
Reasons to Celebrate

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"Ah, finally! The great Wingleader deigns to join us!"

Alstan made his comment loud enough that the approaching J'hanos would be sure to hear it. The young Weysinger had a broad grin on his face, fully matched by the one that Vesoz wore. Vesoz, A'zelen was sure, couldn't have looked any prouder of his brother, almost as though he'd had something to do with the bronzerider's rise in rank himself.

A'zelen watched as J'hanos made his way through the Weyrhall towards their Wing's table, all smiles and charm as he allowed himself to be stopped by well-wishers every few feet. He'd almost made it when his arm was snagged by bronzerider B'tak on the next table over. B'tak had been a clutchmate of theirs, a rival back then with whom J'hanos had competed fiercely, now a wingsecond to L'tan. Even in their weyring days, A'zelen would have laid marks on J'hanos becoming a Wingleader first -- B'tak was a good man, a good tactician, but he didn't have the personal touch that J'hanos did with people, nor did he have the other bronzerider's magnetic looks.

Around them, the Weyrhall resumed its usual level of activity and murmur, the spectacle of a promotion to Wingleader over for now. Finally, J'hanos reached his Wing's table, receiving its general acclaim with a gracious bow.

He didn't seat himself immediately, but paused by the head of the table, by the empty chair of the Wingleader, and after a moment, the table quieted down. J'hanos placed one hand on the back of the chair -- the only backed chair at the entire table -- and picked up the goblet that his brother filled for him, raising it. The rest of the Wing quickly reached for their own cups, and when he was sure that he had their attention, his expression became sober and serious.

"D'ralt, and Nalth," he said, and voices around the table echoed him raggedly. "Who have gone ahead to make the Final Crossing. May their names never be lost to time."

A good man, A'zelen reflected as he drank. A great man, a great Threadfighter, a great leader. But shearing, swirling winds during a bad night 'Fall had sent a clump spinning around and into the Wingleader's back, and he and Nalth had not re-emerged from *between*. That was how quickly it could happen, even to the best of them.

The Wing had already mourned the loss of its Wingleader properly, with fire and dancing and skin after skin of the older bronzerider's favorite wine, and Weysinger Alstan singing his honors. This was one last gesture, after which, while they would not forget him, they would move on. D'ralt had died but they were alive, and a dragonrider's life was full of all too many such farewells; the living had no choice but to go on. Thread fell and demanded they fight it, no matter who was lost.

Putting down his goblet, J'hanos unfastened his belt-pouch. "And now, a happier task falls to me." He pulled out a new set of rank cords, and held them out in A'zelen's direction. The bronzerider didn't need Vesoz's nudge in his ribs, he was already quickly putting down his own wine and getting to his feet. "Would you do the honors, Wingsecond?" J'hanos asked him.

"Wingleader, it would be my pleasure." With J'hanos's promotion, A'zelen now became the Wing's senior wingsecond. He held the new wingsecond cords for a moment, hearing the whispers that raced around the table -- he knew that everyone could see the color, could see that they were for a bronzerider, but there were at least three candidates for this promotion and speculation had been rife amongst them from the moment of D'ralt's death.

A'zelen stepped over the bench and began to walk down the table, eyeing his wingmates as they whispered amongst themselves and nudged each other in anticipation. He had made nearly three-quarters of the circuit when, with every face turned towards him, he turned his head and said, "Sh'dan?" at the same moment that he threw the cords.

"What?" said the young bronzerider, half-rising in his seat. The thrown rank cords hit him on the side of the head and then fell into his half-raised hands, to general laughter and calls of encouragement and congratulation from around the table. Sh'dan looked down at the cords, then looked up and around with an almost shy smile on his face.

"Do the Wing proud, Sh'dan," A'zelen said formally, although his grin and his tone were anything but. He finally got an answering grin from the dark-haired rider.

"I will, sir. I'll try to follow your example --"

"Please feel free to be less wordy, though, bronzerider," J'hanos called good-naturedly down the table as he finally settled into the Wingleader's chair. "Our Wing only needs one A'zelen -- if we had two, nobody else would ever be able to get a word in." He smiled and raised his goblet at the mock-glare that his senior wingsecond sent him.

Vesoz was already refilling all the cups within reach when A'zelen made it back to his seat. "This isn't bad," the new Wingleader told his brother, a little condescendingly, as he studied his goblet. "Where's it from?"

"Not bad, he says." Vesoz rolled his eyes. "And after what I went through to make sure a supply of it came this way --"

"All right, all right! It's... quite good," J'hanos allowed, his eyes twinkling. "It reminds me of that Boll white from '34. So, where did you get it?"

"For that earlier crack, I should make you guess," Vesoz said, making sure to keep the seal on the wineskin turned away.

"Mysterious as he's being, it's got to be a Southern vintage," Alstan said, taking another sample. "I say, Paradise River. They're getting more and more reliable every Turn."

J'hanos was studying his brother's face closely. "No," he said slowly, "that's not it. For this occasion, it ought to be a Tillek, but if it's a Tillek, I don't recognize --"

"No, no," A'zelen corrected him. "Don't you remember? We used up the last of the Tillek when Alstan became Weyrsinger. Although," his eyes narrowed in Vesoz's direction, "it would be just like your brother to have seen more come in and not to have told us."

"Oh, you wound me," the younger man said, not looking displeased at all. "Give up?" he asked his brother, who had taken another sip.

"Not a Benden, can't be," the bronzerider was muttering. "Too resinous --"

"Just tell us, Ves," A'zelen said, "before J'hanos strains something important."

Vesoz looked smug. "It's from Rubicon's pressing of two Turns ago."

The three other men instantly wore identical frowns.

"Rubicon? *Really?*" Alstan sniffed at the wine and tasted it again as if trying to find whatever he had missed.

"Give that here," J'hanos demanded, and Vesoz promptly handed over the wineskin with its tell-tale seal.

"They *have* come along way, haven't they?" A'zelen commented. Rubicon had only been founded a decade before, and the first of its wines had been less than impressive.

"Oh, they'll bear watching," Vesoz agreed cheerily. "Their reds still aren't fit for a high table, but this is the second good white of theirs we've opened. Give them another ten Turns, and they'll be rivalling Paradise River, at least. Who knows, maybe even Tillek," he added slyly, watching his brother.

J'hanos snorted, on cue. "Well, in that case, it's a good enough vintage for this," he said, and after refilling his own goblet and A'zelen's, he lifted it in the brownrider's direction for another toast. "Since congratulations are due."

Both Alstan and Vesoz looked puzzled, even as they drank, and A'zelen ducked his head, embarrassed. "What? What!?" Vesoz demanded.

At the same time, Alstan was darting looks back and forth between the two riders. "This isn't about you becoming senior wingsecond," the Weyrsinger guessed. "What's going on?"

A'zelen smiled around at them shyly. "It's Sharene. She's, well -- we're going to have a child."

Vesoz whooped, topping up every goblet as others at the table looked at him curiously, then raised his own cup to A'zelen and drank again, now that he properly knew what they were drinking to. Alstan nudged the brownrider with

his shoulder, grinning fit to split his face. "Oh, that's good, that's very good news," the harper said, warmly.

"Told you it would happen if you just kept on trying!" Vesoz beamed.

"We were starting to wonder," A'zelen admitted. "The healers say we have to be careful, and that she might have to take it easier than usual, and you can imagine what Sharene says about *that* --"

The other men chuckled. "But," he went on happily, "she's more determined than she is inclined to be stubborn, thank the Egg. And it's not like she lacks for willing helpers."

"Women to watch her every move and scold her and keep her from doing too much, you mean," Vesoz corrected him, and they all laughed, thinking of Sharene's large, weyrbred family.

"Yes, that too," A'zelen agreed, grinning. "Between her mother and her aunts and her cousins, there isn't a lot for me to do, really. And Master Reilen says that Ginera is the best midwife he's ever known..." He trailed off, with an uncomfortable look in J'hanos's direction, as he remembered.

The bronzerider smiled slightly, and nodded. "She birthed Jeshan and Elhana," he said quietly. "And she did all that she could for Enasha. Truly, I don't think that Sharene could be in better hands."

A'zelen was grateful for that. He and Sharene had been trying to have a child for so long, that he had nearly accepted that it would never happen, and he'd often looked on her cousins and nieces and nephews, as she had, to fill that gap in their lives. He also knew that she was no longer a young woman, and that women often said that late first-births could be hard. He didn't want to admit out loud how worried he was. "Thank you," he said simply.

J'hanos's gaze was knowing. "Sharene is strong and you've waited a long time for this," he told the brownrider. "Between her sisters and aunts, she's helped with enough pregnancies to know what she's doing. And whether she knows or not, I'm certain that they'll all be *more* than willing to tell her."

"And woe to any mere *male* who tries to impart wisdom on the subject, I'm sure," A'zelen said with a faint smile, pushing his concerns aside with an effort.

"Just remember that and you'll do well." J'hanos smiled and clapped his wingsecond on the shoulder. "When the time comes, I'll make sure that Ves tracks down something suitable for us to toast mother and child."

"Only the best!" Vesoz chipped in. "I'll start hoarding now."

"So long as don't find ourselves deprived between now and then," J'hanos told him drily, then looked down the length of the table to where his wingmen were talking animatedly amongst themselves as A'zelen's news spread. He chuckled softly. "One life ends but another begins. I think D'ralt would have approved."

A'zelen nodded. "I know he would."

"And that, I think, deserves another toast." J'hanos pushed himself to his feet, waiting for the Wing's chatter to still before raising his goblet once more. "To the future," the Wingleader said, his voice carrying over the background chatter of the Weyrhall. "May there be no unpleasant surprises awaiting us!"



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