
Bloodlines

by Smitty

Ninth Pass: 2434.09.23

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr (www.kadanzer.org), a fan club approved by Anne McCaffrey in 1995. Kadanzer Weyr is a non-profit group -- all materials pertaining to Ms. McCaffrey's works displayed on this website may only be accessed for personal, non-commercial purposes. Please do not reproduce without permission. All references to worlds and characters based on Anne McCaffrey's fiction are copyright© Anne McCaffrey 1967, 2005, all rights reserved, and used by permission of the author. The Dragonriders of Pern® is registered U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, by Anne McCaffrey, used here with permission. Use or reproduction without a license is strictly prohibited.

The brown stood blinking in the bright afternoon sunlight, his birth-wet body glistening sienna and tan as he shook out his wings and protested the strangeness of the world in high, querulous tones. A whisper of reaction ran around the stands as the dragonet took a cautious step forward, leaving the remnants of his shell behind as he became aware of the need to find a partner amongst the white-clad boys arrayed before him. A soft, encouraging croon from gold Irineth sent the brown into a bolder advance and it took only moments for the dragonet to make his decision and butt against an overjoyed Malzig, who gasped and crouched to embrace the hatchling, mumbling incoherently against the brown hide.

And in that instant, the Hatching was over, leaving the sands of Southern's Grounds littered with empty shells. The successful led their dragons away to be bathed and fed; the disappointed turned back towards a few more sevendays of candidate chores, merging into the Weyr's population until Yashelth laid her next clutch. There would be other eggs, other Hatchings, other chances. It would not be long before they were facing the dragons' choice again.

Next time, however, one of their number would not be amongst them.

Vesoz watched Malzig -- M'zig -- lead his brown away, following the twenty-three other successful pairs from the Grounds. As he ran a tanned hand back through black hair, a part of him couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like to Impress... but in truth it was hard to feel disappointment for the loss of something that he had never expected to experience. There had been a certain thrill to the uncertainty off it all, but somehow it had been more exciting to see his brother stand before the eggs and to live the adventure vicariously than it had been to face it for himself.

His gaze strayed towards the stands and the too-familiar figures seated close to the Weyrleaders, their presence suddenly more threatening than it had been in Turns. There were some fates that Vesoz had not expected to be a part of, but there were others that he would do everything in his power to avoid. And with his twenty-second Turn a mere sevenday away and the safe honour of Candidacy no longer a shield to hide behind, the spectre of parental expectation

was suddenly more real and more threatening than Vesoz cared to remember.

The sands were almost empty. Taking a deep breath, Vesoz took a moment to consider what the best approach would be with his father. Search or no Search, he had always known that this moment would come eventually....

And, he suddenly decided, if it had taken some four Turns already, then the moment could certainly stand to wait a little longer. Concluding that there was actually much to be said for cowardice, Vesoz set off after the new weyrings. It was only right that he get to congratulate his friends and admire their dragons before the young beasts fell asleep, after all. It wasn't as though it would be the same next time, when he wasn't a candidate himself... and dependent on how the rest of the day went, there might not even *be* a next time, so visiting the hatchlings today was all the more important. He'd catch up with his family later.

Much, *much* later.



"Hopefully that will be the last time that we are required to go through this," Lady Ghanassa murmured as she followed her husband from the stands. "I don't know how anybody can stand to live in this climate."

"The sands reflect the heat -- it should be cooler once we reach the Weyrhall," Grezan, her eldest son and Tillek's Heir, commented from behind her. "And at least there is something of a breeze here, mother, which we wouldn't have inside the Grounds of a Northern Weyr."

Ghanassa made a soft sound of annoyance. "If your brother had more self-control, we would be *at* a Northern Weyr. High Reaches is so much more civilised, not so full of, of...."

"Southerners?" Lord Olzaraj turned to help his wife down the last steps. "No help for that, Ghannie." Tillek's Lord paused to nod a polite greeting to a sunburned stranger wearing the cords of some no doubt barely-built minor Hold, ignoring the look that his wife threw his way for using a pet name in public, no matter how quietly. "Besides, I rather suspect that Jalhanos would have made his way here one way or another."

Grezan snorted. "After the mess he made in the North, it's the only place anybody would have let him hold more than a conversation!"

Olzaraj threw his son a quelling look. "The South is a land of opportunity for those who care to take it, and whatever *else* might be said of your brother, he's certainly adaptable. He'd have carved himself a place here, one way or another."

"Better that than carving up High Reaches sons," Ghanassa murmured, fanning herself.

"J'hanos seems to have done well enough for himself here," Venasi said, following her husband Kemras, from the stands with Lireena, Grezan's young, Telgar-born second wife, at her side. "He might never be a Lord, but you might yet have a Weyrleader in the family."

Ghanassa glanced irritably at her younger sister. "We can only hope. A shame that J'hanos looks to be our only bronzerider in this generation...."

Tillek's Lord saw the unhappy look that flickered across Venasi's face and smothered his sigh -- the subject of Vesoz was always a fraught one where Ghanassa was concerned. *That* was no fault but his own, he knew, and today would no doubt have been easier if the lad actually *had* Impressed. Still, an unattached Vesoz did open up several other possibilities....

"So, what now?" Grezan enquired, his mind evidently working in the same direction as his father's.

"The Hatching Feast?" Lireena asked hopefully. She was soundly ignored by the others.

"Boy's too old to stand again," Olzaraj said. "Not yet too old to marry, however."

"Vesoz could choose to stay in the Weyr," Venasi pointed out, her expression carefully neutral as she spoke of her eldest son.

Ghanassa snorted delicately. "Vesoz will do as he's told," she said, her tone inviting no argument. "The dragons may have no use for him but his Blood does. He'll come. He always was one to know his place."

"He was until J'hanos took it on himself to play the Searchrider," Grezan pointed out. "Who knows what ideas this place has put in his head? The stories you hear about the Weyrs --"

"Stories are just that," Olzaraj said firmly, "*stories*. Vesoz is still of the Tillek line, no matter how he has spent the last few Turns. I wouldn't take back a daughter, but a son? A son still has value. Lhermel of Crestin Bay has a daughter in need of a husband and his only boy is a feckless fool -- we would do well to have a presence there. We'll find a use for young Vesoz, rest assured of that. Lad has too much training to --"

"Lord Olzaraj?"

Schooling his features to an expression of gracious greeting, Olzaraj favoured Genna and T'del with a polite smile. "Weyrwoman, Weyrleader. Our thanks for your hospitality on this fine Hatching day."

"The pleasure is ours," T'del replied with equally courteous warmth. "It is always good to see you here at Southern. Our commiserations on your son not finding a dragon. He has been a credit to your family but, alas, the dragons choose as they will...."

"Of course," Olzaraj said smoothly, falling into the easy flow of political formality. "We are grateful that they found J'hanos acceptable -- to have two sons Impress on your sands was perhaps too great a hope."

Genna inclined her head in sympathy. "Will you be joining us at the Feast?"

"Of course." Olzaraj glanced back to where Lireena stood at Grezan's side. "I rather think that my Heir's wife is in need of sustenance -- the call to attend the Hatching came before breakfast in Tillek."

A slight frown crossed the Weyrwoman's face as she followed Olzaraj's gaze and the Lord covered his smile -- no

doubt Genna had expected to see Hereni, whose inability to conceive had required her replacement in Grezan's bed. "Well," the goldrider said, recovering quickly, "I'm sure that our kitchens will be able to keep you and yours well-catered for today." She offered her arm to Olzaraj. "Indeed, the Feast should be starting soon, if you would care to accompany us?"

"In that case, my dear Weyrwoman," Olzaraj took Genna's arm, leaving T'del to provide escort to Ghanassa, "please lead on...."



Vesoz was admiring a proud Y'sarn's sleepy green Hursath when a familiar bronze shape swooped in to circle his head, chittering loudly. Ennie, who had been perched obediently on her owner's shoulder, olive tail looped around his neck, chirped a cheerful greeting and launched herself to join the other firelizard, projecting her excitement at the day's events. Vesoz watched the pair for a few moments, knowing himself caught, then turned with a sigh. "Hey, Jal."

"I thought I might find you here." J'hanos stopped at Vesoz's side, looking down at the hatchling green. He nodded to Y'sarn, "Well done, Weyrling -- she's a beauty. I'm sure you'll both be a credit to the Weyr. Now, if you'll excuse us...."

Vesoz sighed as his half-brother placed a hand on his shoulder and steered him firmly away from the new weyrings. "Jal...."

"Come on, Ves -- you need to get yourself bathed and changed. You can't avoid them forever, you know."

"Who says that I'm avoiding anyone?" Vesoz muttered. "Just wanted to congratulate the others."

J'hanos stopped in the shade of a fellis tree and turned to look at his sibling. "Yes, you've been jumpy ever since this clutch was laid and you're usually the first to the Feast -- that says 'avoidance' to me!" He shook his dark head. "I mean, there's the best that the kitchens know how to cook just waiting for you to feed your face and you're skulking out here with the dragonets?"

"Yeah, well, it's all right for *you*," Vesoz suddenly snapped. "You *have* a dragon -- they can't make *you* go back to Tillek!"

"And what's so bad about Tillek?"

Vesoz blinked at him. "Er, well, nothing as such, but... oh, you know what I mean! I wouldn't have time to unpack before they had the Marriage Mark cast."

J'hanos rolled his eyes. "Look, Father can't *make* you go back, not if you don't want to. You're a part of the Weyr now, whether the family likes it or not. All you have to do is tell them that that's what you want, and the sooner you do that, the sooner it'll be over."

"Easier said than done." Vesoz looked at his brother, immaculately dressed in black and dark blue with bronze and green Wingsecond cords pinned to his left shoulder, the very image of what a dragonrider should be... and of what

he himself was not. "They're going to want me to go back. I know they are."

"So tell them that you want to stay."

Vesoz laughed sourly. "You really think that'll make any difference?"

"Only if you *let* it make the difference." J'hanos seemed caught between frustration and sympathy as he said, "You've been away from Tillek for Turns, Ves -- you can't just go back to being some convenient piece of marriage-material, no matter what Father wants or expects. Shards, I thought you were past that when you had me bring you here!"

"It was different then!"

"How?"

"Because then I could be a Candidate --"

"*Technically*, you have to be Searched to be a Candidate," J'hanos pointed out.

Vesoz snorted. "Are you going to tell Father the details of that one? Or Genna? Or G'teris?"

"What do you think?" The bronzerider quirked a smile that quickly faded as his expression turned serious once more. "Ves, you can't keep hiding from them. They know how old you are and you're hardly a child --"

"I know, I know...." Vesoz sighed, leaning back against the old fellis's trunk and fixing his eyes on the wind-tousled leaves above him. "It's just that... when I was growing up, I was never really encouraged to show any initiative, you know? I mean, I had a bloody good life compared to most folks I know, no question about that, but... I was never taught that I was anything other than a bastard lordling born to serve the Blood."

J'hanos shook his head. "We're *all* born to serve to Blood, Ves, bastard or not. I'd have had no more say in my marriage prospects than you in yours."

"You were Searched."

"And *you* were apprenticed," J'hanos said. "After a fashion...."

"Only to get me out of the way and increase my worth." Vesoz ran his fingers back through his black hair as he added, "Fostering wasn't exactly a safe option after your exploits with the High Reaches Blood, not after what happened to poor Jolgan."

The bronzerider winced at the mention of their dead sibling, lost to a duel at Boll shortly before his Search. "Yes, well...."

"And the ships showed me that there was more to the world than just Tillek," Vesoz continued, "but... old habits die hard, Jal. If Father says that he wants me to go with them, I'm really not sure that I can say no. It would have been a lot easier if I had actually Impressed. And that... well, it was never going to happen, was it?"

"You're panicking yourself over nothing," J'hanos tried again. "This is only a problem if *you* allow it to be."

Vesoz groaned and closed his eyes.

They stood in silence, J'hanos studying his younger brother's face intently for a few moments before seeming to reach a decision. "Ves, if I could offer some form of

distraction, something to take their attention away from you, would you take it?"

Vesoz blinked at him, feeling a sudden glimmer of hope. "In a heartbeat! What do you have in mind?"

"It's... something I've been thinking about for a while now," J'hanos said simply, his features unreadable. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Good. Get changed and get to the Feast." J'hanos reached out and squeezed his brother's shoulder. "I'll catch you up. There are people I need to see...."



Vesoz took his time getting to the Feast, loitering in the showers as he washed away the sand and the sweat of the Hatching Grounds and then making sure that his red and blue shirt -- a current favourite that clashed quite stunningly with Ennie's green hide -- was hanging *just* so. Eventually, however, he knew that he was out of excuses and so made his way across to the Weyrhall and the Gather Square, hoping against hope that his family might have already returned to Tillek.

Inevitably, those hopes were quickly dashed when Vesoz caught a glimpse of Olzaraj deep in conversation with the Southern Lord, Lady Ghanassa fanning herself against the heat as she stood at her husband's side, occasionally nodding at some comment. Vesoz ducked his head and headed for the food tables, alert to the fact that while he knew where Olzaraj and Ghanassa were, others were as yet unaccounted for and he had no great desire to bump into Grezan if he could possibly help it. He felt suddenly conspicuous in his bright clothing -- even amongst all the others dressed in their gather best -- as he filled his plate, wondering if perhaps he should try to change into something more sombre. Or, indeed, if he should find a sympathetic greenrider to drape himself over -- while the thought of male-male pairings was one that still made him shudder somewhat, Olzaraj didn't know that, and if the Lord thought his son to be a boy-lover then that might just --

"Vesoz! There you are!"

Vesoz froze, all thoughts of potential escape evaporating as he turned with a weak smile and said, "Hello, Mother."

Venasi looked up at him, then pulled him into a surprisingly strong hug. "It's so good to see you again, and looking so well too! I'm so sorry that you didn't find a dragon. We had such high hopes that we'd have our second bronzerider...."

"Well, you know, the dragons choose and all that." Vesoz freed himself from her grasp and then grinned as he saw the cords pinned to the shoulder of Venasi's gather gown. "Steward? Great-Aunt Bronwen finally retired?"

"Last month. She was starting to feel the cold in her bones," Venasi said with a smile. "I'm sure she'll be nagging at me from her chair by the fire for Turns to come, though -- you know us Tillek women, we're from hardy stock."

Vesoz laughed softly. "You need to be to deal with the Tillek men! You must be feeling quite the oddity here, though."

"What, all those holders who've never seen a female steward before?" Venasi chuckled. "The way that things are going, I doubt that Tillek will be unique in that for much longer. Women in the Crafts, riding greens -- the Lords will follow on soon enough, I'm sure. I doubt I'll see a girl named as Heir in my lifetime but one day, one day...."

"I wouldn't let Father hear you say that," Vesoz said, then winced and nodded a polite greeting to Kemras, who had come up behind his wife. The man was the captain of one of the big three-master trading ships, bluff and taciturn and rarely seen by Venasi's eldest son, who always felt a slight awkwardness around him. Vesoz had been born Turns before Kemras had entered his mother's life, but it was hard not to sometimes feel like an uninvited guest in their marriage. "Good day to you, Shipmaster."

Kemras gave a nod and a grunt of acknowledgement, but anything further he might have said was forestalled by a strong hand closing on Vesoz's shoulder and a cultured voice in his ear. "Ah, we were starting to wonder where you'd got to, little brother."

Vesoz closed his eyes for a moment, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in his gut that robbed him of his appetite. "Grezan. It's, er, good to see you."

"Likewise," Grezan said, smiling broadly as his younger half-sib turned to face him. "A pity about the dragons not finding you suitable, but don't worry -- we'll find you something to do with your life soon enough."

"But I --"

"There you are, my boy!" Olzaraj made his way across to them, looking overheated even in the light tunic he wore -- being a Lord appeared to mean never being out in public unless wearing some form of brocade, so far as Vesoz could tell. "We've been looking for you!"

Vesoz looked around at his gathering family, feeling uncomfortably like a lost calf surrounded by a slasher pack. He smiled and murmured his polite greetings, the old habits of courtesy and deference emerging like half-forgotten instincts to carry him through this reunion. The urge to flee warred with the bone-deep sense of duty that was part and parcel of being a son of the Blood, no matter how illegitimate his birth or how long his separation. "I trust that Southern's hospitality meets with your approval?" he said at last, grasping for a safely neutral topic of conversation. He didn't know what J'hanos had in mind, but he hoped that the bronzerider would arrive soon....

"Passable, passable," Olzaraj said, looking around at the weyrfolk and guests milling about beneath the trees. "It certainly makes a change to attending Hatchings at High Reaches, although the heat can be rather stifling."

"And High Reaches doesn't serve salted crawlers to its guests," Ghanassa put in, eyeing one of the plates on the buffet tables.

Vesoz half-turned, eager to see if Headwoman Ima had decided to put out some of her precious preserved lazies

from the previous Turn's emergence, then remembered his situation and turned back. "The South does have a great many different foods that --"

"They're *crawlers*, Vesoz," Grezan said in disbelief. "Crawlers aren't food. Shards, man, the sooner we get you out of this place, the better."

And there it was, said. Vesoz felt himself pale beneath his tan and stammered out, "I like it here!"

"I'm sure you do," Olzaraj said, his tone matter-of-fact. "But Southern Weyr doesn't need you any more -- Tillek Hold does. We need to keep the Blood strong and --"

"Gran'pa 'Zara!"

Olzaraj stopped mid-sentence and his face broke into a delighted smile as he turned to scoop up a happily squealing Jeshan. "Well, hello there, little boy! Fancy seeing you here!"

Vesoz breathed a sigh of relief as Olzaraj and Ghanassa fussed over their grandchild. Looking up, he saw J'hanos approaching with a wide-eyed Elhana in his arms, her black hair tied up in a top-knot with blue and white ribbons -- Tillek's colours, Vesoz realised. J'hanos handed his daughter over as Ghanassa reached for her, passing her across as he placed a kiss of greeting on the older woman's cheek. "Mother, Father. It is good to see you here again."

"It's always good to be wherever these little dears are," Ghanassa said, clearly charmed by her granddaughter. She beamed at Elhana as J'hanos greeted the others in the party, apparently oblivious to the sudden tension between the bronzerider and Grezan. "They've grown so much more each time I see them, I swear...."

J'hanos's gaze flicked to Vesoz for a moment, and in that instant the younger man *knew* what his brother was about to do... and knew that this might just be a debt that he could never repay. He looked away as J'hanos ruffled his son's hair and said, "Well, you may be seeing them grow some more. I've been thinking about what you said after Enasha died and I'd like to foster them at Tillek."

"Excellent news!" Olzaraj bounced the child in his arms, drawing a giggle from the boy. "Do you hear that, Jeshan? You're going to be coming to Tillek, where you belong." Setting his grandson down, he turned to J'hanos. "Why the change of heart? The last time we spoke of this you seemed determined to keep them at the Weyr."

The bronzerider sighed and did not look in Vesoz's direction. "In truth? I just don't have the time for them that I'd like. I wish that I did, but I'm a wingsecond and my duty to the Weyr must come first. Narella and her family have been wonderful with them, but..." He met his father's eyes. "I'm still holder enough to want to see them raised by my Blood. Tillek is a part of their heritage just as it is mine. And I think that this is what Enasha would have wanted for them."

Jeshan, almost four Turns and full of energy, scampered gleefully around Vesoz's legs before deciding that this particular uncle was too familiar to be interesting and launching himself at Grezan. "Unca Grez!"

Tillek's Heir looked down at the toddler pawing at his tunics, caught Ghanassa's glare, and stooped to pick the boy up. J'hanos smiled at his elder brother. "I think he likes you," the bronzerider said mildly. "How are your attempts to start a family going, Grezan? Is your new Lady shipping any cargo yet?"

Lireena blushed scarlet at J'hanos's words and Grezan scowled. Jeshan promptly tried to pull his face back into a smile. "Not yet," Grezan said around his nephew's hands. "But we're working on it."

"Old Hold will be full of brats before you know it," Olzaraj said fondly, tickling Elhana and making her squeak and hide her face against Ghanassa's shoulder. "This one can have Jezna's old room when she's a little older, I think.... When will they be making the move?"

"Today, if you can take them." J'hanos rescued Grezan from Jeshan's attentions, leading the boy across to his grandparents. "I've made the arrangements at this end. I'm be sorry to see them go but I fear that if I keep them here much longer, I'll never want to let them leave."

Olzaraj nodded vigorously. "Of course, of course. Strike while the iron's hot."

"And," J'hanos added, "it's not as though I won't have any family connections here. Vesoz has taken a position in the support staff here at the Weyr -- they're *very* impressed with him; I suppose all that early numeracy training finally sank in."

"Really?" Olzaraj frowned. Vesoz did his best to look inconspicuous.

"Oh yes. In fact," the look that J'hanos turned on his brother left Vesoz in no doubt that this was a cue, "the kitchens are probably wondering where he is right now -- doesn't do to keep the cooks waiting on a day like today...."

"Yes! I mean, no!" Vesoz agreed fervently, "Ima and Fujita will be out here after me in a minute, so I'd better dash! Nice seeing you all again!"

"But --" Olzaraj started but was interrupted by a loud wail from Elhana.

"Oh dear," said Ghanassa, "I think she may be in need of a change...."

Recognizing that he might never get a better chance, Vesoz took full advantage of the distraction and made good his escape.



The waters lapped quietly at the cliffs of the Weyr's headland, high tide covering the narrow beach below. Vesoz watched the waves shimmer and dance in the moonlight, a constantly shifting pattern of darkness and light extending out to the black mass of the Wherry Arches and beyond, the motion of the water a soothing counterpoint to his thoughts. Ennie was curled in his lap, her small thoughts filled with sleepy pleasure as her owner's hands stroked gently across her hide in unconscious rhythm.

Footsteps disturbed the vegetation behind him, a familiar tread pulling Vesoz out of his contemplations. "Hey, Jal."

"They've gone." J'hanos dropped down beside his brother. "Vhauth and I took them back to Tillek a couple of hours ago."

"Thank you," Vesoz said softly, then glanced at the bronzerider. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"Oh, I did." J'hanos sighed. "What I said was true enough -- I want them to know their Blood and I just don't have the time for them here. I wish that I did, but with Enasha gone... it's better this way. I can visit them still -- it's not as though distance is a problem for a dragonrider. And besides," he nudged Vesoz in the ribs with an elbow, "they seemed happy enough with the exchange."

"Grezan didn't."

J'hanos snorted. "Grezan's shooting bolts from an empty quiver -- two wives and who knows how many mistresses are proof enough of *that*. Jeshan and Elhana are the first grandchildren that Mother and Father have real access to at Tillek, what with Ghellina marrying into Keroon and Jezna into Nerat, although I've heard that her husband might be striking out into the territories around Landing soon. If Grezan can't produce sons, they'll look elsewhere to keep the line true."

"Even a Weyr?"

The bronzerider chuckled. "I think they'd rather accept the children of a weymating than have to acknowledge some of Zejral's by-blows with the kitchen staff. That lad has *appalling* taste in women."

"I'm sure even his brats will find themselves getting used for political ties as we go into the Interval," Vesoz said, gazing out to sea. "Don't want to waste a precious drop of Blood, after all." He turned to his brother. "Do you think they'll come back for me again?"

J'hanos shook his head. "No. I think I convinced them of your worth to the Weyr in the end."

"Thank you," Vesoz said again. "That's twice you've rescued me from family expectations now."

"Oh, there are still some of *those* attached," J'hanos told him firmly. "I expect you to behave yourself and not make me regret keeping you here! Just stay out of trouble."

Vesoz grinned. "How about I just don't get caught?"

"You know, that's not *quite* the same thing...."



Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass Dragonriders of Pern® Fanclub

www.kadanzer.org