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# Nightwatch, Part 1

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Ninth Pass: 2434.13.20

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

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N'yan stared at A'zelen with a mixture of uncertainty and hope. "You'll do it?" the bluerider asked. "You'll really do it?"

A'zelen frowned down at the record hide, looked up at the bluerider, frowned at his stylus, and finally turned his attention back to the other man, with a sigh. "Are you still here? I thought you were going?"

The younger rider shifted his weight, as if in a struggle with himself, edging towards the door but reluctant to leave. "I am. I've got to. It's just -"

A'zelen sighed again. "You didn't think I'd say yes right away and you'd prepared half a dozen more ways to convince me?"

N'yan blinked, then nodded. "Well, yes. I was going to say, if there's any favor--"

"That's all right. I'm sure you'll do the same for me sometime. Or something." A'zelen made a shooing motion with the hand that was holding the stylus. "Go on. Gather to go to? Pretty lady waiting?"

"Right. Right." N'yan nodded again, opened his mouth as if to say something else, then closed it with another decisive nod, and rushed out the door.

A'zelen shook his head slightly, stared at the door for a moment longer, and then returned his attention to the record hide.

It was full dark and both moons were up, when he put down the last in a succession of cups of klah, and rolled up the hide reluctantly. The sandtable desk was covered in notes that he wanted to keep, so he slid the protective panels over them, and straightened up a few of the messier piles. He didn't want Sharenne to bother with it when she finally got in.

He ran a damp cloth over his face and hair, and changed his shirt for a clean one. After a moment's hesitation, he reached for a middle-weight tunic that was hard-wearing rather than gather-fine, and pinned his wingrider's knots to the shoulder. He had buckled his belt when he remembered and, grimacing, took it off again to put his beltknife on it.

Out in his wallow, Toth stirred at his rider's summons. The brown rose and stretched, then leaned down to help A'zelen in the task of putting on the light flying harness, regarding his rider with a calm and purposeful eye. "We aren't going far," A'zelen told him.

*I know*, said the brown. *It is too short to go between.*

Once up on the brown's neck, A'zelen found that his tunic was just the right weight for the cool, refreshing night breeze coming off the sea. He'd been right; it was no kind of night for wearing flying leathers.

Toth sprang aloft, powerful downbeats of his wings taking him quickly up and over the treeline of the clearing that surrounded the group of weyrcots and wallows that was their home. From the air, A'zelen could clearly see the brighter lights of the Weyrhall off in the distance, and in a building somewhere near it, he knew, would be his weyrmate Sharenne, keeping vigil with one of her friends who had gone into labor earlier that day.

Otherwise, he thought, they might have gone to the gather at Southern Boll themselves. It had been far too long since a really good gather had fallen on a Southern Weyr restday, and while A'zelen didn't really care one way or the other, Sharenne would have enjoyed it. As it was, there'd been no reason to deny his young wingmate's request to swap duty-shifts for the night, so that the bluerider could take a girl he was trying to impress. There was 'Fall tomorrow, but not one to which their Wing was rising. A'zelen really had nothing better to do, and no reason to refuse. It was this, or an empty weyr for the night, reading until his eyes became gritty, without Sharenne to scold him into bed.

Toth winged his way over the dark, moonlit expanse of the Weyr, towards the cluster of lights that marked Southern Hold. Halfway between the looming, open caldera of the Weyr's Hatching Ground and the last cots on the Hold's western border, on the road that followed the path of the cliffs that overlooked the beaches below and the sea, there was a wide clearing. There was an open-sided shelter there, lit by torchlight, and that marked the nominal boundary between Hold and Weyr. With both moons up, the brownrider could even make out the shelter's pale slate roof, and the lighter expanse of the clearing against the dark of the encroaching jungle. Toth made for the shelter.

Most of his fellow riders disliked this duty, even more than they disliked sitting as watchriders on the Hatching Ground's northern rim. This spot was isolated too, but the watch had to be shared with one of the Hold's guardsmen, as well. That could make for a very long night indeed, depending on the guardsman's disposition towards dragonriders, and nothing interesting ever seemed to happen. Riders openly wondered why the watch was kept at all, but it was the Lord of the Hold who had started it, a long time ago. The Weyr had matched his policy with a sentry of their own, and A'zelen, who had a better memory for history than most, knew that if the watch had been quiet in recent memory, it hadn't always been.

Besides, it didn't bother him. Riders took their turns at it - there were far more of them to rotate through the duty than there were soldiers in the Lord's Guard - and swapped the duty when they could. The attitude of the guardsmen never made any difference to him. He was perfectly happy to pass an entire night's watch in silence, left to his own

thoughts. It could be very good thinking-time, with no one to bother him or otherwise demand his attention. A'zelen liked the long hours of the night.



A'zelen and Toth were early. The brown dragon set down next to the shelter, a little closer to the edge of the cliffs overlooking the sea. Toth took watch-duty very seriously, and understood the value of a dragon's eyesight in the darkness. One of the soldiers had once remarked to A'zelen that he liked that you could see the light of the dragon's eyes whenever you looked for them; that he felt secure knowing that the brown didn't doze, like some others, but kept the watch with them. A'zelen brought that up every time one of his wingmates tried to say that all the Lord's men had a problem with dragonriders, or with dragons.

The older, thickset man who came out of the shadows of the shelter raised an arm in salute. "Brownrider," he greeted, respectfully enough.

A'zelen dismounted, and nodded to the man politely. "Guardsmen Vardin," he returned, pleased to see the surprised expression flicker over the man's face. A'zelen's memory for faces and names often surprised people; he had only stood watch with the man once before, that he could remember.

The guardsman turned his head, then nodded. "That's my replacement," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the bobbing light of an approaching glowbasket. "So I'll bid you good night and good watch."

"Good night," the brownrider returned. In the shadow of the treeline, he couldn't see the shape of the tethered horses that he knew were there, though he was sure that Toth could. The guards didn't think it a good idea to keep a horse tethered too close to a dragon for any length of time; even if they'd trusted the dragon's appetite (and some didn't, despite rider assurances), it fretted the horse. Toth was always careful to keep watch for any danger to the guards' mounts, as well.

When the other guard had come within hailing distance, Vardin shouted, "You're late!"

"No," drawled a voice from the darkness. "He's early."

The older man looked at the dragonrider, and A'zelen raised his eyebrows and shrugged apologetically. "I'm early," he agreed.

"Huh," said the guard, and went back into the shelter, emerging a moment later with his swordbelt and sword in hand. "Good night," he said again, and A'zelen, surprised by the friendliness, raised his hand in farewell.

The man who entered the circle of torchlight, passing the older soldier already leaving and handing over his glowbasket, was younger, taller and leaner than his comrade. A'zelen saw him quirk a smile at something the other grumbled as they passed each other. The younger man's pace was almost a casual saunter; that was probably what had provoked a comment from the guardsman anxious to be free of his post, the brownrider thought.

The man's eyes did a quick sweep of the area as he approached; his gaze skipped from A'zelen to the shelter, to Toth, to the road as far as the line of torches lit it, and to the sea, before coming back to settle on the dragonrider. The look was openly assessing, but, A'zelen decided, neutral, not hostile. The wavering light of the torches nearest threw shadows across a lean, craggy face, reflecting sparks from dark, deep-set eyes. He would have remembered that face, A'zelen thought. Definitely. He hadn't met this man before.

The soldier canted his head slightly, and offered a small smile. "Guardsecond Gavril," he said.

"A'zelen," he returned, nodding in a friendly way. "And that's, ah - brown Toth."

The guardsman's expression became fractionally less relaxed, but he nodded towards the dark bulk and glowing eyes without hesitation. "Toth," he acknowledged. Then he did a slight double-take when the dragon seemed to rumble in response.

The brownrider chuckled. That earned him a sharp look, but all the soldier said was, "Let's see if Vardin left us any decent klah."

A'zelen followed him into the shelter.



"You don't stand this watch very often?" A'zelen asked, wrapping his hands around his fifth cup of klah of the night.

The guardsecond glanced at him over the rim of his own cup. "What makes you say that?"

A'zelen shrugged. Though it wasn't always a very rewarding pursuit, he usually at least tried to make some kind of small-talk with the Hold guards. They could turn into an excellent source of information, or an entertaining font of gossip, if they proved talkative. "Haven't seen you before."

That lopsided smile appeared briefly again. "No? I've seen you." At the brownrider's questioning look, he elaborated, "You're in bronzerider D'ralt's wing. A wingsecond, right?"

A'zelen allowed his surprise to show. "That's right."

Gavril smirked, and answered the unspoken question. "Groundcrew duty," he said.

"Oh." The brownrider thought hard for a moment, and realized that while he saw groundcrews all the time, he'd never bothered in that case to regard the men as individuals. He had only been junior wingsecond to D'ralt for a few months, since J'hanos had become senior on L'myr's death. He was a little surprised that the change had been noted so quickly, outside the Weyr.

"I pull this duty now and then, like everyone else," the guard went on. He walked over and seated himself in a chair placed near the nominal entrance of the shelter.

"A lot of riders try to avoid it," A'zelen admitted, not yet sitting down himself. He'd been sitting for hours already that evening. "Shifts get traded for favors a lot."

"Our men aren't fond of it either," the other man agreed. "But it's harder for us to avoid. Especially when it's used as a punishment duty."

"Really? Punishment duty?" A'zelen frowned.

"Light punishment," Gavrill allowed. "Dark-hour watches always are. Men don't like losing their sleep, or leaving their beds."

"Or sitting in the middle of nowhere alongside a dragon?" the brownrider suggested, and the guardsman slanted a look at him.

"Or that. Sometimes."

"So what wrongs get a man sent out here?" A'zelen asked, genuinely curious. Already, this man was proving one of the more talkative of the guardsmen he'd ever stood the watch with.

"Little things. Being late on duty. Being careless with gear. Mouthing off to a captain."

"And if the man's a guardsecond?" he persisted, but with a smile to ease the sting of the question. He'd never run into a guard of any rank out here, though.

Gavrill smiled sardonically, and raised his klah cup slightly. "That'd be...the latter."

A'zelen grinned, amused by the casual admission. "Our wingleaders don't use the assignment as a punishment, but maybe they should."

"What do they use instead?" the guard asked.

"I guess sweepriding's the equivalent," he said, after some thought. Sweepriding could sometimes be a far more important duty than this, but at other times it was more like make-work. Hours spent in the air, hoping desperately to spot something unusual and interesting.

"Well, that's hardly fair," Gavrill said, and A'zelen threw him a questioning look. "Sounds to me like that's making the dragons do most of the work."

A'zelen chuckled. "That's the point. It's mind-numbing **and** ass-numbing."

The guardsecond's eyebrows went up. "I thought flying was supposed to be the greatest thing ever," he said, in tones that indicated that he had never flown on a dragon and wasn't sure about the idea.

"It is, but..." The brownrider groped for a way to put it. "Sometimes it's a pleasure to ride horses, right?"

Gavrill cocked his head, and understanding dawned on his face. "Right. But being in the saddle from sun-up to sundown escorting a tithe-train is still a chore." He looked slightly surprised. "Never thought of dragonriding that way."

"Go on my next sweepride with me, and you'll believe it," A'zelen assured him.

"Thanks," said the soldier, with heavy irony. "I'll pass."



***There is movement in the treeline***, Toth announced, and A'zelen straightened in his chair, earning an inquiring look from the guard.

"Movement in the treeline," he repeated out loud, and then to his dragon, *How big is it?*

"Animal of some kind?" asked Gavrill, standing and moving out from under the shelter, putting his back to the torches.

***Large, and there are several***, the brown reported. ***Men. I hear them.***

"Men?" the brownrider repeated aloud, and the guard's head turned to him quickly, then turned to look up at the dragon's eyes.

"Can't always be whersports, I guess," Gavrill said. He picked up his swordbelt from where he'd hung it over the back of the chair, and looped it over his head and onto his shoulder. He returned into the cover of the shelter, to the center where, next to the table that held klah and a basket of meatrolls, there was a long, low chest. Opening it, he took out a crossbow, and a quiver of bolts that he hooked onto his tunic's belt.

"Uh, wait a moment," A'zelen began, watching these preparations. "Wait -- don't you think we should find out who's out there before we get ready to start shooting?"

The soldier's relaxed manner and easy-going expression had shifted into an intense but calm efficiency. Nonetheless, the look he gave the dragonrider was amused. "What do you want to do, hail them?" Then he held up a quick hand when A'zelen opened his mouth to reply. "Ah! That wasn't a suggestion. If they wanted us to know they were there, they would've walked up on the road."

"Agreed, but --" A'zelen hurried to keep up with the guardsecond's brisk pace as he walked out of the shelter again.

Gavrill interrupted him. "Which way?"

*Toth?*

***They are not yet past where I am sitting.***

A'zelen looked at where the brown's nose was pointing, and indicated that direction. The guard set off at an angle, clearly intending to get ahead of them and intersect their path. A'zelen lengthened his stride to catch up, and resumed his objections. "That doesn't mean they deserve to be shot!"

"Did I say I was going to shoot them?" Gavrill asked, not slowing his pace or looking around.

"The crossbow is somewhat suggestive."

That did earn him a look, but the farther they walked beyond the line of torches, the harder it was to see the details of the other man's face. "It's called 'being prepared'."

*Toth, can you tell me anything else about them?* A'zelen asked quickly.

***I do not think they have seen you, or know that I see them***, the dragon said. ***They do not move carefully. They are sure the trees and darkness hide them.***

"What if it's just a couple of boys?" he tried again, out loud.

The guardsecond did stop then, and turned to him, his features barely visible in the moonlight. "Look, brownrider. I appreciate the dragon's help. If he has any more information I need, I'm all ears. Maybe it is just some boys on a dare. I sure hope so. But then again, maybe it's not, and as a matter of fact it'd probably be better if you went over and waited with your dragon while I find out."

"Then how would I tell you if Toth has any more information you need?" A'zelen countered, and that time, even in the moonlight, the expression that was turned on him was clearly one of exasperation.

When they were within a dragonlength of the treeline, Gavrill held up an arm in the brownrider's direction, the palm of his hand turned outwards, a clear signal for A'zelen to come no farther. Frustrated, but understanding the thought behind it, he stopped, and dropped to one knee in the grass to wait. From this distance he could shout any warning Toth might give, if necessary.

The guardsecond paused, and removed a bolt from the quiver at his belt. He drew back the lever that set the heavy bowstring, and armed the weapon with the bolt; and, unseen in the darkness A'zelen frowned unhappily.

Youngsters from the Hold sometimes made a game out of trying to sneak along the Weyr-Hold road unseen. He'd even heard tell of one group that made it all the way to the Hatching Ground, to be caught when they'd walked back in plain sight on the road, boasting that they'd managed to sneak a look at the queen's eggs. There'd been displeasure over that prank in both Hold and Weyr, but the queen hadn't been disturbed, and no harm was done in the end, so the boys got off lightly.

If whoever was out in the jungle right now had less innocent intent, surely they would have planned better, and avoided the guarded road altogether. Adventurous lads and sometimes young gather-lovers tried to skirt the road and the clearing in the cover of the trees, but never too deeply, for fear of being lost or of running across something dangerous come out to hunt in the night. A'zelen didn't like to think of either the guardsecond, or his quarry, surprised in the darkness and reacting in reflex, with tragic results.

Gavrill had moved silently past the fringe of trees and undergrowth, and was completely invisible to the brownrider now. After a moment, A'zelen picked up small sounds coming from his left - the sounds of branches moved aside then allowed to spring back, and once or twice a muffled grunt or curse. Realizing that they might glance out and see even his kneeling shape outlined against the torches back at the shelter, he lowered himself until he was lying on his belly in the grass, and listened, his eyes straining to pick up any detail or movement.

"That's far enough, boys." Gavrill's voice suddenly rang out clearly in the stillness. "Ah! I'm a 'second in the Lord's Guard, which means I'm much better-armed than you. Put the beltknife back in the sheath - that's right. Thank you. Now -"

In a crash of underbrush, two shapes exploded out of the treeline and pounded less than a tail-length past where A'zelen lay. *Toth* -! he started, but the dragon was already springing in a long, gliding jump that landed him directly in the path of the fleeing men. Rearing back on his haunches, wings spread, the brown snaked his head down to hiss at the men, who stumbled to a halt.

Gavrill came running out not far behind them and A'zelen scrambled to his feet and followed in the guard's

wake. Holding the crossbow casually, but still aimed, the guard slowed his pace when he saw that the dragon had discouraged all attempt at escape in the men. They were still regarding the big brown uneasily as Gavrill and A'zelen advanced near enough to see their faces.

They were young men, but not as young as the boys who commonly dared this kind of stunt. Even in the dim torchlight, they were stamped with a resemblance that made A'zelen think they must be brothers, or cousins at least.

"As I was saying," the soldier continued, his tone relaxed but with an edge of authority under it, "I'm Guardsecond Gavrill, of the Southern Guard. This is Wingsecond A'zelen of the Weyr, and obviously, that's brown Toth. You mind telling us what you thought you were doing?"

One of the two reached out and squeezed the other's arm, drawing his attention from the dragon. He turned a defiant face towards them, lifting his chin. "I am Carler, of the Neratian ship *Stormcloud*. This is my brother Nerran."

Gavrill waited a moment to see if the young man intended to continue, and when the silence had stretched long enough, he cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. "And? You're both a long way from home, boys."

"My father's ship is here at Southern, for trade," Carler, who seemed to be the older, said defensively. Gavrill's skeptical expression didn't change.

"But Southern's docks are on the far side of the Hold's headland from here," A'zelen pointed out, keeping his tone friendly. He folded his arms across his chest, trying to project as calm an air of authority as the guardsecond did.

"Not really the best time of day for sightseeing, either," Gavrill added.

"We're going to the Weyr to fetch back our brother!" Nerran blurted out, and though the other youngster shot him a sharp look, he nodded in agreement, his expression still defiant.

"Your brother -?" Gavrill's tone invited elaboration.

"Cerdan. He's but fifteen, and this was his first voyage away from our home," Carler told them. "This evening, a dragonrider took him away from our ship. Our father protested, but the dragonman took him anyway."

A'zelen met a questioning glance from the guardsecond with a frown. "Did he say that your brother had been Searched?"

"That's what Cerdan told Father," Nerran admitted. "But Father told him not to be a fool."

"Being Searched is a great honor," A'zelen told them gently.

"Father doesn't think the dragonman Searching Cerdan was an honor." Carler's tone suggested that he agreed with his father. "He thinks the dragonman was making an excuse, to take Cerdan into his bed."

"And we are going to rescue him!" Nerran added.

A'zelen shouldn't have been shocked. He was craftbred, after all, and a harper. Or perhaps that *was* why he was shocked. "No dragonrider would misuse the right of Search that way!" he protested. He was doubly disappointed to

catch a sardonic look on Gavri'll's face, before the guardsecond turned his attention back to the young men.

"I'd like to know how you thought you'd succeed in finding your brother once you got to the Weyr. It's kind of a big place. Not to mention, how you thought you would get him all the way back out again." When Carler began to speak, Gavri'll held up a quelling hand and overrode him. "Ah! Forget it. Let's just agree that it wasn't the smartest idea, and leave it at that." He looked at each boy in turn. "Does your father know you're out here?"

"No," Carler admitted. "He has gone to the Hold to protest the loss of his son."

"Then he's got *slightly* more sense than you do," said the guardsecond. "He's the boy's father, he's the shipmaster – if anyone has the right to protest, he would. Shouldn't you wait to see if that works, before taking more drastic measures?"

Carler's eyes slid to A'zelen, and then away again. Nerran looked at his brother, and said reluctantly, "That might take until tomorrow, and we did not want to leave our brother alone in the Weyr for the night."

"I see." Gavri'll shook his head. "Well, I'd say that's pretty moot, at this point – since you failed to get past us, and since I'm scorched if I'm letting you go any further."

"We've done nothing wrong," the older boy asserted, and Gavri'll rolled his eyes.

"*Yet*. You've done nothing wrong, *yet*, mostly because we *stopped* you," the soldier pointed out, impatiently. "And you're not going to get to do anything wrong now, because we're sending you right back to the Hold, where you get to find your father and see what *he* says about this little plan of yours. That's as good an offer as you're going to get – you get to tell him about it before *I* do. Which, I promise you, I will, first thing in the morning."

"If you want to speak to your brother, tomorrow, to ensure all of you of his safety and happiness, I'll arrange that," A'zelen offered, which was as much as he could do. Even though it rankled to think of these seamen having such a bad opinion of weyrfolk as to make that necessary.

"Tomorrow we will bring my brother home!" Carler countered, and at that, Gavri'll made a dismissive gesture with the hand that wasn't holding the crossbow.

"All right, that's enough. Back to the Hold, both of you. And don't even think of trying to sneak back, because you won't get past *him*." He gestured at the brown dragon, still looming watchfully overhead. "He'll know if you don't go straight back, and believe me, you don't want to know what'll happen if I have to run you two down a second time tonight. Do yourselves a favor, and go back to your ship." When they hesitated, he shifted the crossbow slightly, and waved his hand invitingly in the direction of the Hold. "Go!"

Reluctantly, circling the dragon at a great distance on their way back to the road east to the Hold, the two young men moved off. When they'd reached the road, Toth took off and flew a circle overhead, looking as if he meant to follow their progress from the air.

*You're not really going to follow them back to the Hold?* A'zelen asked him, standing next to the guardsecond with his arms still crossed, watching the boys' retreat.

*It will not hurt them to think so,* Toth responded, turning another lazy, wide circle in the air.

"He really going to shadow them all the way back?" Gavri'll said, finally moving to walk back towards the shelter, keeping one eye on their progress.

"Long enough for them to think so," said A'zelen.

"You tell him to do that?" the guardsecond asked.

"No. He heard what you said and decided it was a good idea."

He saw a look of slight consternation cross the soldier's face. "I didn't think dragons listened to anyone but their riders," Gavri'll said.

"Dragons seldom *speak* to anyone but their riders," A'zelen corrected him, pedantically. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with their hearing."



Gavri'll had unloaded the bolt from the crossbow, but left it and the quiver sitting out on the top of the chest, as if he thought there was a chance he might need it again. A'zelen found that his cup of klah had gone cold, so he threw the dregs into the grass outside the shelter and poured himself another. He held the pitcher up to catch the guardsecond's eye, and at the man's, "Yeah, thanks," poured another.

Coming to sit down in the chair opposite the one the guard took, he passed over the mug. A'zelen sat in silence for a few moments, sipping at the hot drink. He studied the guardsecond's face surreptitiously, but couldn't read the other man's expression. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward with his arms resting on his thighs. "No dragonrider I know would misuse Search to seduce anyone," he said finally, quietly.

The guard gave him a measuring look. "I'm sure that's true, brownrider," he said.

A'zelen's brow creased as he looked up at the other man. "Your pardon, but - you don't *sound* very sure."

Gavri'll seemed to consider his words, looking into his mug of klah. "I'm sure it's true, for you. I'm sure you think it's true of every rider in Southern Weyr, and I guess I believe that, too."

"But?" A'zelen prompted.

"You know as well as I do, that it happened." The guard's tone wasn't belligerent, but it dared him to contradict the statement.

"There were reports, after the Oldtimers came forward," the brownrider agreed cautiously. "But those stories are Turns in the past."

"Not so far in the past that there are those who don't remember," Gavri'll said. The way he said it, A'zelen suddenly wondered what it was the guardsecond was remembering. "Like maybe the father of those boys." He held up a hand to forestall protest. "I'm not saying that the

shipmaster has good cause. I'm saying I'm not surprised, that's all."

"I can probably arrange for the boy's father to speak to him, reassure him," A'zelen offered again. "But the truth is, it's the boy's right to accept Search even if his father doesn't like it."

"The father's the one you're going to have to convince of that," the guardsecond told him agreeably. "Not me."



Later, Gavriil broke the silence with, "So, do you have any little holdings of your own? Uh -- weyrings? Whatever?"

A'zelen was momentarily startled by the sudden personal question. Then he realized what the guardsecond's line of thought had likely been.

"No, I, ah -- that is, I'm fairly sure I don't," he said. "No, I'm sure. I would know, because the few women I -- well, they would have told me."

"I guess weyrfolk don't really have families?" Gavriil said, with a tone in his voice that suggested he thought perhaps he should have known that.

"Oh! Uh, no, that's not really true," A'zelen said immediately. "In fact it's not true at all. Weyrfolk do have families, although sometimes they're sort of --" He made a series of gestures with his hands, meant to convey the far-reaching, cooperative bonds of the fostering system of the Weyrs. "I know a lot of dragonriders who keep in touch with their children, who try to be a part of the foster-family in which they're raised. I kind of -- well, I wasn't raised in a Weyr, obviously, but I get the feeling that weyrfolk create a very strong sense of family, through the connections they make with each other." He looked at his hands, and smiled slightly. "My weyrmate, Sharenne -- she'd like to have children. My children. We've been trying, but it hasn't been easy."

"Wasn't easy for Saressa and me, either," said the guardsecond. "It was a while before Kessil was born. He's nearly seven now, and no luck getting any others." He smiled, though, a genuine smile, and the look on his face was fond. "Saressa makes it up with fosterlings, though."

"Sharenne and I talked about that," A'zelen admitted. "She works in the Weyr's kitchens, and lots of the other women foster. She's been helping her mother take care of some of her younger sisters and brothers, though; that's helped. Once they get old enough not to need fostering, I guess we'll think about it again. Unless we get lucky before that."

There was a short, companionable silence, before Gavriil spoke again. "So, you're not weyrbred." His voice was diffident, as if he didn't want to seem to be prying.

"No. No, I'm, uh -- I'm craftbred," the brownrider said, a little surprised at the guard's desire to continue the conversation. In his experience, while guardsmen might be drawn out to talk about themselves and life in the Hold, they seldom showed an equal amount of curiosity about the lives of the dragonriders they stood watch with. He'd wondered

before if it was because they were afraid of being told things they didn't want to know. "My parents are both harpers, over at Landing."

The guardsecond sat up, then leaned back easily in his chair. "Landing, huh?" He sounded -- very slightly -- impressed. "Did they want you to be a crafter, like them?"

"Well, yes. Of course. They expected it." He considered that for a moment, how it sounded, and added, "It was what I wanted, too. I made journeyman, before I was Searched. If Toth hadn't --" He trailed off, glancing at the dark bulk of the dragon outside the shelter, sure that he was wearing that indulgent, adoring expression that seemed to come over most dragonriders when they spoke of impressing their bondmates.

"You're a *journeyman*, too? What, a harper?" At the brownrider's nod, Gavriil snorted slightly. "Should've known."

A'zelen considered pursuing that, and decided not to.

"Were your parents angry that you left the Craft?" the guard went on.

A'zelen shook his head. "Oh, no. Well, a little surprised, maybe, a little disappointed, but -- I mean, they're *harpers*."

"Ah, right. Who knows the teaching ballads better?" Gavriil still seemed slightly bemused, perhaps by the idea of giving up a journeyman's knots to take a chance on draconic choice.

A'zelen had a good guess as to what had prompted the conversation, and he thought that it wasn't actually a burning need in the guardsecond to know about a dragonrider's family background. "What about you?" The soldier looked confused for a moment, and he explained, "How will you feel if Kessil is Searched, someday?"

From the look on the other man's face, he thought he'd hit the target with that question. Gavriil frowned, looking down at the toes of his boots. Then he smiled, a strange, pensive smile. "It would be his choice," he said, finally.

"But I asked how *you* would feel about it," A'zelen persisted gently, and the other man gave him a narrow look.

"What does any father want for his son?" the guardsecond asked, in return. "A prosperous, safe, happy life. As good a life as he has himself, or better."

That wasn't really an answer either, A'zelen thought. "Do you expect him to have the sort of life you've had?"

"What, become a guardsman? No," Gavriil said, readily enough. "I guess if I've thought about it at all, I thought maybe he would go, and join my family..." At the brownrider's blank look, he shook his head slightly, and explained, "My father and brothers are holders for Toric. You know the lake, way to the south? Drake? They founded a holding on its north shore."

"I know it," A'zelen agreed. "It's beautiful down there."

"Yeah, it is. And the holding is doing well. That's where Kessil's future is, I hope. Saressa and I talked about sending him there to foster for a time, when he's a little older."

A'zelen thought about that rich, fertile, temperate country, one he had mostly seen from the air while flying 'Fall. He must have flown over this man's family's holding; thinking about it, he thought he knew which one it must be. "Why didn't you go with them?" he asked, and only after he'd spoken, realized that it might not be a welcome question.

But Gavrill didn't seem to take offense. "Because I was already a guard here, when they left. My father had plenty of sons and sons-by-marriage to help him. And this is what I'm good at," he said, simply.

"And your father? Did he agree with your choice?"

From the keen look that the guardsecond shot him, he understood the parallel that A'zelen was drawing. He seemed to consider his answer for a moment; but since he'd been the one to start this conversation, A'zelen thought it was only fair. "Yeah, he did. He let me make the choice, and supported it. He thought having family still at the Hold might come in handy."

"That's one way of looking at it." A'zelen paused. "You don't think we've heard the last of this."

Gavrill knew what he was referring to. "No, I don't." He tilted his head, regarding the brownrider steadily. "You promised you'd arrange for them to meet."

"I meant it," said A'zelen firmly. "The Weyrlingmaster probably won't be pleased, but if there's any chance of making peace with the boy's father, it should be taken."

"Yes. It should." The guardsecond sighed. "I hope the shipmaster is smart enough to realize that, come morning."



One moon had set, and the other was just visible on the horizon. The dark stillness of the last hours of the night had given way to grey light, illuminating a ground-mist that settled over the clearing, and the sounds of wherries waking and calling echoed from the jungle surrounding them. It was near dawn, and soon the watch would be over.

These were always the most difficult hours of the watch. With the increasing light and the rising of the sun, came a feeling of rejuvenation; but it battled with a creeping exhaustion.

Gavrill rose, and walked to the edge of the cliffs, stretching his legs and no doubt trying to stir some circulation. A'zelen yawned, rubbing at his eyes with both hands, and wondered if it would be unwise to have one more cup of klah. He might need it. He would have to postpone sleep in order to go report to the Weyrleader, and this time, the report would be a bit more than the usual formality.

**There are men approaching,** Toth announced suddenly, and A'zelen started. The brown was still sitting in the same alert posture he'd kept all night.

"Where? How many?" he asked, getting to his feet reluctantly and stretching.

**On the road. You will see them in a moment,** said the brown.

A'zelen peered in the direction of the spot where the road emerged from the jungle. In the growing light, he

might have been able to see the tethered horses, but the ground-mist blocked his view.

"Guardsecond?" he called, and when he saw he had the man's attention, he said, "Someone's coming, on the road." He could hear the other man's groan as he approached.

"Here we go," said Gavrill, grimacing. "Scorch it, I was hoping we might actually make it off this shift before they pulled themselves together."

"They, who?" A'zelen asked.

"Our friend the shipmaster, and whoever else he's got with him. It's too sharded early for this," the guardsecond said sourly.

At length, three shapes emerged from the mist, marching steadily towards them, and beside the brownrider, Gavrill groaned again. "Crap. It *would* be Cynestan."

A'zelen thought hard for a moment. "Southern's steward?"

"That's the one." The expression on the guardsecond's face was deeply unhappy.

"Not a friend of yours, I take it?" A'zelen asked mildly, earning a sardonic look.

"You could say that. This is going to be a joy and a half," said the other man. He scrubbed both hands vigorously over his face and scalp. "He's going to be mad that the man roused him out of his bed this early. But we're the ones who are going to catch char and ash for it."

"It's not our fault," said the brownrider firmly, and the other man gave him a disbelieving look.

"Like *that* matters?"

Looking a great deal more relaxed than he sounded, the guardsecond put his swordbelt back on, picked up the crossbow, and then moved out to position himself in the center of the road. He held the weapon casually, angled low across his body and aimed away from the approaching men, resting his weight on one hip, waiting. After a moment's hesitation, A'zelen went to stand alongside him, crossing his arms. Then he wondered if that might look belligerent; after some consideration, he decided that he didn't care.

"Steward. Harbormaster," Gavrill said, when the men had come close enough that he didn't have to shout. "What brings you all the way out here on this fine morning?"

"Guardsecond Gavrill," acknowledged one of the other men, just as pleasantly. This was a shorter, thick-set man with a fair bit of silver in his brown hair and beard. "I'd forgotten that it was you on duty." He turned shrewd eyes onto A'zelen. "Brownrider? I don't believe we've met."

A'zelen recognized the other man, though. "Steward Cynestan," he returned, with a polite nod, just to make the point.

"Wingsecond A'zelen," Gavrill added quickly, with an indicating tilt of his head. "And Toth."

At his words, the dragon sat up a bit taller, raising his head, and stretched his wings before leaving them in a semi-furled position of readiness. A'zelen saw two of the men arrayed before them trade uneasy glances, and beside him, the guardsecond gave him an unreadable look and cleared his throat.

Cynestan didn't allow himself to appear distracted by the dragon's display. "Wingsecond," he acknowledged the correction gracefully. "This is shipmaster Cardel, of the *Stormcloud*, out of Nerat --"

"Ah yes. We had the pleasure of meeting two of your sons," Gavriil said, with a slight smirk. The shipmaster frowned, but the steward went on before he could speak.

"Then I'm sure both of you will understand why we're here," said Cynestan smoothly.

"Well, I know why I *think* you're here," A'zelen corrected him pleasantly. "Why don't you explain, and we'll see if we're in agreement?"

The steward raised his eyebrows, while the other two men shifted and looked more openly taken aback. "Harbormaster Derras and I are here to escort shipmaster Cardel to a meeting with the Weyrleaders, on the subject of the somewhat...precipitous Search of his son by a bluerider from your Weyr."

The shipmaster snorted angrily. "Search, he called it! I know what I call it! I want my son returned to me."

A'zelen saw Gavriil's frown out of the corner of his eye, but he kept his attention on the steward. "The Weyrleaders have agreed to meet with you already?"

The answer was apparent in the confusion on the shipmaster's face, but it was Cynestan who said, "I thought it would be most efficient to take the matter to them directly."

"Oh, well then," said Gavriil, with false geniality. "The answer to that's easy. No."

For the first time, a look of consternation came over the steward's face. "I beg your pardon?"

"I thought that was clear enough," the guardsecond returned. "No. As in, no, you will not be escorting shipmaster Cardel into the Weyr." He shifted his stance slightly, looking less relaxed and more like an obstacle that would be difficult to move. Otherwise, he seemed completely unaffected by the growing anger being focused on him.

"What is this, steward?" the shipmaster growled. "I told you, it will be too easy for the Weyrleaders to ignore or refuse a message. You agreed. You said --"

"I know what I said," Cynestan interrupted sharply. "And I meant it. The guardsecond here oversteps his bounds."

"Oh, the guardsecond here is well aware of the bounds, steward," Gavriil shot back. "I know the purpose of this watch, even if you've forgotten. And part of that purpose is to prevent unauthorized traffic between Hold and Weyr."

Cynestan looked shocked, and his voice rose slightly as he responded, "Are you suggesting that it is not within my authority --?"

"Pretty much," the guardsecond agreed, at which the expression on the steward's face became even more thunderous. A'zelen was also more than a bit surprised at the soldier's open baiting of the other man, but he schooled his own expression into polite neutrality. "By the Lord's own order, only he may authorize anyone from the Hold to approach the Weyr in this way. And, since you know as

well as I do that Lord Toric left on a ship for Delta Hold yesterday," he added, "I somehow doubt that this delegation bears his authorization."

That, thought A'zelen, was something of a gamble. It was possible that the steward had exchanged a message with his Lord, by firelizard. If the man had one, that is -- and perhaps Gavriil knew that he didn't.

"And as *you* should know as well as I do," Cynestan said, his irritation plain, "my authority in Lord Toric's absence --"

"Extends to Hold matters," Gavriil finished for him. "Not to the initiation of negotiations, either with other Lords or with the Weyr."

A'zelen thought, from the look on the steward's face, that the man knew that the guardsecond had the right of it, but had been hoping to find himself dealing with a soldier more awed by Cynestan's rank, and less likely to argue the Lord's policies with him.

"The Weyrleaders, of course, are under no such restrictions," the brownrider spoke up. "And, as I promised your son Carler, I will, as soon as I go off-duty, bring this matter to their attention. You will be given the chance to speak to them, and to your son," he promised the shipmaster, who looked no happier. "That's the best I can do."

"Sounds generous to me," the guardsecond put in, not very diplomatically. "In the meantime, you can wait in the comfort of the Hold for the Weyr's invitation."

"Oh, and will we have your permission to accept, when that comes?" Cynestan asked him sarcastically, and Gavriil shrugged.

"That doesn't fall under my duty, steward," he replied. "My duty right now is this post, and this road, and who is allowed to travel it to disturb or conspire with the Weyr."

"Well," said the steward, with a false smile. "You can be sure that the Lord will receive a detailed report regarding your performance of your duties." His tone was subtly threatening.

"Much appreciated," the soldier smirked back. "That's *Gavriil*," he added, helpfully. "Guardsecond to captain Hanan."

The look on the steward's face was still unhappy, but he nodded towards A'zelen in reluctant concession. "We will await word from your Weyrleaders, then, wingsecond," he said, neatly reminding the brownrider of his duty, and their expectations. Then he turned, with an impatient gesture at the other two men.

"What?" shipmaster Cardel exploded. "I'm not leaving here without my son!"

"Don't be a fool!" Cynestan hissed back at him. "You'll come with me, and wait with me, and I'm sure --" he flashed another insincere smile at the brownrider "-- that the Weyrleaders will not keep us waiting long."

"Well, they had better bring my boy with them," the shipmaster said, sullenly. He stabbed a finger in A'zelen's direction. "You hear me? I don't just want to see sharding dragonriders, I want to see my boy."

A'zelen nodded briefly, and with a final, angry snort, the shipmaster turned and began to stalk back towards the Hold. Cynestan gave them both one more irritated look, before he followed, gesturing the silent harbormaster to proceed him.

The brownrider and the guardsecond watched their retreat into the remains of the morning's mist. The sun had risen while they debated, A'zelen realized. He let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"That went well," Gavrill observed finally, his tone light.

A'zelen gave him a steady look, not believing for a moment the casual posture or relaxed expression. "To *conspire* with the Weyr?" he asked pointedly, and Gavrill shrugged at him.

"Would you believe that's a direct quote?" he said, with a quirk of a smile and a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," said A'zelen slowly. "Yes, I suppose I would." He looked at the slight smile remaining on the soldier's face. "So, did you just earn yourself night-watch duty for life?"

Gavrill said, "Oh, probably." But he didn't look that worried about the idea.

The guardsecond turned back to the shelter, and A'zelen followed him as he began to move along the row of torches, snuffing them out one by one.



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