
Nightwatch, Part 3

by Holly Hutchison

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"Hey, Wingsecond!"

A'zelen turned around at the hail, and had a few moments of confusion before recognizing the stocky, dark man wearing the uniform of Southern's Guard. This was Kawald, the cheerful, boisterous man who'd been introduced to him as Gavril's guardsecond some time ago.

A'zelen hadn't noticed before, but he must be Lord Toric's escort to the Hatching. The man's grin was infectious and A'zelen smiled back as he reached out to clasp the arm that Kawald extended.

"Guardsecond," he returned, allowing a slight note of question in his tone.

He didn't see a captain's knots on the man's shoulder, but, he reflected, it was unusual for Toric to be seen attended by any lesser rank of guardsman. Since Gavril's promotion, he'd seen the man on such escort duty three times, which A'zelen had taken as a sign of favor towards the young captain, even though Gavril tried to play down the honor.

Kawald's pleasant smile didn't change, and he nodded, so A'zelen went on, "Is this your first time visiting the Weyr?"

"Very first time!" the guardsman confirmed. He looked around with an amused expression. "Doesn't look that different from the Hold, does it?" he observed. "Except for all the dragons."

"Did you enjoy the Hatching?" the brownrider asked politely. He was wondering what act or service had earned Kawald this honor, but he couldn't think of a way to ask that wouldn't sound both nosy and a bit rude.

"Oh yes! Shards, you know -- I never thought about what dragons must look like as babies!" Kawald said with a chuckle, and A'zelen laughed as well.

"A bit more homely and awkward than you expected?" A'zelen asked knowingly, and the guardsman shrugged.

"I didn't want to say it, but --" Kawald's expression became wistful. "It was a beautiful thing to see, still. Them choosing their riders, I mean."

A'zelen was slightly surprised at the observation, coming from the tough-looking soldier. "It's a beautiful thing," he agreed simply. "So," the brownrider went on, "I haven't seen or heard tell of your captain in months -- he must be keeping out of trouble. How is he?"

He'd meant the inquiry to be casual, but at his words, Kawald's face changed, losing his smile and the amused sparkle in his eyes. The look he gave the brownrider was so troubled that A'zelen almost took a step backwards, and he felt the beginnings of an icy dread in the pit of his stomach.

"Shards, Wingsecond, you haven't heard?" the guardsman asked, and then answered himself immediately, "No, of course not. I guess you wouldn't have." His face screwed up into a painful grimace.

"Heard?" repeated A'zelen, staring at the other man. The thought popped into his mind instantly, *he's here in Gavril's place. But he's still just a guardsecond* --

"Yeah, he --" The man stopped, closing his eyes briefly and taking a deep breath. "His son, Kessil. You know, that's right, you met him, didn't you? Brought your dragon to meet him, he didn't stop talking about that for a month --" Kawald looked up and met his eyes. "Poor lad died. Two months ago."

A'zelen started, and his thoughts shifted, discarding one set of speculations only to have another dozen questions crowd into his mind. "Kessil died? How?"

"Drowned," said the guardsman sadly.

"Oh, Faranth," the brownrider breathed.

"Yeah. It was an accident, but -- well, Gav couldn't save him. He tried but it was too late. It's just about gutted him." Kawald shook his head, lifting his gaze to stare off into the middle distance. Perhaps imagining, as A'zelen suddenly was, how that would feel.

He couldn't imagine. Just could not. He'd lost wingmates, of course. Lost friends. But that wasn't the same thing at all.

"How is Saessa?" he asked, automatically, and the look on the guardsman's expressive face turned uncomfortable.

"She's... strong. It's ripped out her heart, too, you can tell," the man said, his own voice reflecting pain. "But she's been strong. She's had to be, 'cause Gav is just..." Kawald trailed off, and shook his head again, his lips thinning unhappily. A'zelen wondered if he couldn't find the words, but the other's expression suddenly made him think that, instead, he was keeping himself from saying too much.

"I should..." the brownrider began, and then he stopped. That wasn't quite right, and he started again, "Would they mind, if I came to see them?" He remembered Kessil laughing as he climbed up Toth's tall shoulder, watched by A'zelen and his worried-and-trying-to-hide-it father.

Kawald gave him a small smile. "I'm sure Saessa would like that, Wingsecond," he said, with a note in his voice that, after a moment, A'zelen identified as protective. "But you won't see Gav for a while yet -- which, let me tell you, is probably for the best."

A'zelen frowned, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

"He got sent down to Island River on tithe-train duty last month," Kawald explained, with a shrug. "He, uh -- well, the Lord sent him, personally. Told him to get out and clear his head --" He saw the expression on the brownrider's face, and nodded in agreement, but explained, "Yeah, I

know, that sounds kind of harsh, I guess. But I think the Lord meant it kindly."

A'zelen blinked, having never before heard anyone ascribe any action of Lord Toric's to *kindness*. The guardsman smiled grimly. "He was right, anyway. I mean, Gav – it was just eating him alive, brownrider. He wasn't any use to anybody, let alone himself. Giving him a job to do, and getting him far away from Southern – that was about the best kindness anyone could probably do for him. It wasn't like he was allowing anyone else near enough to help."

Including, A'zelen was sure from the way Kawald had been talking, his own wife. "When will he return?"

Kawald sighed. "If he returns?" Then he saw the look on the rider's face, and said hastily, "Nah, that's not fair. He'll be back. To be honest with you, Wingsecond, I'm not sure he *would* come back on his own account. But he won't fail his duty, there's no question of that. Nobody ever said the Lord wasn't a good judge of his men. It'll probably take, oh, another month, I'd guess."

"Another month?" A'zelen repeated, incredulously, and the guardsman gave him a look of subdued amusement.

"Sure. It's a long way to Island River. If you're not a dragonrider, that is."



After speaking to the guardsman, A'zelen removed himself from the crowds of the Hatching feast. He was no longer in the mood for celebration.

He thought about seeking out J'hanos, to make his excuses, but he didn't see his fellow wingsecond; nor did he see Wingleader D'ralt. He had no doubt they could survive the feast without him, for a while.

He did find Sharenne, hurrying busily back towards the kitchens, and she took one look at him and recognized instantly that something was wrong, diverting her path to join him. Even the Weyr's kitchen staff, though they worked hard all through a feast like this, put on something pretty even if it wasn't gather-best, and A'zelen thought that his tall, slender weymate looked especially fine, with her black hair braided up under a brightly-patterned, beaded scarf. She gave him a searching look and put her hand on his arm, and the brownrider put a hand on her waist and drew her to him briefly, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against her hair, breathing in the aroma of cooking herbs that he thought suited her better than any flowery perfume would have.

Sharenne drew back slightly, looking into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

A'zelen gave her a small smile. "Nothing. Nothing. Just some bad news. I'll tell you later."

He knew after all this time that the look on her face was saying, *are you sure?*, so he nodded in answer to the unspoken question, and kissed the side of her head. "Go on. I'll tell you tonight."

"I'll remember to ask," she promised him, and then she was hurrying away.

Thinking, pacing, trying to understand his mood, he let his legs carrying him away from the area around the Weyrhall.

He tried reaching out for the comforting touch of his dragon's mind, but the brown had dozed off in his wallow, and he got only an echo of sleepy contentment from that direction. Toth wouldn't really have remembered the boy anyway, he supposed. Or the boy's father.

The unsettling thing was, he hadn't even known. It was – he had to stop and think about it – four months, perhaps, since the last time he had seen Gavrill, serving as escort to Lord Toric at one of Yashelth's hatchings. It was five months, probably, since he had last stood on the night-watch duty. It might have been many more months before he would have stood it again, and perhaps seen Gavrill or heard the news from whichever guardsman shared the watch that night, if he hadn't by merest chance run into Kawald today. If the Lord's guard hadn't been someone he had met, through Gavrill, they would likely never have spoken, and he wouldn't have asked after his friend the captain.

His friend. A'zelen frowned thoughtfully, and stopped to examine the word.

There was no one he knew better at Southern Hold, that was true. There was no holder he'd encountered as regularly, or spoken to more. He did, he admitted, often look forward to running into the sharp-tongued captain. It might not happen often, but he enjoyed it when it did. However, he couldn't say that he'd really sought out the man's company, even if A'zelen did think about him from time to time. That one day, more than a Turn ago now, when he'd taken Toth so that the boy could meet the dragon, that had really been the closest he'd come to an intimate look into the guardsman's life.

That didn't make Gavrill a friend, he told himself. Yes, he liked the Guard captain. But friend was far too strong a word for a string of pleasant encounters, especially with a man of so vastly different a background and station from A'zelen's own.

A *friend*, he told himself, wouldn't have gone two months before hearing, accidentally, of the death of his *friend's* beloved and only child.

But if that was so, and if based on what was really only an acquaintance with a holder whom, A'zelen mused, he really didn't know very well at all – then why did he feel badly, not only for the other's loss, but for not having known?

Nearly his first thought had been, *I should go and see them*. Hard on the heels of it came the realization that there was no *should* about it – that only one unusual encounter, one afternoon of allowing a holderboy rare and special access to a dragon, hardly gave him any real connection that conferred an obligation towards the grieving parents, or even the right to feel personally touched by their loss. If he looked at things honestly, he had to admit that neither Gavrill, whom he liked, nor Gavrill's wife or son, had really

been included in his world. Nor was brownrider A'zelen a part of their world. He hadn't known, because *there was no reason why he should have*.

Realizing that, he had a choice now. He could change that, if he wanted to, and examining his reaction to Kawald's news, A'zelen knew that, yes, he wanted to. Apparently they had become a part of his world, without his having realized it. And if that was true, then he would act appropriately.

Tomorrow was a Threadfall day. But very soon after that, he would go into Southern Hold, and find out which cot it was that Saressa kept – with, he remembered Gavrill telling him, the fosterlings, and the chickens, and her brewing. That would be a start.

Then he would figure out what to do about Gavrill. His friend.



2436.13.05

Kirith's rider says, the man is at the eastern tower.

Toth made this announcement to A'zelen late on a warm evening, when the brownrider was just starting to think about getting up and closing some of the shutters of the cot he shared with Sharenne. Despite the summer season, the breeze was lively, and he thought there might be rain soon.

A'zelen looked up from his sandtable and glanced out the window, but could not see a thing. The light of the glowbasket hanging by the door did not even reach to illuminate Toth's brown bulk. From her favorite chair across the room, Sharenne raised her head at his movement.

The impressions accompanying Toth's statement made it less cryptic. A'zelen knew who *the man* was. Blue Kirith and his rider Dr'gal must be on the Weyr-Hold nightwatch duty tonight.

"Is there anything wrong?" Sharenne asked, lowering her sewing into her lap, and A'zelen turned his attention to her.

"No. No, Toth just told me – Gavrill must be back."

Sharenne's expression softened with remembered sympathy, and she nodded. She had gone with him when he'd visited Saressa, more than a month ago, better than A'zelen himself at reaching out to the older woman. Saressa, surprised to see them at first, accepted their gesture matter-of-factly, making A'zelen think that she must be almost weary of everyone else's sorrow on her behalf. Especially without her husband there to share the burden, and the whole responsibility for the small cot resting on her shoulders.

A'zelen had come away from there wishing that there was something, anything he could do to help, and knowing that she would not accept it.

He'd seen Kawald there that day, too – the guardsecond clearly trying, as much as Saressa would let him and as much as his duty would allow, to help his captain's wife around the cot. The brownrider had made the man promise to get word to him somehow, once Gavrill himself returned

to the Hold. Passing word through the road watchmen had seemed the simplest way.

The eastern tower – that would be the fire-tower on the headland at the eastern end of the Hold Cove. A matching fire-tower stood on the Hold's headland as well, their twin lights serving to guide ships at sea safely into Southern's harbor. A'zelen frowned. The captain was only just returned from a two-month journey, and already he was standing night-watch duty at the fire-tower? That seemed odd.

"Tomorrow's a restday," Sharenne said. "Perhaps you can try to see him in the morning?"

"No, I think..." The brownrider tapped his stylus on the rim of the sandtable thoughtfully for a moment, then he rose. "I'm going now. He'll... he might be busy tomorrow."

"If he's only just back, don't you think he and Saressa might be busy tonight?" his weyrmate asked, reasonably. He crossed the room and bent to drop a kiss on the top of her head.

"Apparently not." Then at her puzzled look, he explained, "The word is that he's on duty tonight."

"Well, I hope your going doesn't get him in trouble," she said.

"Oh," said A'zelen, heading for the door, "I think it might be a little late for that."

Toth was already sitting up and alert, roused by his rider's determination. He ducked his head through the light flying harness, shrugging it into place, then turned his head to fix one glowing eye on A'zelen as he mounted, in a way he had that always made his rider feel as if he was keeping the dragon waiting. It didn't matter if the task at hand was one that interested the brown, or not; if it was something he was being required to do, then he seemed to feel it should be done promptly and efficiently. A'zelen doubted, though, that the dragon remembered the guardsman, and thought that Toth was probably only picking up A'zelen's own sense of expectation.

"All right, all right," A'zelen muttered, pulling himself into place and taking hold of the straps. "Let's go."

Toth leapt, and they were soon surging up, circling around to the north of the bowl of the Hatching Grounds before turning east-southeast, choosing to fly out over the moon-silvered expanse of ocean.

Rikth greets us, the brown reported. L'ban and Rikth were wingriders under A'zelen in D'ralt's wing, and they were the Weyr's watchriders for the night, perched invisibly on the rim of the Hatching Grounds. ***As does Kirith***, the brown added as they swept along the coast.

Tell Kirith to have Dr'gal thank the guardsman standing watch with him, A'zelen said.

I have, Toth replied.

He wasn't sure that Dr'gal even knew why A'zelen had wanted to know. He wondered if the bluerider was telling the soldier on watch that the brown dragon was flying past even now. He wondered, too, if the man standing watch at the western fire-tower would spot them. He wondered what gossip might be repeated around the Hold tomorrow.

They passed the Hold headland with its lit beacon, and saw the glowlights in the masts of the ships at dock along the Hold Cove. The lively breeze was causing some middling surf, and the ships were all rocking at their moorings. Above the wind of their flight, A'zelen thought he could hear the dockyard sounds of ropes and rigging tackle and mysterious metal pieces knocking around.

The twin fire-tower on the eastern headland was also lit, of course. The Hold extended as far as this headland, but the buildings were fewer here, more widely scattered. In a way this tower was even more remote from the Hold than the duty-post on the Weyr-Hold road where A'zelen had stood so many times.

It was easy for Toth to circle widely around the square stone tower, and approach the cleared space between it and the jungle from the dark inland side.

"What's your business here, dragonrider?" a familiar voice challenged as A'zelen dismounted. He turned and could see a figure in the tower's doorway, lit by the torches on either side of it.

A'zelen waved. "Gavrill!" He didn't have to make it a question, there was no mistaking either the voice or the man.

The Guard captain took a half-dozen steps away from the tower, then halted. Some part of A'zelen was very pleased to note that even though the man had clearly noticed their approach and landing, he hadn't picked up a crossbow.

"A'zelen?" The note in the soldier's voice was one of disbelief, and the brownrider was also a little pleased to know that he'd surprised the other man. He could see the confusion on Gavrill's face. "What are you sharding doing out here, Wingsecond?"

"I came to see you," A'zelen answered conversationally, close enough now that he didn't have to shout.

"But... you're not supposed to be here. We don't – dragonriders don't –" Gavrill ran a hand through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. It was longer and shaggier than when A'zelen had last seen him.

"Will it be a problem if Toth is seen sitting there?"

"If he's seen?" the guardsman muttered, looking up at the big brown. "Probably. It's going to raise some questions." Gavrill shot him a narrow look. "You know, I should be ringing the bell to alert the Hold. This is exactly the kind of thing that would make the Lord crazy."

I will wait elsewhere, Toth said suddenly, and putting thought to action, took off immediately, leaving Gavrill gaping after him.

"Now where's he going?" he demanded.

"To wait someplace less conspicuous," A'zelen replied reasonably. "I don't want to cause trouble." He gestured towards the tower. "I just wanted to talk."

The captain gave him another strange look, then shrugged resignedly. "All right."

A'zelen followed him through the tower's door – a gap, really, between two of the stone structure's support pillars. Open-sided and not very tall, it mainly served as a sturdy support for the beacon-fire platform above. There were stairs inside leading up, but once the fire was lit for the

night, nobody could go up onto the platform anyway until it had burned off its fuel.

The watchman's post was on the seaward side, with a sweeping view of the ocean and the Hold Cove to the west. The signal bell was really a great circle of iron hung between two poles. There was the usual table, with its supply of klah, and a chest that A'zelen knew would hold weapons. The only seat was a stone bench that ran between the pillars on either side of the seaward door.

The guardsman didn't seat himself, nor did he offer A'zelen any klah, and while the brownrider didn't really want any right then either, going over and pouring a cup gave him something to do. When he turned back, he saw that Gavrill was standing out near the signal bell, but was watching him.

"When did you get back?" the brownrider asked.

Gavrill was frowning in a way that looked like he was trying to figure something out, but was having trouble fitting all the facts together. "A sevenday ago."

So Kawald hadn't been as quick to get word to him as he might have been. "Getting night-watch duty already?" A'zelen looked around at the lonely outpost. It was a long way across the cove to the Hold headland.

The captain snorted. "I guess there's no way you'd know, but there's a stomach sickness running through the Hold. They think it came in with the crew of an Igen ship."

"Something serious?"

"No, no. Just... annoying. So we've been a little short-handed the last few nights." Gavrill's smile was humorless. "Let's hope word of that doesn't get around."

The beacon-fire high overhead threw fitful light on the ground around its base, and there were a few torches on this side of the tower, too. Their light wasn't that reliable, either. A'zelen thought that Gavrill looked tired. He'd lost weight since A'zelen had last seen him, too.

The brownrider finally put a name to the expression he was seeing in the other man's eyes. It was wariness.

"Gavrill, I –" This was harder, he thought, than going to see Saressa had been. She hadn't pretended that she didn't know why he and Sharenne had come.

The soldier cocked his head, when A'zelen didn't go on. He was standing with his back to the sea, thumbs in his belt and his weight on one hip; he looked relaxed, uncaring. A'zelen remembered thinking before that the casual manner was an act.

"What?" said the captain, finally, a touch impatiently.

A'zelen took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he said.

The other man held his eyes for a moment longer, before turning his head and looking across towards the other beacon-fire. "Yeah. I know." The silence spread between them, until A'zelen wondered if that was all the man would say, before he added, "Thank you."

"Gavrill –"

"What?" This time the question was quick, and sharp. It did get the man to look at him again. There was almost no expression, that A'zelen could read, on the other's face, but

there was frustration in his voice. "Everybody is sharded sorry, brownrider. What else do you want me to say?"

That was the trouble. A'zelen wasn't sure, himself. So he said what had been on his mind since the day he'd talked to Saressa. "It wasn't your fault."

There was absolutely no change in the guardsman's expression or his stance. "Wasn't it? How would you know?"

"Saressa told me what happened," the brownrider went on. She'd also warned him that her husband wouldn't discuss it, but A'zelen had never in his life been afraid of an argument, or afraid that he might lose one.

"You must not have been listening, then."

"She told me why Kessil disobeyed you and went out there alone," he continued.

A promise from a beloved father to take the boy out hunting sea-treasures in the tidal rocks east of this very headland. A busy father called to unexpected duty. A rebellious boy going anyway, alone, although his parents had forbidden it. Ignoring warnings, ignoring common sense. The way boys would.

A'zelen wasn't sure that he should say this, but, "What, do you think that somehow, if you had been a better father, he wouldn't have disobeyed?"

Gavrill shot him a burning look. "As a matter of fact, yes. That crossed my mind," he said, biting.

The brownrider walked slowly towards the other man, ignoring the way the guardsman's casual posture had stiffened into something hard and uninviting. "Gav," he said, and the other man glanced at him sidelong. He realized he'd picked that up from Kawald. "I don't for a moment believe that you didn't do everything possible to protect your son. I don't believe you didn't try to make him understand –"

"Obviously I didn't try hard enough," the guardsman snapped.

"Yes, you did," A'zelen contradicted him. "Children never understand. You can't make them. They never see danger. And you can't be there every moment to watch over them."

The twist of the guardsman's mouth wasn't a smile, it was a painful grimace. "Wasn't like I was a lot of use even when I was there," he said, angrily, self-mockingly.

A too-young boy, distracted out on the rocks, not noticing the tide coming in. Too afraid of the high, crashing waves to try to swim. Hurting himself trying to scramble onto the higher rocks. Parents finally arriving in time only to see him swept into the surf.

"You almost died yourself trying to save him," A'zelen corrected him gently.

The dark eyes turned to him then, looking at him fully, and he wasn't shocked at what he read in that face. "Please, don't wish that you had," the brownrider added.

He could see, in his mind's eye, from Saressa's bare description, the image of the father emerging from the sea with the boy's lifeless body in his arms, helped staggering to

shore by his friends and some of Southern's seamen. Half-drowned himself but unwilling to let go of his son.

"Why not?" The question was belligerent, but sounded genuine, as if the soldier couldn't find the answer and wanted to know if anyone could.

"Because Kessil didn't want to die himself, and he wouldn't have wanted to kill you, either," A'zelen said with simple conviction. "Because Saressa –"

The rapport between them was broken suddenly as Gavrill jerked and moved away. "Yeah, well, Saressa's gone."

A'zelen thought for a moment that he hadn't heard correctly. "What?"

"She left. A few days ago. Going to her brother's cothold." Gavrill made each statement flat, but there was some emotion underlying the words, something suppressed and simmering that A'zelen tried to identify. "Kawald got sent as her escort. The cothold's inland."

"Well," A'zelen said, frowning, uncomprehending, "that's probably –"

"I'm pretty sure neither will be coming back," Gavrill concluded, as if he hadn't spoken.

He should have sounded outraged, indignant. Instead, to A'zelen, listening hard, he sounded almost... vindicated. "What do you –?" he started to ask.

"Haven't talked to the new Harper about it yet," the soldier went on, almost talking to himself. "There's time, though, before they reach the cothold."

"Time for what?" the brownrider found himself asking apprehensively.

Gavrill shrugged with impatience. "To end the marriage. Not that her brother wouldn't take her in, no matter what. But they don't have a harper out there. That way, she and – that way, they can be married. If that's what she wants."

"They..." A'zelen said slowly. "You mean, her and... Kawald?" He was rapidly remembering his and Sharenne's visits to the cothold, the guardsecond there, looking at the memories now to try to see something he hadn't thought to look for at the time. Searching farther back, trying also to recall that first conversation with Kawald, at the Hatching.

The captain smiled, again without humor. "Apparently he's been very... supportive. Which is a sharding lot more than you could say for me."

Crossing to the stone bench, he lowered himself onto it, suddenly looking weary. "She didn't want to be here, the place where her son died, any more. Can't say I blame her." He scrubbed his face with both hands. "Can't say I blame her for not wanting to look at me any more, either."

A'zelen was trying hard to remember if he had caught any hint of this from the woman when he'd spoken to her. All he could recall was her sadness and exhaustion. She had struck him before as strong, brisk, and businesslike. What he could imagine, all too easily, was the guilt-ridden man before him accepting her departure without a fight, as one more punishment that in his own eyes could never be harsh enough to make him feel that he'd atoned. And her being

unwilling, finally, to struggle against his determined self-blame.

"Gav –" he began, but the other man shook his head sharply.

"Whatever you want me to believe about Kes, there's no question that I failed Sara." He leaned his arms on his thighs, and looked down at his hands where they were clasped tightly. "I went to Island River and back, brownrider, and I can't escape this, no matter where I go. If she thinks she can find peace by running from it, I won't try to stop her." Then he squinted up at A'zelen, searching his face. "And who knows, maybe another husband can give her more children. I sure as shells couldn't seem to."

A'zelen studied the guardsman, taking in the sudden shift in mood, the defeated posture. He liked this even less than the earlier ill-temper.

"I didn't think of you as a man who would give up easily," the brownrider said at length.

"Sara –"

"I'm not talking about Saressa," A'zelen interrupted. "I'm talking about living."

Gavrill groaned. "Shards, you don't let things go, do you? Oh, that's right," he said, his tone acerbic, "you're a harper, too. Guess that explains –"

"Maybe you feel you failed your son," the brownrider persisted, provokingly. "And nothing that anyone says will make a difference to that. Maybe you feel you failed your wife, too, and you don't deserve her anymore after what's happened. And between the two, maybe you feel like a failure and you don't see why you should keep trying."

The soldier didn't turn his head, but he looked at A'zelen from the corner of his eye. "And now you think you're a mind-healer, is that it?" he said scornfully. He shook his head. "I don't know what you think gives you the right –"

"I think I'm a friend," A'zelen returned, making the claim a challenge. "And I think I probably see you a lot more clearly than you see yourself, right now."

Suddenly the guardsman erupted from his seat, stalking over until he was almost crowding A'zelen where he stood. It took a great deal of willpower for the brownrider not to move, and to keep his gaze on the other man level.

"That's what you think, huh?" Gavrill demanded, brows drawn down in a fearsome scowl. "You've got me all figured out? Going to tell me how to fix my life?" He stabbed a forefinger at A'zelen, but stopped just short of touching him. "Well, I've got news for you, brownrider. This isn't some sharding harper's tale that you get to write an ending to. You can't fix this."

"No, I can't," A'zelen agreed heavily. "And I'm not trying to. I just want you to *think*, sear it –"

"I've *been* thinking!" Gavrill yelled. "I can't *stop* thinking! Not for a *moment* of every sharded waking day."

"And what you're thinking is *wrong!*" A'zelen shouted back, just as strongly.

That brought the guardsman up short, and he almost reared back, his eyes wide. Then he huffed a humorless

laugh, and stepped back, looking away. "Shells, you're arrogant."

"It's been said before." A'zelen shrugged. "That doesn't mean I'm not right."

That earned a snort from the other man. "Well, don't let me stop you, go ahead," he said caustically. "Tell me how wrong I am."

"You wish you'd died saving your son," the brownrider told him, "instead of surviving yourself and failing to save him."

The look the soldier gave him clearly said that this was so obvious that it didn't merit comment.

"And now," A'zelen went on determinedly, "you can't think of what you have left to keep you going."

Gavrill was watching him closely, and had hooked his thumbs back in his belt, but he hadn't managed to recapture his earlier, casual pose. A'zelen could almost feel the other's coiled tension. "But *you're* going to tell me," he said, his voice bitter and challenging.

"All I'm going to tell you," said A'zelen seriously, "is that quitting would be easy. And I don't know what makes you think you deserve things to be easy."

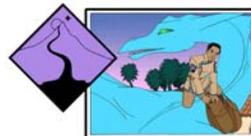
Gavrill jerked as if slapped, and his face was shocked. A'zelen didn't give him time to say anything, quickly going on, "Quitting isn't going to make up for what you feel are your failures. It isn't going to even any score. It might end your pain but only by bringing more pain to others, and nobody else deserves that – not Saressa, not me, not any of your friends."

The guardsman shut his eyes tightly for a moment, as if he could shut out what A'zelen was saying – or as if he could ignore the real pain on the brownrider's face. "Well, you're right about one thing," he said finally, his voice raspy. "I don't deserve to have it easy."

So long as it got him to the right conclusion in the end, A'zelen didn't care how he got there, so he nodded in agreement. "You need reminding of that, you can ask me, any time," he said, making the other man snort.

Gavrill eyed him in a resigned way. "I still say you're sharded arrogant, brownrider."

A'zelen smiled slightly, and inclined his head. "I can live with that."



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