
One Chance

by Juniper
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V'kam pulled back the sheet and sat down on the bed. It had been a long, hot day, full of minor annoyances, and sleep was going to be very welcome. He turned to lie down.

Fordath's rider wants you to know that there is a disturbance.

V'kam froze with one leg raised, then tilted back to a sitting position. G'tin and Fordath were taking their turn on watch at the Weyr entrance, on the road from Windsong Hold. *What kind of disturbance? And why is he calling us rather than A'nar?* On the nights when StormWind was providing the Weyr's watchriders, it was standard procedure to alert the wingleader if any situation requiring backup should arise.

There was a pause, then, ***Garath tells Fordath that he cannot talk to his rider now.*** Selputh sounded disturbed by the other bronze's reply.

What? Never mind, tell me what's happened. V'kam stood up and retrieved the clothing that he'd just removed. The important thing was to deal with the situation. If A'nar was unavailable for some reason, that would be up to him. He hoped it wasn't anything so serious that he would need to refer it up the chain of command.

A man has come, on a runnerbeast. Fordath says he asks us for help – there are people injured, and beasts.

What's happened? No, never mind, I'm going over. It would be easier to ask G'tin directly. V'kam was already buttoning his shirt. He finished dressing, then went outside and hastily fitted Selputh's straps. He mounted the bronze and flew to the road gate, where two of the Weyr's three watchriders were stationed.

G'tin met him. As he approached, V'kam could see that the younger man's face was lined with concern. "He's over there." He indicated the side of the road just outside the gate.

The other watchrider was standing there, her slim figure bent forward as she spoke to a dark-haired youth who was sitting on the ground. The messenger's legs were stretched out in front of him and his arms were folded protectively across his chest. He seemed barely old enough to be considered an adult. Nearby, an exhausted runnerbeast stood with splayed legs and lowered head, still breathing heavily. The poor creature must have been ridden hard. Neither of the dragons was there, but as he glanced further down the road, V'kam thought he saw two darker shapes against the dark forest that lined the road.

G'tin followed his gaze and confirmed, "We sent the dragons away – the horse was getting spooked."

"That was sensible. What's happened?"

"He's from Waterfall; his name's Bordal. He's with a tithe herd. They're at the last stopping point on the way here, and they were attacked by slashers. There are two people injured, one seriously, and some dead herdbeasts; probably injured beasts, too."

V'kam nodded to G'tin, relieved to get a clear, succinct report. "Thank you. This sort of incident is exactly why we have riders on watch out here during the night."

He approached the young man, who looked up nervously and started to get to his feet. V'kam forestalled him. "Don't get up. You told G'tin you had two people injured, and some dead and injured beasts? I'm going to rouse out some healers and herders to help you, but you'll need to come back with us to show us exactly where. How many people in all, in your group?"

"Four of us, sir. Two with the wagons and two of us riding, with the herd. They're all back there – it's a big clearing a few miles this side of Crossbreeze Hold. But that's a small place: there's no healer there, so I rode straight here. Can you help us, sir?" The young man was still breathless.

"We have healers here," V'kam assured him, "and we'll get one there as soon as we can." He knew the place slightly: it would be easiest to go *between* to Crossbreeze and then fly along the tithe road.

The young man nodded, looking relieved at the assurance. "How am I going to get back there?" His eyes widened as the obvious answer suggested itself. "A-dragonback? I never..."

Kadja said reassuringly, "There's nothing to worry about. You'll be there before you know it." She looked over at V'kam. "We should get him some flying gear, sir. He'll catch his death if he goes *between* like that."

The reassurance apparently wasn't working, because the young man's mouth opened for a sharp intake of breath at the mention of *between*. To do him credit, he shut it again quickly and said, "Thank you, sir. I can show you the place, but you'll need to land on the road: the clearing's not that big that it'll take dragons as well as everything else."

There were times when the imperturbable mask that V'kam cultivated snapped into place without him even having to think about it. "Get someone to bring him a jacket," he instructed, then started working on the more important aspects of the situation. As always in an emergency, the things that needed to be done seemed to form themselves into a mental checklist, a crisp, clear picture of the plan and its component tasks. Messages to send from dragon to dragon, rousing wingriders and giving them further messages to deliver. Someone to go to the Weyrhealer, someone else to the Weyrherder. A watchrider detailed to replace G'tin: there was no doubt in V'kam's mind that he wanted the young bronzerider along. G'tin was competent, and he knew beasts. 'K'nis was a herder, too,' he thought, and had Selputh pass the word for the brownrider, then sent for other wingriders to meet in the

Gather Square. As he stopped his rapid interchange with Selputh, he became aware that all three of the others were looking at him.

“Kadja, you stay here until your watch ends. G’tin, you’re coming with me. Get your gear and take our friend here to meet the others in the Gather Square. I’ll be with you as soon as I’ve told –” He broke off, suddenly uncertain, and saw G’tin open his mouth to speak. Unwilling to have to risk questions that might relate to A’nar’s whereabouts, he pressed on firmly, “Kadja, if anything else comes up – and let’s hope it doesn’t, but this sort of incident is exactly *why* we have riders on watch out here during the night – Wingssecond R’nen’s your contact.”

That meant another message to send. *Wake Imeth, my friend, and ask him to tell R’nen that we are going out and he’s the contact point for the watchriders. And then –* He hesitated, uneasy in his mind. He was about to take riders and others into a potentially dangerous situation on his own initiative, and he didn’t really have the authority to do that. *Then ask Garath again if he can speak to A’nar.*

The response was almost immediate. ***Garath says he will not answer. He is not worried. I would be worried if you would not answer me.***

He’s asleep? An awkward thought occurred to V’kam. *Just check with Garath – he’s not in bed with someone, is he?* ‘Not that I’ve seen A’nar with anyone, and, shardit, he’s on call; but that might explain why Garath wouldn’t talk to him.’

But the answer came back, ***Garath says not. His rider is asleep and will not wake.***

That was rather odd, and it left V’kam in an awkward situation. He had to report what he was going to do. Permission would certainly be granted, but he should still contact Flightleader R’mal, or in his absence, the Weyrleader. He hesitated, reluctant to go over A’nar’s head. ‘He could just be deeply asleep. We sweated buckets over this afternoon’s drill. That, and maybe a drink or two...’ He had a little time before the riders and the Weyrherder’s people would be ready to leave, and the healers would need to pick up their kit. He needed to back to StormWind’s area to get his own flying gear; if he were quick, he could check on his wingleader as well without creating any delay.

“G’tin, get our friend here over to Main. We leave as soon as the healers and herders are there.” V’kam quickly returned to Selputh and climbed to the dragon’s back, but instead of joining his wingmates in the Gather Square, he directed the bronze back to StormWind’s area, and had him touch down next to A’nar’s weycot.

He dismounted quickly and skirted the sandy wallow. Garath appeared to be asleep, but as he passed, V’kam noticed a faint blue glow as the bronze’s eyelids were raised, then dropped again. The shutters of the wingleader’s weycot were closed, but there were chinks of light round the edges, showing that there were open glowbaskets inside. A’nar must be in, at least. V’kam mounted the steps and knocked at the door. There was no reply. After a second knock also brought no response, V’kam hesitated for a moment, then opened the door slightly.

“Sir, are you there? Something’s come up.” There was still no reply, but the room was clearly lit. Had A’nar left the glowbaskets open for his return, or was he inside and asleep? V’kam called again, then pushed the door open further and stepped inside. He halted, surprised by what he saw.

He’d had the impression that A’nar was an orderly man. Certainly his office was spotless, without a map or a page of notes out of place. But here, there was dragon harness thrown in a tangle across the back of the couch. Sheets of hide lay on the floor, and several empty wineskins had apparently just been thrown into a corner.

He was sure it hadn’t been like this the last time he was here, but then, that was some time ago. At one stage, he’d been a frequent visitor, and they’d often spent a companionable evening together, here or at V’kam’s cottage. Nowadays, that happened less often, and always in the Weyrhall or somewhere away from the Weyr. He couldn’t have been in here since... to his surprise, he realised that it was nearly five months ago.

As he glanced uncertainly about, his thoughts were interrupted by the loud and unmistakable sound of a snore emanating from the wingleader’s bedroom. V’kam walked over to the doorway. “Sir? Sorry to wake you, but...” Then he stopped. By the small amount of glowlight that was passing the opening, he could see that A’nar was lying on his bed, fully dressed and face down, except that his head was turned to one side. His breathing was heavy and didn’t sound healthy. Concerned, V’kam entered the room and bent forward to lay a hand on his wingleader’s shoulder. “A’nar? Are you all right?” There was no response except another grunt. At this point, V’kam’s nose told him exactly what the problem was.

“Shards, wingleader, you picked a fine night for a bender.” Another shake confirmed his suspicion that he wouldn’t be waking A’nar up any time soon.

He retreated to the main room, drew the curtain across the doorway, and looked around. There was another wineskin and an empty bottle by one of the chairs. A glass lay on its side nearby, but he could see no sign of a second. Had A’nar had company? He suspected not.

He lifted the wineskin to his nose, then the bottle. They’d contained rough-smelling red wine and a spirit that, after one sniff, V’kam concluded would probably strip varnish. They were not at all like the decent vintages that he knew A’nar preferred, or the fine marshberry brandy that he’d been offered a time or two. He glanced at the side-table where A’nar usually kept a bottle of the expensive spirit, but there was none there. What A’nar had been drinking was cheap and – V’kam frowned at the realisation. What A’nar had been drinking was exactly what someone might drink if they were getting through a lot of alcohol, and were more concerned about getting drunk cheaply than anything else.

A’nar’s bad temper in the mornings had become almost legendary over the last few months; the wingriders jokingly ascribed it to insufficient klah at breakfast. It suddenly appeared in a very different light. And, he remembered, this wasn’t the first time he’d seen A’nar drink himself into oblivion.

None of that, V’kam realised, was going to deal with the immediate problem. Well, he wasn’t going to tell L’ars – and certainly not R’mal – that his wingleader was drunk and insensible when there was a crisis on StormWind’s watch. That simply wasn’t acceptable, and certainly not without giving A’nar a chance to explain himself. Flipping the glows shut, he hurried out, directing his thoughts to Selputh.

I need you to talk to Udoth. Tell him that we are going to help the tithe herd, and ask him to tell his rider. Tell him that everything is under control, we are just... notifying him as a courtesy.

‘And I hope that’s going to prove true,’ he added to himself, ‘or else I’m going to have to think up a very convincing excuse by the time we get back.’



It was close to midnight by the time that five dragons of StormWind Wing circled their destination. The darkness was almost total, so that it was hard to tell that they were above a large clearing. The sky was completely overcast, and a heavy rain was falling.

‘This is going to be wet and muddy,’ G’tin thought. ‘But Bordal was right: we’ll not all fit in there, with the herd and their wagons. Besides, it would panic the beasts.’

Selputh tells us to land along the road, where it widens.

G’tin turned his head to repeat that for Bordal and Apprentice Herder Morres. “We’re putting down on the road. We’ll walk back.”

Towards the edge of the clearing, a faint glow seemed to outline a roof. As Fordath passed almost above it, G’tin realised that it was a cooking-shelter, with another building beside it. The light from the fire stood out, but seemed to cast the area beyond its immediate light into deeper shadow. There was a track from the clearing to the road, and the junction made a triangular space where a herd could stop or carts could turn. It was large enough for a bronze to land and take off again. Selputh went in first, but as soon as his rider and passenger had dismounted, he moved up the road to make room for Fordath.

It was almost impossible for G’tin to see where they were heading, but Fordath turned along the road neatly, and assured him, ***I can see it clearly.***

Of course you can, my friend. The bronze’s keener night vision let him land safely, though his wingtips were closer to the trees than G’tin liked. Fordath seemed to take it in his stride, however, and the smaller dragons would have no trouble. Only green Nyth went straight to the clearing. She and E’darin were bringing Weyrhealer Glynda: presumably the craftmaster had wanted to go straight to her patients. Two journeyman healers, Kerres and Divid, were somewhere above with K’nis and Shyla. G’tin slipped down from Fordath’s back and waited for the others to dismount safely, then the bronze moved along the road to make room for the next to land, while G’tin and the others followed V’kam and journeyman Trevon down the wide path towards the clearing. The beasthealer was drawing ahead of V’kam.

As the trees opened out, G’tin could see the cooking shelter with a failing fire beneath it, and next to it, a small building with a tiled roof that must provide a sleeping-place for drovers. The faint glimmer of glowlight suggested that it was occupied, though the doors and shutters were closed against the rain. This clearing was a regular corral for tithe herds, G’tin knew. Travellers could normally find Thread shelters along the main routes in occupied areas, but a herd like this would need to time its journey very carefully to avoid ’Falls.

It was a scene of destruction. There were two wagons by the entrance to the clearing, with horses tethered nearby, but one of the wagons was on its side, its load of feed spilled. The dark shapes of two dead herdbeasts were lying on the ground not far from the buildings. The rest of the herd were bunched together at the far end of the clearing, still standing despite the dark and the rain; and even at a distance, G’tin could tell that they were noisy and restless. Somewhere a beast was lowing constantly and urgently. ‘That one’s in pain,’ he thought. ‘Why hasn’t someone done anything for it?’

The door of the tile-roofed hut opened, silhouetting a figure against the glowlight within. “Bordal, is that you? You’d better come in here.”

“Coming.” Bordal had moved ahead of G’tin and was already heading for the shelter. As he entered, the other man came out and approached the riders. He was short but stocky, with iron grey hair and a weathered brown face. “No room in there for a crowd. We’ve got injured beasts, too: can anyone give me a hand with them? I couldn’t leave Rinndal for long – that’s the lad’s father – until the healer got here.”

“My name’s Trevon, journeyman beasthealer, and here’s Morres who works with me at the Feeding Grounds. We’ll help with your herd.”

G’tin chipped in with, “K’nis and I could give a hand, too. We’re used to working with beasts.”

K’nis, behind him, agreed, “That’s right. We were both apprentices; we worked in the Feeding Grounds when we were candidates.”

For a few moments, G’tin was reminded of the days when he and K’nis – Kenis, then – had been candidates together. Luka, too – the three of them had been good friends. They’d been part of the same weyrling class, after they Impressed. Now, though he and K’nis were in the same Wing, they hardly spoke beyond the essentials.

“Good,” Trevon said. “That’ll be plenty. Make sure you take those leathers off before you get near the beasts.”

K’nis chuckled. G’tin started to peel off his leather jacket, which was no hardship on a hot, wet night. As he bundled it up, he saw K’nis doing the same thing.

E’darin asked, “Why do you have to do that?”

Morres gave a warm, deep laugh. “You must be weyrbred. If they smell of dragon, the beasts won’t want them anywhere near.”

Trevon asked, “Where are the injured ones?”

The man pointed to the dark shapes that must be dead beasts. “Worst ones, I slaughtered. But there could be others in there somewhere – just listen to them. Couldn’t

see them, though, in the dark, and I couldn't hang around – people come first. Rinndal's hurt bad and Sommitter can't use his arm."

"It was slashers, the lad said?" That was V'kam. "Do you know how many? Or if they're still around?"

"Aye. Three or four of 'em. Rinndal went into the woods to take a leak, and he must have walked right into them. We'd only just got here, and it was almost dark. He called out and ran, but one of 'em got him across the belly and they followed him into the clearing. Three or four of them. And we went to help Rinndal, but one of 'em got Sommitter across the arm. They ran into the herd and cut some as they broke through, and some of the beasts went knocked one of the wagons over when they scattered. Don't know if they're still out there, but the beasts are uneasy still, so I reckon they could be."

Trevon said, "We'll look them over, and deal with any injured. What kind of beasts? Any bulls among them?"

"No, just bullocks and a few old dairy cows that are past breeding. Some good beef, mostly good for nowt but dragon food, is my guess."

"It all helps," Trevon said. "V'kam, can we send—"

He was interrupted by Bordial's anguished voice coming from the shelter. "Da! No!"

The drover muttered, "That didn't sound good," and hurried off.

Shyla had brought small glowbaskets, and passed them out, while V'kam and E'darin started roping the killed beasts prior to moving them away from the herd. G'tin and K'nis left their leathers under the fire-shelter and worked in just shorts and tunics. Trying to check the condition of forty or more herdbeasts, on a dark, wet night, proved hard work. The rain continued steadily, and G'tin was soaked to the skin in a matter of minutes.

As he moved among the beasts, G'tin could see them quite well as long as he passed the glows close to them. That wasn't particularly easy, though: rain and hooves had combined to turn the ground into thick, slippery mud, and the beasts were unsettled enough that he had to dodge kicks and swung heads as he passed. 'At least they're de-horned,' he thought. 'It would be far too easy to frighten one into goring, with all this going on.' He kept a watchful eye on his surroundings, glancing warily into the trees, as well. Those slashers had attacked, but they hadn't been able to feed.

There was the sound of scuffling, then the frantic lowing stopped as Trevon slaughtered another injured bullock. That seemed sensible: it had been suffering, and it would be easier to take the carcasses back as meat for the latest weyrlings than to treat injured beasts and then drive them to the Weyr, perhaps slowing the pace of the herd.

After a few minutes, G'tin found himself looking at K'nis across the back of an old black and white cow.

"This one's clean." K'nis gave a chuckle. "Like old times, this. When we were candidates." With a man on each side of her, the beast moved forward out of the way.

G'tin smiled. "I don't think we ever had a situation quite like this in the Feeding Grounds, but there were certainly moments. The night we met those raiders—" He

broke off abruptly. "I'm sorry." That had been a very bad night indeed for his friend.

He could see K'nis stiffen, but the brownerider said, "It's all right. Long time ago, now." With more warmth than G'tin had heard from him in a long while, K'nis went on, "We go back quite a way, don't we?"

"We do." G'tin wanted to respond to the overture, but didn't know quite what to say. The distance that had grown up between them was his fault, and despite a Turn in the same Wing, he hadn't managed to remedy it.

K'nis seemed to have no such problem. "Before we Impressed, long before you were Weyrleader."

"And now we're wingmates again."

"Which is good," K'nis finished, and G'tin could hear the smile in his voice as he went on, "Come on, then, we've got beasts to look at." They continued talking quietly and soon fell into an easy routine as they moved through the herd. There seemed to be no more major injuries, and there was no chance of seeing smaller cuts, but they turned the glows onto each beast, then positioned themselves so that the beasts would move away, and checked for lameness. Some of the tension that G'tin felt about the situation fell away when there was no further trace of the slashers – perhaps Nyth's presence in the clearing had scared them away, to say nothing of the larger dragons along the track. And there was a degree of ease between him and K'nis that hadn't been there for a long while.

A few more minutes brought them face to face with Morres and Trevon, with a dun-coloured beast between them. Morres was applying some sort of salve to a scratch on its leg.

"Is that all of them?" Trevon asked. "Someone will have to have another look in the morning, though."

Another figure loomed out of the darkness. It was V'kam. "The water troughs are full. Are you done here?"

"Nearly," Trevon replied. "Just got to work out who's going where."

V'kam said quietly, "The boy's father died. I've sent E'darin back to their Hold with him and the body. K'nis, you and Shyla had better stay here the rest of the night – the slashers won't come after the beasts with a couple of dragons in the clearing. Come back when they get on the road tomorrow. That just leaves G'tin and me to take everyone else back. The Weyrhealer wants Sommitter – the man with the injured arm – to go back to the Weyr, too."

"You take the healers, then," Trevon said. "I can come back in the morning, and Morres is going to ride back with the herd."

The apprentice looked up from what he was doing and said cheerfully, "I get a day's ride outside the Weyr."

G'tin retrieved his riding gear from the shelter. As he and K'nis walked back towards the road with the wingsecond, he remembered something that had been niggling at the back of his mind. "I'm sorry we didn't call you straight away when Bordial arrived, sir. We thought the wingleader was on call, and Garath told Fordath that he couldn't contact him."

"We exchanged," V'kam replied, answering G'tin's unspoken question. "I should have informed you."

Something came up.” After a moment, he added deliberately, “An engagement at short notice.”

“No harm done, sir.”

Behind G’tin, K’nis chuckled. “Something came up? Who is she?”

V’kam frowned and said sharply, “That’s enough of that.”

G’tin wondered if K’nis was right, but he was puzzled. Hadn’t Selputh asked Fordath why they were rousing his rider rather than A’nar? That didn’t sound like a pre-arranged exchange. And it wasn’t like V’kam to let something slip. On reflection, though, V’kam could be quite... proper. If he’d tried to contact the wingleader at a delicate moment, he wasn’t likely to say so. G’tin dismissed the doubt from his mind, and reached out to tell Fordath what they were going to do.



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The rain had stopped and a pink dawn was streaking the eastern sky by the time V’kam was free. He’d left the injured man in the infirmary in the care of the duty healers. Later on, he’d send someone to help bring back the dead beasts, which could be butchered as meat for the weyrings, but it was too early for that. He could get a couple of hours’ rest.

He removed Selputh’s straps and left the bronze settling into the sand of his wallow while he went inside and prepared for bed. Despite the wakeful night he’d had, he felt restless, and lay on his cot with his thoughts too active to let him relax into sleep. Even after turning it over in his mind as he patrolled the clearing, he still hadn’t worked out what to say to A’nar; and the conversation with G’tin and K’nis was bothering him. Eventually, he gave up trying to rest and pulled some clothes on, then sat on the couch in the main room of his weycot and tried to think things through.

Lying was foreign to him, but last night he’d lied to the wingriders without a second thought in order to cover for A’nar. In fact, more thought might have made his lies more convincing: he’d reacted, rather than planning, and that could lead to trouble. ‘And G’tin, of all people.’ The young bronzerider was rather strait-laced, and A’nar still bore a grudge against him. G’tin had little reason to be sympathetic to his wingleader’s failings. Still, he’d managed to retrieve the situation. K’nis had jumped to a likely conclusion that V’kam had intended. Maybe G’tin would, too. He hoped so, and in any case, G’tin wasn’t likely to call him on it.

And then there was A’nar. How much was he drinking? A single night’s excess was no great matter, even if he was supposed to be on call, but the story that those bottles and wineskins told was longer and more sinister. His instincts told him that A’nar was drinking too much. Enough to be a danger to himself and the Wing? If that were so, he’d lose his knots – and so he should. But instincts weren’t proof, and neither were empty wineskins. If A’nar said they were several months’ worth, or left over from a party, how could he know if it were true? Why hadn’t he noticed anything?

And what if A’nar really were drinking too much? If he flew ’Fall when he’d been drinking, he could get himself killed – himself and others. Even if he flew while hung over, his responses would be poor, or he could make bad decisions. It would hardly be the first time that someone had risen to ’Fall with a morning-after head, but it was very definitely frowned upon.

One thing was clear: if he thought there was a problem, it was V’kam’s duty to report it. But A’nar was his wingleader, and that meant something to V’kam. Loyalty was also a duty – but it shouldn’t extend to risking lives...

Realising that he was going round in circles, he let out a sharp breath. He knew that lack of sleep wasn’t helping. He had to talk to A’nar, and find out somehow what was going on. But whatever was he going to *say* to the man? How could he even raise it? And he had to do it soon. He wondered when A’nar would wake.

With that thought, an idea presented itself. He got up and went to his shelves to look for what he needed. It was a while since he’d made use of these particular ingredients, but there they were, on the lowest of his shelves. He took a couple of orangefruit from his fruit bowl and squeezed them roughly into a mug, then mixed the spices with the juice. The resulting concoction smelled pleasant enough, but he knew from experience that it had a sharp bite. He left it to stand while he went to wash.

Feeling better for a shower – though no amount of warm water was going to make up for a lost night’s sleep – and dressed in fresh clothing, he collected the mug from his table, gave it a final stir, then left his weycot and headed across the grass. A short walk brought him to A’nar’s front step. He stood at the door and listened for a moment. All seemed quiet.

He knocked loudly. Inside, someone swore.

He knocked again, then opened the door and walked in, calling, “Good morning, sir,” just loud enough to carry. “I’ve come to report. We had some excitement last night.”

From the bedroom came, “Go away.”

V’kam steeled himself against an outburst of temper, but he had to deal with this before other people were expecting A’nar to be up and about. “Sorry, sir, but you need to hear what I have to say.”

“What the blazes are you doing coming here at this time of night? Get out!”

V’kam wondered if A’nar had actually opened his eyes yet.

“It’s breakfast time. I’ve brought you some of my old wingleader’s favourite fixer-upper.” He lost patience. “And I can’t give it to you standing out here. I’m coming in.”

There was a mutter from within, followed by the sounds of movement and of breath drawn in sharply through clenched teeth.

V’kam counted slowly to ten, looking round the room at the evidence that supported his suspicions, then he pulled back the curtain. A’nar was sitting on the edge of the bed, red-eyed and blinking. He was still fully dressed, and his hair was standing up on end. The creases in his forehead suggested a bad headache. ‘Well, he asked for that, if I’m not mistaken.’ Still, a degree of sympathy defused V’kam’s

anger, and he moved forward with soft steps, repeating more calmly, "I've brought you something for your head. Drink this. And then we need to talk." He held out the mug.

A'nar glared up at him, but took the drink and downed it in two swallows. "That doesn't taste bad." He sounded surprised. It wasn't until he took his next breath that he opened his mouth and exclaimed, "Faranth! What's *in* that?"

"It puts back what the drink takes out, or that's the theory. You should drink water, too."

"I know that," A'nar said shortly, then took several deep breaths through his mouth and swallowed hard. "Sharding stuff's liquid firestone. Now what in Faranth's name do you mean by coming in here and waking me up?"

"I covered your backside last night," V'kam answered bluntly, "and I want to make sure you're not going to contradict what I said."

A'nar stared at him. "You what? Did something happen?" He levered himself to his feet and stumbled into the living area, where he dropped into a chair.

V'kam followed, but stayed standing as he explained, "Slashers attacked a tithe herd. We took healers and herders down to treat the injured. One man's dead, and some beasts slaughtered. We didn't have any trouble after we got down there – but the watchriders tried to contact you."

A'nar froze for a moment at that news, but then flicked a hand irritably towards another seat. "Sit down, man."

V'kam hesitated, then sat. "Garath told the watchdragons he couldn't wake you. I handled it - said we'd agreed that I'd cover tonight and hinted that you had company." Keeping his voice level, he continued dryly, "You may find that the Wing is taking bets on who the lucky lady is."

"You said *what*?" A'nar roared – then winced.

"It was the only reason I could think of on the spur of the moment why Garath would refuse to rouse you." He let a sharper note into his voice. "I *assumed* that you didn't want me explaining that you'd drunk yourself into a stupor when you should have been on call."

A'nar's eyes flared, but then narrowed. With exaggerated care, he placed the mug on the table beside his seat, then turned to V'kam again. The small task seemed to have given him time to collect himself.

"So. You covered one... *indiscretion* by saddling me with another one. Going to turn me in? Get me a month in the middens?"

V'kam watched him for a moment, then shook his head. "Of course not. The flightleader thinks we had it all arranged. G'tin and Kadja may wonder why we didn't tell them I was on call instead of you, but they'll put it down to a last minute slip-up on my part."

"G'tin?" A'nar's look was sour. "It *would* be G'tin on watch."

"G'tin won't suspect anything except what I meant him to," V'kam said firmly, though inwardly, he was less certain of that. It could get very awkward if the other riders did suspect what had really happened. "And there's something else."

"What now?"

'Last chance to avoid this,' V'kam thought, but pressed on anyway. "A'nar... how much have you been drinking?"

The wingleader shrugged. "No more than usual. Just had a bit of a bad day, yesterday."

V'kam shook his head and looked pointedly round the room at the empty bottles and skins. "If you got through all that yesterday, sir, I'm surprised you're still breathing, let alone sitting here and talking to me. And if that's no more than usual..." He let the thought trail off. "It looks to me as if you're getting through bad wine by the skinful - and worse spirits."

A'nar shrugged. "I suppose I've not done a lot of clearing up lately."

V'kam continued to watch him, without saying anything further.

A'nar looked back at him through narrowed eyelids, and for a few uncomfortable moments, they locked eyes.

It was A'nar who gave way first. "What are you saying? You think I'm a drunkard?" To V'kam's surprise, he drew himself up in his seat and went on, "If you think I'm drinking too much, then it's your duty to tell the flightleader before I turn up drunk for 'Fall and get someone killed." He stared at V'kam, as if challenging him to deny it. "L'ars would be a fool not to give you the Wing, you know."

"So it is," V'kam replied mildly, hiding his appreciation of the way A'nar had put him on the spot by implicitly questioning his motives. "And so he would – though he might not see it that way. But I'd rather you got yourself together, and StormWind didn't lose a damned good wingleader."

A'nar flushed. "I'm not drinking too much. Occasionally I have a few in the evenings. That's all."

V'kam thought of old Z'ruk at Eastern, who'd denied his problem until he could scarcely get out of bed in the morning without a shot of spirits. Was he making too much of this? He didn't want to antagonise A'nar if he could avoid it. "Well, that's good," he said mildly, "because I'd be concerned if you were. And it wouldn't do to have a wingleader turning up at drills with a pounding head and a temper to match."

The creases in A'nar's forehead suggested that the pounding headache, at least, was still there. 'And as for the drills,' V'kam thought, "if the helmet fits, wingleader..."

A'nar glared at him, but eventually dropped his eyes and said resentfully, "I guess I should try to steer clear of the nights before we're flying in the morning. I'll cut back. You don't have to worry. There won't be a problem."

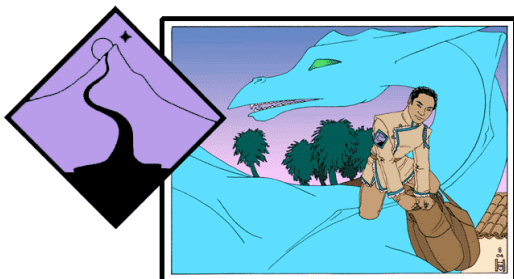
That was more or less an admission. V'kam cursed silently to himself, but he leaned forward in his chair slightly, smiling without humour, and continued steadily, "I don't want there to be a problem, because I couldn't let our Wing or its riders be put at risk. I covered for you last night, but if this happens again, or I think you're letting drink affect your performance, I *won't* cover it up again." He let the iron creep into his voice. "You get one chance here, A'nar. If ever you turn up at drill or at 'Fall the worse for drink, or so hung over that you can't do your job properly, I *shall* go to the flightleader. I don't want that, but I'd have to. The Wing comes first. Do you understand?"

“Get out!”

V’kam didn’t move. “Do you understand?”

“I understand! I’ll do it. Now get out!”

V’kam got to his feet and left without saying anything more, and wondering whether he’d still be wingsecond by nightfall. He hoped that A’nar would be as good as his word, but he felt very sorry for anyone who made a mistake in this morning’s drill.



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