
Nightwatch, Part 4

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Toth was not a brown with a very high libido, a fact for which A'zelen was often grateful. Because when Toth did have the urge to rise to greens, he usually caught them.

Not that A'zelen minded the catching, all that much. Not now, anyway, after many Turns in the Weyr, as a dragonrider.

Mating flights had been a bit of a shock for the craftbred young man, his brown's size and power, cleverness and determination making sure that it was a fact of Weyr life that he encountered fairly early on. But it hadn't taken many flights before A'zelen concluded that, though when given the choice he preferred the bed of a woman like his curvaceous weyrmate Sharenne, there was a kind of welcome pleasure to be found in these occasional, intense encounters with hard-muscled partners who matched him strength for strength. And, weyrbred as she was, Sharenne was more understanding and encouraging of mating flights than he at first had been.

Right now, though, Sharenne was the furthest thing from his mind.

Tumbling over in the wide flight-couch, hips locked in the legs of a wiry, dark-skinned man, A'zelen rolled, smoothing his hands down the flexing muscles of a sweat-slicked back. He barely felt the texture of the furs beneath his shoulders; rather, he felt the sun and wind moving over Toth's taut-stretched wings as the brown spread them to slow the descent of himself and the green, similarly entwined.

His fingers spread and locked over the other man's ass, pressing him down as A'zelen's hips thrust upward, bringing their groins together in delightful, sliding friction that sent sparks running up his spine. Groaning, his partner burrowed his face in the angle between the brownrider's neck and shoulder.

A'zelen arched his throat invitingly and shivered when teeth grazed a line up to his jaw. He thrust again, urgently, this time meeting hipbone as the other twisted, knee pressing against the inside of A'zelen's thigh as the greenrider shifted and sought leverage. Impatient, frustrated, A'zelen simply slid his grip to the other man's hips and pulled until they were aligned again.

With a whine of frustration of his own, the greenrider braced his hands on the bed to either side of them and

pressed his body into A'zelen's, his thrusts settling into an urgent rhythm. A'zelen tried to reach between them, but his partner wasn't cooperating so instead he tried to match the other's movements, hooking one leg behind the man's thighs to pull him in tightly.

In his mind he felt the tidal rush of Toth's satisfaction and he rode that until the greenrider all at once went still, his back arching and a strangled gasp accompanying the pulse of hot liquid between them. The greenrider collapsed across A'zelen as, with a few more powerful thrusts of his own against slippery heat and pressure, his dragon's triumph blended seamlessly with the rush of his own climax.

Afterwards his muscles felt as spent and tired as if it was he, and not Toth, who had flown so far and so fast. Greenrider D'sarn was already asleep and snoring in his familiar, slightly wheezing way.

A'zelen awoke when a cool breeze gusted in through the high windows on the flightcot's walls, and from the glimpse of light on the trees outside and the color of the sky, he knew they'd been lying there, tangled together, for hours. He closed his eyes, feeling the heaviness of the other man sprawled half over him, all hard angles and satiny skin over sleek muscles. Though he never felt the urge to seek out a man's bed in normal circumstances, here in the warm afterglow of a flight he let himself enjoy the sensations of the moment. Once they left this cot, he and D'sarn would move back into their role of friends, and that kept what they did in here in its proper place in A'zelen's mind, in his picture of himself and what it meant to be a dragonrider.

Pushing, he easily shifted the still-sleeping greenrider over, resettling himself in a more comfortable position, reaching out with his mind for a light touch of his dragon's exhausted contentment, letting that pull him back into a doze.

He was drifting, letting his thoughts float from subject to subject without direction, every once in a while knowing, when he roused, that he'd fallen into half-dreaming. Beside him, under him, the other man stretched, long neck twisting as his face turned away, a curl of hair behind his ear falling into the brownrider's slitted eyes. Sleepily, he moved his hand to brush it away, then let his fingers trail down over the line of the man's jaw, his neck, the hollow of his throat, letting his eyes drift shut again.

The other man made a satisfied noise, and A'zelen felt his own lips curve as, behind his closed eyelids, he pictured a wide, thin mouth quirking up on one side in a gentle smile that gradually warmed dark, deep-set eyes. Gavril was...

Not here. A'zelen's whole body jerked and he was wide awake, immediately, eyes flying open as he half sat-up, staring down at his bed-partner. Definitely, *definitely not* the face so vividly in his mind just a moment ago.

Disturbed by his sudden movement, D'sarn's face screwed up in a frown before his eyes opened and he blinked up at the brownrider. "What? What's the matter?"

'Now where under the moons had *that* image come from?' he wondered, shaking his head sharply. D'sarn had high cheekbones in a broad, round, dark face, with a

flattened nose and full lips and a sleepy-eyed look even at his most alert. He didn't look a thing like... "Nothing's the matter," he said aloud. "Just, an odd dream, that's all. It's gone."

"Mmm," the greenrider agreed, yawning. He turned his face and rubbed his cheek against A'zelen's arm. "That wasn't half-bad, eh?" he asked cheerfully, with a wide, toothy, teasing smile. His hand moved from where it had been resting in the small of the brownrider's back, and began stroking his hip. "Do you have to get back to your lady right away, or do you have time for a proper second round?"

D'sarn's Lysith was a favorite of Toth's. A'zelen already knew what the two of them could do together, with skill and attention and trust replacing the wild, driving energy of a mating flight's coupling. Not something he sought out for himself, but it was all right to accept, when it was offered. He easily pushed out of his mind that strange flash of desire; he'd think about it later, maybe. Right now the greenrider was making it difficult to think of anything else anyway, as his stroking hand drifted and became more insistent. D'sarn was a younger man and was already growing hard again, where the brownrider's thigh pressed against him, and A'zelen smiled down at him, feeling the stirrings of his own response.

"I think I have that much time," he said. D'sarn grinned widely, and reached for the small pot of oil on the floor beside the bed.



Sharenne was seated on the sheltered porch of their weycot when A'zelen returned, a basket of mending beside her chair and her feet propped up on a low stool. Swelling ankles had been only one of many discomforts that she was suffering in her advancing pregnancy. They were a favored topic of complaint – along with lower-back pains and, of course, continuing and chronic morning sickness – not least because it was easier to complain about these irritating but perfectly common inconveniences than to worry about more unsettling possibilities.

She was seated here now with mending in her lap, instead of at her usual post in the kitchens, because the healers had ordered her to stay off her feet and move around as little as possible -- a necessity that, A'zelen knew, drove his energetic weymate out of her head with boredom; but both of them were too worried about why the healers had ordered it to do anything but follow their instructions to the letter.

As he approached, he could see that she had wool stockings in her lap and a darning needle in her hand, and he became a bit more cautious. Sharenne hated her immobility, and hated her swollen ankles, but the brownrider knew that was nothing next to the loathing she had for darning.

Toth, of course, was not back in his wallow yet; he was over sharing Lysith's, his great brown bulk tucked around

the petite green possessively. A'zelen had passed them on the way here.

Sharenne looked up and saw him approach, and happily stabbed the needle into the darning-pad before throwing the whole bundle into the basket. Then she held her arms out towards him imperiously, her face expectant.

Grinning, A'zelen navigated carefully around basket and stool, and let her hands slip over his shoulders as he bent towards her for a kiss and a quick nuzzle behind her ear, at which she made an approving noise.

"Good flight?" she asked, with genuine interest.

"Oh, yes. Well, it was D'sarn, you know how he is." A'zelen dragged the other chair on the porch over and seated himself.

Sharenne arched an eyebrow at him. "Of course I don't *know* how he is," she told him. "D'sarn won't even *dance* with women."

"Hmm, true." Toth had flown Lysith so many times, that this was merely another variant on an old exchange. Sharenne liked to tease him about D'sarn, even though the greenrider flew in another Wing, and didn't particularly seek out A'zelen's company between mating flights. And she knew that she had no need to worry about A'zelen's attention straying towards men, anyway. Briefly, he wondered if he should share with her that odd, intruding thought about his friend the Guard captain; but then he decided that it wasn't worth mentioning. She'd only remind him that edge-of-sleep dreams were usually nonsense, and besides, imagining other riders as bed-partners was one thing, even if it wasn't a trick his mind usually played on him. Imagining a holder that way... was best forgotten, quickly. So when he answered her, he said nothing but, "Well, take it from me, then -- he's *very* good." Which was only the truth.

His weymate gave him a sidelong look. "Better than me?"

A'zelen gave her the look of astonished innocence that he knew she was expecting; the one she had assured him she thought was irresistibly adorable. He made his blue eyes very wide, and let his lips pout a little. "Now I didn't say that!" he protested, and she chuckled at him. "But when you're busy, you know, he'll do for an afternoon."

Sharenne stretched, pushing back her hair with her hands as she let her head fall back against the chair. "Busy? Busy? Oh A'zelen, I am *so bored!* If you really loved me, you'd save me before I *drown* in this boredom!"

The brownrider reached down and picked up one of his weymate's feet, moving it to his own lap and beginning to massage it. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it," he said, soothingly.

Sharenne slumped in her chair and closed her eyes. "That," she said, her lips curving into a smile. "Keep doing that."

"All right," A'zelen agreed. "I will."



2437.09.19

Horses were an unusual enough sight, in the middle of Southern Weyr's main complex, that it made A'zelen slow and take a closer look. He was on his way to the Weyrhall, but now he diverted his path towards the spot between the Weyrqueen's wallow and the support staff's cots, where a man was standing beneath the trees holding the reins of two saddled mounts.

Herd animals didn't like being brought this far into Southern Main, surrounded on all sides by dragon wallows. Carts bringing supplies to the stores and the Weyrhall were usually hitched to the most placid oxen that could be found. Those very few visitors to the Weyr who didn't arrive a-dragonback usually left their horses in the stables where the tithe trains arrived, closer to the feeding grounds. A'zelen wondered who under the moons this could possibly be, since even Lord Toric was known to favor walking here from Southern Hold, rather than going through the hassle of riding.

He particularly wondered, when he realized that the man holding the mounts was wearing the tunic of the Southern Guard. Moments later, A'zelen recognized his friend Gavrill.

It was more than a month since he'd last seen the man – no, he realized, it was over two months, for it had been Southern Hold's midwinter festival, after which the captain had departed on an inland journey. A'zelen had feared their friendship would cool after that confrontation at the fire-tower almost a Turn ago; though he felt justified in his upbraiding of the other man, he wasn't fool enough to expect that Gavrill would be grateful to him for it.

But the guardsman's reaction, or to be accurate lack of reaction, surprised the brownrider. They simply never spoke of it again, and if in the following months Gavrill's mood was still dark, his temper readier and his tongue sharper, he threw off any signs of self-pity or self-destruction, at least that A'zelen or any of his other friends could see. It was difficult to tell if he was recovering – maybe someone never really recovered, from a blow like losing a child – but at least he was living, and A'zelen was content with that.

Now, here he was again, an unexpected visitor to the Weyr; but the first rush of pleasure that A'zelen felt at seeing him quickly became puzzlement, and instead of calling out a greeting, the brownrider's steps slowed, and he approached thoughtfully. Southern Guard captains came into the Weyr rarely, usually only to provide a ceremonial escort for the Lord or his family on Hatching or gather days. This day was no such occasion, and yet A'zelen could see that Gavrill – who on regular duty wore pieces of his uniform casually, whatever he could get away with – was dressed as formally as the brownrider had ever seen him.

A'zelen felt a stirring of unease.

The horses noticed him first, raising their heads at his approach – perhaps at the dragon-scent that might be clinging to him – and that caused the soldier to look in his direction as well. Gavrill turned and waited for him, cocking his head to one side slightly and raising his chin in a

gesture by now familiar to the brownrider; assessing, not necessarily inviting.

“Wingsecond,” the captain said in greeting, his serious tone matching the sober look on his face.

A'zelen raised a hand slightly, then let it fall. “This is a pleasant surprise,” he said in return, stopping just short of letting it sound like a question.

Gavrill looked away from him, towards the Weyrwoman's cot. After a moment, he said, “How's Sharene?”

A'zelen remembered the look on the guardsman's face, months earlier, when the brownrider announced that he was going to be a father. Gavrill was happy for him, genuinely, but it was a quiet happiness tinged with private pain that A'zelen understood all too well. Yet Gavrill always asked after Sharene, wanting to hear, asking the right questions, never avoiding the subject as A'zelen had once feared that he might. That had to be a good sign, but of what, the brownrider wasn't sure.

“She's well,” he answered. “Bored, though. Bored to tears.” The other man's eyebrows lifted in question, so he elaborated, “The healers have been urging bedrest. She's compromising by shifting between bed and chair, but either way she's barred from the kitchens.”

“Even now?” Gavrill asked, a little surprised, and A'zelen nodded.

“I thought we might be past that by now,” he said. “So did Sharene, really. But the healers are being careful. You know.” He waved a hand, in a gesture towards past conversations. He'd confessed to the other man his worries, the healers' cautions, Sharene's history of difficulties. Gavrill at least hadn't tried to be falsely soothing; he'd only counselled that they should do whatever the healers thought best.

“They know what they're doing,” the man said now, repeating his old assurances, and A'zelen shrugged in agreement.

“I know. So does Sharene. She'll do what they tell her to, no question. But ashes, she's bored.”

A fleeting smile quirked the other man's mouth. “I'm sure, like any good husband... ah, weyrmate, that is, you're doing your best to alleviate that.”

“I've done everything but pay a harper to stay at her side.” A'zelen flashed a small smile of his own, and scratched the side of his nose. “Actually, I threatened to do that. Alstan would do it, for a while at least, until she got sick of it. Which would take about a day and a half, really. It was tempting.”

“I'll bet.” Gavrill's expression lightened for a moment, but then settled back into the same serious, almost grim lines it had been wearing when A'zelen first approached. But the guardsman was clearly in one of his less forthcoming moods.

“So,” A'zelen said, after a moment, when it was clear that the other man wasn't going to speak again. “You're done up fit for a gather-day, and yet, look –” he waved a hand at the scene around them “– no gather.”

He even knew enough now to know that this green wherhide tunic, with its badges and rank-knots, close-fitting and tailored to the soldier's tall, lean frame and a bit heavier than was comfortable in the midday sun of even a Southern spring, was indeed formal best. It was fit more for a wedding or a Hatching feast, and the brownrider's eye could distinguish it from the looser, weathered, slightly faded and stained uniform that saw everyday use.

It gave his friend a stiff and serious look, and that was partly what made A'zelen uneasy. That, and his awareness of that waking-dream he'd had, an apparent shift in his perception of the other man that he didn't really yet understand himself and couldn't, absolutely couldn't allow to show.

If Gavrill noticed A'zelen studying him carefully, he made no sign of it, instead looking down at his hands, his busy fingers twisting in the straps of the reins he held. "No gather," he agreed, his tone ironic. "I'm here as escort to Torald."

"The Heir?" The currently favored Heir, at least, or so he was the last A'zelen had heard. That position had changed a number of times over the Turns. There were some who said that Torald was the one who would last, that he had enough of his grandfather in him to keep Lord Toric's favor. Others – and A'zelen remembered that, very late in the hours of one night-watch, Gavrill had given voice to this himself – thought that Torald had the flair and the temper of his grandsire, but not the shrewd judgement, not the cleverness. Not yet, anyway – but the man was young, and the old Lord gave no sign of being finished with life yet.

Gavrill nodded, and then inclined his head towards the Weyrwoman's cot. "He's in there."

"Why?" the brownrider asked. It didn't occur to him to think of the question as indiscreet, although in truth, it wasn't his business. He received an odd, searching look in return.

"You don't know," commented the guardsman. It wasn't a question; he sounded thoughtful, but there was an edge to his voice.

A'zelen frowned. "I don't think so. I can't think why Heir Torald would be here, meeting with the Weyrleaders." He gave the other man a sharp look. "With a Guard captain as escort."

"You know a man named Haidon?"

The brownrider thought about it; he assumed that Gavrill must mean that the man was a weyrman, but the name wasn't familiar to him. He shook his head.

"He's one of your herdsmen," the soldier said, voice and gaze level. He paused, then added, "One of the women in the Hold is crying rape against him."

"Oh." A'zelen felt his gut clench. But the first question that came to him was, "Is it true?"

The soldier gave him a disbelieving look. "Is it *true*?" he repeated incredulously. He waved his free hand sharply, taking in the scene around them. "Would I be here if it wasn't?"

A'zelen shook his head. "That's not an answer. The fact that you're here with Heir Torald suggests there must be some question –"

"The girl says it's true," Gavrill answered flatly. Very clearly, he not only believed it, but he considered the matter closed.

Perhaps the other man's posture, or the growing anger that A'zelen could almost feel coming off him, in waves, should have made him hesitate, but the brownrider read the warning signs and went on anyway. "Was he caught in the act, then?" he asked, then answered himself, "He wasn't, was he? If he was, then you'd be holding him, and someone from the Weyr would have had to go to you, to plead for him. But you're here, because he's here, and you have to ask the Weyrleaders before you can take him."

"No, he wasn't caught in the act," Gavrill agreed, with a dismissive gesture. "He got away before the girl could find help – but she did, and she knew his name and his face and where he could be found."

"And what does *he* say?"

The guardsman shook his head impatiently. "I don't know. What do any of them say?" he demanded. "There must be some mistake? It wasn't him? The girl was willing?"

The scorn in the other man's tone disturbed A'zelen. "And one of those things couldn't be true?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Gavrill rounded on him. "What? You think the *girl* is lying? To her family, to me, to the Heir of the Hold?" He stepped forward, crowding the brownrider, and A'zelen stood his ground.

"I'm not saying I think she's lying," he replied, matching the other's visible anger with calm. "I don't know her –"

"Well, I do," the guardsman snapped. "I know her, I know her father, I know her betrothed –"

'And if that's so,' A'zelen thought but kept himself from saying, 'then you're far too close to this.' "All I'm saying," he interrupted, aloud, "is that it wouldn't be the first time a man was accused by mistake. And if Heir Torald has been in there arguing about it with the Weyrleaders this long, it must mean they have some doubt as well."

"If they have *doubts*, then it's because they're listening to a frightened man –" Gavrill began heatedly, and A'zelen cut him off with an upraised hand and a disbelieving look of his own.

"Do you blame him for being frightened? Shards, Gavrill, we all know what will happen to him if you take him back to the Hold for punishment."

"That's what we call *justice*," the soldier growled in return.

"No." A'zelen shook his head sharply. "It's only justice if you can be truly sure of his guilt –"

"I'm sure!" Gavrill shot back, just short of yelling.

The brownrider gave him a pleading look. "No, you're not. You *want* to be, and that's understandable, but you don't *know*, and the truth is that it's her word against his."

At that, a look of disgust crossed the other man's face, and he looked away. A'zelen went on, desperately, "And

until you're willing to start from that point, instead of starting from the conviction of his guilt... the Weyrleaders can never let you have him. They can't give him up, because he's one of theirs, the same way you'd protect one of your own."

He couldn't tell if that argument reached the guardsman through his anger. "Nice sentiment," is what Gavrill said, with a slight sneer. "I'd like to see the Weyrleaders say that to the girl herself, and her family."

"Maybe they will," A'zelen said, although he wasn't sure of that at all. "Look, one thing I do know, and you *have* to believe this." The look on the guardsman's face said that he didn't have to believe anything, and the brownrider forged on strongly, "If the Weyrleaders were sure of his guilt, they'd hand him over. If they don't, that doesn't mean they'll let this drop."

"Good. Because we sure as shards won't," the soldier promised, both tone and expression dark. And at that moment, the door of the Weyrwoman's cot burst open.

Yes, that was Heir Torald, all right – a young man with his grandsire's height, and mane of sun-bleached hair. One look at the man made clear what the Weyrleaders' answer had been. He came striding from the weycot with a thunderous expression, his face flushed with anger, and he gestured sharply at the alert Guard captain. Gavrill moved quickly to hand over the reins of one of the horses, while A'zelen took several steps back.

Genna and K'med stood just outside the weycot's door and watched as the Heir and his escort mounted, controlling the skittish horses. A'zelen thought the Weyrwoman's face looked sad, but he knew her sympathy was the last thing that either of the holders wanted. The bronzerider's expression was neutral, but was set in lines recognizable as stubborn to anyone who knew him.

Torald hauled his horse's head around in a sharp turn, and then paused, wrestling for control of his mount and perhaps of his temper as well. "This matter is not settled," he said finally, his tone just short of discourtesy.

"We will send word of what we discover," K'med returned. "And we'll send our Weyrsinger to speak with your Harper." Lying unspoken between them, A'zelen could almost hear the words the bronzerider didn't say: *and you will have to be satisfied with that.*

"Do that," the Heir ordered sharply, and kicked his horse to set it moving.

All that time, Gavrill had said not a word, nor had he looked at A'zelen; and his stony expression didn't change, difficult to read past the obvious fact that he was no happier than the man he was escorting.

The brownrider's eyes stayed on his friend's stiff back as the two holders rode away. He wished... he wished he'd had more time, wished he'd been more convincing. Wished he could have felt that he'd made the other man understand. It wasn't that the Weyr didn't care for justice, it wasn't that they condoned a thing like this, either, but flame it, he *had* to see that they had to be sure.

Genna looked over, and saw A'zelen standing there, giving him a puzzled look. "Wingsecond?"

"Weyrleaders," he replied, dragging his attention away from the retreating figures with difficulty. Shaking himself, he gave them an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, I just – the Guard captain is someone I know."

K'med glanced after the two men as well, and then gave A'zelen a grim smile. "I don't blame them for being angry," he said. "I'd want the same thing, in their place. But I'm seared if I'm going to give them a man who might be innocent."

"Then," said the Weyrwoman, "it's in our interests as well to find the truth in this. Wingsecond? Would you be willing to find the Weyrsinger, and bring him here?"

He nodded to both of them. "Of course."

"And in the meantime, I will fetch this herdsman myself," the Weyrleader said. He shared a look with the goldrider, and their stern expressions matched. She met his eyes, with a nod, and then met A'zelen's, before retreating into her cot.

He couldn't shake off this encounter easily and he was glad to have something to do, anything that would help, but after he fetched Alstan and brought the harper here, his own role in this would end; it wasn't his business. And he knew that, just because they all wanted to discover the truth, there was no guarantee that they'd succeed.

Perhaps the man would confess. Or perhaps further questioning would reveal that the truth of the matter lay somewhere in the middle, somewhere between a young man who now feared for his life, and a young woman whose fears A'zelen could only imagine. And, between Weyr and Hold, and the need of each to protect its own.

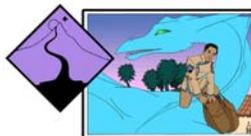
They at least shared that much in common, if they could only see it, and respect it. If they could, if they only could do that much, then maybe they could reach each other past all the other things that divided them.

The brownrider realized quite well that he was thinking less of the age-old question of Weyr and Hold, and more on a very personal level. But the one was clearly a mirror of the other. The Weyr and the Hold were nothing but individuals, like himself, and like Gavrill, sometimes understanding each other, sometimes emphatically not.

A'zelen wished, again, more than ever, that he'd had time to get through and reach some kind of understanding with his friend. He'd never felt the width of the gulf between them more than he did at this moment. He was standing on the edge of it, it was wider and deeper than he'd realized, and he felt like the failure to bridge it was *his* fault, somehow.

It wasn't a feeling that he liked, at all.

He moved off, still troubled, in search of the Weyrsinger.



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