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# Flying Blind

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There was only a brief tap at the door before it swung open. D'zan didn't bother to look up from his daily logs, having recognized his friend's step on the porch stair.

L'ward dropped into the chair facing the Weyrlingmaster's desk and kicked up his booted feet comfortably.

"How long have I been your best friend?" L'ward drawled.

D'zan looked up and frowned wearily. "Your mother forget to teach you to wipe your feet? You're shedding shit on this sevenday's performance reviews."

L'ward snorted and wriggled his toes, making the tips of his boots quiver. "I've known you since the days when you were just another snot-nosed candidate, tight-assed with fear that some dragonrider might have designs on your narrow backside. Not many of us left, are there?"

D'zan bent back to his work. "You want to get those feet off my desk, or do I have to use a machete?" he asked, his quill scratching to the end of a page.

L'ward ignored the threat. "So you tell me -- why is it that I'm the oldest friend you've got, and yet you treat me like this?"

"So you tell me -- who's got his shit-stinkin' feet up on who's desk?" D'zan muttered.

"Your last and only friend in the whole sorry world," L'ward snorted. "That's who. So you tell me. How come I'm always the last to know?"

"You want some respect to go with that whine? Get your feet off my desk."

"I'm serious," L'ward said. "You never give me the storm warnings and just leave me flying blind. Like tonight. I'm not halfway through the dinner line in the Weyrhall and all of the sudden the gossip grannies are all over me like whersports on fresh meat. And so that's the first I hear of Resla and you parting ways. Word like that comes from the old ladies, and not from my old friend himself. Why is that?"

"Maybe because I've got better things to do than sit around listening to gossips chatter in the Weyrhall?" D'zan answered dryly.

L'ward snorted. "More like you don't want your best friend slapping your silly for being a shaffin' piss-faced fool. You never did like being told you're wrong. Or that you're an idiot. And if you've walked out on Resla, then you're both a fool and an idiot, and I should slap you to some sense. So tell me -- please -- that that lot of Weyrhall gossip was just gas and wind."

"No." D'zan still had not looked up from his record keeping. He dipped his quill into the inkpot and continued writing in his narrow, tight hand across a fresh page of parchment.

"No." L'ward swung his feet off the desktop and sat up sharply. "I'm going to have to slap you then. Slap you like a little girl. D'zan, you've done a lot of stupid things over the past twenty Turns, but this has got to be the stupidest! Don't be a wherskull! Resla's a darling, true-hearted woman. She's worth a dozen of you, and if you walk out on her like this, you're just asking to spend the rest of your life being miserable -- and deserving it, too. You hear me?"

"I heard you."

"And?"

"And what?"

"You just going to keep sitting there?"

"Until these performance reviews are done? Yes."

"Coward. That girl loves you, and you break her heart and then run to hide behind your weyrings. You should be ashamed of yourself."

D'zan put down the quill and stared hard at the bluerider. "You done?"

"Shards, no. Not until you get up and go to that woman and get down on your knees to beg her to forgive you--"

"What makes you think I'm the one who said it was over?" D'zan's voice broke at the last.

L'ward went silent, looking shocked. "Resla left you?" he finally asked.

"I don't think this is working,' the woman said. 'I'm not happy with you,' she said. 'Let's just be friends,' she said, and 'It's over, goodbye.' So. Old friend. Is there anything else you think you're entitled to know?"

"I don't believe it," L'ward said.

D'zan reached for the quill again. "I'd say she's a smart woman. She knows what she wants, and what she doesn't. Good for her, and best of luck."

L'ward sat in silence for a while, so that the only sound in the room was the scratching of D'zan's writing quill. Then L'ward cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. You always treated Resla right. Come on. Let's round up B'baer and the boys and go drown your sorrows at Safe Mooring Inn."

"Shaft it. Last thing I need is a hangover. Go drink to K'bort's new high hopes, and let me finish my work in peace," D'zan retorted.

L'ward collected himself to his feet and retreated for the door. He hesitated there, looking back over his shoulder in concern, then quietly left. Only when the door had shut behind him did D'zan look up again. The brownrider gazed at the door for a long stretch of them, his stare focused somewhere beyond the wood and hinges and brass door knob. Then his hard expression broke. D'zan dropped the quill and leaned his face into his hands for a time, until he had wrestled himself back under control. Composed once more, he reached after the quill, dabbed irritably at the splatter of ink against the stained surface of his desk, then stabbed the quill into the inkpot and returned his attention to his work.



"I can't believe that's true," Shahara said quietly, as most of the weyrlingseconds gathered that evening over cups of beer. At least it was evening back at Kadanzer; at Rubicon Hold, the sun was already rising over the coming day. The serving girls who worked the sawdust floor of Safe Mooring Inn kept a healthy distance from their table, even though B'baer hadn't tried to pinch anyone yet. Tonight, at least, the bluerider was keeping his remaining hand to himself.

"Resla seemed happy, didn't she?" S'kan asked.

"D'zan's been happier than I've seen him since Tanara," L'ward muttered into his beer.

"I don't believe it. We all know what D'zan's temper is like. He must have broken up with her." K'bort said sharply. "And to do it after she lost the baby..."

"That must have been the pebble that caused the barrel to spill," E'zok said. "Resla's miscarriage. Won't be the first weymating I've seen go sour after that sort of thing."

"Well, what's over is over, and none of us can change things," Jallori said, with a knowing look around the table. "Neither D'zan or Resla would appreciate our trying to get involved, or our trying to get them back together."

"And we shouldn't," K'bort added. "He wasn't right for her. He's too sour, and she's too sunny. She deserves better."

"They did seem happy," G'nán said, contemplating what little ale remained in his cup. "I'm sorry to see this happen."

"Not as sorry as the rest of us," Ambri snorted. "The Weyrlingmaster gets his short-shorts in a twist over something like this, and his temper bleeds out on us. And bleeds for months."

"Maybe he'll get over it quickly," E'zok said. "Like maybe by the end of the Turn?"

"Aye. Or maybe not," B'baer said. The bearded bluerider sat back on the bench and regarded his companions soberly. "Seems to me that our Weyrlingmaster has been on a strangely even keel since Resla sailed out of his port. I haven't seen him lose his temper once in the last four days."

"Not even when J'day slipped a crawlie down the back of Orllie's shirt in the middle of D'zan's lecture on sweepriding techniques," Ambri agreed. "The girl squealed and carried on like a bacon at harvest-season slaughter, but I swear, it was almost as if he didn't care anymore."

"Of course he cares," L'ward said. "The day D'zan can't find fault with a half-witted weyrling bluerider is the day wherries learn to *between*."

"I don't know," Ambri said, frowning now. "I thought for sure old Stumpy would chew firestone and spit flame, but he hardly seemed to notice. Just paused to let the girls and boys giggle it out of their bloodstreams, then continued with the lecture like there'd been no interruption at all."

The table went quiet for a time, as the gathered weyrlingassistants looked around at one another. "That doesn't sound like D'zan at all," Jallori finally said.

"It doesn't," L'ward scowled. "First rule of thumb with the brownrider has always been to get mad first, and then when that passes -- get even madder."

"He was certainly good and pissed when Tanara kicked him out of her bed," Ambri said; she immediately winced and shifted a glance toward G'nán, but the bronzerider gave no reaction to the observation.

"Well, a man can get tired of being angry all the time." E'zok swallowed the last of his beer and waved down one of the serving girls for another round. "Maybe he's just lost his mad for a while. Like when you're hit so hard you can't catch your breath. But he'll recover."

"Right," L'ward agreed. "D'zan's been around this Weyr too long and survived a little too much to be thrown for long by a little romantic disappointment with our headsecond."

"Why are we worried about D'zan?," K'bort asked gruffly. "He can take care of himself. Poor Resla. She doesn't seem too heartbroken to anyone, does she?"

"Not that I've noticed. She's always sunny," G'nán said.

"I'd say Resla's maybe smarter than any of us figured. D'zan got a reputation for burying his women. Maybe Resla just woke up one morning and didn't want to be the next," B'baer offered with his

usual wicked grin. G'nan glowered at him, but E'zok at least snorted into his beer.

"Not funny," L'ward frowned.

"But possible," Shahara agreed.

"Doesn't matter why, and doesn't matter whose decision it was," Jallori said firmly. "If the Weyrlingmaster and the headsecond are no longer seeing one another, that's their business. Their *private* business -- and none of ours."

"Spoilsport," Ambri said.

"Spoilsport and *right*," Jallori agreed. "The rest of us need to keep our noses clear of this."

"Yeah," said L'ward, B'baer held up his cup in a toast and said "Aye aye," in unison, while the others around the table nodded somberly.

"Best to let sleeping whers lie," E'zok agreed. "And enjoy the peace and quiet until D'zan finds his mad again."



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"So, brownrider, how about we go inside and take this conversation into a more horizontal position?"

D'zan froze with his ale cup inches from his lips. He stared across his porch toward the goldrider who sat in the chair opposite his, while nightsingers continued to buzz in the jungle brush nearby. Lybelle snorted in laughter and refilled her own cup, splashing a little of the foaming brew across her hand.

"Close your mouth, brownrider, before something flies into it," she chuckled. "What, you've never been propositioned by a goldrider before? I can hardly believe that."

D'zan managed to find his cup with his lips, and swallowed a long pull of the dark FireStorm stout. "Not quite like that," he admitted. "Woman, you're drunk."

"And so are you," she said with a wicked smile. "And I meant the offer. I like you, Weyrlingmaster. There's not all that many men in this Weyr worth sharing a bed with. So what do you say -- are you going to disappoint me?"

D'zan regarded the Weyrwoman-second, not yet drunk enough to lose his caution with her. In the few months since her arrival at Kadanzer, Lybelle had proven to be intelligent and competent, with a keen diplomatic sense that Valenne lacked. What was more, she had proven in private to have both a ribald sense of humor, a genuine distrust in all bronzeriders that D'zan shared, an endless supply of wicked gossip about some of Telgar's past contributions to the Weyr, and a truly respectable capacity for potables. He enjoyed her company -- and that was an admission he couldn't make of many in recent days.

"Lybelle, you're a good woman," he said, as evenly as half a night's consumption allowed. "I'd rather not do anything to risk --"

"Pssh," Lybelle said, dismissing that as she might a nightsinger buzzing too close to her in the dim light of the single glow. "You're old enough and wise enough not to take a night's tumble for a handfasting. I'll only make you the offer once, brownrider. Now or never."

D'zan swallowed down the rest of his stout, wishing there were more of the homebrew. He looked at Lybelle measuringly, knowing to take her at her word. He would not deny he was attracted to the woman. She was tall -- taller even than Resla had been -- with a slender, athletic body. There was less of her than there had been of Resla -- it was a bittersweet comparison he couldn't help but make -- and she carried herself with a proud grace that let the world know she knew her own measure. He liked that self-confidence, and liked even more the wicked way she had of laughing when something truly amused her. It was a challenge to earn that laugh. D'zan knew he would regret it if he lost his chance to hear it again.

But *shards*, she was a beautiful woman. And it had been a month and a half since he had last shared a bed...

"You've not been sleeping around since you and your headsecond parted ways," Lybelle said then, as if reading his thoughts. "I know you haven't -- there hasn't been anything more interesting than Resla's misfortune with you to keep the kitchen ladies chattering of late. Come on, Weyrlingmaster. You'll regret it for the rest of your days if you don't accept my offer, and we both know it."

"You're right," D'zan agreed, putting his mug aside on the flat porch railing and shoving himself upright. "I will regret it."

Turns out, he did, too. But not how he would have guessed.

They made it into his bedroom without embarrassment, and the beer and Lybelle's potent kisses were enough to make him drop his inhibition regarding exposing his wooden leg. After all, Lybelle was a mature woman, and had Threadscore scars of her own for him to discover beneath the vibrant tunic she wore. But to his horror, the desire he felt kindled in his blood and his gut didn't seem to migrate to where it was most needed. He had the beginnings of an erection as they tumbled onto his bed, but within minutes it was gone and nothing about Lybelle's skilled touch brought it back.

"Looks like a wooden leg isn't all that you need," Lybelle finally said as they both lay exasperated with the effort.

"I swear, this has never happened to me before," D'zan muttered fiercely, shamed by his impotence.

The goldrider chuckled. "Don't they always say that?"

"Your laughing isn't helping matters much," he snapped in a tight voice.

Lybelle's long fingers stroked the side of his face, and he saw the flash of her white teeth in the darkness. "You're forgiven," she said. "I'll assume it's the beer."

D'zan groaned and rolled toward her, resting his forehead against hers. "Wish I could say the same," he confessed. "It's not you, goldrider. You're beautiful and any man who doesn't want you must be a boy-lover. I'm failing you. I'm sorry."

Her fingers continued to stroke his face, toying with the stubble on his lower cheeks and chin. "Failing me? Is that what you think it is?"

D'zan moved back a little, looking at Lybelle's face in the moonlight. What he sensed in himself was deep and dark and ugly, and nothing that he wanted to admit to her.

'I failed Resla,' he told himself. 'High and wide, I failed her in ways I didn't even see coming at me. Did I fail Tanara in the same way? Or Farah? Or Ella? Shaffit, how badly did I hurt Resla? How long was I hurting her, and not knowing a thing about it? I thought I knew women. I thought the women I've loved had taught me everything there was to learn. But really, all I've learned is there's no way to walk that table, and that I'm as able as any boy to have my heart torn out and handed back to me on a serving plate. I'm being a fool, and I'm flying as blind through life as any half-assed weyrling in their first 'Fall. Sure as rain falls, if I keep staring at her like a halfwit, Lybelle won't want seconds of me, crippled and horse-faced old holder's son that I am. So why, why am I so *shaffing* afraid of a drunken tumble with the woman?'

"D'zan?" Lybelle asked, her touch as soft as feathers against his face.

D'zan captured her hand his in own and pressed a kiss against her fingertips. "Forgive me, goldrider," he said. "Bad manners. Maybe I can't get it standing, but that doesn't mean I can't still give you a good time." He kissed her fingers again, and then, determined to make amends, began to work his way down her torso, kissing her klah-dark skin as he went.

Maybe he *was* flying blind and Threadscored, but even a blind man could do his best to make it through the night.



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