
Nightwatch, Part 5

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Guardsecond Ferrel found his captain in the equipment room of Southern's guardhall, seated on a bench and surrounded by flamethrowers, parts of flamethrowers, cloths and brushes and flasks of oil.

The monthly inspection of the groundcrew equipment was routine, but not a task that Captain Gavrill ever delegated to anyone else if he could help it – a degree of caution that Ferrel deeply appreciated. He had at least a little faith in the captain's feel for the sometimes finicky machines, and would rather wear one knowing that Gavrill had passed it, than trust the thick-fingered, thick-headed, impatient judgement of Captain Makon. And it was axiomatic amongst the guardsmen that they would rather trust their own maintenance of the machines than to take the word of the Hold's smiths alone. The smiths might know more about making a flamethrower, and they might be good at their craft, but the truth was that no smithcrafter ever had to strap one on his back and go out in Threadfall with it.

It wasn't long after dawn, but Ferrel wasn't surprised to find his captain deep into the inspection already. A cup of klah rested on the floor at his feet, which probably meant this was a chore he'd set himself to complete before finding breakfast. Ferrel paused in the door, and rapped on the frame to get the other man's attention.

Gavrill looked up, then reached up with a grease-stained hand to remove the brush he'd been holding in his teeth. "Morning," he greeted, tilting his head expectantly.

"Reporting a smooth transfer of the watch, as ordered, sir," Ferrel said, sketching a salute towards the other man, who nodded in acceptance. He and Gavrill had worked together for too many Turns for either to be concerned with formality.

"All quiet, I assume?" asked the captain absently, concentrating on disassembling the flint housing at the end of a flamethrower's wand.

"Dead quiet," Ferrel replied, moving into the room and wandering aimlessly. "Dead, dead quiet. It was brownrider P'kar on duty."

"Yeah," Gavrill grunted absently, absorbed in his work. "He never has much of anything to say."

Ferrel shot him a worried look, that the captain didn't notice. "No, he doesn't," the guardsecond said. He picked up a pair of fine-nosed pliers from the bench, and turned the

tool over in his hands, uneasily. Finally, he added, "I asked him about your wingsecond friend, though. Remembered you saying that woman of his should be having her baby soon." Ferrel could remember the couple, the good-looking brownrider and his tall, pretty wife – or, weyrmate, whatever they called it. Ever since the brownrider and Ferrel's captain had become friends of a sort, they were a regular sight around the guards' table at gathers.

He grimaced, wishing he wasn't the one bearing this news.

"Oh, yeah? Yeah, she's a little overdue, actually, I think." Gavrill did glance up at him then, casually. Obviously expecting, if there'd been news, then Ferrel would have run in here blurting it out. Then he saw the look on his 'second's face, and his expression changed instantly, serious and intent. "What?" he asked sharply.

Ferrel didn't bother hiding the sorrow in his face. "She died birthing the babe, sir. Early yesterday."

Gavrill frowned at him for a moment more, before reacting. "Shards," he said. "The child?"

There wasn't an easy way to say it, and no use delaying. "Died too," he said, expecting that news to hit his captain hard, and it did. Gavrill's eyes closed tightly, briefly, as he tried to suppress any stronger reaction, and by that speaking volumes instead.

When he opened his eyes again, he wasn't looking at Ferrel any longer, but staring off into a distance only he could see. "Scorch it," he said finally, softly. Then he focused on the guardsecond again. "Thanks for telling me. Thanks for thinking to ask."

"Was hoping it would be good news," Ferrel muttered, slapping the grip of the pliers he'd picked up rhythmically into the palm of his hand. "Though I guess if it was then you'd've heard –"

"Maybe," said the captain, noncommittally. He was close-mouthed on the subject of his friendship with the dragonrider, and Ferrel didn't blame him, since most of the men found it odd, at best, and in some it might have provoked suspicion, or gossip of the kind that a Guard captain didn't need.

Ferrel was one of those who found it a little odd, maybe, but he didn't question it. What was there to question? He'd met the brownrider and liked the man himself, for a dragonrider, that is. And he'd known Gavrill since the man's earliest days with the Southern Guard, and one of the things he liked best about the younger man was that he was a little unpredictable, a little surprising, a little unconventional, and utterly dependable. Ferrel thought – when he took time to think about it at all – that it was probably why the man had made captain, despite a manner that made him as many enemies as friends. The key thing, Ferrel had realized once, was that it made him the *right kind* of friends. Which was why Ferrel was happy to follow the other man's lead, having recognized a long time ago that he himself was not the stuff of which Guard captains were made.

So now, he looked at his captain, his friend, and said, "What are you going to do?"

After a pause, Gavrill had gone back to tinkering with the flamethrower's wand, but Ferrel didn't believe for a moment that his mind was on the task any longer. He'd schooled his features into a blankness that reminded the guardsecond how sharded dangerous it could be to play the other man at cards, and the look the captain shot him was coolly assessing. "Do?" he repeated, his tone offering nothing either.

Ferrel just gave him a silently eloquent look in return. Gavrill looked down at the half-disassembled machine in his hands. Then he raised the wand and squinted at it thoughtfully.

"This sharded thing wasn't always lighting," he said, finally. "Thought maybe I could fix it, figured it was just the striker or the flint, but it's not. Something's clogging the fuel-spray mechanism – I think it might just be worn out."

Ferrel nodded, waiting. Gavrill stood up, stepping over the bench he'd been straddling. "We don't have any spares left for that, either. I checked earlier. Not ones I'd trust, anyway."

"Too bad Journeyman Sorrik won't be back till the end of the sevenday," the guardsecond commented, knowing as well as Gavrill did that the Hold's senior Smith had taken his best junior journeyman and had gone off to a seahold down the coast.

"Yeah, well," said Gavrill, sweeping the parts of the flamethrower into a cloth sack. "To be honest, I'd rather have the Weyrsmith look at it. Make sure I'm not overlooking something."

"That's a good idea," Ferrel said, neutrally. The truth was, Gavrill should have taken the broken flamethrower and left it in Sorrik's workshop to wait on the man's return. But it wasn't unheard of for the guards to want the Weyr's smiths to look over the flamethrowers – they were the acknowledged experts, after all, since everyone knew the safety of the queenriders depending on keeping those machines well-maintained.

The captain slung the strap of the flamethrower's tank over his shoulder, and picked up the sack, heading for the door. On the way, he paused to lay one hand briefly on Ferrel's shoulder, his dark eyes meeting the guardsecond's and holding them for a moment. "Thanks for your report," he said.

Ferrel nodded. "Any time, sir. You need me to cover anything?" he added.

"No, I've got it. Don't worry – go get yourself to bed." Gavrill patted his shoulder before moving off. "Get some sleep," he said, over his shoulder. "You could make a belpouch out of the bags under your eyes."

Ferrel snorted. "Funny, sir. Jilli knows who she can blame for that." He watched as the captain just gave him a wave in response, without turning again, as he walked out of the guardhall.

It wasn't that Gavrill was unfamiliar with the layout of the Weyr. After all these Turns, he knew his way around the main parts of it pretty well. But, what with one thing and another, it surprised him to realize that he didn't really know where A'zelen's cot was to be found. He'd never actually been there.

On the one hand, maybe that was a little strange. It wasn't like he hadn't been here for gathers and Hatchings. There'd just been no reason to visit the brownrider and his weyrmate in their cot. Even on happy occasions, when he was at the Weyr, Gavrill was usually on duty, or on some specific errand. It didn't leave a lot of time for socializing.

And then, there was the fact that Lord Toric had never really approved of too much casual contact between his Hold and the Weyr. Wasn't that the reason they bothered keeping watch on the main road in the first place? He wondered if Toric's successor would continue the practice – not that anyone expected the old Lord to die any time soon. The Pass would likely be over before then. Who knew what would happen to relations between Weyr and Hold then?

Then Gavrill winced, when he remembered the last time he'd come this far into the Weyr. He'd been escorting Torald, and the purpose of that escort didn't make for a pleasant memory.

Torald had been livid with the Weyr's "arrogance". Gavrill had wanted just as much to drag that unfortunate herdsman back to the Hold, to face the wrath of the girl's family. It wasn't easy accepting that A'zelen had been the one with the correct instincts, that day. Him, and his Weyrleaders, who'd insisted that cooler heads should prevail.

At the time, "cooler heads" hadn't described Torald *or* himself, he admitted. Being forced to return to the Hold empty-handed had stung Torald. The last thing the Heir wanted was to have it look as if the Weyr had bested him. There was no telling how the old Lord would react when he heard about *that*. So Torald had seized on the bright idea to call on the Hold's Harper, to help prepare the record of the case as if the Weyr handing over the culprit was only delayed, instead of in question.

Maybe bringing the Hold Harper into it was what Torald should have done from the start. Harper Enril had insisted, in his crusty, straightforward way, on confirming the facts for himself. Being a harper meant he was an expert at sifting truth from story, anyway.

The tale that Enril uncovered was definitely at odds with the one the outraged father had brought to the Guard and to Heir Torald. This one was of a girl who didn't want the marriage agreed on by her father and the man he'd chosen for her. This was a story about an unhappy, scared young woman making the kind of desperate, stupid mistake that young people often made. Finding out, the husband-to-be jumped to the wrong conclusion – because it was easier to believe in another man trying to steal his woman, than accept that she didn't want *him*. Panicked by the fury of her betrothed and her father, it was also easier for the girl to



agreed that it had been rape, than to risk their anger falling on her as well.

Not an honorable thing to do, no question. Not to some poor, unsuspecting herdsman from the Weyr. Not to a boy who hadn't learned yet to be careful when choosing a bedmate at a Hold gather. Shards, what young man in his teens was *ever* cautious about a thing like that? No, not fair, not honorable. But, understandable, in the circumstances.

At least that tale had ended somewhat happily, if not with the same husband for the girl that her father originally wanted.

Maybe Toric's policy of controlling and limiting contact between the two communities was a wise one.

Gavrill headed for the grouping of cots that housed the Weyrsmith and his staff. Before he tried to figure out where to find his brownrider friend, he'd better take care of his excuse for coming into the Weyr in the first place. He wasn't actually sure why this flamethrower wasn't firing properly – but he was certain it wasn't the flint or the striker, anyway. He hadn't had time to start taking the wand apart before Ferrel came in. Whatever the problem was, it was a sure bet the smiths here could handle it. If he was very lucky – and very charming and persuasive – they might even have it fixed and ready for him to take back with him later.

Assuming he could find A'zelen, that is. Even if he had no clear idea what he was going to do when he did find the brownrider.

It wasn't as if there was a sharded thing he could do for the man. Gavrill knew that all too well. There was no way to change things, no way to bring Sharene or her babe back, and no real way to make the loss of them easier to bear. People mouthed such sentiments – "it doesn't seem like it now, but it will get better" – but Gavrill knew from bitter experience how wrong they were. A loss like that never got easier to bear, you just learned to live around the huge hole that it punched in your life. Maybe the pain dulled, but it never went away.

And it wasn't that he imagined A'zelen needed the same bracing slap in the face that the brownrider had come and delivered to Gavrill. Which, granted, he hadn't exactly appreciated at the time. He'd only come to recognize the value of it later. Everyone else had been tip-toeing around him, and then there was A'zelen, marching right in, barging past Gavrill's walls as if he didn't even notice them. Arrogant, yeah, but pretty sharded brave, too. It had gotten through to him, before he'd even recognized the care and friendship that underlaid that gesture.

It had meant something, to know that his life was worth something to someone, at a time when Gavrill had stopped believing in its worth himself. It had taken A'zelen getting right into his face before he'd seen it. At the time, nothing less could have gotten through to him. So it wasn't just the brownrider's friendship he was thankful for, but the man's stubborn determination as well.

That was why he was here. He wanted to return that gesture. A'zelen had just lost someone he cared for, deeply, someone who had cared for *him*. The loss was hard enough,

but the loneliness, Gavrill knew, was worse. The regret was terrible, and the pain of being left to deal with it alone was worse. Wanting punishment, that was the pain that Gavrill had clung to, and it was A'zelen who'd jerked him up short, stopped him from riding it down into his own destruction.

Gavrill didn't think that the brownrider would need exactly the same service – he was a *brownrider*, after all. He might not understand it that well, but he'd heard often enough that a dragonrider could never be truly alone, unless he lost his dragon. And Toth was about as big and solid an anchor as Gavrill could imagine anyone having. Still. Having a dragon didn't mean a dragonrider didn't feel the loss of a person he loved, and a future he'd looked forward to.

The more he thought about it, the more inadequate this impulse of his seemed. What could he really offer? Sympathy, with some experience behind it. Concern. The statement, by his presence, that he cared. Not a whole blasted lot, when you got right down to it.

Well, inadequate or not, he'd do it.

Before he realized it he was rounding the corner of the big storage-cots, and crossing the stone-flagged pavement that surrounded the workshops of the smiths. These were set at a distance from most of the other support buildings, just as they were at the Hold, downwind of everything. The Weyr was as cautious of fire spreading through its buildings as the Hold was. The tapping of a hammer on metal told him there was someone in the open-sided forge shed, so he headed that way.

What he found were a few apprentices, working sullenly in the day's gathering heat, and a slender woman with her dark hair braided back from her sweating, dirt-streaked face. She might not have been wearing her rank cords at the moment, but Gavrill knew who this was, and he briefly cursed finding her on duty instead of one of her fellow journeymen. It was a lot harder, he knew from previous errands like this, to bluff or charm his way around Revanne. Even as a senior apprentice she'd had an intimidating manner and a nose for sniffing out deception. He didn't expect her being confirmed with rank to have changed that. He really, really hoped that whatever was wrong with this flamethrower, it wasn't something so simple that it made him look like an idiot for bringing it here.

She looked up and saw him crossing the pavement, and by the time he entered the shelter, all eyes were on him, the apprentices taking this as a welcome distraction from their projects. The woman was seated at a table spread with pieces of some mechanism – gears and what might have been a handle, a crank for something or other, maybe the spits for the kitchens. Watching him and waiting for him, she brushed a tendril of hair that had escaped from her braid off her forehead with the back of a grease-stained hand.

Even though he was pretty sure it wouldn't work, Gavrill gave her a pleasant smile. "Journeywoman," he said, with a nod that was respectful even if it wasn't a bow.

"Captain," she returned neutrally, not returning the smile. That, he knew, was typical of her, so he didn't take offense. "What can the Weyr's smiths do for you?"

He unslung the flamethrower tank from his shoulder and let it rest on the ground. "Nothing complicated." He held up the bag, looking for a place to lay out the pieces within, and after a moment the young woman gestured at a nearby table, getting up and coming over as he started arranging all the parts on it. "Got firing problems, and it's not the lighting mechanism, so I'm guessing it's the fuel delivery..."

The journeywoman had picked up the wand and was looking at the end. "Did you try swapping in a replacement for the sprayer end?" she asked, turning a glowbasket to give her better light for an inspection.

"No, see – we're out of spares. And Master Sorrik's away for a sevenday at least –"

She gave him a sharp look. "Did it occur to you to try testing it with one taken from another flamethrower that you know is working?"

That would certainly have been his next idea, under normal circumstances, trying to determine if it was a problem there or deeper in the fuel-delivery line. But he hadn't gotten that far. So he raised his eyebrows and put a blank look on his face, and answered, "Uh, no. Look, to tell you the truth," he went on, ignoring her disdainful snort, "I could have spent all morning swapping in parts, trying to find the problem, but – I'd feel better if a smith looked at it, that's all. Could be lots of things. Could be the sprayer, could be a worn trigger, I don't know. I just use the things, I'm no smithcrafter."

"Well, that's certainly true," she drawled. But at least her attention was now absorbed by the puzzle of the mechanism she was studying. Thank the stars he'd had this as a handy excuse.

"And you know Master Sorrik," he added, gesturing vaguely. For one thing, he knew that unlike Weyrsmith Baldis, Master Sorrik wasn't that keen on women in the craft. The Hold had no women amongst its smiths, while Revanne had made journeywoman only this past Turn, and there was a girl sitting over there amongst the apprentices, too. He heard her snort again, and knew she appreciated the point. "His skill with plumbing is nothing short of inspiring, but, you know –" Again, he tried a winning smile, which went unnoticed. "When it comes to flamethrowers –"

"Yes, well," said the journeywoman finally, putting the wand down on the table. "As it happens, this will provide the apprentices with an excellent exercise in diagnosis for the morning." And as a matter of fact, the apprentices across the room, who were trying hard not to look like they were listening, did seem to perk up a bit at the idea. "Don't worry," she assured him, "they will be supervised, and we won't allow this to leave until I or Weyrsmith Baldis have inspected it."

The look she gave him then was challenging, as if she was waiting for him to say that he would prefer it be the Weyrsmith who passed the repaired machine. So, seeing the

opening, he gave her a warm smile and said, "That's good enough for me." She was good – she hid any surprise at his answer. He gestured again towards the Weyr. "I've got some other...business, here, so –"

"I doubt this will take more than a few hours, captain," Revanne told him. "Come by here as you're leaving. If for some reason it's not ready, we'll find a way to save you another trip."

"Will do. You'll let me know what's owed –?"

"When we determine whether it needs anything but a good cleaning," she said. "Otherwise, the training opportunity makes it a fair trade."

His smile was absolutely genuine, as he gave her a nearly-proper salute. "Thanks. See you in a few hours, then."

Now all he needed to do was to figure out how to find A'zelen.

Actually, no. He knew how to do it. What he needed was to find the right *someone* to point him in the brownrider's direction. And, he told himself, heading towards the center of the Weyr, where the roof of the big Weyrhall was visible over the trees, there was no sense starting anywhere but at the top.

And that, to Gavriil, didn't necessarily meant the Weyrleaders, or the queenriders, or the wingleaders, or the other people who held the highest ranks. Just like in the Hold – the Hold belonged to Lord Toric, no question, but even Lord Toric knew that if you wanted anything, there was just one person whose good side you'd better be on – and that was the Headwoman.

Here at the Weyr, it wasn't much different. So he'd start with Headwoman Ima, and work his way down from there.

The closer he got to the Weyrhall, the more he noticed how the air, the trees, and the roofs of the building were thick with firelizards. Far more than frequented the Hold, and that had a fair number hanging around, especially near the docks. He glimpsed neck-banding on some of the firelizards zooming around, but a larger number were unbanded. That made sense, he guessed – wild ones would be attracted to the ones attached to people, and possibly to the dragons in the Weyr as well. The noise they made drowned out the normal noise of wherries – either that, or their presence had scared a lot of the wherries off. At least, he bet, they probably did wonders for the Weyr's vermin problem. So long as you didn't consider firelizards themselves vermin, that is.

In the Hold, of course, criticism of firelizards wasn't uncommon, but it tended to be muted, given the number of them attached to the Lord and his family. Toric didn't insist on people attaching them, but he did hold the vocal opinion that keeping one successfully was a point of pride (naturally, the Lord himself had three). It was safer to grumble about the wild ones, or about lesser colors perhaps, or those that belonged to visitors.

Gavriil squinted up at the chattering fairs, and considered for a moment whether it was time to try to attach another himself. They were handy things for a guardsman

to have, and most of Southern's men were encouraged to get one, if not ordered. A fair number of his men had them. He'd impressed his own before he'd turned twenty, and couldn't help the involuntary smile whenever he thought of the little brown. But it was a smile tinged with a little pain, because he couldn't remember the brown without remembering how it had felt when the firelizard died, tangling with a wild wher. Gavriil had thought his own heart had stopped, and that distraction had earned him a serious wound before other men had driven the wher away.

No. Just like every other time when he'd wondered if he ought to try again, he decided against it. Useful though it might be, he wasn't ready, even though the loss was almost a decade in the past, now. At least his senior captain never pushed it, even if he brought it up from time to time. Gavriil always indicated the deep scarring on his thigh as a reason; it was only luck that he hadn't died along with the firelizard. He was wary of putting himself in that position again. That, at least, seemed to be reasoning Captain Hanan could accept.

A woman hurrying by with a basket of fresh greens on her hip responded to his question that he could find the Headwoman in the laundry-sheds. Sure enough, he saw the short, round, grey-haired figure of the lady in question leaving the building ahead, and he quickened his pace. She turned and stopped when he hailed her, and waited for him. For her, he performed a small bow, and her eyes crinkled with her smile.

"Captain. What brings you into the Weyr?"

He gestured back towards the smithy area. "Oh, I, ah, had some business with the Weyrsmith –"

"Ah. Flamethrower problems again," the older woman said, wisely.

"Yeah. You know how it is – they're the experts." Gavriil adjusted his pace to hers as she made her way back towards the main Weyrhall.

"It's a wonder the Hold's smiths aren't insulted," Ima commented, still smiling to take the sting out of the words. "You would think they would take it as a challenge."

"Nah, they just complain about picky guardsmen – but hey, less work for them." He returned her smile.

"And what may I do for you, since I assume you came to find me." She looked up at him, adding archly, "Unless I'm taking you away from business you have with my laundry-women?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Not with your laundry-women, no," he agreed. "I'm looking for the cot of one of your brownriders."

"Oh?" she said, with interest. "Which one? And I hope you're not about to tell me it's for some trouble he's caused in the Hold, captain."

"No, no, nothing like that." Gavriil became serious, and saw that she noticed the change. "It's Wingsecond A'zelen."

The Headwoman's face changed instantly, her good-humored expression falling. "Oh, eggshells – pardon me," she said, sorrow in her voice. "What a terrible, terrible few days it's been."

"I'm sure," he said, with sympathy, knowing that Sharene had been part of her staff. "I only just heard –"

"Poor, dear A'zelen," Ima went on. "To lose both of them, like that. It's just terrible," she repeated. "And they're never prepared for it, dragonriders. They're used to losing each other in Fall, they never expect tragedy to come from another quarter, from their homes."

"I don't think anyone's ever prepared for it," he said, quietly, and she nodded.

"That's true, that's true." Ima sighed. "I can direct you to his cot easily, captain. You'll find him there – at least, I expect you will. I know her family – it's such a large family, did you know? – should be helping take away some of her things this morning."

Gavriil hid a grimace at that idea, although of course, it made sense. "Yeah, I've met some of them – gathers, and, you know...."

Armed with her directions – which really were fairly simple, given what a 'snake's warren the layout of the Weyr was – he set off along the indicated path through the trees. Finding the cot didn't prove that difficult, nor did recognizing it. If Toth's mountainous bulk, curled up in his wallow outside, wasn't enough, there was the activity surrounding it, in an otherwise quiet and empty quarter of the Weyr. As he approached, two young men exited the cot, carrying baskets of what looked like clothing, and through the wide windows he could see more activity within.

Gavriil paused briefly near the brown's head – not quite within reach, not quite bold enough to go nearer and touch the great beast. The dragon's eyes were open, and he had no doubt he'd been noticed. This close he could see the whirling of the eye's colors, violet-tinged and disquieted. "Hey, Toth," he said, after a moment, since it seemed unmannerly not to acknowledge the dragon. The brown didn't even twitch an eyelid.

He took a deep breath, and went up the short flight of steps that led to the weyr.

The cot had a big, open common room, and a walled-off bedroom over to the side. It was comfortably furnished, not extravagantly, and everything was neat and tidy except for one corner that held a set of shelves and a sand-table, covered with stacks of paper and rolled hides and scroll-cases, and a few instruments. That told him a lot, right there – those would be A'zelen's, so the cot's neatness was no doubt the work of Sharene.

There was a young woman, stamped with features that made her family connection clear, kneeling beside an open chest and sorting through the contents, and just as Gavriil entered, another girl came out of the bedroom with an armful of women's clothes. Already, the room had an unsettled look to it; it was clear that things had been removed, and the remainder not yet rearranged to cover the lack.

All of that, he noticed peripherally, taking in the details automatically. His attention was immediately on the familiar figure standing over by another set of shelves, a basket at his feet, holding something in his hands. A'zelen

turned the moment Gavrill appeared in the door, and looked at him.

Of course. Toth must have alerted him.

Both girls glanced at him, too, but then they went back to their own tasks. They would recognize him, from gathers, too, just as he did, though he couldn't put names to their faces. Not right now.

"Gavrill?" The look that A'zelen turned on him was a frown. As Gavrill crossed the room and got closer, he took in the details of the other man's appearance. It didn't surprise him that the brownrider didn't look good. He was unshaven, his blue eyes were bloodshot, and his brown hair was as disordered as hair cropped that short could get. Most noticeable, though, was the way his posture was hunched in on itself, making him look smaller than he was.

He looked...wounded, Gavrill decided. No big surprise there. The brownrider also looked brittle, and Gavrill barely checked an impulse to reach out and touch the other man, to draw him into a quick, rough hug. There were men he could do that to, had done that to, when they needed it, and ashes, but A'zelen looked like he needed it right now. But he also had no trouble recognizing the barriers surrounding the other man, and Gavrill knew how that was, too. He knew how hard the brownrider would be working to maintain those walls, and how the wrong move, the wrong touch might send him flying apart.

"Gavrill?" A'zelen repeated, still standing, frozen, holding a spinning shuttle in his hands. "What are you –?"

"I heard," Gavrill said, simply, watching the other man's reaction.

"What are you doing *here*?" the brownrider finished. He looked almost confused. Gavrill could almost read the thoughts rattling around in the other's head. This was the Weyr, and this wasn't where the guardsman belonged, this wasn't his proper place....

"I came as soon as I heard." He kept his words simple, his voice soothing. He saw A'zelen nod, finally, and bend down to place the shuttle in the basket at his feet.

"Oh. How did –? Right. That's – you, ah, didn't have to –" The brownrider wasn't looking at him. He stared down at the basket for a moment more, before automatically turning to the shelves and taking the next item down. He held the bowl of bobbins in his hand, looking at them as if he didn't know what they were.

"Yes, I did. I wanted to, and I had to," Gavrill told him, watching carefully, knowing how fragile the other man's control likely was. When the brownrider still didn't look up, he said gently, insistently, "A'zelen."

That brought the red-rimmed blue-grey eyes back to him. When he saw he had the other's attention, he said, "I'm sorry."

After a moment, A'zelen started, and his brow furrowed in a frown again. "I know," was the first thing he said, didactically, before he shook his head as if to clear it. "I – uh, yes, I'm –" A brief, humorless smile flashed across his face, instantly erased. "I'm sorry, too."

Gavrill cursed himself, mildly. He didn't have the words. He'd always preferred actions, gestures. How could he have forgotten what a man of words A'zelen was?

"What can –?" he started, anyway, feeling helpless, and then the brownrider interrupted him.

"Does it get better?" Those light, intense eyes were pinning him, searching his face. "What do you think? I'm not exactly short on offered opinions," A'zelen said, with a short, strained laugh, "but I'd like to hear yours. Does it get better?"

Swallowing, forcing himself to answer, Gavrill said the first thing that came to mind. "No. It doesn't get *better*." He held the brownrider's eyes, seeing the challenge, and the slight defiance. He saw his answer wasn't what A'zelen had expected him to say. He sighed, and groped for more words. "She was special. You're never going to find another like her. You'll never stop wishing you hadn't lost her."

A'zelen's eyes closed briefly, then he nodded, opening them and looking at Gavrill again. "No, I never will," he agreed. Looking down, he tipped the bowl, and let its collection of bobbins fall into the basket, replacing the bowl on the shelf.

"You'll learn to live with it, that's all," Gavrill finished. Knowing it wasn't very comforting, but, he sensed the other man wasn't looking for empty comfort. "You don't have any choice."

"No," the brownrider agreed, sadly. "I don't."

Gavrill gave him a half-smile, and finally dared to reach out. His hand rested on the nape of the other's neck, squeezing slightly, and when A'zelen allowed that touch, Gavrill drew the brownrider into a solid hug. A'zelen's breath hitched, but no more than that. He stood still for a moment, allowing the embrace, before returning it, more tightly, more fiercely than Gavrill had expected he would.

They stood that way for a moment, Gavrill letting the other man hang on and control his breathing. Letting him decide whether this was enough, or if he needed to break down. But A'zelen didn't, and when he felt the shift of the brownrider's stance, the tightening of his shoulders, Gavrill let go, stepping back.

A'zelen took a deep breath, his expression unreadable. "Th – thank you," he said, finally.

Gavrill gave him another smile, warmer this time, and gave his shoulder a last pat. "Sure," he said. After another moment's hesitation, A'zelen turned his attention back to the shelf. Gavrill tilted his head, watching, and said, "Your wingleader ground you?"

The brownrider shot him a surprised look. "Yes. Well, not – not exactly, grounded, but I won't be flying Fall, not right away." He picked up a piece of cloth and began wrapping the bowl in it. "When this is – as soon as we're done here, I'm going to, ah, Landing."

Gavrill nodded. A'zelen's parents were still at Landing. "That's a good idea," he said. "Do they know?"

"No, ah – not yet." The brownrider shrugged. "They will when I get there."

"Yeah." A thought occurred to him, and he frowned. Wanting something to do with his hands, he reached out and took a ceramic cup from the shelf, turning it over, looking at the glaze without seeing it. Finally, he decided that while the question might be stupid, he had to ask anyway. "You're coming back, right?"

A'zelen turned his head, gave him another intense look. "Yes, of course. In a few sevendays." There was a question in his tone, too, that sounded to Gavrill like, *why would you think otherwise?*

It wasn't really worth explaining. "Good." He placed the cup back on the shelf. A'zelen was still scrutinizing him, but he doubted the other man could read anything in his careful expression. "So, hey – I have a few hours to kill," he said. "Can I help?"

The brownrider kept up his searching look for a long moment more, before saying, "Yes, if you want."

"Great." He smiled, and looked around the room, at the girls who were still courteously ignoring them. "Tell me what to do."



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