And what am I going to owe you for all this?”

That was the part that had been worrying him, actually. He still didn’t have any marks to his name, and he didn’t have many ideas for how to get them, either. But he *had* thought about coming to work for the Weyrsmith, before Marshall had nabbed him for the herders. There were things he could do – repairs, simple building projects. Maybe the

smiths would have need of an extra pair of hands, and he could work the deal off that way, on his restdays or on some evenings.

Kason grinned at him. “Eh, don’t worry about that. I’d say we’ll be quits, by the end of it.”

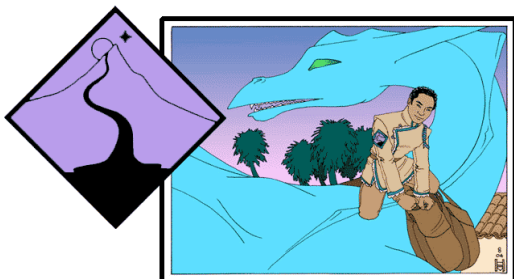
Gavrill’s eyebrows went up, and he exchanged a look with A’zelen. “And how do you figure that?”

The young man picked up the sword again, looked at it for a moment, and then offered it back to Gavrill hilt-first. He took it automatically. “I told you, they taught us a bit of weapon-smithing when we were apprentices, but it wasn’t much in depth. And most of that was beltknives. Real weapon-smithing’s a specialty, and I didn’t get interested enough in it to learn much about sword-making, which is even more specialized than any other kind, and not much call for it besides.” Kason pointed at the sword. “You’ve already taught me a few things about it that I didn’t know before. I’ll learn even more by making the practice sword for you. Once you’re all set up, if you show me a little about how you use them – then I’d say learning all of that makes us about even. It’s not like you’re asking for much, after all.”

Gavrill used his shirt-tail to wipe off the sword’s blade before resheathing it. He knew that knowledge was valuable, sometimes. He just hadn’t expect *this* knowledge to be worth anything to the smithcrafter. “All right, then, Kason,” he said. “If you say so. I’m willing to cross palms on it, if you are.”

Kason nodded. “I’d say it’s a deal.”

(TO BE CONTINUED)



# Kadanzer Weyr

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