
When The Bough Breaks

by Smitty

Ninth Pass: 2437.11.13

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 fire crackled brightly, tall flames dancing against the starlit sky. J'hanos had lost count of how many such bonfires he had attended over the Turns, of how many too-brief lives had been commemorated in heat and light and fierce remembrance. The life of a dragonrider was never easy, never safe within a Pass, and for all that the holders saw only the privilege and rank, the price paid was too often a pitifully brief existence and a painful death in 'Fall. No candidate stood without that knowledge, without accepting the necessity and the sacrifice of the role they were choosing to take on. A dragonrider knew that their days were likely few and that they would leave loved ones to mourn them in flame.

Sometimes it was hard for a rider to remember that there were more dangers in the world than Thread. And sometimes it was even harder to remember that those loved ones were no more immortal than those who risked their lives in the skies.

J'hanos looked around at the unhappy faces that surrounded him. A'zelen's weyrmate, Sharenne, had gone into labour with their long-awaited first child the previous afternoon, her father's dragon calling the brownrider from drills. The pregnancy had not been an easy one and Sharenne had more Turns behind her than most first-time mothers, but she was a strong woman and the Wing had stood ready to celebrate the arrival of their senior Wingsecond's son or daughter.

But the labour had stretched on and on and when Sharenne's son had finally been delivered he was already dead, slipping silently into the world in a wash of blood from a placenta too quickly detached from his mother's womb. The healers had done what they could for Sharenne, but the bleeding was too much, the wound too deep within her exhausted body, and mother had followed child into death before the sun had risen on the new day.

The vagaries of Threadfall could be cruel, the bronzerider noted sadly, but there were other fates that were far, far crueller.

Someone touched his arm, and J'hanos turned to see one of Sharenne's sisters, Narella, who had fostered Jeshan and Elhana before they had gone to Tillek. Tears were streaming down her face and J'hanos didn't have time to say anything before she collapsed sobbing into his arms.

Sharenne's was a large and close-knit and mostly female family and they had been every bit as eager to welcome her child as A'zelen had been -- this loss was not an easy one. Stroking the distraught woman's dark hair, he murmured his condolences, suddenly remembering how she had been one of those to offer him such comfort after Enasha's death.

As, indeed, had A'zelen and Sharenne.

A gitar sounded from somewhere on the other side of the fire, Alstan starting on a tune that the bronzerider recognised from other nights like this, mournful and lyrical in its complexity. Narella's weyrmate, a short, stocky man who served as one of the Weyr's herders, came up and offered the bronzerider a sad smile as he gathered her to him and led her away to where several other female relatives were sobbing their grief out to one another. J'hanos watched them go, wishing that he could offer more than words, but knowing that there was nothing that even a Wingleader could do to return what had been lost here. He really ought to see how A'zelen was --

J'hanos stopped, frowning as he realised that he hadn't seen the brownrider since sunset. Moving through the gathering, stopping now and then to offer quiet words of condolence, he looked around for his wingsecond, surprised and somewhat concerned to find that he was nowhere in sight. A'zelen had never been the most social of creatures and tonight of all nights....

The bronzerider sighed and shook his head. Tonight was not a night for A'zelen to be by himself, no matter how tempting the thought might be. There were some things that, he knew from bitter experience, were best not faced alone.

Vhauth, can you ask Toth where A'zelen --

Toth says that his rider is at their weyr, the big bronze replied instantly. Toth says that his rider is very unhappy. His rider says that he wishes to be on his own but Toth thinks that he should not be alone.

The bronzerider frowned. If Toth, an imperturbable beast even by the stolid standards of browns, was concerned enough to go against his rider's wishes on this -- and quickly enough that he was obviously acting on his own initiative -- then A'zelen clearly needed the company. *Tell Toth that I'll come out to him. If they've not missed A'zelen here yet, I doubt they'll miss me.*

The darkness of the forest that still covered much of Southern Weyr enfolded him as he moved away from the fire, the glowlit stillness of the path he followed back towards the weyrcot complex south of Main a soothing contrast to the brightness and raw emotion of the gathering he had just left. A pair of pale nightwherries flapped just ahead of him, one clutching the remains of a young treehopper in its forepaws, and the bronzerider watched as they vanished into the trees, their world untouched by the concerns of their human neighbours. Glows were uncovered in many of the cots he passed, a reminder that life went on for more than just the wild fauna -- many, likely most, at the Weyr would have barely been aware of Sharenne's existence and would note her death with a moment of sorrow or pity

and then forget that she had ever been a part of their community. It was the way of the world -- but it didn't make it any easier for those left behind.

A'zelen's weyr was close to his own and J'hanos could see the shadowy form of Toth curled in his wallow across the clearing as he stopped to scratch at Vhauth's eyeridges in greeting. The bronze rumbled softly in pleasure at the touch and Lan, who had been curled on the dragon's back, flew down to demand a caress of his own. J'hanos obliged the firelizard, petting the little beast as he asked, *A'zelen's still in there?*

Toth's rider in still in his weyr, Vhauth returned. ***Toth worries for him.***

I'm not surprised. Sighing, J'hanos pushed away from his dragon, sending Lan a firm command to *stay* as he entered his own weyr. Crossing to a low cupboard in his tack store, he rummaged at the back for a few moments before pulling out a tall, wax-sealed bottle of a pale amber liquid, examining it briefly before setting it to one side and fetching two small, ornate cups fashioned from silver and seawher ivory, a gift from his parents at his graduation to the Wings. "Right," he muttered, "Let's see if this doesn't help to dull the pain a little...."

There were no glows visible through the windows of A'zelen's weyr, no obvious sign of life other than the great bulk of Toth, who watched the bronzerider's approach with violet-tinged eyes. J'hanos knocked at the door then, receiving no answer, pushed his way in. "A'zelen? Come on, I know you're in here!"

There were a few moments of silence, then a tired voice came out of the darkness to the bronzerider's right. "I'm really not in the mood for company tonight, J'hanos."

"I know you're not," the bronzerider said, his voice tinged with sympathy. "But that doesn't mean that you don't need it."

"I don't --"

"I'm not giving you an option on this, Wingsecond." J'hanos crossed the room to the table where the brownrider sat, opening the glowbasket and looking at the other man as he winced and shielded his blue-grey eyes from the sudden light. "I couldn't find you at the wake."

"Couldn't face it any more," A'zelen said quietly. "I can barely... I can barely deal with what *I'm* feeling. I can't face their grief as well, not yet, not now. I keep thinking that she's going to walk through that door and it's all just going to *stop*...."

J'hanos set the bottle and cups down on the table and seated himself across from the brownrider. "I know." The cluttered cot still carried the sense of Sharene's presence, her scent, the small touches of a life too briefly lived. A sewing basket rested beneath a window, an embroidered corner of cloth poking out from it; a light shawl hung over the back of a chair; a pair of carved bone earrings sat on the table beside the glowbasket. So many small reminders, so many tiny, inconsequential things that now carried the ability to claw at the emotions with all the savagery of a cornered wildcat. J'hanos could remember having to deal

with the minutiae of Enasha's life in the months after her death, finding things in odd corners long after he'd thought them cleared and gone. A'zelen still had all of that to live through, although in his case J'hanos was certain that Sharene's family would be on hand to help redistribute her belongings. "It takes time but it does get better."

A'zelen closed his eyes as if in pain. "I'm not sure that I want it to get better."

The bronzerider nodded and set to unstopping the bottle, understanding all too well what the other man meant, what it was to cling to the hurt when it was the only expression left for lost love. "You will. Not now, perhaps, but you will." He poured a measure of the pale liquid into each of the cups and pushed one towards his wingsecond. "Here, drink."

"I don't think I --"

"Drink. It will help."

A'zelen looked at him for a long moment, then lifted the cup and threw the contents back in one gulp, swallowed... and exploded into a coughing fit an instant later. Finally catching his breath, he wheezed, "What *is* that?"

"Tillek makes more than wine, you know," J'hanos told him, lifting his cup and downing the spirit with rather more dignity than the brownrider had managed. The liquid left a line of smooth fire down his throat and an aftertaste of fruit on his lips and it was a few moments before he could speak again. "And this is amongst the very best she produces. There are times when birth-rank can be a very useful thing. I was saving this for a happier occasion but I think it may find more use here tonight."

A'zelen eyed the bottle suspiciously. "How did you manage to keep it away from Ves?"

"By making sure that it doesn't get stored with the wine." J'hanos refilled the brownrider's cup, then his own. "Drink," he said. "The bottle's open now and I'll not see it go to waste."

Nodding, A'zelen reached for his cup and did as his Wingleader ordered.



It wasn't until A'zelen had drained his seventh shot that he found his tongue again. "I can't believe she's gone."

J'hanos nodded, moving to refill the cup once more. "I know. When Enasha --"

"No, it was different with Enasha," A'zelen said, ploughing on as if needing to get the words out before they escaped his grasp. "What happened to Enasha was terrible but you *knew* -- she was sick and you knew, you were prepared." He looked up at the bronzerider, his grey eyes filled with pain in the glowlight. "I wasn't. I'm not! She was just here, just yesterday. She was here and I was worried, but I never thought that she'd just be *gone*...." He trailed off and drank again, not noticing that the bronzerider was no longer matching him drink for drink. "We wanted a baby. *She* wanted a baby. Babies aren't meant to kill you!"

J'hanos closed his eyes and emptied his own cup, feeling the pain of Enasha's loss anew. He loved Elhana, had never thought to blame the girl for killing her mother, but... "Sometimes the world doesn't work like it should."

"I want her back, Jal," A'zelen said quietly, using the old nickname that the bronzerider accepted from very few. "I want to show her how much I love her."

"She knew."

"Did she?" A'zelen took the bottle, filled his cup, drained it, then filled it again. "I couldn't even --"

"She *knew*. Anybody who saw the two of you together could see that."

"I couldn't even take her *between*!" A'zelen's gaze was beseeching. "I was her weyrmate and I couldn't even do that for her, for our son! It was just too --" he took a deep breath, "-- too *final*. K'suf took them, he took his own daughter. No father should have to do that! But I couldn't..."

The brownrider's shoulders trembled for a few moments, then he seemed to tighten his grip on his composure and swallowed down more of the fruit spirit. J'hanos watched him, remembering how he had taken Enasha back to her family, returning her to her birth Hold for her funeral rather than sending her body *between* in the Weyr custom. "Sharenne would have understood," he started.

A'zelen shook his head. "No --"

"She would have understood. You just didn't want to lose her."

"I'd *already* lost her!" The brownrider rubbed at his temples as if already feeling the hangover that would surely come. "I never thought that I'd lose her. *I'm* the one who goes after Thread -- I always thought she'd be the one to see me *between*."

J'hanos nodded, refilling the cups once more. A little of the liquid splashed on the table as his aim wandered slightly. "There's not many riders survive their weyrmates."

"Those that don't are the lucky ones," A'zelen said mournfully, emptying his cup. "They don't know how much this *hurts*. I just want her to come *back*, Jal. I didn't deserve her..."

The bronzerider snorted. "I think she'd disagree there. She chose you for a reason and there wasn't a force in this world that could make Sharenne choose a man she didn't want."

A'zelen almost smiled. "No, there wasn't. She'd never have made a good holderwife."

"No." A thought struck J'hanos and he felt the breath hitch in his chest. "The sad thing is that that's all that Enasha ever really wanted. She wanted a husband and I could never give her that, not how she wanted..."

They lapsed into silence once more, each lost in his thoughts as the level of liquid in the bottle sank ever lower. Finally, A'zelen looked up and said, "Do you think you'll ever take another weyrmate?"

J'hanos blinked owlishly at him. "What?"

"Weyrmate. Do you ever..." The brownrider frowned and tried again. "Would you take another one? Been almost five Turns since Enasha..."

Closing his eyes, J'hanos took a few moments to gather his thoughts. "I don't know," he said at last. "If the right woman came along --"

"Not Vivia, then?"

"Definitely not. If the right woman came along and if the time was right --"

"And if she could get past Ves..."

"Vesoz isn't my keeper," J'hanos said with a snort, then downed the contents of his cup. "I mind my own affairs. It's not like I'm celibate."

"I think I might be." A'zelen stared at the bottle, his eyes unfocussed. "I can't believe she's gone. She *can't* be gone..."

J'hanos refilled the cups again, frowning slightly at how little of the alcohol was left... and how much was splashed across the table. "She's gone," he said. "You're not. That hurts."

"All she wanted was a baby..." The brownrider's hands were wrapped tightly around his cup, his knuckles as white as the carved ivory beneath his fingers. He half-lifted the drink to his mouth, then set it down hard and buried his head in his hands, his sobs, silent at first, growing gradually louder. "She can't be dead! She *can't*!"

J'hanos stood unsteadily, not quite certain why the floor seemed to be moving so strangely but suspecting that it might have something to do with the almost-empty bottle. He moved around to where A'zelen sat, wrapping an awkward arm around his wingsecond's shoulders and then holding him as the brownrider turned towards the offered comfort. After a while, J'hanos realised that his own cheeks were wet with tears, the whole miserable situation dredging up feelings he thought he'd left Turns in the past. What had happened to Sharenne was far too close to Enasha's fate, A'zelen's pain *far* too familiar...

The brownrider finally snuffled wetly and pulled away, his expression faintly embarrassed. "Sorry."

"It's better out," J'hanos said, a small, bemused part of his mind noting that his father would likely faint if he saw this scene of open emotion with another man. He wiped at his face with a sleeve. "You should sleep --"

"Not here," A'zelen said quickly, casting a fearful glance towards the screened-off sleeping area. "I can still *smell* her here..."

"My couch," the bronzerider told him firmly. "I have blankets."

"Thanks, Jal." A'zelen sighed and rested his forehead against the table, apparently not noticing that his short hair was soaking in a small pool of spilled alcohol. "You're going to ground me, aren't you?"

"Yes," J'hanos replied, drunk enough to be unperturbed by the sudden change of subject. "You're out of the Wing roster 'til end of the month. N'reis'll take your 'second slot until you get back."

"Huh, good choice."

"Won't be long. You need the time to yourself." The bronzerider sighed. "Believe me, the distraction of work will look good, very good, but I can't risk it. Can't risk you making mistakes because it hurts inside and you can't concentrate."

A'zelen shuddered. "I know. Not seen my parents for...." He pushed himself back up to a sitting position, frowning. "For months and months. They should know. This would've been their first grandchild...."

For a moment J'hanos thought that the tears were going to begin again, but then A'zelen took a deep breath and turned to look at him. "I think... I think I might be drunk." He paused. "Yes, Toth tells me that I definitely *am* drunk. I think you might have to help me get to that couch."

The bronzerider nodded and pushed himself to his feet, wobbling as he tried to find his balance on the level floorboards. "Shard it, I always forget how strong that stuff is...."

A'zelen stood, leaning heavily on the table as he glanced around the room, taking in the achingly familiar details of a life that would never be quite the same again. "She's really gone, isn't she?" he said softly, the question seemingly pitched more to himself than to J'hanos. "My Sharenne...." He closed his eyes a moment, then lurched towards the bronzerider. "I can't stay here."

The pair of them took a few moments to work out a way in which they might both succeed in staying upright, and J'hanos, his brain feeling as though it were swimming blindly in his skull, realised that the following day would bring new hurts of its own. "You ready?"

"I'll never be ready," A'zelen said sadly, but then he nodded and the two of them staggered around the table, leaving the bottle and the cups and the open glowbasket behind them as they made their way out into the night of a world that Sharenne was no longer a part of.



Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub

www.kadanzer.org