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# Second Choices

by Juniper

2859.02.14 - 2860.02.26

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2859.02.14

‘They like him,’ D’vrey thought. ‘Look at the way they’re all listening to him.’

Dinner was almost over, with only dessert to come, and D’vrey’s attention – along with that of everyone else in the Weyrhall – was fixed on L’ars as he outlined his intentions for the Weyr. ‘I mean, he’s the new Weyrleader and what he’s saying is important, but people would listen to him anyway. They like him. How does he do that?’

D’vrey was as interested as anyone else in what L’ars was saying. When the Weyrleader announced “personnel shuffling” to make sure that bronzeriders got the training that they’d need to become leaders in the future, he nodded thoughtfully. That was a good idea. G’tin had done his best in his term as Weyrleader, but he’d really not been ready for the job, and how could he be? He couldn’t have been much more than a Turn out of weyrling training when he won the knots. Would the shuffling involve promotions for the bronzeriders concerned? There wasn’t much point in it if they weren’t going to be wingseconds, was there?

As L’ars sat down and Weyrwoman Lybelle began to speak, D’vrey was considering his chances. He was twenty-three Turns old, and he’d been a wingrider for more than four Turns. He knew what he was doing – in the air, at least.

Akrenth, away in his wallow, seemed confident. ***We could do that! We would lead well in ’Fall!***

*So we would, my friend,* he answered regretfully. *If that were all there was to it. You don’t remember what B’nalsh said-*

“...the Queens’ Wing will no longer perform catches during Threadfall,” Lybelle announced.

‘What?’ That news sent a murmur round FireStar’s table and shattered D’vrey’s line of thought. As the Weyrwoman explained her reasons, he recalled Nioranth’s loss a few days earlier. Akrenth had been distressed, as any bronze would be at the death of a queen, but that was far behind him now, already fading out of his short memory. Still, this was unsettling. Falling out of control wasn’t something he liked to think about: it was reassuring to know that someone would at least try to save you if it happened. How many dragons and riders would fall to their deaths because they weren’t caught?

He listened to the rest of Lybelle’s talk with only half his attention, only really noticing the buzz of renewed

conversation when a young girl put a sticky dessert in front of him. His wingmates seemed to approve of L’ars’ plans. He turned to his neighbour.

“There must be a better way to do that. The catching.” He raised his hands, trying to sketch out the positions of a falling dragon, with queens converging on her from above and below. “Maybe if...”

T’mani smiled, but shook his head. “Never give up, do you, D’vrey?” He turned away to talk to Lora, who was sitting on the other side of him.

D’vrey kept his face impassive – it wasn’t unusual for someone to break off a conversation with him. Why weren’t they interested in thinking about how things were done? He’d show them, though. Wingseconds ought to think about things like that.



2859.02.15

“You know why I’ve asked you to come,” L’ars said, waving A’nar into a chair. The Weyrleader’s office already looked less formal than when G’tin had occupied it – fewer maps, and more plants.

A’nar sat down. “Either you want to add a four-hundred-Turn-old rider or two to my Wing, or you want to foist some wet-behind-the-ears bronzerider on me as wingsecond?” he suggested, with reasonable good humour. Last night’s astonishing arrival of several dozen dragons from the past was in everyone’s mind today.

“Not quite how I’d put it,” L’ars said easily. “But that’s the general idea. The wingsecond, that is. Our new arrivals won’t be joining anything for a while.”

A’nar gave a perfunctory nod to that, and dealt with the real issue. “I’ve already got one bronzerider as wingsecond, and we’re working well together, the three of us. Can’t say I want to break that up: it would be bad for the Wing. Though it’s not a bad scheme overall,” he conceded. It was quite a good one, in fact, but he meant what he said. Besides, he didn’t much like being told who he could and couldn’t have as his wingsecond, and neither of his current ’seconds deserved a demotion. Still, for the good of the Weyr, people sometimes had to make sacrifices, and he was more or less resigned to going along with this if L’ars couldn’t be persuaded to leave StormWind alone.

“It’ll be worse for the Weyr if we don’t get these young men trained as leaders. You don’t want to risk another G’tin in charge, do you? All youth and no experience.”

“That’s for sure,” A’nar agreed with feeling. “Though your plan wouldn’t have stopped that. G’tin was too young to be a wingsecond at all. But you said the idea was for every Wing to have a bronzerider as a wingsecond. We’ve already got V’kam.”

“True. But I want a younger bronzerider as a ’second in as many Wings as possible, and you’re low in bronzes, even with G’tin.”

“And that’s another thing,” A’nar interjected quickly. He’d had little opportunity to protest about that transfer: L’ars had told him of it on their way into the WeyrHall after the wingleaders’ meeting, with no time to discuss it. “I can’t think why you want G’tin in StormWind. Better for all of us if he went somewhere else.” A’nar had made no secret of his opinion of G’tin: the boy had been a fool to think he could lead the Weyr, however many queens his bronze had won, and he’d been a fool to take on leading SkyTamer Wing after L’rian died.

“That’s not up for debate, A’nar. You need more bronze strength. G’tin needs to be challenged, and it’d be awkward all round to leave him with SkyTamer now he’s not leading it. He’s a good young rider, better than many who are a lot older, and he’s now in your Wing. Think yourself lucky.” L’ars sounded almost smug.

A’nar mentally chalked up a mark against his new Weyrleader’s judgement, but he could see that L’ars wasn’t going to be shifted. “So just give me another young bronzerider as a wingrider. I’ll take one from the next lot of weyrings.”

“This is a way of upping your bronze strength now, *and* getting someone trained to lead. With G’tin as well, that’s two more experienced bronzeriders for you, A’nar. It’s a good bargain for StormWind. I want you to go along with this. Besides, you’re good at bringing the younger men along.” The Weyrleader went on smoothly, “I can see if D’zan will take R’nen – it is R’nen? Or we can exchange him for your new man, if he’d rather not stay with StormWind. Or I’d be glad to have him in FireStorm.”

“I can ask him,” A’nar replied doubtfully. “That’s not the point, though.”

“It’s one of the points. The other one is who you’re going to pick as replacement. You don’t *have* to go with my recommendation there.”

“If I prefer someone else, you’ll transfer my choice?”

L’ars leaned back negligently in his chair. “Of course. I said that at the meeting.”

A’nar frowned, but didn’t reply. L’ars had said quite a lot at that meeting, and some of it still rankled.

“Here, take a look at who’s out of the running.” L’ars pushed a sheet of hide across the table. “That’s the current situation, and my recommendations. You can see the men who are already spoken for, so you can’t have any of those. Apart from that, anyone with three Turns in the Wings, and at least twenty-two Turns of age. Your choice.”

A’nar scanned the list of riders and Wings. The name suggested for StormWind was unchanged, and riders whom he’d prefer had already been promoted elsewhere. “He’d not be my first choice. But I’ve had T’noh in my Wing before...”

L’ars shook his head. “Not him. I’ve not seen Z’hon yet, and I’m recommending him there. What about—”

A’nar interrupted. “Don’t rush me.” He looked down the list again, then laid it on the desk, trying to keep the annoyance from his face. “I’m going to be looking at people who are a long way from my first choice, and then breaking in a new bronzerider that I don’t want as well as a new wingsecond that I wouldn’t have chosen. What about

leaving the wingsecond for a while? Or give me one or the other.”

L’ars said firmly, “Choose your man, A’nar, and I’m not moving G’tin.” He folded his arms and looked at A’nar with a thoughtful expression on his face. “If you don’t think you can work with all these changes, maybe it’s time for a break? You’ve got good experience with weyrings, and we’ve men ripe to lead...” The Weyrleader raised questioning eyebrows.

A’nar realised he’d been left with no room to manoeuvre. He scanned the list one more time, committing the names to memory, then laid it on the desk and stood up sharply. “I’ll let you know my choice of wingsecond first thing tomorrow, *sir*.” He saluted as officiously as he could manage, turned on his heel, and left without waiting for an answer. Shaffit, he needed a drink!



#### 2959.02.16

“I’m the one to get the boot, I suppose?” R’nen’s weycot was steamy in the heat of a summer afternoon, and the brownrider stood with his back to the window, casting his face into shadow.

“I’m sorry, R’nen. L’ars is insisting I replace one of you, and when it comes down to it, V’kam is senior. Some of the brownriders are going to the Weyrwing Wing. Do you want me to see if—”

R’nen interrupted. “No thanks, sir. I’d rather be fighting Thread than nannying weyrings, rank or no rank. Besides, I doubt the Weyrwingmaster would want me near his girls.”

“Right. You’ve never got into any scrapes with weyrings, though, have you?”

“No scrapes,” R’nen said, grinning, “But a man likes to keep his options open. So, who’s getting the knot?”

A’nar trusted R’nen enough not to take that too seriously. “I’ve picked B’veed, from SkySoaring. L’ars’ suggestion, but he seemed about the best of the ones everyone else had left me. If he fouls up, though, he’ll be out on his ear, and I’ll try and get you back in. One problem bronzerider at a time is enough.”



#### 2859.02.19

D’vrey added a heaped spoonful of rivergrains to his plate and offered the serving spoon to Eilsa, but the greenrider shook her head and took some tubers instead. They’d been chatting as they moved slowly along the serving table. One of the helpers brought out a pot of fish stew that smelled delicious, so D’vrey decided to wait while she made room for it on the table.

“We’ve got our new wingsecond now,” Eilsa said. “B’veed. Instead of R’nen. R’nen’s staying with us, though – he didn’t go off to the Weyrwing like some of them.”

D’veey shrugged, not really interested in the brownrider’s fate. “I don’t think I would, either. I never much fancied teaching, even when I was going to be a harper. Is B’veed any good? He Impressed after us.” Being passed over in favour of someone with less experience was rather frustrating.

“He seems all right so far. Nice-looking, too.” With a rather smug smile, Eilsa added, “Kashmyth’s definitely got her eye on his Kridzeth.”

“Kashmyth’s got her eye on anyone with wings,” D’veey teased. Eilsa was a former classmate, and one of the few people with whom he felt relaxed enough for a bit of joking. Unlike most women in his experience, she said what she meant and didn’t leave you trying to work it out.

“Suits me,” Eilsa laughed. “Not that your Akrenth has ever shown much interest – is he one of those bronzes that thinks greens are beneath him?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “But we were lucky. I mean, we’d heard about all the other Wings: it sounds to me as if A’nar got last pick, or something. We didn’t really have anyone to promote, you see. Or maybe he just took a long time to make his mind up. Can’t think who else he might have chosen.”

Rather stiffly, D’veey said, “There are plenty of bronzeriders of the right age, and with the right experience. I made a list...”

Eilsa was staring at him. “Oh! I’m sorry, D’veey. I didn’t think *you’d* be interested. You’re not – I mean, in class, you never seemed interested in that sort of thing. Leading people, and all that.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” D’veey wondered indignantly, though it was a little disconcerting that she’d worked out that he’d hoped to be chosen when he hadn’t said so. He answered firmly. “I’m a bronzerider. Bronzeriders are supposed to be leaders. That’s how it works.”

Eilsa nodded and said apologetically, “I know how it works. And you were always good in the drills. Well, I expect there’ll be other chances. The Weyrleader will want the Wings to keep on having mostly bronzeriders as wingseconds now, won’t he?”

“That would make sense,” D’veey agreed. As he helped himself to the fish stew, he silently resolved, ‘And next time, it’s going to be me.’



### 2859.2.27

Sitting in his armchair on the night before an early morning ’Fall, A’nar considered his new wingsecond. He’d finally decided to follow L’ars’ original suggestion, and he had to admit that it looked as if the Weyrleader had made a good choice. Even though he only just had the required three Turns in the Wings, B’veed knew what he was doing. He was hard-working, good in the air and attentive to what

was going on around him – at least in drills. After his first actual Threadfall as wingsecond, he’d told A’nar that it had been a struggle to keep track of the Wing at the same time as flaming and watching for Thread, but he seemed to have been doing all right since then.

V’kam had taken the young man under his wing, and A’nar was amused to see B’veed start to model his leadership style on the senior wingsecond. There were worse models, he thought. Perhaps L’ars’ decision hadn’t been such a bad one. *That* decision, anyway. He was trying not to think about G’tin unless he absolutely had to, and usually found that a stiff drink after drill helped him to put the young fool out of his mind. A’nar noticed that there was some friendly rivalry between him and B’veed. The two were much of a type, but G’tin probably had the edge when it came to flying and judging the fall of Thread. Shaffit! That was not what he wanted to be thinking. Well, ’Fall again tomorrow, over Dorado and Thornblaze. After that, he was going to make sure G’tin really had something to work at in drills. He’d see what B’veed was made of, too...



### 2859.3.27

From his seat opposite Eilsa at one end of a long table, D’veey had a good view of the Weyrhall door and the people arriving for lunch. A tall figure with a wingsecond’s knot caught his attention, and he asked his companion, “R’nen’s your wingsecond again?”

“For the moment,” Eilsa answered. She looked pretty with that regretful expression on her face. “B’veed and Kridzeth got injured in the ’Fall three days ago, and they’re going to be out of action for a few sevendays. A’nar asked R’nen to fill in until they’re better.”

“What happened?” D’veey asked curiously.

“I didn’t see it, but it was right at the start, during the changeover with Eastern. The wind was against us, and that changeover is tricky when it’s over land. I heard they turned right into a clump. Kridzeth got a hole in his mainsail and B’veed’s knee was scored. He’s still in the infirmary and Kridzeth won’t be flying for a bit. They should be all right soon, though. I mean, they’re not replaced for good.”

“They aren’t? He’ll be wingsecond again when he’s better?”

“That’s what the wingleader said. B’veed’s supposed to be working with V’kam, once he can walk – learning how to do the job, or something like that.”

D’veey frowned. “I know it’s not all about leading in the air, but I’d have thought it came with practice. How do you practise being a good wingsecond on the ground?”

Eilsa looked at him strangely. “You can practise the things on the ground too, I suppose. It’s not just about flying, after all. There’s all sorts of things he can supervise on the ground. And then there’s how to deal with people, and... well, leadership. Being someone people want to follow.”

“Right,” D’vrey said, and continued eating, but the words sounded an echo in his mind.

“Hello, anyone at home?” Eilsa was waving a hand in front of his face, and he realised that he was staring blankly into space.

“Sorry. Just thinking. B’nalsh said that to me, a couple of Turns ago. A wingleader or a wingsecond has to be someone that people want to follow.”

“Well, of course. Why’d he tell you that?”

D’vrey shrugged. “Just... advice, I suppose.”

It wasn’t comfortable advice. B’nalsh had taken him aside to review his progress; it had been rather disconcerting. “You’ve got the potential to lead in the air,” he’d said. “You fly well, you make good decisions and you’ve a good grasp of formations and when to use them. But on the ground... you don’t deal with people well enough.”

Eilsa was looking at him expectantly. Embarrassed, he went on awkwardly, “Said I had to learn to *handle people* better. I’ve been trying – talking to people and so on. Not really sure what I’m supposed to be doing, though. Nobody ever teaches you that.”

Eilsa smiled at him broadly and shook her head. “Oh, D’vrey,” she said in an amused-sounding voice. “Whatever are we going to do with you?”

She did have some ideas, though.



### 2859.06.13

Rain beat on the roof of A’nar’s office as he stood facing his junior wingsecond.

“I’m sorry, R’nen. L’ars told me to appoint another bronzerider as ’second. I’ll be announcing it tonight.”

R’nen gave a rueful smile. “It’s all right. I knew this was only temporary.”

As the wingsecond’s rank cords dropped onto his desk, A’nar said, “Come on, let’s round up V’kam and go and get a drink before dinner.”



### 2859.06.23

It was quite late and D’vrey was tired, but he was still pleased to see Eilsa coming across the Weyrhall with a mug in each hand. He greeted her with a smile. “That thing you suggested? Trying to work out how people would react to what I’m going to say by thinking how I’d feel if they said it to me?”

“Hey, let me sit down, at least.” Eilsa set the two mugs of klah on the table and stepped over the bench to sit. “What about it?”

D’vrey reached for his drink. “I’ve been trying it.”

Eilsa smiled, her large brown eyes widening. “And? What happened?”

“I don’t see how it works. I mean, it only works if they’re going to think the same as you.”

“Well, yes. But people react pretty much the same over a lot of things, you know?”

“I suppose so.”

“For instance,” Eilsa went on, seeming to warm to her subject. “If someone wanted to go to bed with you, and you didn’t seem to catch on, how would they feel?”

D’vrey pursed his lips. “Frustrated?” He looked at her expectantly to see if that was the right answer.

“Exactly!”

“But maybe not,” he said. “They might not be that bothered. I mean, it’s not as if they’re likely to be passionately in love with me. Or they might just, well, *ask*.”

Eilsa rolled her eyes. Clearly, he wasn’t doing very well at this.

After an awkward silence, he asked, “So what’s going on in your Wing?”

Eilsa sounded pained. “Oh, poor B’veed! That injury that he got in ’Fall, it’s not healed properly. Something keeps happening to his kneecap when he’s flying – his knee locks up somehow. One of the healers had to climb up on Kridzeth’s leg and unstick it. He’s not going to be able to come back to the Wing yet – maybe not at all. We’ve got a new wingsecond.”

D’vrey winced at the thought of unsticking a kneecap. “That was bad luck. He wasn’t in the Wing any time at all before he was hurt.”

“Only a few sevendays. So now we’ve got C’rev from FireBlaze. Do you know him?”

“Yes. He’s all right. Competent.”

“And doesn’t he know it! Well, we’ll see how he does.” Eilsa started to sip her klah in silence.

She looked frustrated, D’vrey thought.



### 2859.07.26

From the moment he arrived in StormWind, C’rev showed plenty of promise, to say nothing of confidence in his own abilities. He and Dorth were impeccably turned out, rivalling even V’kam, and he insisted on a similar standard from the wingriders. His inspections were detailed – some would say nitpicking, until A’nar told him not to take all day about it. Any other task A’nar gave him was completed in the fastest possible time, and he was performing well, though perhaps not exceptionally well, in drills and Threadfall.

“So why,” A’nar asked V’kam, one evening in the wingsecond’s spotless living room, “am I hearing from Garath that he’s annoying the life out of everybody? Is something happening when I’m not around? Am I missing something?”

V'kam frowned. "I've heard him pulling rank more often than he should need to. He wants to be treated more formally than R'nen did. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but he does go on about it. I've mentioned it to him – that, and supervising people when they don't need supervising. He seems to ease off when you or I are present, though."

"Rank gone to his head, do you think? Or is it that he's afraid he'll lose respect if he doesn't exercise authority? I've seen that before. Then if someone senior is there, he can let up because he doesn't have to be in charge."

"It could be either, but if it's respect he's looking for, he's going the wrong way about earning it," V'kam said grimly. "And I've told him so. I don't know how much impression it made."

"I'll talk to him."

When he did, C'rev listened gravely, pleaded inexperience, and politely thanked A'nar for the advice. He even seemed to be following it, for a while.



#### 2859.10.28

These late night mugs of klah in the Weyrhall were getting to be a habit. A very pleasant habit, D'vrey thought, and Eilsa was good company.

"So, how are things in StormWind?"

The greenrider gave a dry laugh. "Oh, wonderful. A'nar's snapping at everyone until he's had his second mug of klah in the mornings, but that's nothing new. C'rev's picking on R'nen: that *is* new. V'kam's being terribly proper – I really thought he'd mellowed a bit – and the rest of us are keeping our heads down. Nothing serious."

This sounded interesting. "Is C'rev doing all right?"

Eilsa pulled a wry face. "C'rev thinks he's Pern's gift to dragonkind. Kashmyth says she wouldn't let Dorth catch her if he were the last bronze on the planet. But they both seem pretty keen in 'Fall. Too keen, maybe."

D'vrey tilted his head and frowned a silent question.

"Well," she explained, "Dorth's got a good long flame and he's very accurate with it, but he's sometimes a bit inclined to call things that his neighbours could get better. Kashmyth says it's because he likes to flame more Thread than anyone else."

"That's not good – I mean, we're all taught not to do that." It was a basic discipline, and it was surprising if an experienced rider wasn't following it.

"I know," Eilsa agreed, sucking thoughtfully at her upper lip. "It's like he needs to show what a big powerful bronze he is, better than us mere greens! But A'nar told C'rev to keep him in line, and he's been better since then. Maybe C'rev will settle down when he's got used to the idea of being wingsecond."

"Settle down?" He didn't understand.

"Oh..." She seemed to be unwilling to explain. "Well, he's a bit inclined to throw his weight around. Doesn't seem

to know when he needs to give orders and when he can just let people do what they're going to do anyway. He told me to make sure I got Kashmyth clean after 'Fall – but really, did he think I wasn't going to? Maybe he just likes to feel he's in charge. He's ordering R'nen around a lot, too, but R'nen's just letting him get on with it. He's got more sense to rise to that sort of thing."

"He's got something against R'nen?" People were strange sometimes, but D'vrey realised that there was an obvious explanation here. "Or is it just that R'nen was wingsecond?"

Eilsa said regretfully, "Well, that could be our fault – me and Kadja and Andryce. It was a few sevendays ago, the day before we were flying 'Fall. The three of us were in here playing cards with R'nen. And it wasn't late, really it wasn't, but C'rev came over and told us to go to bed because we had an early start. Which would have been fair enough, except it was only just after supper. We all looked at R'nen, because he was about to clean Andryce out, so it was him that was going to lose out if we didn't finish the hand. And C'rev started sounding off about how we should do as he said, and it wasn't up to R'nen."

That didn't sound good. "What did R'nen do?"

"He just said, "You heard the wingsecond," and picked the cards up, and we went. But I think that's why C'rev's got it in for R'nen." She glanced to make sure nobody was within earshot before adding, "And, of course, everybody liked R'nen as wingsecond. It must be awkward for them both. But R'nen's not making any trouble for him, and C'rev's still down on him."

"Strange," D'vrey said, because some comment seemed to be needed. "So, is—" He swallowed. "Sorry, I'm sounding like one of A'nar's tests, when we were weyrings."

Eilsa smiled cheerfully. "No accounting for people, is there? Personally, I think he's insecure under all that superiority. Though," she added, sounding puzzled, "I get the impression that the Old Man's not too keen on him. But that's enough of Lord C'rev." She laid a hand on D'vrey's arm and smiled warmly up at him. Very warmly, in fact. "You know, if you've finished, we could go back to my weycot... don't look so stunned!"

D'vrey shut his mouth rapidly. Did she mean what he thought she meant? "That would be... nice." That sounded terribly bland. What were you supposed to say when a woman suggested – she *was* suggesting going to bed, wasn't she? He'd had the impression that she was hinting at it a few times now, but women didn't do that often enough in D'vrey's experience for him to be sure.

Eilsa sighed, and patted his arm in an altogether non-amorous fashion. "You're a lovely person, D'vrey. Don't worry, it was just a thought. I suppose I'd better be going. Goodnight." With that, she picked up their empty mugs and went to return them, leaving a bewildered D'vrey behind. Was it something he'd said?



2859.12.10

StormWind's preparations for 'Fall were almost complete, and A'nar and his wingseconds were finishing their final inspection of the dragons and riders. C'rev took care to do a thorough job. The lives of dragons and riders depended on their kit being in good condition, so he gritted his teeth as he checked yet another green's straps to see that the stitching looked sound, and that the rider had all his flying gear. This was such a waste of time! He never found anything, and they ought to be responsible enough to keep their equipment in shape. But then, if there wasn't a need, Wings wouldn't hold inspections, and if these riders had what it takes not to need inspecting, they'd have done better than Impress greens. And why were there so many women in this Wing? He moved on, but not before he heard A'nar calling, "Are you done yet?" The wingleader and V'kam had finished their part of the inspection and were walking back towards their own dragons.

C'rev turned and called, "Nearly done, sir," wondering how they could get through so many riders so quickly. Next in line were Runea and green Lominth, who'd graduated from weyrling training only a few days ago. The girl seemed to be prodding at a strap-buckle. Fussing over nothing, no doubt – that would be typical of a new rider, and this was her first Threadfall in the Wing. "What's wrong with that?"

"I thought I saw something give in the buckle when I pulled it tight, sir."

"Well, this is a fine time to find it! You should check your equipment *before* 'Fall. Let's see." She moved aside, and he tugged at the strap that went through the buckle. Nothing seemed to be falling apart.

"It's fine," he said, letting his annoyance at the delay show. He'd only been taking the time to do a thorough job, and A'nar was still finding fault with him. He needed to hurry now.

"It was when—"

"If you're that worried, you can swap it for another one tonight. But Thread's not going to wait for you to fuss about perfectly good buckles."

At length, they were formed up and airborne. Flightleader R'mal had placed StormWind on the middle level for the start of this 'Fall. The wind over Thornblaze was gusty, which made it harder to predict how the Threads would fall. In those circumstances the agility of the Wing's greens was particularly valuable, even though the Wing above was destroying a proportion of the Thread before it reached StormWind.

Half an hour into the 'Fall, Dorth reported, ***Ianath is flaming well, but the wind catches the clump as he flames. He cannot char it all. It has fallen.***

The low Wing would have to catch the rest, and the bronze passed on the warning. The same was happening above, and the next thing Dorth flamed was a tumbling fragment: *Keep alert. There are lots of these small pieces falling: they're harder to see.*

***I know. A big clump to the left. Lominth claims it.***

Visibility was good and Lominth was flying fairly close to C'rev and Dorth. C'rev glanced across to see how the young green and her rider were doing, just as the wind caught the tangle of Thread that they were aiming at and tossed it off to their left, into the path of Lominth's wing. With no time to climb safely out of the way, the green sideslipped at a sharp angle, and the Thread fell harmlessly beneath her – but the stupid girl was falling off her dragon's back! As Runea pulled herself upright again, C'rev wondered what the Weyrling Wing was teaching them these days.

***Lominth says she is returning to the Weyr. Something has broken: her straps are too loose. Her rider will fix it and return if she can.***

'The buckle!' There must have been something wrong after all. A'nar was going to be furious. This couldn't be his fault!



"She was lucky that she wasn't killed," V'kam said, frowning.

"So was C'rev," A'nar growled, glad only that he'd chosen to discuss it in private with the junior wingsecond. "And he had the gall to blame me for rushing his inspection! When he'd finished blaming Runea for not spotting it earlier, that is. All he had to do was tell me, and I'd have swapped her for one of the replacements. She'd have had time to change to her spare straps, or get another buckle and sew it in."

"He's normally very meticulous in his inspections," V'kam said. "I'm surprised he let that through."

"He normally pulls people up if they can't see to shave in their toecaps," A'nar agreed, "but he let a young, inexperienced rider fly with her straps in a dangerous condition, and that after she'd told him she thought there was a problem. And he still doesn't see that he's at fault. Well, he can reflect on it on his extra night watches, and it had better not happen again. Believe me, those knots of his are dangling by a thread."



2859.12.28

"Looks like my luck ran out, sir," Runea said, her voice thick with the sound of a headcold. She looked rather feverish.

A'nar raised a hand to stop her trying to sit up in the infirmary bed. "Don't get up. I've seen the dragonhealers and I know Lominth isn't scored too badly. She's going to be fine. How are *you* feeling?"

"It's not too bad. I've got a big burn on my left leg, but the healers say it's not too deep. It'll heal all right." Runea raised a hand to her face and A'nar saw that she was

clutching a handkerchief. She dabbed at her nose, then blew it heartily. “Scuse me.”

“You’ve got a cold?”

“Not my day, is it?” the girl said with a faint smile. “To tell you the truth, that’s making me feel worse than the burn is at the moment: I’ve got so much numbweed on my leg that I can hardly tell it’s there.”

“Why were you flying, with a bad cold? You know you should report if you’re ill enough for your flying to be affected. Coughing and sneezing at the wrong moment—” He broke off, seeing the blush coming to her cheeks. “Was that what happened?”

“Don’t blame Wingsecond C’rev, sir, please!” Runea sounded alarmed. “He did ask me if I was all right to fly. I told him I was.”

A’nar took a deep breath and tried not to sound angry. “And were you?” he asked, as gently as he could manage.

She shook her head. “Sorry, sir. I just didn’t want to get in any more trouble.”

“You don’t get into trouble for reporting sick when you *are* sick, greenrider.” He pointed at her injured leg. “But flying when you’re sick can get you into worse trouble than a wingleader can give you. You should have told the wingsecond the truth.”

“Yes, sir,” she said miserably, and wiped her nose again. She didn’t sound convinced.



### 2859.13.01

“Couldn’t you tell that she wasn’t well?” A’nar asked, when he’d called C’rev to his office the next morning.

“She said she was all right.” The wingsecond sounded defensive.

“Runea said she was fit to fly because she was afraid to tell you she wasn’t,” A’nar retorted. “She didn’t think you’d believe her.” He’d finally got the whole story out of her: she felt C’rev resented her because of the earlier accident. “And what does that say about your leadership?” Reminding himself to keep his voice level, he continued, “As a leader, you have to know your people. You have to see beyond the obvious.”

“Was that why she was injured? Because she was ill?”

“She told me that her eyes were watering and her reactions were slow. She was having trouble concentrating. She didn’t see the length of Thread that caught her. What do you think?”

C’rev thought about it, and concluded, “She should have said.”

“Yes, she should. She should have reported herself sick before we even got ready for ‘Fall. But she didn’t. She was there, and you should have seen she wasn’t fit to fly, even if she told you she was. *You* have to decide – or refer it to me if you can’t.”

“She just looked a bit off. Pale. Dabbed her nose with a handkerchief. She wasn’t coughing and sneezing, or anything.”

“And how’s she supposed to do that when she’s flying?” Behind a face mask and goggles, and with leather gauntlets on, dealing with a runny nose could be a serious distraction. “And you must know how much worse a blocked head feels when you’re flying high. C’rev, you’re not thinking. You’ve already nearly got her killed once!” He reminded himself again to keep his voice down and his temper under control.

“I can’t be expected to do their thinking for them!” Now it was C’rev who was almost shouting.

“Yes, you can,” A’nar said angrily. “If that’s what it takes keep them alive, that’s exactly what you’re expected to do.”



### 2959.13.03

D’vrey raised his mug to greet Eilsa. “*Another* wingsecond?”

Eilsa dropped onto the bench and rolled her eyes. “Don’t mention Bronzerider Hard-to-get. Utterly gorgeous, and none of us women have got anywhere at all with him. Kashmyth thinks I’m not trying hard enough. He’s very nice, though.”

“So what happened to C’rev?”

Eilsa gave a smug chuckle. “The Old Man sent him packing. At least, Andryce heard him shouting at A’nar, and the next day he’d gone back to FireBlaze. So now we’ve got T’mist.”

“Do you think he’s going to last?”

“I’m beginning to think you’ve got your eye on those knots,” she teased.

D’vrey shrugged defensively. “Well, why not? I’m doing my best to be worth them. Not that I’d want anything to happen to T’mist, of course. He’s a good sort.”

Eilsa smiled. “Well, good for you.” She sounded as if she approved.

D’vrey took a deep breath, and smiled at her, trying to catch her eye. “We bronzeriders don’t all play hard to get, you know.”

Her mouth opened in surprise. Did she have to smile so prettily? “D’vrey? D’vrey, you’re flirting with me. Do you know, I believe you’re finally getting the hang of it.”

“That’s just as well. Because I’d really like, um. Would you like to come back to my cot? I mean, we’re good friends, aren’t we, and it would be...” Why did she look so pained?

“D’vrey,” she said, and lowered her voice. “I’m sorry. I’d love to, but it’s not a good day for it today.”

“Something’s wrong?”

She shook her head hastily. “No, just the usual thing, but... another time, right? I’d like that.”

“Usual – oh!” He blushed to the roots of his hair. She was talking about women’s troubles. What was a man supposed to say to that?

“Yes, of course. Another time.” Did she mean it, or was that just an excuse? He couldn’t tell. Disappointed, he smiled, and changed the subject to something that had happened in his Wing’s last Threadfall. That sort of thing was so much easier to talk about.



### 2860.02.03

“T’mist and Shaktoth.” A’nar raised his voice and his glass. “May they not be forgotten.” As the circle of riders and friends echoed the names of the dead, he drank, letting the wine seep into the knot of tension that had gripped his chest since the morning’s Threadfall had seen the death – the stupid, wasteful death - of the bronze and his rider. As far as A’nar could gather, they’d skipped *between* with a minor score to Shaktoth’s wingtip, and never emerged.

He turned away from the circle of people, signalling that the formal part of the memorial was over, and stared into the fire. The loss of this promising young pair was hard to take, and it was unbearably frustrating that he didn’t know why it had happened. Had something distracted T’mist at the crucial moment? The young man had mentioned a day or so ago that they’d never been scored since they graduated. Dangerous words! Was the fact that it could happen to them such a shock that he didn’t visualise his return properly? He would never know.

He finished his wine quickly and went to get a refill. R’nen was standing by the table. Without a word, the brownrider picked up a wineskin and offered to pour.

“Is that the red? Yes please.” He needed it now. These memorials were the worst times of all, but he didn’t allow himself to drink until he’d said the words of StormWind’s simple ceremony. To dishonour the dead with slurred speech was unthinkable. Now that it was over, he could safely take refuge in the wine. First, though, there was something else he should do. He reached into his pocket with his free hand.

“Here, R’nen.” He held out the knotted cords. “If I have my way, you’ll get to keep them. I can’t promise, though: L’ars is still keen on training future leaders.”



### 2860.02.25

“A’nar, you need a new wingsecond.”

The wingleaders’ meeting was almost over when L’ars leaned back in his chair and fixed his eyes on A’nar. “You’ve not replaced T’mist yet. You can’t keep putting R’nen back in.”

“I’m not going to *keep* putting R’nen back in,” A’nar answered. “I’ve *put* R’nen back in. The Wing needs a bit of stability, and all these youngsters aren’t giving it. R’nen does a good job, and I don’t want to make any more changes for a good long while.”

“Every time you put R’nen back, it means your Wing’s having two changes rather than one,” L’ars argued. “I know you’ve had some back luck...”

“I’ve had some immature young men forced on me in the name of leadership training,” A’nar corrected, aware that this wasn’t entirely accurate. “And now one of them’s dead, one has a long-term injury, and the other smooth-talking young tunnelsnake got sent back to his old Wing with his tail between his legs – and you’re welcome to him, Th’rin. But that’s enough. I need someone who knows what he’s doing, makes good decisions in the air and doesn’t believe he hatched from the First Egg. R’nen fits the bill. I’m not keen on trying anyone else at the expense of my Wing’s safety – not for a long, long while. I don’t understand why you’re still picking on StormWind over this. Other Wings still have one brownrider as a ‘second.”

“As *senior* wingsecond,” L’ars corrected. “And they’re bringing on a bronzerider as junior. You know it’s important that we bring on our potential leaders. I’m not singling you out, A’nar: it’s just that so far the longest you’ve kept one is five months.” He looked round the table. “And the rest of you, we’re continuing this policy. If any of you need a replacement, you still need to include a younger bronzerider whose leadership potential will be developed by the position.”

Into the silence that followed, R’mal said, “If you are having difficulty finding a suitable young man, perhaps you should allow dear R’nen to fill the breach for now while you bring on one of your own young bronzeriders to be ready for the position. G’tin will be old enough in a Turn or two, or we could transfer somebody else with leadership potential now, for you to get to know him and train him in StormWind’s ways.”

A’nar nodded slowly. “That could work.” R’mal’s idea had definite merit. He could weigh up a likely young man without the risk of promoting him, and if that didn’t work he could try someone else. Though, if he were honest, he had to admit that G’tin even now would have done a better job than... well, certainly than C’rev. He’d had high hopes of B’veed and T’mist. “All right,” he said. “But R’nen gets a Turn or so at it first: that’s only fair.”

“No,” L’ars countered, with a glance across the table to where Z’hon sat glowering. “I’d like to see StormWind settled with someone suitable before then. You’ve got a point about too many changes, though. One more try, A’nar, and then if that doesn’t work out you can follow R’mal’s plan. But you’re to give whoever it is a fair crack at it. Who do you want?”

A’nar shook his head. “As I’m not planning any changes, I don’t have anyone in mind,” he temporised. He didn’t really want to be obstructive, and L’ars wasn’t being unreasonable, but A’nar was genuinely concerned at the effect of so much instability in the Wing’s leadership. “After the last *three*,” he continued, emphasising the

number, "I'd prefer someone more mature, but if bronzeriders aren't at least wingseconds by the time much less experienced men are getting promoted, there's generally a reason for it."

"You want someone who'll fit straight in, after all the trouble you've had," Th'rin commented. "Someone a little older, you say? What else?"

"Competent, of course – someone who knows Threadfighting and will give the right orders in 'Fall. Able to keep aware of what's going on, so that he doesn't get himself killed while he's doing it: that would be useful. Someone who thinks about what he's doing and doesn't think he knows it all – he's got to listen and learn. If I can get that, I'm less set on the age. I don't need someone who can charm the wherries from their nests, but I don't want another one who lets his rank go to his head."

"Well, give it some thought," L'ars instructed. "Let me know in the next few days. And you'd better warn R'nen."



2960.02.26

Walking along the dunes at Magarula while Garath dried himself in the late afternoon sun, A'nar mulled over the previous afternoon's conversation. The Weyrleader was going to want a decision soon. It went against the grain to replace R'nen yet again, but he didn't think he was being unreasonable in what he expected of a wingsecond.

***Drannath asks if we are busy. I tell him we are here and you are thinking.***

*Do you know what he wants – what B'nalsh wants?*

***His rider wants you to see something, if you can come now. He will show us where to go.***

Curious, A'nar turned round and started to walk back towards his dragon. *Tell him we'll be there as soon as we can. I'll get your straps.*

As they emerged from *between* above a long beach, A'nar saw that a Wing was doing a rope drill in tight formation, with a handful of dragons on a higher level dropping the painted creeper-vines. Drannath greeted them and spiralled down to land. The drill continued after he dropped out of his position.

"We're doing a missing man drill," B'nalsh said. "I like to keep my bronzeriders on their toes. That's B'raniz leading now, but I'll take him out in a few minutes, too. Watch the bronze on the left wing."

A'nar watched with as the Wing went through its manoeuvres, which included several changes of formation, while Garath relayed some of the orders that Drannath was sending to the acting wingleader. StormWind did this type of drill occasionally: it was good training for his wingseconds and the other bronzeriders. Perhaps he should do it more often. After a few minutes, one of the wingseconds dropped out and went to join the rope throwers. Shortly after that, the current wingleader was also a

'casualty'. The bronze that A'nar was supposed to be watching swapped smoothly into the leader's position.

"What do you think?" B'nalsh asked after a while. "I've just told him that the wind has shifted to the east."

A'nar watched for a moment longer as the bronze flamed a tangle of rope, and then the Wing realigned itself to better deal with the new angle of the wind. "He's doing well. Is that your junior 'second?"

B'nalsh said, "No. He could be yours, though, if you want him: if you're open to recommendations, he'd be mine. When you were talking yesterday about what you wanted in a wingsecond, I thought he might suit your Wing. I wanted you to see him in action, though. I don't know if you know him, but don't be put off by his manner. He's a thinker more than a talker, but he works hard, and he's very precise in the air. Now, it's time this drill ended: shall I call him down when I dismiss them?"

"Please do," A'nar said. "Garath says that's Akrenth. I do know them: Akrenth Hatched while I was Weyrleader. Haven't seen that much of him since, though." He frowned, remembering the awkward young man.

"I think you'll find he's improved."



D'vrey always enjoyed the 'missing man' drills, which B'nalsh held every few sevendays. All the bronzeriders got the opportunity to act as wingleader or 'second, and B'nalsh would sometimes even put a brownrider into a wingsecond spot. D'vrey approved: it was important for a Wing to be able to carry on without falling to pieces in the event of losing its leaders. The Weyr's history had shown many times how easily that could occur. This time, he got to fly in both the wingsecond's and the wingleader's roles, and he thought he'd acquitted himself reasonably. They'd not been paint-stained, they'd not missed much rope, and the Wing had held together under his instructions as he responded to the supposed wind changes and other orders that Drannath was passing to Akrenth.

He was surprised, though, when Akrenth told him, ***The Wing is dismissed to return to the Weyr and wait for Drannath's rider to return for the debriefing. Drannath says we are to join him on the beach. Garath is there. His rider wants to meet you.***

Garath's rider? A'nar wanted to meet him?

StormWind had just lost their wingsecond, hadn't they? With a lurch of hope somewhere in his chest he wondered if this time he were being considered. But Eilsa had said that R'nen was back in the post, and she'd seemed to think it was permanent this time, though he wasn't sure how she'd know. What could A'nar want, then? Well, no doubt he was about to find out. They glided downwards in a broad circle.

He had a sudden memory of A'nar, his first Weyrleader, lecturing the bronzeriders in the class on what he called their "particular duties and privileges." "A

bronzerider must be able to make conversation in any social situation,” he’d said.

‘Let’s hope I can do it now,’ he thought.



D’verey got the klah this time, and he was sitting with two mugs in front of him when Eilsa arrived, her clothes wet and clinging from the heavy rain outside. He tried not to smile too much as he patted the bench alongside him.

“Well,” he said quietly, when she sat down next to him at the long table. “You’ve got another new wingsecond. Hope this one’s going to last a bit longer than the rest.”

Eilsa looked puzzled. “No. R’nen’s doing it. We’re all hoping there’s not going to be any more swapping around.”

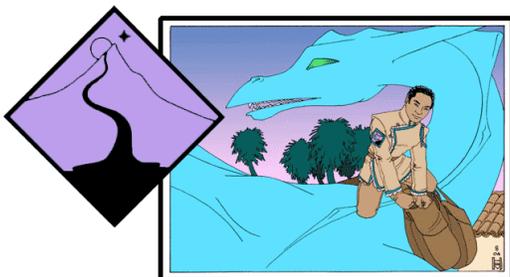
D’verey shook his head. Still keeping his voice down, “See, this time I know something you don’t. The Weyrleader insisted on another bronzerider. A’nar hasn’t announced it yet, because he needed to talk to R’nen first, but you’ll hear tomorrow morning. You mustn’t tell until then, though – I mean, don’t let on that you knew before it was announced. But I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Her eyes widened. “You?” she mouthed.

He nodded, allowing his smile to break out at last.

To his astonishment, she threw her arms round him and kissed him thoroughly. “Hey, am I still allowed to do that - *sir?*”

Oh, yes. She was. She definitely was.



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