

---

# Nightwatch, Part 2

by Holly Hutchison

Ninth Pass: 2435.02.07

Printed in FTA #22 (2005)

*This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr ([www.kadanzer.org](http://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.*

---

In keeping with every ambition, every plan, and every gesture of its Lord, gathers at Southern Hold were always tremendous events, the biggest and best a holder could offer, as befit the biggest and best Hold on Pern. Not given otherwise to waste or extravagance, Lord Toric knew the advantages of excessive display, and it still pleased him that a mere gather at Southern should rival in quality the rare festival at Fort or Ista. Everyone else knew it too, and the attendance of Southern gathers swelled accordingly.

For the riders of Southern Weyr, the Hold's gathers were especially welcome. The festivities being an easy half-hour stroll from the Weyr, dragons could be left resting in the comfort of their own wallows, unless owed or sought favors called them out to provide transport. It was only a little over two months since the Turn's End celebrations, but an inconvenient local Threadfall had curtailed the size of that festival. With several days clear on either side of this restday, more people would be able to travel to attend this gathering.

Once past the undeveloped stretch of jungle that lay between the Weyr and the Hold's outlying western cots, A'zelen noticed the crowd become a throng almost immediately. Trailing along behind Sharenne, surrounded by a flock of her sisters, aunts, cousins and nieces, the brownrider felt happily superfluous, watching the women chatter and the younger girls pull on the hands of their elders.

The cots were more scattered here, at the edge of the holding, separated by cleared fields and paddocks. But though the center of the gather was still far away, east of the headland along the stretch of the Hold Cove, there was plenty of activity here, where A'zelen knew most of the Hold's woodsmiths resided. Charcoal kilns mixed their smoke with cookfires, and in a large, fallow field, groups of men gathered to watch herdsman show off the paces of shuffling draught teams. Over at the side of the field, a contest was developing between two straining pairs of beasts pulling heavily loaded wagons along a marked course, to the shouts of men on the sidelines, betting on the outcome.

The brownrider heard the girls' entreaties reach a higher pitch of excitement when they saw a few striped-canvas booths set up on the verge of the field to take advantage of the waggoners' thirsty customers, as well as the arrivals from

the Weyr. Sharenne cast one comically desperate look over her shoulder at him as two nieces towed her determinedly away, and A'zelen smiled and shrugged, waving goodbye with a cheerful wiggle of his fingers. He didn't envy her trying to convince the girls that more and better variety of treats waited further on, if the children would only allow them all to get there.

"I'll be at the Weavers!" Sharenne shouted to him as he continued on.

"I'll find you!" he called back, but didn't stop.

The brownrider wandered aimlessly, more or less heading with the flow of the crowd towards the cove and the heart of the gather. There was nothing he wanted, or needed, here, but he enjoyed watching the people. They had waited for the heat of the day to pass before making their way to the gather -- much to the childrens' distress -- but there were a few hours yet before the dancing would really get started, and until then, nothing A'zelen had to do. He'd go to the gather square and find the Vintners' tent, find a harper he knew or perhaps one he didn't, and while away the late afternoon in conversation before it was time to find his weymate, procure supper, and get down to the serious business of dancing until Sharenne had her fill of it. And he knew Sharenne; that would take a while, and he'd better be rested for it.

From the headland above the harbor, A'zelen had a view of the two wide beaches spread out to either side. The one closer to the Weyr was thick with basking dragons, while the beach of the Hold Cove was an extension of the gather's activity, bright with flags and tents, and crowds gathered to watch the small-boat races and other watery contests. Such things didn't usually command his attention, but as he stood there, undecided, he heard a piercing whistle from below. Looking down, he instantly saw the wildly waving figure of J'hanos's younger brother, Vesoz; his other arm encircled the shoulder of a pretty, dark-haired girl.

"He's down by the boats!" the young man shouted, when he saw that he had the brownrider's attention. A'zelen assumed he must mean his bronzerider brother.

"Thanks!" he shouted back noncommittally, and Vesoz gave him a large grin, then bent his head to say something to his companion as they continued down the ramp to the beach.

A moment later, A'zelen thought, why not? He didn't have any particular interest in boats or in seamens' swimming contests, but it might be a chance to watch J'hanos wheedle his way into a race, and besides, he knew the bronzerider had a way of sniffing out the most worthwhile wines.

Beyond the seawall and the activity of the harbor, the beach widened and the crowds thinned slightly; not everyone was willing to trudge through the sand. He stuck to the harder-packed surface closer to the water, and thought about taking off his boots.

The sound of shrieking children running past wasn't an unusual one, on a gather-day, and A'zelen wouldn't have

even noticed if he hadn't heard an adult's voice raised above them, shouting for their attention.

"All right, all right! Give me the ball. No, that's right -- give it here. *Now.*"

A'zelen's step faltered as he recognized the voice, and he reversed direction, circling around the end of a canvas booth until he could see the broad, empty space behind it, looking for the voice's owner. He wasn't hard to spot: a lean man with shaggy, sun-lightened brown hair, standing in the middle of a knot of clamoring boys, most of whom didn't even reach his elbow, holding the leather toy up over their heads.

"All right, settle down! Denal?" the man pointed at a truculent-looking red-haired child. "You know that once the ball gets past the post, it's scored, right? You can't tackle Mardan *after* he's scored."

"Didn't see the post?" the boy offered, squinting up at the tall man, who swiveled and looked pointedly at the stake in the sand with the bright red cloth tied to the top and fluttering in the breeze.

"Uh-huh." There was a wealth of skepticism in the man's tone. Some of the other boys jeered. "Well, do your team a favor, and pay more attention next time, huh? Now they're gonna be a man short while you sit out this round."

A storm of protest greeted this announcement, at least from half of the boys assembled, although the other half looked satisfied and grinned openly. The man let them yell for a moment, then waved his free hand in the air sharply. "Ah! Ah! That's enough. *All* of you pay attention, and if I catch anybody messing around, you'll sit out the rest of the game, understood?" He bent a stern eye on all of them, tossing the ball in the air a few times. "I told you to start with, I am *not* explaining torn shirts or bloody noses to your mothers. Got it?"

There were various muttered "yes, sir's" and "no, sir's", and one daring "can we just *play*?" piped up from the fringe, before the tall man relented and said, "Get ready." Boys raced to positions around the cleared area of sand, while the man paused and then crouched down beside a short, dark youth who was holding a cloth to his nose.

"How is it?" he asked gently, and the boy tipped his head back, taking the cloth away.

"It's stopped, sir!"

"Good. You ready to play, Mardan?"

"Yes sir!"

"Good," he repeated, standing again. He let his hand go from the boy's shoulder to squeeze the nape of his neck briefly, before ruffling the short hair and clapping him on the back. "Go on." Then he handed the ball to the boy who was guarding the near post, and sauntered off the field.

Shouts and shrieks erupted behind him as the leather ball was kicked into play, and then a look of surprise crossed his face when A'zelen stepped out from the shadow of the booth's awning, hand raised in greeting.

The man's head cocked to one side, and he smiled. "Wingsecond!" he called.

He wasn't wearing his Guard tunic, but there were rank cords pinned to the shoulder of his loose shirt. A'zelen squinted, but his eyes weren't deceiving him. "*Captain* Gavrill?" he replied, letting the question show in his voice.

That inspired nearly a full grin, and the other man glanced down at his own shoulder as if in surprise. "Looks that way, doesn't it?" A particularly shrill protest from the playing field caught his attention and he spun on his heel. But it was only the ball being stripped from one player by another, who wove between the opposition and kicked the ball sideways towards a teammate.

"Guard duty on a gather-day?" A'zelen asked, with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"This?" Gavrill snorted. "Not exactly on the official duty-roster, no." He hooked his thumbs in his belt, and kept one eye on the fast-moving, chaotic play of the game, but glanced at the brownrider. "What brings you out here?"

"Oh, I, ah -- I'm heading down there --" A'zelen gestured farther down the beach. "To the boats. The races. But I heard the game and then I saw..."

"Hey HEY hey!" the man beside him interrupted. "Whoa! Hold on! Excuse me --" he said aside to the brownrider, who waved assent. "Everybody, stop. STOP! All right, now Tereg, put the pole back in. Right, make sure it stands up. Thanks. No, that didn't score. Ah! Me, that's who says. No score. Take it from there. No, Denal, you're not back in yet, just wait there. Ready? Play!"

Gavrill turned back to him, and smiled briefly. "You were saying?"

A'zelen shook his head, returning the smile. "I hope you're getting some reward for this," he remarked dryly.

"Are you kidding? For this, I should be drawing hazard-pay," the guardsman replied, with good humor.

"Hmm, well -- listen," A'zelen said. "I just -- I heard your voice, and I realized -- do you remember that boy?"

The look the other man turned on him was completely blank. "What? Who? Which boy?"

"The boy," A'zelen repeated. "With the -- you know, the Search. And the brothers. And the father, from Nerat?"

The blank look lasted for a moment longer, and then understanding dawned. "Oh! The shipmaster, that Cynestan tried to get into the Weyr. Yeah, yeah, I remember."

"Yes, that's right," the brownrider said, momentarily distracted. "The Steward wasn't very pleased with you. I thought -- well, I didn't think the next time I saw you, you'd have moved *up* in rank."

Gavrill shrugged. "Let's just say that when the story reached the ears of certain people -- certain people who're a lot better to stay on the good side of than Steward Cynestan -- there was appreciation that he wasn't allowed to make it any farther than the watch-post."

"And for *that*, you're made a captain?"

Narrowed, dark eyes shot him an unreadable look. "Among... other things." Gavrill didn't elaborate. "So, what about the boy?"

"Cerdan. Well, C'dan - he Impressed. At the next Hatching," A'zelen reported. "First time standing, and he Impressed a green."

Gavrill's eyebrows went up. "Good for him."

"Yes. Well, I thought you'd like to know how it turned out," he said, and that earned a small smile.

"Yeah. It's good to know." Another brief, sidelong glance. "Did they come? I mean, his family? To the Hatching."

"Oh. I, ah -- no, I don't think so." A'zelen frowned. "I got a feeling, from that meeting -- the next morning, you know -- it didn't go so well."

"Ah." There was a raucous burst of cheering and shouting, and after raising a hand briefly in the brownrider's direction, Gavrill went striding out amongst the milling, yelling, squabbling boys again.

"All right! Good shot, Tereg. Toss me the ball -- thanks. All right, everybody," he said, gesturing them all to gather around. "That makes the score three to one. Now, I want all of you to go under the tent there, and get something to drink, and sit in the shade a few minutes, all right? And you can go in again when we restart, Denal."

The guardsman had turned and, still in possession of the ball, was heading back towards A'zelen, when a tow-headed boy of not-quite-ten Turns came racing up behind him. "Da! Let me have the ball, Da! Please?"

Holding the toy out of reach, Gavrill snagged the youngster around the shoulders with his free arm and hugged him. "Hey, there. Slow down. No, you can't have it. You know what happened the last time."

"We won't toss it or kick it or nothin'!" the boy promised, and Gavrill grinned.

"Uh-huh. That's right, you won't, because I'm holding onto it, and that way Jesra won't have to make good on her threats to kick you all out of the tent."

"But Da --!"

"Ah! Nope, not gonna budge on this one. Now, hey, settle down for a moment, I want you to meet someone."

They'd reached the spot where A'zelen was standing by then, and Gavrill released the boy but kept a steadying hand on his shoulder. A'zelen found himself being scanned by a pair of dark eyes, and he could guess where the boy had gotten that shrewd, assessing look. He smiled warmly, and after a moment, got an answering broad grin.

"Kessil, this is Wingsecond A'zelen," said Gavrill. "He's a brownrider."

"Pleased to meet you, Kessil," A'zelen said, extending his arm, and the boy reached up eagerly to clasp it.

"Fair gather-day, Wingsecond!" the boy replied, and then, released, after a glance up at his father, he looked back at the brownrider. "Could I meet your dragon, too?"

That surprised a laugh out of A'zelen, in company with the guardsman's amused but slightly shocked, "Kessil!"

"He's not exactly here right now," the brownrider explained, with a smile. "He's back asleep in his wallow."

"Then how'd you get here?" the boy demanded, and A'zelen shared an amused look with Gavrill, who was shaking his head.

"He *walked*, Kes," the guardsman said, ruffling the boy's hair and earning a frown from his son.

"Dragonriders don't have to walk places," the boy asserted.

"We can if we want to, though. And it's a nice gather-day, and not very far from the Weyr. But I'll tell you what," A'zelen said, smiling at the boy's skeptical look, another small copy of one the brownrider had seen on his father. "I'll make sure you get to meet Toth some other time, all right?"

"Promise?" said Kessil.

"My word," said the brownrider, bringing his fist to his chest in salute.

"All right!" The boy hopped excitedly, and only Gavrill's hand on his shoulder kept him from running off in the direction of his friends.

"Hey, hey -- manners, Kes."

A'zelen found himself the recipient of a breathless, but fairly correct, bow. "Thank you, Wingsecond! My duty to your dragon!" Then the tow-headed boy took off, only to stop short after racing a dozen steps, to call, "Clear skies!" over his shoulder.

Gavrill shook his head fondly. "He's at that stage, you know? Never walks anywhere if he can run."

The brownrider shot him a quick smile. "He's a nice lad. I can see a lot of you in him," he said.

"Oh, wait till you meet his mother," the guardsman returned, with a small laugh. A'zelen could easily read pride and love in the open expression on the man's face, before he seemed to catch himself, realizing the dragonrider was looking at him, and he looked away with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"I'd like that," A'zelen said, sincerely. "I lost my weyrmate Sharenne to the shopping, but --"

"She's up at the gather, too?" Gavrill asked, nodding up towards the cliffs overhanging them. "So's Saressa. Handed Kes off to me and told me she didn't expect to see us until nightfall."

A'zelen grinned. "I'll be at the dancing square tonight, with Sharenne. So maybe --"

"I'll look for you there," the guardsman promised, and then he winced at a particular loud shout in an adult female voice from the direction of the tent into which he'd sent the boys. "I, ah -- I better get over there, before something happens that Jesra will make me regret --"

"Say no more. I should go see if the races are finished or not." A'zelen backed away, waving slightly, and watched for a few moments while the other man strode quickly in the direction of the slight commotion in the tent's shadows.

"See you tonight!" Gavrill called back, over his shoulder.

"See you!" the brownrider replied. Then, with a small smile, he turned, making his way back to the well-trodden path along the beach to where he could see the boat-races plainly still going on.

"A'zelen! Hey, A'zelen!" called a voice behind him, moments later, and he turned to find that somehow, Vesoz and his pretty girl had gotten behind him, and were hurrying to catch up, followed by the familiar figure of journeyman Alstan. He slowed and waited for them.

"Thought you were ahead of me," he greeted them, and in answer the lanky, dark-haired young man held up two damp skins that, knowing Vesoz, had to hold chilled wine.

"We were," Vesoz told him, grinning. "But we stopped for supplies."

Alstan matched his friend's smile with a wide one of his own. "We've got juice, too, if you're not quite ready to start drinking."

"Depends, is the wine any good?" A'zelen saw an affronted look start to form on Vesoz's face, and held up a hand, quickly. "Right, right, you've never supplied us with a bad one yet."

"I should hope *not!*" the support staffer said, in frosty tones that were clearly meant to mimic their Weyrsinger. Alstan burst out laughing, and A'zelen chuckled. "This is Melia," Vesoz added after a moment, nodding at the young woman tucked under his arm. "Melia, that's brownrider A'zelen."

Melia's only response to the brownrider's greeting was an openly-appraising look, a giggle, and a tighter grip around Vesoz's waist. A'zelen smiled politely, and concluded that the young man must have encountered her at the Hold, since he didn't think she looked familiar.

"Who's your friend?" the journeyman Harper asked, curiously. The brownrider frowned at him.

"My friend?"

"We saw you talking to some holder behind the booths, back there," Vesoz told him, gesturing behind them and raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, that -- that was Gavril."

"Didn't know you had friends amongst the Hold guards," Alstan said cheerfully.

"Well, I don't -- I mean, he's not really --" A'zelen started to explain. "I stood night-watch along with him recently."

Alstan narrowed his eyes and snapped his fingers, as if trying to remember. Then he pointed at the brownrider, with a triumphant look. "Right! The boy who was Searched and the shipmaster from Nerat!"

"Yes, that's right."

"Oh yes. Enril had to attend the meeting with the Weyrleaders and the shipmaster the next morning. He had a *lot* to say about that," the journeyman chuckled.

A'zelen smiled briefly. "I'll just bet he did. Speaking of whom -- that reminds me, do you have to do a turn tonight?"

"Of course," said the harper promptly. He was dressed in gather finery and wearing both the Craft's badge and his rank-cords. Alstan was a good-looking man, but his open, cheerful face was boyish, and he often had trouble getting people to take his rank as Enril's senior journeyman assistant seriously. He shot a knowing look at the brownrider. "What about you?"

"Me? What about me?"

Vesoz laughed. "Conveniently left your flute back at the Weyr, did you?"

Alstan was shaking his head at A'zelen's attempts to look innocent. "Oh, come on. It'll be fun. You only have to do a couple of songs, there's plenty of harpers to take turns tonight. Somebody'll have an instrument for you."

"And it'll give you a break from Sharenne and all her female kin trying to dance your feet off," Vesoz added cheerfully.

"Which leads me back to my original point," A'zelen said smoothly. "And that is that I'm counting on *both* of you to pitch in and help."

"Oh, I always have time for dancing with pretty ladies," said Alstan, grinning, with a wink at Melia. Who giggled again.

"Hey! There's Jal!" Vesoz pointed.

A'zelen shaded his eyes, seeking J'hanos. "And he's. . . soaking wet."

"Ah-hah!" the bronzerider's brother said, waving his hand in Alstan's direction. "I told you! You owe me."

Grumbling good-naturedly, the journeyman dug into his belt-pouch as they made their way towards where the tall, black-haired bronzerider was standing beside one of the small boats, arguing in an animated way with a stocky seaman. A'zelen smiled to himself, and followed in their wake.



A'zelen came down off the harpers' dais and handed the wooden flute back to its owner. He was quietly pleased that he had acquitted himself fairly well, even though the second tune chosen was one that he hadn't practiced or played -- shells, hadn't even *thought* about -- since his apprentice days. Musical performance had never been his first love, he far preferred studying, interpreting, and creating Records. But you couldn't be a journeyman Harper without being at least competent to play *some* kind of instrument, and A'zelen's pride demanded that when he did have to play, he played well.

Alstan had been correct -- there were so many harpers in attendance at this gather that nobody was required to stay on the dais for very long. His three songs contributed, the brownrider was free to go and rejoin Sharenne where she was seated in the midst of a large flock of extended family.

Actually. . . not seated, he realized, as he scanned the crowd for her tall, slender form and cloud of dark hair. He noticed that her father, brownrider K'suf, had arrived, and had his arm around Sharenne's mother. He saw at least two of her half-brothers, both dragonriders themselves, lurking on the fringes. But of his weyrmate there was no immediate sign. . .

Ah. There she was. Out on the the dance-square, partnered by -- he squinted -- Alstan. A'zelen smiled to himself. The journeyman was as good as his word, and had been seen partnering even Sharenne's ten-Turn-old niece

Kasha earlier, much to the young girl's thrill. K'suf's sons, as well as some of his daughter's mates, like A'zelen, all did their part to make sure both girls and ladies got their turns out in the square, but of course, they were all kin, and therefore, not very exciting as partners. Not nearly as exciting as a young, handsome, cheerful journeyman Harper.

The short, fast dance ended, and soon, laughing together, Sharene and Alstan staggered off the square. Seeing her weyrmate returned, she rushed up and threw her arms around A'zelen's neck, and he chuckled, catching her weight against him.

"Oh! You're back! That didn't take long," she commented, smiling up at him.

"No, thank the shell, I got out of there before somebody came up with a song I didn't know!"

"Is there a song you do not know?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him skeptically. "I don't believe it! Alstan!" she called. "Do you hear this nonsense?"

"Heard and witnessed!" the journeyman cried, picking up a goblet of chilled wine from the table. "A'zelen is admitting there may be something he doesn't know!" he explained to the nearby family members who had turned at his shout. He smiled toothily at A'zelen's mock-sowl.

"That is news indeed," K'suf commented, looking impressed. "Do not worry, son," he then called over, kindly. "That day comes for all of us!"

"All right, all right," A'zelen chuckled, squeezing his weyrmate more tightly amidst the general laughter. It was at his expense, but it was fondly meant so he didn't mind.

Sharene was fanning herself with her hand. Though it was cooler than it had been at the height of the day, the air was still humid, and here at the dance-square at least, still. The night breeze must have been coming from the west, A'zelen thought, and they were being sheltered from it by the Hold. A pity. He looked over at his weyrmate, who was holding her abundance of curly dark hair off her neck. "We'll be sitting the next two or three out, won't we?" he guessed.

"Oh yes!" she agreed, looking for her wine cup. "You missed three in a row!"

"Oh, shells," A'zelen said mildly, and she swatted him on the arm. "Hey! I was doing my duty as a Harper! Doesn't that count for something?"

She smiled at him. "I suppose. And Alstan and Vesoz were kind enough to step in and take your place."

"I'll just bet they were," the brownrider said, narrowing his eyes pointedly at the journeyman, who just laughed.

"I don't know where Ves got to," Alstan said. "He *was* just here. . ."

"Probably trying to avoid yet another irate holder father." The pretty, giggly girl of the afternoon had not lasted past the first round of dancing, when some very large male kinsman had come and objected to her sitting amongst the weyrfolk. Knowing Vesoz, he wouldn't be heartbroken over it for long.

Speaking of whom. . . yes, there he was, with the hand of a plump, dark-skinned girl linked to his arm. Vesoz

marched up to their table, and laid a full skin on it with a flourish. "There! That's the best I could find."

"And we all appreciate your efforts!" said the Harper, grabbing the new skin and unstopping it to sniff appraisingly.

"Well, that's the last of the good Tillek red that Jal had put away, so don't drink it all at once," the young man said, a slightly sour look on his face.

"Won't J'hanos miss it?" A'zelen asked, realizing that he hadn't seen his fellow wingsecond since the man had returned to the Weyr to change into dry clothes for the night's activities.

"Doubt it," Vesoz said glumly. He shook his shaggy black hair out of his eyes with an impatient toss of his head. "He's not noticing much apart from Selitia right now."

"Selitia? Who's that?" Sharene asked, making room for the other young woman to sit.

Alstan and A'zelen shared a look. "Selitia," the journeyman repeated slowly. "Isn't that --?"

"Gold Norath's rider?" A'zelen finished.

Alstan snapped his fingers and knocked on the table sharply. "Of Eastern! Of course!"

"Yes, that's her." Vesoz glanced back towards the food stalls, his expression irritated, dark eyes narrowed. "Seems she's chosen Jal as her escort for the evening."

"Nice going, J'hanos!" Then the brownrider gave Vesoz a hard look. "Oh, come on, Ves! What did you expect? He's a bronzerider! He's got duties."

"He's a bronzerider," Alstan added, smirking. "He's got hormones. And she's got a nice young gold who hasn't formed an attachment to any single one of the bronzes in her Weyr."

"If you don't think she's good enough for him," A'zelen told the bronzerider's scowling brother, "then I'm not sure who you think *would* be!"

"Unless he'd rather J'hanos were paying attention to a goldrider a little closer to home?" the Harper suggested innocently, falling easily into the familiar back-and-forth.

"Well, the choices are somewhat limited," A'zelen allowed, hiding his smile at the look on Vesoz's face. The younger man was usually the first to try to wind his friends up, so any opportunity to turn the tables was not to be missed. And Vesoz's protective streak where J'hanos was concerned was far too tempting a target. "Teshea has always preferred older men. . ."

"And Kadana has always preferred men with bigger. . . dragons," Alstan put in. "No disrespect to Vhauth intended, of course."

"And Genna isn't *quite* ready to let him be Weyrleader yet. . ."

"But there's always Vivia!" the journeyman said helpfully. Vesoz groaned loudly. "All right, perhaps not. Too bad Dunia took up with Corsan so quickly after she arrived." There was a slightly wistful look on the harper's face.

"Yes, yes, we all know your opinion of Dunia." Vesoz rolled his eyes.

Alstan brightened suddenly. "That reminds me, she promised me a dance!"

Sharenne stood up, along with Vesoz's girl. "Well," she said decisively, "I think you all should stop worrying about what J'hanos is getting up to and with who, and pay attention to your *own* gather-loves, before we go off and find someone who will." Beside her, the dark-skinned girl gave a suddenly-contrite Vesoz an arch look. "Hilona and I wish to dance."

A'zelen got up quickly, Vesoz not far behind him. "At your command!" he said with a smile, holding out his hand.

"That's better," Sharenne told him, keeping her lofty look for a moment longer, and A'zelen's smile widened into a full grin. He loved it when she turned imperious.

As Vesoz took Hilona's arm, Alstan finished off his cup of wine, and leaned over the table, snagging the sleeve of a plump aunt of Sharenne's. "Lady? May I?"

Yes, A'zelen reflected, making his way out onto the dance-square. Alstan was a good friend.



The brownrider and Sharenne ended the next dance -- a circle processional -- three-quarters of the way around the dance-square from where they had started, and they were making their way through the scattering throng of couples either clearing the way or getting into position for the next dance that the harper was calling, when A'zelen heard, "Hey! Wingsecond!" called from behind him.

He turned to find Guard captain Gavrill almost treading on his heels, a broad smile on his face and his arm around a short, well-endowed woman with a head of chestnut curls who barely came up to the guardsman's shoulder.

"Captain," the brownrider nodded. He tilted his head towards his weymate. "Sharenne, this is Captain Gavrill." Thankfully, he'd remembered to mention his encounter on the beach to her earlier.

Sharenne held out her free hand, which the guardsman took and bowed over briefly, not breaking stride. "My pleasure, ma'am," he said warmly. Then he caught A'zelen's eye, and jerked his head towards an opening between tables. "Come on."

A little surprised, A'zelen angled in that direction, letting go of his weymate's waist to take her hand. He smiled in a friendly way at the short woman, who had been staring at him rather openly, then darted an expectant look at the other man.

"Oh! Right, sorry." Gavrill had removed his arm from her shoulder and was in the process of waving her ahead of him. "Jillori, that's Wingsecond A'zelen. Sara wants to meet him. Jilli's the wife of one of my men, Ferrel," he explained, when the woman nodded at the brownrider but didn't say anything before squeezing between the tables and the people seated at them.

There were a number of couples of varying ages seated at the table Gavrill led them towards, on the fringes of the lit area around the dance-square. The men mostly wore cords

of various ranks that identified them as guardsmen, though none were wearing the Guard tunics that would have signalled their being on duty. There were a few herders as well, though, A'zelen noticed, and one man wearing the knots of a journeyman Smith.

The woman Jillori moved around the table and sought out a slender, balding man, who was laughing at some tale being told by his companion, stocky and dark-haired with a sharp, expressive face. The table was laden with earthenware crocks and mugs. The brownrider's arrival with Sharenne in tow earned them a number of measuring looks, mostly friendly and curious.

A'zelen watched as Gavrill wove his way around the corner of the table and came up behind a thin woman whose wheat-colored hair was braided on top of her head. She wasn't all that tall, either, but looked like she had a wiry strength about her as she picked up one of the crocks and poured out several mugs of amber, foamy liquid. Gavrill put his hands on her shoulders and she twisted to look up at him as he bent close to say something in her ear.

The round of introductions expanded to include the guardsman Ferrel, whom A'zelen judged to be a good ten Turns the captain's senior; as well as the stocky man, who proved to be Kawald, Gavrill's 'second. Saressa's blue-eyed appraisal was somewhat daunting -- she had none of the laid-back veneer that marked her husband -- but it quickly warmed into a welcome.

"So you're the brownrider Kessil couldn't stop talking about!" she said, humor in her voice.

"Ah -- yes, that's me." A'zelen shot a look at Gavrill, who shrugged.

"He's *really* excited about getting up close to a dragon," the guardsman said, with a half-smile. The tone of his voice made him sound a good deal more dubious about the idea.

"You don't mind, do you?" A'zelen asked, looking at the boy's mother anxiously. Gavrill hadn't objected at the time, but . . .

"No, no," Saressa laughed. "It just made him a bit hard to get settled down and into bed tonight."

"Anyway, it beats having him try to sneak off into the Weyr to do it," added Gavrill, who got an elbow in the ribs from his wife.

"And just who was it who put *that* idea into his head?" she demanded, but she was smiling. The guardsman was doing his best to look innocent.

Dismissing him with a roll of her eyes, the cotswoman turned to Sharenne and A'zelen. "A drink?" she offered, gesturing at the crocks. "All we have is ale, I'm afraid -"

"Don't let her fool you!" Kawald called, grinning. "Saressa brews the best ale in Southern, and that's a fact! Ask anybody!"

After that, there was absolutely no refusing, nor could A'zelen miss the look of fond pride on Gavrill's face as clean mugs were found and topped up for them. A'zelen had been raised on wine, and drank it by preference, but his eyebrows went up in pleased surprise at the first taste, and he smiled at the cotswoman.

"That's wonderful!" Sharenne said aloud. Of course, Sharenne would drink just about anything, and she had a far better head for alcohol than he did -- she could drink him under the table, which was one of the first things he'd learned when courting her. Clearly some of the men around the table were impressed with the way she drank deeply instead of sipping delicately.

"Do I taste nutroot in the finish?" his weyrmate went on. "And something else -" She sniffed at the mug thoughtfully.

Saessa beamed. "Nutroot, klah berries, and cloves. It's an old Turn's End recipe from the family hold in Lemos," she said. "Do you brew?"

"No, but one of my aunts does. . ."

A'zelen frowned at his mug, and took another sip. Maybe. . . maybe he could taste the clove, and certainly the ale had a smooth, nutty flavor, without bitterness.

Raised voices suddenly arose from two tables away, drawing the attention of all the guards around the table. It was difficult to hear what was being shouted, but there was no mistaking the angry tone. Benches were knocked over as two men lurched away, grappling, while a third tried unsuccessfully to intervene.

Grimacing, Gavrill took one more swallow from his mug before pushing himself to his feet. "Excuse us," he said in the direction of the women and A'zelen, waving at his men. "Let's go, boys."

"Aw, come on, captain," Kawald complained, standing up nonetheless. "Makon and his men are the ones on duty. Why do we have to do their jobs for them?"

"Because we're closest, and I don't want this spreading, that's why," Gavrill told him, although the captain didn't look any happier at the prospect.

A'zelen had taken two steps in the same direction when he realized what he was doing, and came to a halt at Gavrill's quizzical look. "Ah -- thanks, brownrider, but the three of us can handle it."

Embarrassed, the brownrider nodded, avoiding the captain's eye. He didn't know what had made him step forward in the first place -- instinct, perhaps. He could just imagine D'ralt's acid comments, if he heard that one of his wingriders had waded into a brawl at a gather. He'd never hear the end of it from J'hanos -- or from Sharenne, and Vesoz, and Alstan, and a long, long line of others. But besides all that, he knew better. A dragonrider had to think of his dragon first, unless there was no other choice. And this wasn't that kind of situation at all.

Still, something about standing back, beside Sharenne and the guardsmen's wives, troubled A'zelen. It wasn't a feeling he liked.

The three guardsmen moved quickly towards the disturbance, spreading out slightly. The people at the nearest tables had moved aside, giving the fighting men plenty of room. One of the combattants had knocked the other to the ground and fallen on him, and the man who'd tried to intervene had been shoved back to fall over one of the

overturned benches. He was still sitting there when Gavrill and his men reached them.

Moving together, Ferrel and Kawald came up on either side and each took an arm of the man presently on top, interrupting his flurry of punches and dragging him off to the side. Released, the other rolled to his feet, and A'zelen sucked in a sharp breath when he saw the man draw his beltknife on his way up. There was a chorus of outcries, focusing the two guardsmen's attention even as they dragged their struggling man away and tried to put themselves, and a table, between the opponents.

The risen man hadn't taken two steps, though, before Gavrill was behind him. The Guard captain grabbed the wrist of the man's knife-hand and twisted, and at the same time shifted his weight to hook the other's forward leg with his own. Moments later they were both down, the knifeman on his face in the dirt with Gavrill's knee in his back, and an arm twisted up between his shoulder-blades. The captain plucked the knife from a hand gone lax and quickly tucked it into the top of his boot.

A'zelen blinked at the guards' speed and efficiency. He'd been sure that the appearance of the knife would complicate things, perhaps even lead to tragedy, but now, moments later, it was all over. Ferrel and Kawald had their man on the ground as well, and were weighing him down, as a commotion at the back of the crowd proved to be the arrival of the on-duty guard captain and his men.

Gavrill glanced up, managing to look unruffled even when he had to shift his grip to maintain his hold on the subdued man. "Nice of you to show up, Makon," he drawled.

Makon, a burly, tall man with thinning brown hair, favored his fellow captain with a smirk. "I don't know, looks like you fellows have this all under control. Doesn't look like you need us."

"Oh no you don't!" said the kneeling captain quickly. "Taking these numbwits in is *your* job, Makon. Enjoying what's left of this gather is mine. They're all yours."

Gavrill stood up swiftly and moved back, and before the man on the ground had time to do more than groan, the other captain reached down and hauled him up by the back of his collar. He tossed the knifeman in the direction of two of his men; the other two had already taken over the other.

Gavrill made a show of formally presenting the beltknife to Makon, who took it distastefully. "Any idea what started it?" he asked, in a resigned voice.

"Nope!" Gavrill replied brightly. "I'm sure somebody here does, if you ask around. Have fun!" He waved and backed away as Makon rolled his eyes and, after jerking his head in the direction of the Hold as a signal to his men, turned his attention to the small handful of people who clustered by the disturbed table.

As the three guardsmen headed back in their direction, A'zelen could see Gavrill shaking his right hand briskly, and then examining it critically. "You all right?" he said, when the captain came alongside him.

"Yeah, yeah," Gavrill frowned. "Just jammed my thumb, that's all."

"Ow," said Kawald sympathetically. "I hate it when that happens."

Saessa reached out and grabbed her husband's hand, inspecting it herself before giving it the kind of brisk kiss she might have bestowed on a child's skinned elbow. "Very exciting," she said, dryly.

"I would have preferred it without the knife," Gavrill admitted, shrugging at A'zelen and Sharenne apologetically.

"A little over-dramatic for an ending, perhaps," the brownrider agreed lightly.

A roar came from the dance-square -- the end of another fast-moving swing-dance. The next, A'zelen knew, would be something a little slower and easier, to give the dancers a break.

Squeezing her husband's hand and then letting it go, Saessa gave them all a bright smile. "Well, I, for one, have been out for far too few dances tonight -- and every single one of them has been with a heavy-hoofed guardsman." The men around the table laughed, and before Gavrill had gotten out a full syllable of protest, she went on, "I'd like to see if dragonriders dance as well as they claim -- if you'd do me the honor, Wingsecond?"

Grinning, A'zelen gave her the most graceful Harper bow he could muster, and some of Gavrill's men made impressed noises.

"All right, all right," said the captain grumpily. "If that's how this is going to go, I want a second opinion. My lady?" He held his hand out towards Sharenne.

As his weymate curtsied like any proper holder lady, A'zelen offered his arm to the guardsman's wife and began to lead the way out towards the dance square.



2435.05.18

"I would have thought," A'zelen said, "that being captain would have exempted you from having to stand these guard-shifts."

"Well, it's very important for a captain to set a good example for his men," Gavrill explained. "And that includes showing that he's still willing to get his hands dirty. You know, not asking them to do what he won't, stuff like that."

"Right, right," the brownrider agreed. He paused, while the other man took a sip of his klah. "So, seriously, who'd you mouth off to this time? Lord Toric himself?"

Gavrill snorted. "Do I *look* suicidal? No, it was Cynestan."

"You're consistent, I'll give you that."

"Oh, come on! You've met the man. He's a walking invitation to insubordination." Gavrill smiled slightly. "Besides, when he gets good and annoyed, he puffs up just like one of my wife's roosters. I'm sorry, but I can't resist that kind of temptation."

"Even if it lands you here?" A'zelen asked.

"What's wrong with here?" the guardsman shot back quickly. "Here isn't so bad. Could be a lot worse."

If A'zelen remembered the look on the Steward's face correctly, Cynestan would probably agree with that. He probably wished he could suggest more creative punishments for certain particular insolent guardsmen, captains or not.

"Do you have any respect for the man at all?" he asked, seriously. Gavrill's face screwed up into a grimace, as if he tasted something sour -- or as if he was being forced to admit to something he didn't want to.

"Yes, I do have some respect for him," the captain said slowly. "He's a very good Steward, he's on top of everything -- too much, maybe -- and he's very good at advancing Southern's interests. He just, you know, gets above himself sometimes." He shrugged. "Maybe he should have gone and become a Holder somewhere out there. Except, what he's really good at, what he really likes, is stepping in and ordering other men around. He's not so great at getting his hands dirty." Then, Gavrill's serious expression lightened, and his mouth quirked in a smile. "Besides, the rooster thing is hilarious. You remember Kawald? He does a deadly impression of Cynestan in full rooster outrage."

The brownrider chuckled, but he thought that Gavrill's description was probably more telling than the guardsman realized. The two men were fundamentally at odds in what they valued.

"Hey, you know" the guardsman went on, clearly changing the subject. "I can't thank you enough -- can't thank you and Toth enough, that is -- for taking the time to let Kessil meet him."

"Oh," said the brownrider, smiling shyly. "It was no trouble -- besides, I promised."

"Yeah, well, he hasn't stopped talking about it," said the boy's father, fondly. "Toth was great. Really." Gavrill glanced at the rear of the shelter, where the brown dragon sat close to the bluff edge, his blue-glowing eye visible in a black silhouette.

"He can be pretty patient when he wants to be," A'zelen agreed, knowing that his own tone sounded just as fond and indulgent. He was also a little surprised to hear the casual friendliness of the other man's voice, when speaking of the dragon. Maybe Toth's gentleness with the boy had softened the father's attitude, as well.

Kessil had gone right up to the brown fearlessly, as undaunted by the dragon as any Weyr child. Gavrill, though in attendance, had hung back, as A'zelen had expected him to -- the guardsman had consistently exhibited some wariness towards the dragon. He'd watched his son interact with the great beast closely, and A'zelen had no doubt that if he'd needed to, Gavrill would have approached closer. He had little doubt at that point that the guardsman would throw himself into the teeth of any danger, especially if it involved his son. But because he was looking for it, he could also sense the subtle relief about the man, that he didn't have to.

"You've never ridden a dragon at all, have you?" the brownrider asked then, suddenly sure of the answer.

"What?" Gavrill gave him a puzzled look, surprised by what seemed like a shift in subject. "Uh, no. Never have. Why?"

Something he'd said the first time they met had made A'zelen think so, but. . . "The look on your face when Kessil started climbing up Toth's neck." The expression he'd worn as he stood on the ground and looked up at his son sitting astride the dragon.

"What look?" the guardsman demanded, and before A'zelen could answer, he went on, quickly, "Hey, that's pretty far off the ground, you know. I just -- it's not like he'd ever practiced before, like, on a smaller dragon, or something. What if he'd fallen?"

"Toth would have caught him," said the brownrider immediately.

"Caught him?"

"Yes, kind of like -" A'zelen hunched his shoulder and drew up his arm in an imitation of a dragon positioning his forelimb to help a rider dismount. "They get really good at that. And he was watching what was going on."

"Yeah, well -- Kes probably would've thought *falling* off a dragon was great fun," Gavrill said, wincing slightly at the idea.

"Maybe I can take him flying, sometime." He watched the other man carefully as he said it, interested to see the reaction.

"He's a little young for that, don't you think?" asked Gavrill, uncomfortably.

A'zelen shook his head. "Children younger than that fly all the time. Not just Weyr children -- I've brought whole families to Hatchings, to watch a sibling stand."

"Huh. Yeah. I guess you would have." The guardsman still didn't look thrilled at the idea.

***I would not mind if the boy flew with us, Toth confirmed to A'zelen. But he is not ready to try it.*** By the image that accompanied that thought, the brown's rider knew Toth meant Gavrill himself. The dragon had picked up on that unspoken thought.

*No, he agreed silently. I don't think he's ready, either.*

***I fly very well. I am very steady. Everyone says so, the brown stated reasonably. He should not be afraid to fly with me. He would be safe with me.***

*I know, I know, A'zelen soothed. It's not you, Toth. It's just. . . something he's never done.*

It might have been simple fear, he supposed. It didn't have to be reasonable, and you could never tell who'd turn out to be gripped by it, just as you could never tell whether someone would prove afraid of standing on the edge of a tall cliff. A'zelen had met plenty of people who were afraid of dragonkind -- shells, he'd seen a few who were afraid of *firelizards*.

But that, he was sure, wasn't what was going on with the guardsman. The man's hesitation didn't have the edge of outright, unreasoning fear that A'zelen had sometimes encountered in holders. Rather, he thought -- he remembered describing it this way to Sharenne, after that day with the boy -- it was *reasoning* fear, the kind of caution a smart man

ought to have for things outside his control, that could hurt him. Gavrill, he was learning, might be reckless with his mouth on occasion, but he wasn't, deep down, a reckless man.

It made the brownrider appreciate all the more how much trust the holder had showed, giving his son into a situation where the risk was all in A'zelen's control, rather than in his own. That, he realized, had to have been harder for the man than taking the risk himself would have been -- A'zelen didn't even have his own children yet, but he appreciated that.

"Maybe you'll live to see the day when men fly without dragons," A'zelen said aloud.

The look that Gavrill turned on him clearly said that the guardsman was wondering if A'zelen had lost his mind. "You've got to be kidding," he said.

"No," the brownrider replied seriously. "I'm not. I mean it. The Smiths at Landing have been studying the Ancients' air-ships and all the records of AIVAS, with that intention."

"Yeah, and they've been doing that for how many Turns, now?" Gavrill's face was still skeptical. "Any progress on that?"

"Some." A'zelen had an almost instinctive need to defend the other crafters who had made the study of Landing and its riches their life's work. "There's a *lot* of information. It's... it's not just enough to read a record or look at a drawing, a schematic. It's learning the principles that underlie it all, and figuring out every assumption that the colonists made because *they* took their level of knowledge for granted."

Gavrill shrugged. "It was Ancient knowledge. I don't see what it has to do with our lives."

"But it could become *our* knowledge, too," A'zelen argued. "It could have a lot to do with our lives! I mean --" He gestured broadly. "Our ancestors settled this continent using air-ships, shuttles. What if -- what if you could use one to reach your family down on Drake Lake in only hours?"

"If I got a dragon to take me, it would take about a quarter-hour, if that," the guardsman pointed out.

"But aren't you holders always saying you wish you weren't so dependent on dragons, and dragonriders?" he countered. "Isn't that what your Lord has been saying Turn in and Turn out for as long as he's been Lord?"

"Well, but this would be like, a machine, wouldn't it?" At least Gavrill now looked as if he was thinking about the idea. "So instead of being dependent on dragonriders, wouldn't we become dependent on Smithcrafters?"

A'zelen frowned. "What have you got against Smithcrafters?"

"Nothing! I'm just saying, you know -- it's not as easy as you make it sound."

"I *never* said that it would be easy."

"Oh, come on." Gavrill waved an airy hand. "You practically have us flying around the Southern continent

already. And I'm saying, maybe that's trading one set of... problems, for another. I mean -- if I went flying with you and Toth, at least I'd... uh, well, at least I'd know the dragon was being careful because *you* were on his neck."

"Yes, but --" A'zelen shook his head. "In an air ship, you'd know that whoever was piloting it was being careful for his own sake. The man piloting it might even be you! You'd have complete control over your own safety, and --"

Gavrill snorted. "You don't use many machines, do you, brownrider?"

Interrupted in his train of thought, A'zelen stopped, and stared at the other man in consternation. "What? I guess I... don't really... what do you mean?"

"I mean that being in control of a machine is really great, right up until the moment when the machine just breaks, with no warning whatsoever," Gavrill elaborated. "Usually at the worst possible moment." His smile was grim. "Try going out in Threadfall sometime and have a flamethrower explode on your back."

"All right," A'zelen agreed. "But that only happens rarely. Flamethrowers get used hundreds of times, thousands of times every sevenday, all around Pern, without breaking down, let alone exploding."

"Not my point," the guardsman said, shaking his head. "My point is, I'd rather put limits on how far I trust machines. I trust them just about enough to go out on groundcrew wearing a flamethrower, even when I've seen what can happen -- and believe me, that's enough to make a man want to hole up inside and never go out on groundcrew again. I'm just picturing what would happen if one of these amazing air-ships of yours were flying fast enough to reach Drake Lake in hours, and something went wrong."

"Dragons aren't infallible, either," the brownrider pointed out honestly.

Gavrill's eyebrows went up. "Are you supposed to be admitting that?"

A'zelen waved a hand dismissively. "The truth is, something can always go wrong."

"But dragons think. And dragons... care." There was, again, that note of slight discomfort in the guardsman's tone that A'zelen had heard before when he spoke of dragons. "If something's wrong, they tell you. They *want* to live. Machines don't care at all. You can't plead with them, you can't appeal to them, and they make you no promises." Gavrill's smile was ironic. "I'd *rather* fly on a dragon than trust any machine that far. No matter what all the Smiths at Landing say."

"Well," said A'zelen, a little deflated by the guardsman's reaction, "that day is a long way away, if it ever comes at all."

The brownrider yawned hugely, and realized it was about time for another cup of klah. Standing up and making his way to the table, he said, "Is it just me, or does this night feel like it's going on forever?"

Gavrill shrugged, leaning back in the chair and stretching his long legs out in front of him. "Sometimes it's like that. Most of the time, really." He tilted his head down far enough to get a glimpse of the three-quarters-full Timor in the western sky. Belior had already set. "About two hours until dawn, I think. Looks like this is going to be a quiet shift."

"It's making me look back fondly on those dumb boys from Nerat," A'zelen admitted. "What I wouldn't give for some weyrings out on a prank, or maybe an uppity steward trying to bluff his way into the Weyr, right about now."

The captain snorted, and quirked a smile at him. "We have a saying in the Guard -- never complain about being bored, because sure as Thread falls, you won't like the alternative." Gavrill cocked his head, and gave the brownrider a considering look. "I would have thought dragonriders would have similar sayings."

A'zelen laughed. "Oh, we do. We do. Trouble comes easily enough, no reason to invite it -- that's one of Sharenne's father's favorite sayings."

"Wise man," said Gavrill, raising his cup.

Agreeing, A'zelen raised his own back, then drank the strong klah down.



# Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub

[www.kadanzer.org](http://www.kadanzer.org)