
Turning Point

by Juniper

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2860.06.24

“Seems to me,” J’son said, as he scrubbed the stench of ash and firestone from Rohoth’s back, “the Old Man’s losing his edge.”

G’tin was astride Fordath’s neck, using a brush on the bronze’s neck-ridges and wishing only for sleep. It had been a chilly ’Fall in the early morning, and though it was light now, they’d spent most of the time straining to see while battling gusty winds. He answered without thinking, and without stopping what he was doing. “What do you mean?”

“Well, do you remember just after we headed inland into Dorado, when the wind got up and shifted south? When he tried to change our angle and spacing, it took him three attempts to get it right – three different orders, and we were being blown together all that time. Rohoth nearly went into Cuvorth, we were that close. And he’s been like a wherry with a sore head at drill – and in the briefing this morning.”

G’tin frowned. J’son was right on both counts, in fact, but A’nar’s temper was simply a fact of life at present, and G’tin had no intention of discussing it. “It’s hard to tell, when the wind is still changing, especially when it’s dark. Besides, how often does he make the wrong call when we’re flying? Hardly ever.”

It wasn’t surprising that a wingleader couldn’t always gauge the wind-shifts instantly. For one thing, they didn’t happen all at once, and at night, of course, it was simply harder to see how the Wing was dealing with it. It was unusual for A’nar to get such things wrong, though: he sometimes seemed to have an uncanny ability to predict that sort of change from the slightest variation in the wind. Or maybe Garath was particularly sensitive? G’tin considered that for a moment. Either way, it was one of the instincts that made A’nar such a good leader in the air – an opinion that G’tin had never had cause to question, whatever happened on the ground.

From the other side of Fordath, K’nis chuckled. “I never thought I’d hear you defending him.”

Disliking the critical tone of the conversation, G’tin said firmly, “He’s not so down on me any more, and I’ve learned a lot from watching how he does things.”

It was more than a Turn since he’d lost the Weyrleadership to L’ars and been put in StormWind. The first few months had been very difficult, but A’nar was at last easing up on him a little. Although he could still expect the wingleader to point out any perceived fault, he

and Fordath were flying better than ever before, and G’tin was resolved that A’nar should be hard pressed to think up anything to criticise. It seemed to be working. Besides, with the arrival of bronzerider T’yan in the Wing, he wasn’t the sole target any more.

“And another thing,” J’son began, and started to relate another supposed error on A’nar’s part – with much less justification, in G’tin’s opinion.

He interrupted, “He’s the wingleader, J’son. Give it a rest.”

J’son shrugged, but he stopped talking. As G’tin slipped into the water from Fordath’s neck, he noticed R’nen looking towards them. The brownrider said nothing, though, so G’tin moved round to work on his bronze’s hindquarters.



“They’re starting to notice.” Sitting by the open window of his weycot in the late afternoon, R’nen kept his voice low.

“Who? What did they say?” It had to happen eventually, but V’kam still felt a sense of impending trouble at R’nen’s words.

“It was J’son, sounding off to G’tin and K’nis about the wingleader making mistakes – or so *he* thought. G’tin pulled him up, but I suppose... that wind change....”

“Could have happened to anyone.” V’kam completed the sentence and pressed his lips together for a moment before conceding, “But it doesn’t usually happen to him.” He cast his mind back to the incident. “I think I’d have called that differently. You don’t think he was drinking before the ’Fall?”

“He wasn’t – at least, I passed right next to him before the briefing, and I couldn’t smell any on his breath. And didn’t he tell you he never has any the day of a ’Fall, or the night before?”

“He did – and I believe him. The last thing he wants is anything going wrong in ’Fall. You know how he gets if there are casualties. But don’t let him know you’re checking.” A’nar wasn’t, as far as V’kam knew, aware that R’nen was also keeping a discreet eye on him, and V’kam intended to keep it that way for as long as possible.

“I won’t.”

V’kam frowned, replaying today’s incident in his mind. “It could just have been a bad decision,” he hazarded.

“Or it might not,” R’nen pressed. “Or he might just not be on form for some reason.”

“Or we might just be spending too much time taking everything he does to pieces,” V’kam said firmly, but he sounded more confident than he felt. This *was* a fairly minor thing, as it turned out, but it might not have been. Instinct and observation told him that A’nar had been less decisive than usual over the last few sevendays, not performing to his usual standard – and V’kam hadn’t said anything, just watched, and tried to make sure that A’nar didn’t spend too many evenings alone. They had had some pleasant conversations in one or other of their weycots, sometimes with R’nen and whoever his latest girl was, and more recently with D’vrey, the young bronzerider who’d been put in as wingsecond instead of R’nen, or other

wingmates. Sometimes they'd joined the crowd in the Weyrhall instead.

Of course, that left the rest of the evening, and all night. He wasn't cherishing any illusions that A'nar wasn't drinking then. So far, though, the wingleader had kept his word about not being drunk on duty.

The creak of R'nen leaning back in his cane chair pulled V'kam back from his reverie.

"So, what are we going to do about it?" the brownrider asked. "Shards, we'll be for it if something happens and it comes out that we knew about him."

"I know." V'kam stared through the slats in the window blind for a few moments, then turned back to R'nen. "Are you saying that you think I should report the incident? If things had worked out differently today..." Someone might have been killed during that manoeuvre, if the Fall conditions had been worse – or even if they hadn't, the wind coming at a difficult angle made accidents more likely. He'd told A'nar that the first time A'nar's performance suffered because of his drinking, he'd inform the flightleader. He'd meant that – but he wasn't certain that that was the problem today.

R'nen grinned. "Of course I'm not – what's to report, if he wasn't drinking? Besides, he might be a problem, but he's StormWind's problem. I want him back the way he was – and I'll bet you the others would agree."

V'kam wasn't entirely convinced, but didn't let it show. "I'll talk to him after dinner."



The knock on the door was no surprise, but the sense of hopelessness settled more heavily, like a physical weight on A'nar's chest.

"Come!"

He didn't bother putting the glass down. He should never have poured it; he'd been sitting there for several minutes just looking at it, trying not to take the first sip.

It was V'kam who entered, of course. It would be. A'nar watched the wingsecond's gaze slip from his face to the full glass, to the almost-full wineskin on the table beside him, and back to his face.

He wasn't going to offer the man a seat. "So. You reckon I used up my one chance, then?" His voice was sour; even his throat felt sour.

"Perhaps. What do *you* think?" V'kam's tone was crisp and challenging.

"I think I could have got someone killed," A'nar said angrily. "I made a sharding bad decision because I couldn't think straight. I guess you think I must have had my head in a wine barrel. And you know what the irony is?"

He fixed V'kam with a stare. The wingsecond lifted his eyebrows by the merest hint. "No, sir?"

"You know what the irony is? I haven't touched a drop. I haven't had a drink for four, five days. The trouble is, I haven't sharding-well *slept* for four days, either. I'm so tired I don't know where to put myself."

The other man gave a faint smile, but his eyes were wary and he shot another obvious glance towards the untouched glass. "How about bed, sir? It sounds as if you're tired enough to sleep now."

A'nar shook his head in frustration. "I thought that last night. And the night before. I've been sitting here thinking I ought to eat something, but I don't want to get out of this chair and walk across to the Weyrhall. And then I was thinking, just one glass, to help me sleep. But that's how it started, you know – just one glass to help me sleep." He could feel his resistance wearing thin; he knew he shouldn't be talking like this, shouldn't be exposing himself in this way – it was as if his mouth were running ahead of his thoughts, with his will as a mere observer. "And then it became two, and..."

With sudden fury, he flung the untouched wineglass across the room, leaving a trail of red drops across the rug and a pile of glass where it splintered at the foot of the wall. Brin, his firelizard, took off with a shrill cry at the sound, then settled back down on the top shelf. A'nar went on grimly, his voice forceful. "And it's not going to happen again. Because I want to be able to look myself in the face." He was almost shouting, now. "I could have got someone killed today, and I hadn't even been drinking. That's so senseless! All the time I *was*, nothing happened, and when I finally decide I've got to stop... I can't *think!*" He took a deep breath and forced himself to speak more quietly. "Couldn't work out what I wanted, and then gave the wrong orders. Every night I've been lying awake, sweating like a pig and turning over and over and just wanting to get up and... get something. All because I didn't have a drink!"

He paced the room, looking anywhere but at V'kam and wanting only to get out of there, but there was no way he could run out now without losing his last shred of dignity. He took a deep breath, looking down at hands that, mercifully, had stopped the trembling they'd started earlier.

He could almost feel V'kam's eyes boring into him, but the wingsecond's tone was almost gentle when he spoke. "You're talking about that wind change? Nobody was hurt, sir. It was awkward to keep station, that's all." He added quietly, "Is there a cloth? You don't want to let the wine stain your rug."

A'nar answered with a wave towards the shelf, and watched in surprise as V'kam dropped to his knees, blotted the rug with swift, efficient movements and then picked up the broken glass. It was the last thing he'd have expected the man to do, but it was surprisingly calming to watch, and by the time V'kam stood again, A'nar was mentally berating himself for his outburst.

"In that case," the wingsecond challenged, "what are you going to do now, sir? It's nine days until we have to fly 'Fall again: do you think you can be all right by then? Or are you giving up, going back to..." he raised the bundle of wine-stained cloth, "this."

A'nar lurched to his feet, picked up the wineskin, and thrust it towards V'kam. "Get this sharding stuff out of my weycot. And the rest of it from the shelf – yes, down there – and anything else you can find. Bring it out at the next memorial, or drink it yourself, or pour it in the midden, whatever you want, but don't let me see it again. I'm through with it." He stepped back but didn't sit again.

V'kam turned the wineskin over and checked its fastening.

A'nar went on grouchy, "So you and R'nen can stop playing milk-mother." He saw the fleeting surprise on

V'kam's face at R'nen's name. Hadn't he realised how much harder it was for the brownrider to keep an eye on him without it being obvious, now that he wasn't wingsecond? "Yes, of course I knew. Did you tell him, or did he go to you?"

"He came to me. I gather he... found you at a bad moment, one afternoon."

"Shaffit!" The man used words like a mealy-mouthed harper, when he wasn't barking orders at drill. "Well, it's over. You don't need to worry any more. There aren't going to be any more *bad moments*."

V'kam was silent for what seemed like an age, but couldn't have been longer than a trip *between*. Then he nodded. "I'm glad. Go and get some rest, sir. I'll finish up in here, and get rid of... everything. Dinner's over, but would you like me to bring you some food across?"

Suddenly so weary that even the thought of eating was too much effort, A'nar shook his head. "I'll go myself in a bit, if I want to." He hesitated, then added roughly, "I hadn't had any of that," meaning the wine.

Without waiting for a response, he made his way into the bedroom and closed the curtain across the doorway, wondering if V'kam would actually believe him, believe his intentions.

He wasn't sure that he believed himself.



It was dry and relatively cool when G'tin and K'nis walked back to their weycots after supper.

"I hate early 'Falls," K'nis said. "Either you don't sleep, and spend the day blinking like a watchwher at noon, or you do sleep and then you can't sleep at night."

Behind them, G'tin heard a female voice saying goodnight to a friend. "Sleeping half the fifth bell doesn't make up for being up all night," he replied. "I'll sleep."

Both their weycots bordered the open swathe of grass that divided StormWind's area into two, so their usual way home took them past the outermost of FlameWind's cots and behind the wingleader's larger accommodation. As they approached, it looked as if bronze Garath was asleep already. By unspoken agreement they fell quiet as they rounded the weycot and skirted his wallow.

From within the wingleader's cot, A'nar's voice rose, loud enough for his words to be clear.

"I want to be able to look myself in the face. I could have got someone killed today, and I hadn't even been drinking. That's so... senseless! All the time I *was*, nothing happened, and when I finally decide I've got to stop... I can't *think*..."

As the voice dropped back to an inaudible level, the meaning of the words became clear. G'tin looked at K'nis, who murmured, "Oh, shells!" and stopped.

"Move on," G'tin mouthed, and did so himself. They continued in silence until they were inside K'nis's weycot, which was the closer of the two.

"Did that mean what I thought it meant?" the brownrider asked quietly. He sounded rather shocked.

"He must have meant that wind-change that people were talking about," G'tin replied. "Where he couldn't get us

positioned right. It sounded as if he wasn't on form this morning."

"It sounded as if he was drinking too much," K'nis corrected. "If he's doing that and making mistakes because of it..."

"That would be dangerous," G'tin agreed, rehearsing the overheard words in his mind. "But he said the problem was that he *wasn't* drinking," he said reasonably. A flash of memory brought the voice of Weyrlingsecond K'bort into his mind: "Overhear all the conversation, or don't pay attention to the half you hear." He'd made a fool of himself then, and maybe done worse, through misunderstanding something he'd overheard about himself. He wasn't going to do that again.

"If *not* drinking makes him like that, then believe me, he's drinking," K'nis countered, then eyed G'tin suspiciously. "You're pretty calm about this, given the way he's been treating you."

"Don't believe it," G'tin said dryly. A Turn as Weyrleader followed by a Turn of not rising to A'nar's sniping had given him plenty of practice at maintaining a cool exterior. He frowned as he tried to think it through, and turned to stare out of the window.

It was entirely normal for dragonriders to drink, and even drink a lot on occasion, but K'nis was right: what they'd overheard suggested something more serious. A wingleader being dependent on drink wasn't something that ought to be overlooked. Dragons' and riders' lives could be at risk, and his first instinct was to report what he'd heard to V'kam. "Which," he thought bitterly, 'will have half the Weyr thinking I'm trying to get my own back.' But he couldn't take that into account. Confound A'nar for getting himself into such a state! There was only one thing to do – however distasteful it was.

The silence was growing tense. He turned back to K'nis, to find the brownrider watching him expectantly. "So. I'm going to have to go and report my wingleader, on account of a snatch of overheard conversation. It doesn't sound very honourable, does it? You don't take notice of things you overhear." That convention was a necessity everywhere, as most people had far less privacy than dragonriders.

K'nis flushed at the last point. "You're right. Well, it's not as if he's turning up for drill unable to walk straight, so he isn't *very* likely to get us all killed." The irony faded from his voice as he considered it further. "Especially if he's stopped – it might do something for his temper, even. Maybe there's some way we can find out if the wingseconds know what's going on? If not..." He shrugged.

G'tin shook his head: the exchange had confirmed his conviction that this was necessary. "I'm going to V'kam. He might know anyway: A'nar had to be talking to somebody, and he spends time with V'kam. But if this isn't being handled, it has to be. And don't tell anyone else. It's not our place and it wouldn't help A'nar or the Wing." He'd been the unwilling victim of Weyr gossip often enough to feel a hint of unaccustomed sympathy for his wingleader at that prospect.

K'nis looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded. "We're going to V'kam," he corrected.

G'tin wasn't going to argue with that.



By the time V'kam had transferred several skins of mediocre wine and a couple of bottles of barely drinkable spirits from A'nar's weycot to his own, set aside the pieces of broken glass to return to the glass-smiths for reuse, taken the stained rug over to the laundry so that it could get attention first thing in the morning, and rinsed the wine-soaked rag and left it on A'nar's window-ledge to dry, he was longing for a shower. A'nar's cot was quiet and dark; he hoped the wingleader was asleep.

He continued to turn the conversation over in his mind as he walked the short distance to his own cot, and concluded that this had to be progress, even though A'nar certainly had a struggle ahead of him. V'kam had seen the grip that drink could get on a fellow rider before: he wasn't too optimistic about A'nar's good intentions, but if the wingleader was admitting that he had a problem and trying to beat it, that was surely a step in the right direction. Perhaps they could get over this without any more problems, and without anyone else finding out.

There were people going by when Garath's rider was shouting. I think they heard him.

Selputh's news almost stopped him mid-stride. *Who?*

Fordath's and Rikuoth's riders. Someone else was behind, but they turned back. I did not see who that was.

G'tin and K'nis, then. V'kam frowned: that could be a problem. Those two had been in the conversation R'nen had told him about this morning. They'd been there the night the slashers attacked that tithe herd, too – he'd had to make up a tale to cover why they couldn't rouse A'nar. How much had they heard? Sooner or later they were going to put the pieces together.

Why didn't you say something then?

People are always walking by. But you are thinking about people finding out, so I am telling you now.

Did they hear anything?

I do not know. It was when Garath's rider was throwing things. After a moment's reflection, the bronze added, They looked as if they heard something. They looked at each other the way you humans do when you want to know what the other one is thinking. Shall I ask Fordath?

No! Alarm made the response rather sharp. *I'm sorry, my friend. But I don't think that would help.*

A'nar certainly hadn't kept his voice down at that point, and the thin walls and wide open windows of a weycot gave only the illusion of privacy: they were no barrier to sound. He tried to remember what exactly A'nar had said. Would anyone who overheard that part of the conversation have been able to work out what was going on? He'd have to see if he could find some way of calming their suspicions. That meant another excuse, another deception.

You could tell them the truth.

He could tell them the truth. That would certainly be simplest. This whole affair could turn into a spinnerweb of lies, if he weren't careful, and he was uncomfortable with that. But then, G'tin wasn't exactly flexible if he thought something was wrong, and he had no reason to like his

wingleader. Would he talk, if he knew? Would K'nis? Would knowing about A'nar's problems affect their attitude, their commitment to the Wing? And, Faranth, who was the third person? Had they heard anything?

As he climbed the steps and entered his weycot, possibilities and probabilities gave way to the continuing debate that he was conducting with himself. Was covering up A'nar's problem risking the safety of the Wing? He'd thought the chance of that was small, but after today, he wasn't so sure. The longer this deception went on, the greater the chance that it would end badly.



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After the morning drill, V'kam took Selputh's straps to hang them in the storage area of his weycot. This afternoon, he would make a small addition to the padding that the bronze had requested. First, though, there was another matter to deal with, and with luck he could get it done before lunch.

The wingsecond had spent the previous evening wondering how best to approach the conversation with G'tin and K'nis. They could both be prickly individuals at times, though both seemed rather more relaxed than they had been when V'kam first knew them, and despite his qualms about concealing A'nar's drinking, he certainly didn't want it spread abroad by a disgruntled wingrider. 'Of course,' he reflected, "if they follow proper procedure, they should come to me – report what they heard up the chain of command. If they did hear anything.' That was the problem: Selputh had thought they'd overheard something, but neither the bronze nor V'kam knew how much, or if they'd even been able to make out any words. He didn't want to tell them anything they didn't already know.

They were both reliable riders and he'd have thought them trustworthy in a matter like this. If he could allay their concerns, an appeal to Wing loyalty might work. If not, they would see it as their duty to take the matter further, and it would be hard to argue with that. Then again, the hostility between G'tin and A'nar was a wildcard: he couldn't predict how the young bronzerider would-

Fordath says that his rider asks if he and Rikuoth's rider may come and speak to you.

V'kam pressed his lips together and returned from the store into the main room. That in itself was an answer to one question: they wouldn't be coming if they hadn't heard too much for comfort. He was going to have to take them into his confidence.

The two riders, when they arrived, seemed ill at ease. G'tin came in first and stood facing V'kam, looking as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. K'nis drew alongside, but it was the bronzerider who spoke.

"Sir, thank you for seeing us. It's about something that we chanced to hear. I wouldn't normally take any notice of something overheard, but this sounded like a matter for concern. It may be nothing, but it seemed... appropriate to refer it to you."

V'kam looked from one to another. "Let me put you out of your misery. You overheard the wingleader letting

off steam when I called on him last night, and you're concerned that he's going to lead the Wing into danger." Seeing two identically surprised expressions, he added, "Selputh told me you were passing. I wondered if you'd come."

"It's awkward, with having overheard it," K'nis said. "But worrying, if it meant what it sounded like."

"And what did it sound like?"

"It sounded like he's got a drink problem," G'tin replied flatly. "Has he?"

V'kam searched each face. There was no way round answering that, but perhaps he could win their confidence. "It's being dealt with. The wingleader has had a bad patch; yes, he was drinking too much for a while, but he's getting over it, and he's determined to get over it. There isn't going to be a problem."

G'tin began, "Yesterday's 'Fall, there was a wind change..."

V'kam interrupted him before the details of A'nar's performance could be raked over. "He wasn't drunk, if that's what you're thinking. He never drinks when he's flying. But he was so tired he shouldn't have *been* flying, and too sharding proud to ground himself. He's all right today. Hadn't you noticed?" At drill, A'nar had been almost obnoxiously cheerful after a few hours' undisturbed sleep, and seemed to have developed eyes in the back of his head as he led the Wing through its evolutions. He'd seemed to take particular delight in putting G'tin in the most difficult spots – but that was nothing new. V'kam hoped G'tin's sense of propriety would stop him digging any further now.

The younger bronzerider said ruefully, "Right back to normal. So the Weyrleader's giving him a chance to get himself together?"

V'kam didn't answer, unwilling to tell an outright lie. After a few moments, he said, "You won't, of course, mention this to anyone else." That wasn't a question; with luck they'd take it as an order.

G'tin caught the hesitation and frowned, his eyes fixed on V'kam, but it was K'nis who voiced what his friend was obviously thinking, and his tone was accusing.

"They don't know, do they? The Weyrleader, the flightleader – they don't know. You've covered it up!"

G'tin shot the brownrider a startled glance, then looked back to V'kam for confirmation.

V'kam took a deep breath. "Neither of you is the sort who'd take a good man down just for the sake of it. You could – if you spread this about. But I don't think either of you would live with yourselves very easily if you did that, and you wouldn't be doing the Wing any favours."

"Do they know, sir?" G'tin pressed.

"No, they don't," V'kam snapped, then forced himself to continue more calmly, as if this were the most normal thing in the world. "And that's how it should stay," he explained. "L'ars would be obliged to replace A'nar – no matter what he wanted to do, as Weyrleader, he'd have to replace him, and this Wing would lose a very good leader. What's more, it would break him, and I'm not prepared to do that. Are you? R'nen and I are watching him closely, and we're sure he can pull through this. He's not out of control. He needs his Wing behind him, not people treating

him like a liability – and he certainly doesn't need to lose any more knots."

And that last part, he thought, as he saw G'tin stiffen, was pure manipulation. Time to press the advantage. "And that's about enough of taking the wingleader to pieces. Is StormWind strong enough to help where it's needed, or are you going to go running off to the flightleader now?"

G'tin pressed his lips together, obviously thinking hard. K'nis was watching him. Finally, G'tin spoke in a measured tone. "I think you might find Flightleader R'mal more helpful than you expect, sir. He has always been very good at dealing with difficult personal matters affecting his riders; when I was Weyrleader, I always found him entirely trustworthy in such cases."

The carefully chosen words surprised V'kam; for a moment, rather than just a competent young bronzerider, he saw a former Weyrleader with a good knowledge of the senior riders, used to dealing with the highest ranks of the Weyr. He probably knew R'mal better than V'kam himself did. Shells, for all V'kam knew, he might have had to deal with this sort of problem himself!

G'tin continued, "If you believe that A'nar is not going to make bad decisions in 'Fall, then I can see why you want to keep this quiet, sir. He's a good wingleader, and as yet, nothing has happened to disprove your trust. That wind change yesterday was unfortunate, and people noticed – but as you say, it wasn't caused by drink. But you're taking a risk, and the safety of the Wing has to come first. I'll do what you ask, for now – but I'd urge you to take this to the flightleader."

"I'll think about it," V'kam said, with a curious sense that he was being put on trial. For a few moments, he envied G'tin his clear picture of where his duty lay.

He waited until they'd gone, then went out to Selputh. The dragon rumbled quietly and nudged at his rider's chest with his muzzle.

V'kam mechanically raised a hand to offer a scratch. *When did I learn to bend the truth, and put pressure on people like that?* Right now, he didn't like himself very much. Besides, he'd ended up feeling that the pressure was in the other direction.

You always try to do what is best.

I hope that's what I'm doing this time, he told the dragon.



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