

II Evening (Fort Weyr Time).
Meeting of the Weyrleaders at Fort Weyr
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men first settled on Rukbat's third

world and called it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger planet, swinging around its adopted

primary in a wildly erratic elliptical orbit. For two generations, the colonists gave the bright red star little

thought — until the desperate path of the wanderer brought it close to its stepsister at perihelion.

When such aspects were harmonious and not distorted by conjunctions with other planets in the

system, the indigenous life of the wanderer sought to bridge the space gap to the more temperate and

hospitable planet.

The initial losses the colonists suffered were staggering, and it was during the subsequent long

struggle to survive and combat this menace dropping through Pern's skies like silver threads that Pern's

tenuous contact with the mother planet was broken.

To control the incursions of the dreadful Threads (for the Pernese had cannibalized their transport

ships early on and abandoned such technological sophistication as was irrelevant to this pastoral planet),

rock, they could emit a flaming gas.

As the dragons could “fly,” they’d be able to char Thread mid-air, yet escape its worse ravages themselves.

It took generations to develop to the full the use of this first phase. The second phase of the proposed

defense against the spore incursions would take longer to mature. For Thread, a space-traveling

mycorrhizoid spore, devoured organic matter with mindless voracity and, once grounded, burrowed and proliferated with terrifying speed.

The originators of the two-stage defense program did not compensate sufficiently for chance nor for

the psychological effect of visible extermination of this avid foe. For it was psychologically reassuring and

deeply satisfying to the endangered Pernese to see the menace charred to impotence in mid-air. Also, the

southern continent, where the second phase was initiated, proved untenable and the entire colony was

moved to the northern continent to seek refuge from the Threads in the natural caves of the northern

small to hold the colonists. Another settlement was started slightly to the north, by a great lake conveniently

nestled near a cave-filled cliff. Ruatha Hold, too, became overcrowded in a few generations.

Since the Red Star rose in the East, it was decided to start a holding in the eastern mountains,

provided suitable accommodations could be found. Suitable accommodations now meant caves, for only

solid rock and metal (of which Pern was in distressingly light supply) were impervious to the burning score of Thread.

The winged, tailed, fiery-breathed dragons had now been bred to a size which required more space

than the Cliffside Holds could provide. The ancient cave-pocked cones of extinct volcanoes, one high above

the first Fort, the other in the Benden mountains, proved to be adequate, needing only a few improvements

to be made habitable. However, such projects took the last of the fuel for the great stonecutters (which had

been programmed for only diffident mining operations not wholesale cliff excavations), and subsequent

Star was at the other end of its erratic orbit, a frozen, lonely captive. No Thread fell on Pern's soil. The inhabitants began to enjoy life as they had thought to find it when they first landed on the lovely planet.

They erased the depredations of Thread and grew crops, planted orchards, thought of reforestry for the slopes denuded by Thread. They could even forget that they had been in grave danger of extinction. Then the Threads returned for another orbit around the lush planet — fifty years of danger from the skies — and the Pernese again thanked their ancestors, now many generations removed, for providing the dragons who seared the dropping Thread mid-air with their fiery breath.

Dragonkind, too, had prospered during that interval; had settled in four other locations, following the master plan of interim defense. Men managed to forget completely that there had been a secondary measure against Thread.

By the third Pass of the Red Star, a complicated socio-political-economic structure had been

time away from the nurture of dragonkind to learn other trades during peacetime, nor time away from protecting the planet during Passes.

Settlements, called Holds, developed wherever natural caves were found; some, of course, more

extensive or strategically placed than others. It took a strong man to hold frantic terrified people in control

during Thread attacks; it took wise administration to conserve victuals when nothing could safely be grown,

and extraordinary measures to control population and keep it useful and healthy until such time as the

menace had passed. Men with special skills in metalworking, animal breeding, farming, fishing, mining

(such as there was), weaving, formed Crafhalls in each large Hold and looked to one Mastercrafhall where

the precepts of their craft were taught, and craft skills preserved and guarded from one generation to another. So that one Lord Holder could not deny the products of the Crafhall situated in his Hold to others

of the planet, the Crafts were decreed independent of a Hold affiliation, each Craftmaster of a hall owing

naturally, to the Dragonriders to whom all Pern looked for protection during Threadfalls.

The Red Star would swing inexorably close to Pern, but it would also Pass again, and life could

settle into a less frenzied pattern. Occasionally, the conjunction of Rukbat's natural five satellites would

prevent the Red Star from passing close enough to Pern to drop its fearful spores. Sometimes, though, as

siblings will, Pern's sister planets seemed to draw the Red Star closer still and Thread rained relentlessly on

the unfortunate victim. Fear creates fanatics and the Pernese were no exception. Only the dragonmen

could save Pern, and their position in the structure of the planet became inviolable.

Mankind has a history of forgetting the unpleasant, the undesirable. By ignoring its existence, it can

make the source of past Terror disappear. And the Red Star did not pass close enough to Pern to drop its

Threads. The people prospered and multiplied, spreading out across the rich land, carving more holds out

disrepute.

When, in the course of natural forces, the Red Star began to spin closer to Pern, winking with a

baleful red eye on its intended, ancient victim, one man, F'lar, rider of the bronze dragon, Mnementh,

believed that the ancient tales had truth in them. His half-brother, F'nor, rider of brown Canth, listened to his

arguments and found belief in them more exciting than the dull ways of the lone Weyr of Pern. When the

last golden egg of a dying queen dragon lay hardening on the Benden Weyr Hatching Ground, F'lar and

F'nor seized this opportunity to gain control of the Weyr. Searching through Ruatha Hold for a strong

woman to ride the soon-to-be hatched young queen, F'lar and F'nor discovered Lessa, the only surviving

member of the proud Bloodline of Ruatha Hold. She Impressed young Ramoth, the new queen, and

became Weyrwoman of Benden Weyr. When F'lar's bronze Mnementh flew the young queen in her first

mating, F'lar became Weyrleader of Pern's remaining dragonmen. The three riders, F'lar, Lessa and F'nor

place and another, Lessa discovered that dragons could teleport between time as well. Risking her life as

well as Pern's only queen dragon, Lessa and Ramoth went back in time, four hundred Turns, before the

mysterious disappearance of the other five Weyrs, just after the Last Pass of the Red Star had been completed.

The five Weyrs, seeing only the decline of their prestige and bored with inactivity after a lifetime of

exciting combat, agreed to help Lessa's Weyr and came forward to her Turn.

Seven Turns have now passed since that triumphant journey forward, and the initial gratitude of the

Hold and Crafts to the rescuing Oldtime Weyrs has faded and soured. And the Oldtimers themselves do

not like the Pern in which they are now living. Four hundred Turns brought too many subtle changes, and dissensions mount.

CHAPTER I

Morning at Mastercrafthall, Fort Hold

Several Afternoons Later at Benden Weyr

He fancied the sand begged to be violated with words and notes while
he, Pern's repository and glib
dispenser of any ballad, saga or ditty, was inarticulate. Yet he had to
construct a ballad for the upcoming
wedding of Lord Asgenar of Lemos Hold to the half-sister of Lord Larad
of Telgar Hold. Because of recent
reports of unrest from his network of drummers and Harper journeymen,
Robinton had decided to remind the
guests on this auspicious occasion — for every Lord Holder and Craft-
master would be invited of the debt
they owed the dragonmen of Pern. As the subject of his ballad, he had
decided to tell of the fantastic ride,
between time itself, of Lessa, Weyrwoman of Benden Weyr on her great
golden queen, Ramoth. The Lords
and Craftsmen of Pern had been glad enough then for the arrival of
Dragonriders from the five ancient
Weys from four hundred Turns in the past.
Yet how to reduce those fascinating, frantic days, those braveries, to a
rhyme? Even the most
stirring chords could not recapture the beat of the blood, the catch of
breath the chill of fear and the

dismissed as myth, of the thought of burrows of the lightning propagating parasites, of themselves walled up in the cliff-Holds behind thick metal doors and shutters. They'd been ready to promise F'lar their souls that day if he could protect them from Thread. And it was Lessa who had bought them that protection, almost with her life.

Robinton looked up from the sandtrays, his expression suddenly bleak. "The sand of memory dries quickly," he said softly, looking out across the settled valley toward the precipice that housed Fort Hold. There was one watchman on the fire ridges. There ought to be six, but it was planting time; Lord Holder Groghe of Fort Hold had everyone who could walk upright in the fields, even the gangs of children who were supposed to weed spring grass from stone interstices and pull moss from the walls. Last spring, Lord Groghe would not have neglected that duty no matter how many dragonlengths of land he wanted to put under seed.

Lord Groghe was undoubtedly out in the fields right now, prowling from one tract of land to another

nothing of his people, his children nor his fosterlings that he was not able to do himself. If he was

conservative in his thinking, it was because he knew his own limitations and felt secure in that knowledge.

Robinton pulled at his lower lip, wondering if Lord Groghe was an exception in his disregard for this

traditional Hold duty of removing all greenery near habitations. Or was this Lord Groghe's answer to Fort

Weyr's growing agitation over the immense forest lands of Fort Hold which the Dragonriders ought to

protect? The Weyrleader of Fort Weyr, T'ron, and his Weyrwoman, Mardra, had become less scrupulous

about checking to see that no Thread burrows had escaped their wing riders to fall on the lush forests. Yet

Lord Groghe had been scrupulous in the matter of ground crews and flame-throwing equipment when

Thread fell over his forests. He had a stable of runners spread out through the Hold in an efficient network

so that if Dragonriders were competent in flight, there was adequate ground coverage for any Thread that

might elude the flaming breath of the airborne beasts.

fresh new green of the

fields, the yellow blossoms on the fruit trees the neat stone Holds that lined the road up to the main Hold, the

cluster of artisans' cotholds below the wide ramp up to the Great Outer Court of Fort Hold.

And if his suspicions were valid, what could he do? Write a scolding song? A satire? Robinton

snorted. Lord Groghe was too literal a man to interpret satire and too righteous to take a scold.

Furthermore, and Robinton pushed himself upright on his elbows, if Lord Groghe was neglectful, it was in protest at Weyr neglect of far greater magnitude. Robinton shuddered to think of Thread burrowing in the great stands of softwoods to the south.

He ought to sing his remonstrance's to Mardra and T'ron as Weyrleaders — but that, too, would be

vain effort. Mardra had soured lately. She ought to have sense enough to retire gracefully to a chair and let

men seek her favors if T'ron no longer attracted her. To hear the Hold girls talk, T'ron was lusty enough. In

fact, T'ron had better restrain himself. Lord Groghe didn't take kindly to too many of his chattels bearing

the Lord Holders' side.

This was not the first time in recent months that Robinton regretted that F'lar of Benden Weyr had

been so eager to relinquish his leadership after Lessa had gone back between to bring the five lost Weyrs

forward in time. For a brief few months then, seven Turns ago, Pern had been united under F'lar and Lessa

against the ancient menace of Thread. Every Holder, Craftmaster, landsman, crafter, all had been of one

mind. That unity had dissipated as the Oldtime Weyr-leaders had reasserted their traditional domination

over the Holds bound to their Weyr for protection, and a grateful Pern had ceded them those rights. But in

four hundred Turns the interpretation of that old hegemony had altered, with neither party sure of the

translation.

Perhaps now was the time to remind Lord Holders of those perilous days seven Turns ago when all

their hopes hung on fragile dragon wings and the dedication of a scant two hundred men.

Weyr. There'd be other notables

among Weyr, Lord and Craft to signalize so auspicious an occasion.

“And among my jolly songs, I'll have stronger meat.”

Chuckling to himself at the prospect, Robinton picked up his stylus.

“I must have a tender but intricate theme for Lessa. She's legend already.” Unconsciously the

Harper smiled as he pictured the dainty, child-sized Weyrwoman, with her white skin, her cloud of dark hair,

the flash of her gray eyes, heard the acerbity of her clever tongue. No man of Pern failed of respect for her,

or braved her displeasure, with the exception of F'lar.

Now a well-stated martial theme would do for Benden's Weyrleader, with his keen amber eyes, his

unconscious superiority, the intense energy of his lean fighter's frame. Could he, Robinton, rouse F'lar from

his detachment? Or was he perhaps unnecessarily worried about these minor irritations between Lord

Holder and Weyrleader? But without the Dragonriders of Pern, the land would be sucked dry of any

sustenance by Thread, even if every man, woman and child of the planet were armed with flame throwers.

the great hands with their delicate skill, the ranging mind in its eternal quest for efficiency. Somehow one

expected such an immense man to be as slow of wit as he was deliberate of physical movement.

A sad note, well sustained, for Lytol who had once ridden a Benden dragon and lost his Larth in an

accident in the Spring Games — had it been fourteen or fifteen Turns ago? Lytol had left the Weyr — to be

among dragonfolk only exacerbated his tremendous loss — and taken to the craft of weaving. He'd been

Crafthall Master in the High Reaches Hold when F'lar had discovered Lessa on Search. F'lar had appointed

Lytol to be Lord Warder of Ruatha Hold when Lessa had abdicated her claim to the Hold to young Jaxom.

And how did a man signify the dragons of Pern? No theme was grand enough for those huge,

winged beasts, as gentle as they were great, Impressed at Hatching by the men who rode them, flaming

against Thread, who tended them, loved them, who were linked, mind to mind, in an unbreakable bond that

wrote the first word, wondering if he would find some answer himself in the song.

He had barely filled the completed score with clay to preserve the text, when he heard the first throb

of the drum. He strode quickly to the small outer court of the Craffhall, bending his head to catch the

summons; it was his sequence all right, in urgent tempo. He concentrated so closely on the drumroll that he

did not realize that every other sound common to the Harper's Hall had ceased.

"Thread?" His throat dried instantly. Robinton didn't need to consult the timetable to realize that the

Threads were falling on the shores of Tillek Hold prematurely.

Across the valley on Fort Hold's ramparts, the single watchman made his monotonous round,

oblivious to disaster.

There was a soft spring warmth to the afternoon air as F'nor and his big, brown Canth emerged from

their weyr in Benden Weyr. F'nor yawned slightly and stretched until he heard his spine crack. He'd been

Grounds. No dragons were dining and the herdbeasts stood in their fenced pasture, legs spraddled, heads level with their bony knees as they drowsed in the sunlight.

Sleepy, said Canth, although he had slept as long and deeply as his rider. The brown dragon proceeded to settle himself on the sun-warmed ledge, sighing as he sank down.

“Slothful wretch,” F’nor said, grinning affectionately at his beast.

The sun was full on the other side of the enormous mountain cup that formed the dragonman’s

habitation on the eastern coast of Pern. The cliffside was patterned with the black mouths of the individual

dragon weyrs, starred where sun flashed off mica in the rocks. The waters of the Weyr’s spring-fed lake

glistened around the two green dragons bathing as their riders lounged on the grass verge. Beyond, in front

of the weyrling barracks, young riders formed a semi-circle around the Weyrlingmaster.

F’nor’s grin broadened. He stretched his lean body indolently, remembering his own weary hours in

F'lar, bronze Mnementh's rider, had believed that there might be truth in those old legends. Now

Thread was an inescapable fact, falling to Pern from the skies with diurnal regularity. Once more, its

destruction was a way of life for Dragonriders. The lessons these lads learned would save their skins, their lives and, more important, their dragons.

The weyrings are promising, Canth remarked as he locked his wings to his back and curled his tail

against his hind legs. He settled his great head to his forelegs, the many-faceted eye nearest F'nor gleaming softly on his rider.

Responding to the tacit plea, F'nor scratched the eye ridge until Canth began to hum softly with pleasure.

“Lazybones!”

When I work, I work, Canth replied. Without my help, how would you know which holdbred lad

would make a good dragonrider? And do I not find girls who make good queen riders, too?

identified himself as a Benden Weyr dragonrider. He'd have thought it'd be the other way round. Southern Boll was weyrbound to Fort Weyr. Traditionally — and F'nor grinned wryly since the Fort Weyrleaders T'ron, was so adamant in upholding all that was traditional, customary . . . and static — traditionally, the Weyr which protected a territory had first claim on any possible riders. But the five Oldtime Weyrs rarely sought beyond their own Lower Caverns for candidates. Of course, thought F'nor, the Oldtime queens didn't produce large clutches like the modern queens, nor many golden queen eggs. Come to think on it, only three queens had been Hatched in the Oldtime Weyrs in the seven Turns since Lessa brought them forward..Well, let the Oldtimers stick to their ways if that made them feel superior. But F'nor agreed with F'lar. It was only common sense to give your dragonets as wide a choice as possible. Though the women in the Lower Caverns of Benden Weyr were certainly agreeable, there simply weren't enough weyr-born lads to match up the quantity of dragons hatched.

groaned. He'd forgotten that the women were making numbweed for salve that was the universal remedy for the burn of Thread and other painful afflictions. That had been one main reason for going on Search yesterday. The odor of numbweed was pervasive. Yesterday's breakfast had tasted medicinal instead of cereal. Since the preparation of numbweed salve was a tedious as well as smelly process, most dragonmen made themselves scarce during its manufacture. F'nor glanced across the Weyr Bowl to the queen's weyr. Ramoth, of course, was in the Hatching Ground, hovering over her latest clutch of eggs, but bronze Mnementh was absent from his accustomed perch on the ledge. F'lar and he were off somewhere, no doubt escaping the smell of numbweed as well as Lessa's uncertain temper. She conscientiously took part in even the most onerous duties of Weyrwoman, but that didn't mean she had to like them. Numbweed stink notwithstanding, F'nor was hungry. He hadn't eaten since late afternoon

queen would permit only two junior queens in Benden Weyr, there were two unoccupied Weyr-woman

quarters. F'nor had appropriated one and did not need to disturb Canth when he wished to descend to a lower level.

As he approached the entrance of the Lower Caverns, the aroma of boiling numbweed made his

eyes smart. He'd grab some klah, bread and fruit and go listen to the Weyrlingmaster. They were upwind.

As Wing-second, F'nor liked to take every opportunity to measure up the new riders, particularly those who

were not weyrbred. Life in a Weyr required certain adjustments for the craft and holdbred. The freedom and

privileges sometimes went to a boy's head, particularly after he was able to take his dragon between —

anywhere on Pern — in the space it takes to count to three. Again, F'nor agreed with F'lar's preference in

presenting older lads at Impression though the Oldtimers deplored that practice at Benden Weyr, too. But,

by the Shell, a lad in his late teens recognized the responsibility of his position (even if he were holdbred) as

precious little sense and, if some silly weyrling let his beast eat too much, the whole Weyr suffered through its torment. Even an older beast lived for the here and now, with little thought for the future and not all that much recollection — except on the instinctive level — for the past. That was just as well, F'nor thought. For dragons bore the brunt of Thread-score. Perhaps if their memories were more acute or associative, they'd refuse to fight.

F'nor took a deep breath and, blinking furiously against the fumes, entered the huge kitchen Cavern.

It was seething with activity. Half the female population of the Weyr must be involved in this operation, F'nor thought, for great cauldrons monopolized all the large hearths set in the outside wall of the Cavern. Women were seated at the broad tables, washing and cutting the roots from which the salve was extracted. Some were ladling the boiling product into great earthenware pots. Those who stirred the concoction with long-handled paddles wore masks over nose and mouth and bent frequently to blot eyes watering from the acrid

Manora, beckon to him. Her usually

serene face wore a look of puzzled concern.

Obediently F'nor crossed to the hearth where she, Lessa, and another young woman who looked

familiar though F'nor couldn't place her, were examining a small kettle. "My duty to you, Lessa, Manora — " and he paused, groping for the third name.

"You ought to remember Brekke, F'nor," Lessa said, raising her eyebrows at his lapse.

"How can you expect anyone to see in a place dense with fumes?" F'nor demanded, making much

of blotting his eyes on his sleeve. "I haven't seen much of you, Brekke, since the day Canth and I brought

you from your crafthold to Impress young Wirenth."

"F'nor, you're as bad as F'lar," Lessa exclaimed, somewhat testily. "You never forget a dragon's

name, but his rider's?"

"How fares Wirenth, Brekke?" F'nor asked, ignoring Lessa's interruption.

The girl looked startled but managed a hesitant smile, then pointedly looked towards Manora, trying

tempestuous and irresponsible senior Weyrwoman at Southern Weyr, when Lessa tapped the empty pot before her.

“Look at this, F’nor. The lining has cracked and the entire kettle of numbweed salve is discolored.”

F’nor whistled appreciatively.

“Would you know what it is the Smith uses to coat the metal?” Manora asked. “I wouldn’t dare use

tainted salve and yet I hate to discard so much if there’s no reason.”

F’nor tipped the pot to the light. The dull tan lining was seamed by fine cracks along one side.

“See what it does to the salve?” and Lessa thrust a small bowl at him,

The anesthetic ointment, normally a creamy, pale yellow, had turned a reddish tan. Rather a

threatening color, F’nor thought. He smelled it, dipped his finger in and felt the skin immediately deaden.

“It works,” he said with a shrug.

“Yes, but what would happen to an open Thread score with that foreign substance cooked into the

salve?” asked Manora.

“Good point. What does F’lar say?”

“You’re as bad as he is,” she said, grinning up at the tall Wing-second who resembled her

Weyrmate so closely. Yet the two men, though the stamp of their mutual sire was apparent in the thick

shocks of black hair, the strong features, the lean rangy bodies (F’nor had a squarer, broader frame with not

enough flesh on his bones so that he appeared unfinished), the two men were different in temperament and

personality. F’nor was less introspective and more easygoing than his half brother. F’lar, the elder by three

Turns. The Weyrwoman sometimes found herself treating F’nor as if he were an extension of his half

brother and, perhaps for this reason, could joke and tease with him. She was not on easy terms with many

people.

F’nor returned her smile and gave her a mocking little bow for the compliment.

“Well. I’ve no objections to running your errand to the Mastersmithhall. I’m supposed to be

Searching and I can Search in Telgar Hold as well as anywhere else. R’mart’s nowhere near as sticky as

preoccupied and Ramoth was fussing over her latest clutch like a novice — which would tend to make Lessa more irritable. Strange for a junior Weyrwoman from Southern Weyr to be involved in any brewing at Benden.

“A Weyr can’t have too much numbweed,” Manora said briskly.

“That isn’t the only pot that’s showing cracks, either,” Lessa cut in, testily. “And if we’ve got to gather more numbweed to make up what we’ve lost . . .”

“There’s the second crop at the Southern Weyr,” Brekke suggested, then looked flustered for

speaking up..But the look Lessa turned on Brekke was grateful. “I’ve no intention of shorting you, Brekke, when

Southern Weyr does the nursing of every fool who can’t dodge Thread.”

“I’ll take the pot. I’ll take the pot,” F’nor cried with humorous assurance. “But first, I’ve got to have more in me than a cup of klah”

Lessa blinked at him, her glance going to the entrance and the late afternoon sun slanting in on the floor.

have numbweed.”

F’nor grinned down at his Weyrwoman, aware that Brekke’s eyes were wide in amazement at their

good-natured banter. He was sincerely fond of Lessa as a person, not just as Weyrwoman of Benden’s

senior queen. He heartily approved of F’lar’s permanent attachment of Lessa, not that there seemed much

chance that Ramoth would ever permit any dragon but Mnementh to fly her. As Lessa was a superb

Weyrwoman for Benden Weyr, so F’lar was the logical bronze rider. They were well matched as

Weyrwoman and Weyrleader, and Benden Weyr — and Pern — profited. So did the three Holds bound to

Benden for protection. Then F’nor remembered the hostility of the people at Southern Boll yesterday until

they learned that he was a Benden rider. He started to mention this to Lessa when Manora broke his train

of thought.

“I am very disturbed by this discoloration. F’nor,” she said. “Here. Show Mastersmith Fandarel

quick enough to make her fosterlings fend for themselves, as his foster mother had made him.

“Don’t drop the pot when you go between, F’nor,” was her parting admonition.

F’nor chuckled to himself. Once a mother, always a mother, he guessed, for Lessa was as broody

about Felessan, the only child she’d borne. Just as well the Weyrs practiced fostering. Felessan — as likely

a lad to Impress a bronze dragon as F’nor had seen in all his Turns at Searching — got along far better with

his placid foster mother than he would have with Lessa had she had the rearing of him.

As he ladled out a bowl of stew, F’nor wondered at the perversity of women. Girls were constantly

pleading to come to Benden Weyr. They’d not be expected to bear child after child till they were worn-out

and old. Women in the Weyrs remained active and appealing. Manora had seen twice the Turns that, for

instance, Lord Sifer of Bitra’s latest wife had, yet Manora looked younger. Well, a rider preferred to seek his

Cavern. He wondered how the women stood the smell.

Canth did, too, for the fumes had kept him from napping on the warm ledge. He was just as glad of

an excuse to get away from Benden Weyr.

F'nor broke out into the early morning sunshine above Telgar Hold, then directed brown Canth up

the long valley to the sprawling complex of buildings on the left of the Falls.

Sun flashed off the water wheels which were turned endlessly by the powerful waters of the three-pronged

Falls and operated the forges of the Smithy. Judging by the thin black smoke from the stone

buildings, the smelting and refining smithies were going at full capacity.

As Canth swooped lower, F'nor could see the distant clouds of dust that meant another ore train

coming from the last portage of Telgar's major river. Fandarel's notion of putting wheels on the barges had

halved the time it took to get raw ore down river and across land from the deep mines of Crom and Telgar to

the Crafhalls throughout Pern.

himself.

The green Beth, then, had agreed to brown Seventh's advances. Looking at her brilliant color, F'nor

thought their riders shouldn't have brought that pair away from their home Weyr at this phase. As F'nor

watched, the brown dragon extended his wing and covered the green possessively. F'nor stroked Canth's

downy neck at the first ridge but the dragon didn't seem to need any consolation. He'd no lack of partners

after all, thought F'nor with little conceit. Greens would prefer a brown who was as big as most bronzes on

Pern.

Canth landed and F'nor jumped off quickly. The dust made by his dragon's wings set up twin whirls,

through which F'nor had to walk. In the open sheds which F'nor passed on his way to the Craffthall, men

were busy at a number of tasks, most of them familiar to the brown rider. But at one shed he stopped, trying

to fathom why the sweating men were winding a coil of metal through a plate, until he realized that the

could tell why the big kettle

had suddenly discolored the vital anesthetic salve. F'nor swung the kettle to make sure the two sample pots

were within, and grinned at the self-conscious gesture; for an instant he had a resurgence of his boyhood

apprehension of losing something entrusted to him.

The entrance to the main Smithcrafthall was imposing: four landbeasts could be driven abreast

through that massive portal and not scrape their sides. Did Pern breed Smithcraftmasters in proportion to

that door? F'nor wondered as its maw swallowed him, for the immense metal wings stood wide. What had

been the original Smithy was now converted to the artificers' use. At lathes and benches, men were

polishing, engraving, adding the final touches to otherwise completed work. Sunlight streamed in from the

windows set high in the building's wall, the eastern shutters were bur-nished with the morning sun which

reflected also from the samples of weaponry and metalwork in the open shelves in the center of the big Hall.

“And a good day to you, Terry, and you, sirs.” F’nor said, saluting the two riders with airy amiability.

“F’nor, Canth’s rider, of Benden.”

“B’naj, Seventh’s rider of Fort,” said the taller, grayer of the two riders. He obviously resented the interruption and kept slapping an elaborately jeweled belt knife into the palm of his hand.

“T’reb, Beth’s rider, also of Fort. And if Canth’s a bronze, warn him off Beth.”

“Canth’s no poacher,” F’nor replied, grinning outwardly but marking T’reb for a rider whose green’s amours affected his own temper.

“One never knows just what is taught at Benden Weyr,” T’reb said with thinly veiled contempt.

“Manners, among other things, when addressing Wing-seconds,” F’nor replied, still pleasant. But

T’reb gave him a sharp look, aware of a subtle difference in his manner. “Good Master Terry, may I have a word with Fandarel?”

“He’s in his study . . .”

“Fort Weyr manners leave much to be desired,” F’nor said, his teeth showing in a smile as hard as

the grip with which he held T’reb. But now the other Fort Weyr rider intervened.

“T’reb! F’nor!” B’naj thrust the two apart. “His green’s proddy, F’nor. He can’t help it.”

“Then he should stay weyrbound.”

“Benden doesn’t advise Fort,” T’reb cried, trying to step past his Weyr-mate, his hand on his belt

knife..F’nor stepped back, forcing himself to cool down. The whole episode was ridiculous. Dragonriders

did not quarrel in public. No one should use a Craftmaster’s second in such a fashion. Outside, dragons

bellowed.

Ignoring T’reb, F’nor said to B’naj, “You’d better get out of here. She’s too close to mating.”

But the truculent T’reb would not be silenced.

“Don’t tell me how to manage my dragon, you . . .”

The insult was lost in a second volley from the dragons to which Canth now added his warble.

“Don’t be a fool, T’reb,” B’naj said. “Come! Now!”

“You’d better go,” he told the Dragonriders, stepping in front of Terry.

“We came for the knife. We’ll leave with it,” T’reb shouted and, feinting with unexpected speed,

ducked past F’nor, grabbing the knife from Terry’s hand, slicing the smith’s thumb as he drew the blade.

Again F’nor caught T’reb’s hand and twisted it, forcing him to drop the knife.

T’reb gave a gurgling cry of rage and, before F’nor could duck or B’naj could intervene, the

infuriated green rider had plunged his own belt knife into F’nor’s shoulder, viciously slicing downward until

the point hit the shoulder bone.

F’nor staggered back, aware of nauseating pain, aware of Canth’s scream of protest, the green’s

wild bawl and the brown’s trumpeting.

“Get him out of here,” F’nor gasped to B’naj, as Terry reached out to steady him.

“Get out!” the Smith repeated in a harsh voice. He signaled urgently to the other craftsmen who

now moved decisively toward the dragonmen. But B’naj yanked T’reb savagely out of the Hall.

It was Canth, crooning anxiously.

The green's voice was suddenly still.

"Are they gone?" he asked the dragon.

Well gone, Canth replied, craning his neck to catch sight of his rider.

You hurt.

"I'm all right. I'm all right," F'nor lied, relaxing into Terry's urgent grip. In a blackening daze, he felt

himself lifted, then the hard surface of bench under his back before the dizzying shock and pain

overwhelmed him. His last conscious thought was that Manora would be annoyed that he had not seen

Fandarel first.

CHAPTER II

Evening (Fort Weyr Time).

Meeting of the Weyrleaders at Fort Weyr

WHEN MNEMENTH burst out of between above Fort Weyr, he entered so high above the Weyr

mountain that it was a barely discernible black point in the darkening land below. F'lar's exclamation of

surprise was cut off by the thin cold air that burned his lungs.

F'lar could accomplish little if he stormed in on T'ron and the other Weyrleaders, bent on extracting justice for his wounded Wing-second. Or if F'lar was still seething from the subtle insult implicit in the timing of this meeting. As Weyrleader of the offending rider, T'ron had delayed answering F'lar's courteously phrased request for a meeting of all Weyrleaders to discuss the untoward incident at the Craftmasterhall.

When T'ron's reply finally arrived, it set the meeting for the first watch, Fort Weyr time; or high night, Benden.time, a most inconsiderate hour for F'lar and certainly inconvenient for the other easterly Weys, Igen, Ista and even Telgar. D'ram of Ista Weyr and R'mart of Telgar, and probably G'narish of Igen would have something sharp to say to T'ron about such timing, though their lag was not as great as Benden Weyr's.

So T'ron wanted F'lar off balance and irritated. Therefore, F'lar would appear all amiability. He'd apologize to D'ram, R'mart and G'narish for inconveniencing them, while making certain that they knew T'ron was responsible.

green dragon was sterile because

she chewed firestone. Her lust could affect even the most insensitive commoners with sexual cravings. A

mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. Some green-brown pairings were as loud as

bronze-gold. Herdbeasts within range stampeded wildly and fowls, wherries and whers went into witless

hysterics. Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing

consequences. That particular aspect of dragon matings didn't bother weyrfolk who had long since

disregarded sexual inhibitions. No, you did not take a dragon out of her Weyr in that state.

It was irrelevant to F'lar's thinking that the second violation stemmed from the first. From the

moment riders could take their dragons between, they were abjured to avoid situations that might lead to a

duel, particularly since dueling was an accepted custom among Craft and Hold. Any differences between

riders were settled in unarmed bouts, closely refereed within the Weyr. Dragons suicided when their riders

other smithcrafters present — abrogated these two basic restrictions. F'lar experienced no satisfaction that the offending rider came from Fort Weyr even if T'ron, the major critic of Benden Weyr's relaxed attitudes toward some traditions, was in a very embarrassing position. F'lar might argue that his innovations breached no fundamental Weyr precepts, but the five Old-time Weysr categorically dismissed every suggestion originating from Benden Weyr. And T'ron bleated the most about the deplorable manners of modern Holders and Crafters, so different — so less subservient, F'lar amended — to the acquiescence of Holders and Crafters in their distant past Turn.

It would be interesting, F'lar mused, to see how T'ron the Traditionalist explained away the actions of his riders, now guilty of far worse offenses against Weyr traditions than anything F'lar had suggested.

Common sense had dictated F'lar's policy — eight Turns ago — of throwing open Impressions to likely lads from Holds and Crafts; there hadn't been enough boys of the right age in Benden Weyr to match

the Shell, F'lar hadn't suggested that the senior queens be flown openly. He did not intend to challenge the Oldtimer Weyrleaders with modern bronzes. He did feel that they'd profit by new blood among their beasts.

Wasn't an improvement in Dragonkind anywhere of benefit to all the Weyrs?

And it was practical diplomacy to invite Holders and Crafters to Impressions. There wasn't a man alive in Pern who hadn't secretly cherished the notion that he might be able to Impress a dragon. That he could be linked for life to the love and sustaining admiration of these gentle great beasts. That he could transverse Pern in a twinkling, astride a dragon. That he would never suffer the loneliness that was the condition of most men — a dragonrider always had his dragon. So, whether the commoners had a relative on the Hatching Ground hoping to attach a dragonet or not, the spectators enjoyed the vicarious thrill of being present, at witnessing this "mysterious, rite." He'd observed that they were also subtly reassured that

days to get messages from One coast to the other. The Harpecraft's system of drums was a poor second. when a dragon could transport himself, his rider and an ungarbled message instantly anywhere on the planet.

F'lar, too, was exceedingly aware of the dangers of isolation. In the days before the first Thread had

again fallen on Pern — could it be only seven Turns ago? — Benden Weyr had been vitiated by its isolation,

and the entire planet all but lost. Where F'lar earnestly felt that dragonmen should make themselves

accessible and friendly, the Oldtimers were obsessed by a need for privacy. Which only fertilized the ground

for such incidents as had just occurred. T'reb on a disturbed green had swooped down on the

Smithmastercrafthall and demanded — not requested — that a craftsman give up an artifact, which had

been made by commission for a powerful Lord Holder.

With thoughts that were more disillusioned than vengeful F'lar realized that Mnementh was gliding

fast toward Fort Weyr's jagged rim. The Star Stones and the watchrider were silhouetted against the dying

High Reaches and Telgar Weyr missing? Well, T'kul of High Reaches was likely late on purpose.

Odd though; that caustic Oldtimer ought to enjoy tonight. He'd have a chance to snipe at both F'lar and

T'bor and he'd thoroughly enjoy T'ron's discomfiture. F'lar had never felt any friendliness for or from the

dour, dark-complected High Reaches Weyrleader. He wondered if that was why Mnemeth never used

T'kul's name. Dragons ignored human names when they didn't like the bearer. But for a dragon not to

name a Weyrleader was most unusual.

F'lar hoped that R'mart of Telgar would come. Of the Oldtimers, R'mart and G'narish of Igen were

the youngest, the least set in their ways. Though they tended to side with their contemporaries in most

affairs against the two modern Weyrleaders, F'lar and T'bor, F'lar had noticed lately that those two were

sympathetic to some of his suggestions. Could he work on that to his advantage today — tonight! He

wished that Lessa could have come with him for she was able to use deft mental pressures against

as quick to find exception and slights as T'ron, though once she hadn't been so touchy. In those first days after the Weyrs had come up, she and Lessa had been exceedingly close. But Mardra's friendship had gradually turned into an active hatred. Mardra was a handsome woman, with a full, strong figure, and while she was nowhere near as promiscuous with her favors as Kylara of Southern Weyr, she was much sought after by bronze riders. By nature she was intensely possessive and not, F'lar realized, particularly intelligent. Lessa, dainty, oddly beautiful, already a Weyr legend for that spectacular ride between time, had unconsciously attracted attention from Mardra. Mardra evidently didn't consider the fact that Lessa made no attempt to entice any favorite from Mardra, did not, indeed, dally with any man (for which F'lar was immensely pleased). Add to that the ridiculous matter of their mutual Ruathan origin — Mardra conceived a hatred for Lessa. She seemed to feel that Lessa, the only survivor of that Bloodline, had had no right to renounce her claim on

Weyr who was apt to make trouble

for the pure joy of getting attention by disrupting others, and nothing would be accomplished Nadira of Igen

Weyr liked Lessa but in a passive way. Bedella of Telgar Weyr was stupid and Fanna of Ista, taciturn.

Merika of the High Reaches was as much a sour sort as her Weyrleader T'kul.

This was a matter for men to settle.

F'lar thanked Mnementh as he slid down the warm shoulder to the ledge, stumbling as his bootheels

caught on the ridges of claw scars on the edge. T'ron might have put out a basket of glows, F'lar thought

irritably, and then caught himself. Another trick to put everyone in as unreceptive a mood as possible.

Loranth, senior queen dragon of Fort Weyr, solemnly regarded F'lar as he entered the main room of

the Weyr. He gave her a cordial greeting, suppressing his relief that there was no sign of Mardra. If Loranth was solemn, Mardra would have been downright unpleasant. Undoubtedly the Fort Weyrwoman was

sulking beyond the curtain between weyr and sleeping room. Maybe this awkward time had been her idea.

F'lar supposed that his Weyrmate

felt responsible for uprooting the Oldtimers. But the final decision to go forward in time had been theirs.

Well, if Lessa could endure Mardra's condescension out of gratitude, F'lar could try to put up with

T'ron. The man did know how to fight Thread effectively and F'lar had learned a great deal from him at first.

So, in a determinedly pleasant frame of mind, F'lar walked down the short passage to the Fort Weyr Council

Room.

T'ron, seated in the big stone chair at the head of the Table, acknowledged F'lar's entry with a stiff

nod. The light of the glows on the wall cast unflattering shadows on the Oldtimer's heavy, lined face. It

struck F'lar forcibly that the man had never known anything but fighting Thread. He must have been born

when the Red Star began that last fifty-Turn-long Pass around Pern, and he'd fought Thread until the Star

had finished its circuit. Then followed Lessa forward. A man could get mighty tired of fighting Thread in just

seven short Turns. F'lar halted that line of thought.

“I’ll conduct the meetings at Fort Weyr, Benden,” T’ron said in a cold harsh voice. “I’ll wait for T’kul and R’mart before I have any discussion of your — your complaint.” “Agreed.”

T’ron stared at F’lar as if that hadn’t been the answer he’d anticipated and he’d gathered himself for an argument that hadn’t materialized. F’lar nodded to T’bor as he took the seat beside him.

“I’ll say this now, Benden,” T’ron continued. “The next time you elect to drag us all out of our Weyrs suddenly, you apply to me first. Fort’s the oldest Weyr on Pern. Don’t just irresponsibly send messengers out to everyone.”

“I don’t see that F’lar acted irresponsibly,” G’narish said, evidently surprised by T’ron’s attitude.

G’narish was a stocky young man, some Turns F’lar’s junior and the youngest of the Weyrleaders to come forward in time. “Any Weyrleader can call a joint meeting if circumstances warrant it. And these do!”

G’narish emphasized this with a curt nod, adding when he saw the Fort Weyrleader scowling at him, “Well,

T'ron's scowl deepened.

"Wish Telgar'd get here," he said in a low, irritated tone.

"Have some wine, F'lar?" T'bor suggested, an almost malicious smile playing on his lips for T'ron

ought to have offered immediately. "Of course, it's not Benden Hold wine, but not bad. Not bad."

F'lar gave T'bor a long warning look as he took the proffered cup. But the Southern Weyrleader was

watching to see how T'ron reacted. Benden Hold did not tithe of its famous wines as generously to the other

Weyrs as it did to the one which protected its lands.

"When are we going to taste some of those Southern Weyr wines you've been bragging about,

T'bor?" G'narish asked, instinctively trying to ease the growing tensions.

"Of course, we're entering our fall season now," T'bor said making it seem that Fort was to blame for

the chill outside — and inside — the Weyr. "However, we expect to start pressing soon. We'll distribute

what we can spare to you northerners."

"What do you mean? What you can spare?" T'ron asked, staring hard at T'bor.

was developing. “Fanna’s Mirath laid twenty-five and I’ll warrant we’ve half a dozen bronzes in the clutch.”

“Ista’s bronzes are the fastest on Pern,” F’lar said gravely. When he heard T’bor stirring restlessly

beside him, he reached swiftly to Mnementh with a silent “Ask Orth to please tell T’bor to speak with great

thought for the consequences. D’ram and G’narish must not be antagonized.” Out loud he said, “A weyr

can never have too many good bronzes. If only to keep the queens happy.” He leaned back, watching

T’bor out of the corner of his eye to catch his reaction when the dragons completed the message relay. T’bor

gave a sudden slight jerk, then shrugged, his glance shifting from D’ram to T’ron and back to F’lar. He

looked more rebellious than cooperative. F’lar turned back to D’ram. “If you need some

likely prospects for any green dragons, there’s a boy . . .”

“D’ram follows tradition, Benden,” T’ron cut in. “Weyrbred is best for Dragonkind. Particularly for greens.”

“Oh?” T’bor glared with malicious intent at T’ron.

Weyr. And Fanna's Mirath

hadn't produced a single golden egg since she'd come time between.

"We all know Benden's generosity," T'ron said in a sneering tone, his eyes flicking around the room,

everywhere but at F'lar. "He extends help everywhere. And interferes when it isn't needed."

"I don't call what happened at the Smithhall interference," D'ram said, his face assuming grave lines.

"I thought we were going to wait for T'kul and R'mart," G'narish said, glancing anxiously up the passageway.

So, F'lar mused, D'ram and G'narish are upset by today's events.

"T'kul's better known for the meetings he misses than the ones he attends," T'bor remarked.

"R'mart always comes," G'narish said.

"Well, they're neither of them here. And I'm not waiting on their pleasure any longer," T'ron announced, rising.

"Then you'd better call in B'naj and T'reb," D'ram suggested with a heavy sigh.

Benden.

“Look, we’re here now,” T’bor said, banging his fist on the table irritably.

“Let’s get on with it. It’s full

night in southern Weyr. I’d like . . .”

“I conduct the Fort Weyr meetings, Southern,” T’ron said in a loud, firm voice, although the effort of

keeping his temper told in the flush of his face and the brightness of his eyes.

“Then conduct it,” T’bor replied. “Tell us why a green rider took his dragon out of your Weyr when

she was close to heat.”

“T’reb was not aware she was that close . . .”

“Nonsense,” T’bor cut in, glaring at T’ron. “You keep telling us how much of a traditionalist you are,

and how well trained your riders are. Then don’t tell me a rider as old as T’reb can’t estimate his beast’s

condition.”

F’lar began to think he didn’t need an ally like T’bor.

“A green changes color rather noticeably,” G’narish said, with some reluctance, F’lar noted. “Usually

a full day before she wants to fly.”

voice even. He saw T'bor open his mouth to

protest and kicked the man under the table. "However, according to the testimony of Craftmaster Terry, my

rider urged T'reb repeatedly to take his dragon away. T'reb persisted in his attempt to — to acquire the belt knife."

"And you accept the word of a commoner against a rider?" T'ron leaped on F'lar's statement with a great show of surprised indignation and incredulity.

"What would a Craftmaster," and F'lar emphasized the title, "gain by bringing false witness?"

"Those smithcrafters are the most notorious misers of Pern," T'ron replied as if this were a personal insult. "The worst of all the crafts when it comes to parting with honest tithe."

"A jeweled belt knife is not a tithe item."

"What difference does that make, Benden?" T'ron demanded.

F'lar stared back at the Fort Weyrleader. So T'ron was trying to set the blame on Terry! Then he

knew that his rider had been at fault. Why couldn't he just admit it and discipline the rider? F'lar only

his face. “But for a rider, a Weyrleader, to take the part of a Lord Holder against dragonfolk — ” and T’ron

turned to D’ram and G’narish with a helpless shrug of dismay.

“If R’mart were here, you’d be — ” T’bor began.

D’ram gestured at him to be quiet. “We’re not discussing possession but what seems to be a grave

breach of Weyr discipline,” he said in a voice that overwhelmed T’bor’s protest. “However, F’lar, you do

admit that a green, off her feed from Threadscore, can suddenly go into heat without warning?”

F’lar could feel T’bor urging him to deny that possibility. He knew that he had made a mistake in

pointing out that the knife had been commissioned for a Lord Holder. Or in taking the part of a Holder not

bound to Benden Weyr. If only R’mart had been here to speak in Lord Larad’s behalf. As it was, F’lar had

prejudiced his case. The incident had disturbed D’ram so much that the man was deliberately closing his

eyes to fact and seeking any extenuating circumstance he could. If F’lar forced him to see the event clearly,

keep his green in the Weyr.”

“But T’reb’s a Fort Weyr rider,” T’bor began heatedly, jumping to his feet. “And I’ve been told often enough that . . .”

“You’re out of order, Southern,” T’ron said in a loud voice, glaring at F’lar, not T’bor. “Can’t you control your riders, F’lar?”

“That is quite enough, T’ron,” D’ram cried, on his feet.

As the two Oldtimers locked glances, F’lar murmured urgently to T’bor, “Can’t you see he’s trying to anger us? Don’t lose control!”

“We’re trying to settle the incident, T’ron,” D’ram continued forcefully, “not complicate it with

irrelevant personalities. Since you are involved in this business, perhaps I’d better conduct the meeting.

With your permission, of course, Fort.”

To F’lar’s mind, that was a tacit admission that D’ram realized, however he might try to evade it, how

serious the incident was. The Istan Weyrleader turned to F’lar, his brown eyes dark with concern. F’lar

desired. Pern is much more productive than it was four Hundred Turns ago and yet that wealth has not been reflected in the tithes. There is four times the population of our Time and much, much more cultivated land. A heavy responsibility for the Weyrs. And — ” he cut himself off with a rueful laugh. “I’m digressing, too. Suffice it to say that once it was obvious a dragonrider found the knife to his liking, Terry should have gifted it him. As craftsmen used to, without any question or hesitation..“Then,” D’ram’s face brightened slightly, “T’reb and B’naj would have left before the green went into full heat, your F’nor would not have become involved in a disgraceful public brawl. Yes, it is all too plain,” and D’ram straightened his shoulders from the burden of decision, “that the first error of judgment was on the part of the craftsman.” He looked at each man, as if none of them had control over what a craftsman might do. T’bor refused to meet his eyes and ground a bootheel noisily into the stone floor.

D’ram took another deep breath. Was he, F’lar wondered bitterly, having trouble digesting that

. .”

“A man whose green is in heat is unaccountable for his actions,” T’ron said, loud enough to drown

T’bor out.

“A green who never should have been out of her weyr in the first place no matter how you dance

around the truth, T’ron,” T’bor said, savage with frustration. “The first error in judgment was T’reb’s. Not

Terry’s.”

“Silence!” D’ram’s bellow silenced him and Loranth answered irritably from her weyr.

“That does it,” T’ron exclaimed, rising. “I’m not having my senior queen upset. You’ve had your

meeting, Benden, and your — your grievance has been aired. This meeting is adjourned.”

“Adjourned?” G’narish echoed him in surprise. “But — but nothing’s been done.” The Igen

Weyrleader looked from D’ram to T’ron puzzled, worried. “And F’lar’s rider was wounded. If the attack was .

. .”

“How badly wounded is the man?” D’ram asked, turning quickly to F’lar.

fury on T'bor's face, the set look on F'lar's. "A dragonrider can never forget his purpose, his responsibility, to

his dragon or to his Weyr. This can't happen again. You'll speak to T'reb, of course, T'ron?"

T'ron's eyes widened slightly at D'ram's question.

"Speak to him? You may be sure he'll hear from me about this. And B'naj, too."

"Good," said D'ram, with the air of a man who has solved a difficult problem equitably. He nodded

toward the others. "It would be wise if we Weyrleaders caution all our riders against the possibility of a

repetition. Put them all on their guard. Agreed?" He continued nodding, as if to spare the others the effort.

"It is hard enough to work with some of these arrogant Holders and Crafters without giving them any

occasion to fault us." D'ram sighed deeply and scratched his head. I never have understood how

commoners can forget how much they owe Dragonriders!"

"In four hundred Turns, a man can learn many new things," F'lar replied. "Coming, T'bor?" and his

“Rub his nose in it?” F’lar finished, halting in mid-stride and turning to T’bor in the dark of the passageway.

“Dragonriders don’t fight. Particularly Weyrleaders.”

T’bor let out a violent exclamation of utter disgust.

“How could you let a chance like that go by? When I think of the times he’s criticized you — us — ”

T’bor broke off. “Never understand how commoners can forget all they owe Dragonriders?” and T’bor

mimicked D’ram’s pompous intonation, “If they really want to know . . .”

F’lar gripped T’bor by the shoulder, appreciating the younger man’s sentiments all too deeply..“How can you tell a man what he doesn’t want to hear? We couldn’t even get them to admit that

T’reb was in the wrong T’reb, not Terry, and not F’nor. But I don’t think there’ll be another lapse like today’s and that’s what I really worried about.”

“What?” T’bor stared at F’lar in puzzled confusion.

“That such an incident could occur worries me far more than who was in the wrong and for what reason.”

“I can’t follow that logic any more than I can follow T’ron’s.”

don't forget, the Oldtimers

taught us a great deal about Thread fighting we certainly didn't know."

"Why, our dragons can fight circles around the Oldtimers."

"That's not the point, T'bor. You and I, the modern Weys have certain obvious advantages over the

Oldtimers — size of dragons, number of queens — that I'm not interested in mentioning because it only

makes for bad feeling. Nevertheless, we can't fight Thread without the Oldtimers. We need the Oldtimers

more than they need us." F'lar gave T'bor a wry, bitter grin. "D'ram was partly right. A dragonman can

never forget his purpose, his responsibility. When D'ram said 'to his dragon, to his Weyr', he's wrong. Our

initial and ultimate responsibility is to Pern, to the people we were established to protect."

They had proceeded to the ledge and could see their dragons dropping off the height to meet them.

Full dark had descended over Fort Weyr now, emphasizing the weariness that engulfed F'lar.

"If the Oldtimers have become introverted, we, Benden and Southern, cannot. We understand our

Wings followed him without hesitation. He was not as strong out of the skies, however, but with subtle

guidance had built Southern Weyr into a productive, self-supporting establishment. He instinctively looked

to F'lar and Benden Weyr for direction and companionship. Part of that, F'lar was sure, was because of the

difficult and disturbing temperament of the Southern Weyrwoman, Kylara.

Sometimes F'lar regretted that T'bor proved to be the only bronze rider who could cope with that

female. He wondered what subtle deep tie existed between the two riders, because T'bor's Orth

consistently outflew every bronze to mate with Prideth, Kylara's queen, though it was common knowledge

that Kylara took many men to her bed.

T'bor might be short-tempered and not the most diplomatic adherent, but he was loyal and F'lar was

grateful to him. If he'd only held his temper tonight . . .

"Well, you usually know what you're doing, F'lar," the Southern Weyrleader admitted reluctantly, "but

I don't understand the Oldtimers and lately I'm not sure I care."

need him. I could have used

his wits beside me tonight. I could have used his thinking on T'ron's invidious attempts to switch blame.

Well, if it had been another rider, wounded under the same circumstances, he couldn't have brought

F'nor anyhow. And T'bor with his short temper would still have been present, and played right into T'ron's

hands. He couldn't honestly blame T'bor. He'd felt the same burning desire to make the Oldtimers see the

facts in realistic perspective. But — you can't take a dragon to a place you've never seen. And T'bor's

outbursts had not helped. Strange, T'bor hadn't been so touchy as a weyrling nor when he was a Benden

Weyr Wing-second. Being Weyrmate to Kylara had changed him but that woman was enough to unsettle; to

unsettle D'ram..F'lar entertained the wild mental image of the blonde sensual Kylara seducing the sturdy Oldtimer.

Not that she'd even glanced at the Istan Weyrleader. And she certainly wouldn't have stayed with him. F'lar

was glad that they'd eased her out of Benden Weyr. Hadn't she been found on the same Search as Lessa?

the watchrider's query.

Lessa wasn't going to like his report of the meeting, F'lar thought. If only D'ram, usually an honest

thinker, had seen past the obvious. He had a feeling that maybe G'narish had.

Yes, G'narish had been troubled. Maybe the next time the Weyrleaders met to confer, G'narish

might side with the modern riders.

Only, F'lar hoped, there wouldn't be another occasion for this evening's grievance.

CHAPTER III

Morning Over Lemos Hold

RAMOTH, Benden's golden queen, was in the Hatching Ground when she got the green's frantic

summons from Lemos Hold.

Threads at Lemos. Thread falls at Lemos! Ramoth told every dragon and rider, her full-throated

brassy bugle reverberating through the Bowl.

Men scrambled frantically from couch and bathing pool, upset tables and dropped tools before the

stamp out of the Hatching Cavern.

Thread at Lemos northeast, Mnementh reported, picking up the information from his mate Ramoth

as she projected herself toward her weyr ledge for Lessa. Dragons were now streaming from every weyr

opening, their riders struggling into fighting gear or securing bulging fire-sacks.

F'lar didn't waste time wondering why Thread was falling hours ahead of schedule or northeast

instead of southwest. He checked to see if there were enough riders assembled and aloft to make up a full

low altitude wing. He hesitated long enough to have Mnementh order every weyrling to proceed

immediately to Lemos to help fly ground crews to the area and then told his dragon to take the wing

between.

Thread was indeed falling, a great sheet plummeting down toward the delicate new leafing

hardwoods that were Lord Asgenar's prime forestry project. Screaming, flaming, dragons broke out of

identify the wounded beast,

both dragon and rider had gone between where the awful cold would shatter and break the entangling

Threads before they could eat into membrane and flesh.

A casualty minutes into an attack? Even an attack that was so unpredictably early? F'lar winced.

Virianth, R'nor's brown, Mnementh informed his rider as he soared in search of a target. He craned

his sinuous neck around in a wide sweep, eyeing the forest lest Thread had actually started burrowing.

Then, with a warning to his rider, he folded his wings and dove toward an especially thick patch, braking his

descent with neck-snapping speed. As Mnementh belched fire, F'lar watched, grinning with intense

satisfaction as the Thread curled into black dust and floated harmlessly to the forests below.

Virianth caught his wingtip, Mnementh said as he beat upward again. He'll return. We need him.

This Thread falls wrong.

"Wrong and early," F'lar said gritting his teeth against the fierce wind of their ascent. If he hadn't

There was no further time for speculation; only action and reaction.
Dive. Flame. Firestone for
Mnementh to chew. Call a weyring for another sack. Catch it deftly mid-air. Fly above the fighting wings to
check the pattern of flying dragons. Gouts of flame blossoming across the sky. Sun glinting off green, blue,
brown, bronze backs as dragons veered, soared, dove, flaming after Thread. He'd spot a beast going
between, tense until he reappeared or Mnementh reported their retreat. Part of his mind kept track of the
casualties, another traced the wing line, correcting it when the riders started to overlap or flew too wide a
pattern. He was aware, too, of the golden triangle of the queens' wing, far below, catching what Thread
escaped from the upper levels.
By the time Thread had ceased to fall and the dragons began to spiral down to aid the Lemos Hold
ground crews, F'lar almost resented Mnementh's summary.
Nine minor brushes, four just wingtips; two bad lacings, Sorenth and Relth, and two face-burned
riders.

good riders.

How could Thread fall northeast in the morning when it wasn't supposed to drop until evening and in

the southwest? he wondered, savage with frustrated worry.

Automatically, F'lar started to ask Mnementh to have Canth fly close in. But then he remembered

that F'nor was wounded and half a planet away in Southern Weyr. F'lar swore long and imaginatively,

wishing T'reb of Fort Weyr immured between with Weyrleader T'ron fast beside him. Why did F'nor have to

be absent at a time like this? It still rankled F'lar deeply that Fort's Weyrleader had tried to shift the blame of

the fight from his very guilty rider to Terry. Of all the specious, contrived, ridiculous contentions for T'ron to

stand by!

Lamanth is flying well, the bronze dragon remarked, cutting into his rider's thoughts.

F'lar was so surprised at the unexpected diversion that he glanced down to see the young queen.

"We're lucky to have so many to fly today," F'lar said, amused despite his other concerns by the

many queens, in spite of the fact that she would mate only with Mne-
menth. Many queens were the mark of

virility in a bronze and it was natural for Mneventh to want to flaunt his
prowess. Benden Weyr had to

maintain more than one golden queen to placate the rest of the bronzes
and to improve the breed in
general, but three?

After the meeting the other night at Fort Weyr, F'lar hesitated to suggest
to any of the other

Weyrleaders that he'd be glad of a home for the new queen: They'd
probably contrive it to be bad

management of Ramoth or coddling of Lessa. Still, Benden queens
were bigger than Old-timer queens, just

as modern bronzes were bigger, too. Maybe R'mart at Telgar Weyr
wouldn't take offense. Or G'narish?

F'lar couldn't think how many queens G'narish had at Igen Weyr. He
grinned to himself, thinking of the

expression of T'ron's face when he heard Benden was giving away a
queen dragon.

"Benden's known for its generosity, but what's behind such a maneu-
ver?" T'ron would say. "It's not

painstakingly researched from hundreds of disintegrating Record skins in his efforts seven Turns ago to prepare his ill-protected planet. Patterns, F'lar thought bitterly, which the Oldtimers had enthusiastically acclaimed and used — though that was scarcely traditional. Just useful.

Now how could Thread, which had no mind, no intelligence at all, deviate from patterns it had followed to the split second for over seven Turns? How could it change time and place overnight? The last Fall in Benden's Weyr jurisdiction had been on time and over upper Benden Hold as expected.

Could he possibly have misread the timetables? F'lar thought back, but the carefully drawn maps were clear in his mind and, if he had made an error, Lessa would have caught it.

He'd check, double check, as soon as he returned to the Weyr. In the meantime, he'd better make sure they had cleared the Fall from Edge to Edge. He directed Mnementh to find Asgenar, Lord Holder of Lemos.

tried F'lar's patience. True, those three Holds, Benden, Bitra and Lemos, had conscientiously tithed to support Benden Weyr when it was the sole dragonweyr of Pern. But Lord Raid and Lord Sifer had an unpleasant habit of reminding Benden Weyr riders of their loyalty at every opportunity. Gratitude is an ill-fitting tunic that can chafe and smell if worn too long.

Lord Asgenar of Lemos Hold, on the other hand, was young and had been confirmed in his honors by the Lord Holders' Conclave only five Turns ago. His attitude toward the Weyr which protected his Holdlands from Thread was refreshingly untainted by invidious reminders of past services.

Mnementh glided toward the expanse of the Great Lake which separated Lemos Hold from upper Telgar Hold. The Threads' advance edge had just missed the verdant softwoods that surrounded the northern shores. Mnementh circled down, causing F'lar to lean into the great neck, grasping the fighting straps firmly. Despite his weariness and worry, he felt the sharp surge of elation which always gripped him

sardonically at the sight. Let the

Oldtimers disapprove, let them mutter uneasily when F'lar put non-
weyrfolk on dragonback, but if F'lar had

not, Thread would have fallen unseen over those hardwoods.

Trees! Another bone of contention between Weyr and Hold, with F'lar
staunchly upholding the

Lords' position. Four hundred Turns ago, such timber stands had not
existed, were not permitted to grow.

Too much living green to protect. Well, the Oldtimers were eager
enough to own products of wood,

overloading Fandarel's woodcraftsman, Bendarek, with their demands.
On the other hand, they wouldn't

permit the formation of a new Craffthall under Bendarek. Probably be-
cause, F'lar thought bitterly, Bendarek

wanted to stay near the hardwoods of Lemos, and that would give Ben-
den Weyr a Craffthall in its jurisdiction.

By the Egg, the Oldtimers were almost more trouble than they were
worth!

Mnementh landed with sweeping backstrokes that flattened the thick
meadow grass. F'lar slid down

directed his ground crews personally instead of staying comfortably in his main Hold. “Even if Threads have begun to deviate. How do you account for all these recent variations?” Variations?” F’lar repeated the word, feeling stupid because he somehow realized that Asgenar was not referring just to this day’s unusual occurrence.

“Yes! And here we thought your timetables were the last word. To be relied on forever, especially since they were checked and approved by the Oldtimers.” Asgenar gave F’lar a sly look. “Oh, I’m not faulting you, F’lar. You’ve always been open in our dealings. I count myself lucky to be weyrbound to you.

A man knows where he stands with Benden Weyr. My brother-in-law elect? Lord Larad, has had problems with T’kul of the High Reaches Weyr, you know. And since those premature falls at Tillek and Upper Crom, he’s got a thorough watch system set up.” Asgenar paused, suddenly aware of F’lar’s tense silence. “I do not presume to criticize weyrfolk, F’lar,” he said in a more formal tone, “but rumor can outfly a dragon and naturally I heard about the others. I can appreciate the Weyrs not wishing to alarm commoners but — well

might show him in a bad light, that one

wouldn't give coordinates to save a rider's life.

No, they'd have had good reason not to mention premature falls to F'lar that night. If T'kul had

confided in anyone. But why hadn't R'mart let them know?

"But Benden Weyr's not caught sleeping. Once is all we'd need in those forests, huh, F'lar?"

Asgenar was saying, his eyes scanning the spongewoods possessively.

"Yes. All we'd need. What's the report from the leading Edge of this Fall? Have you runners in yet?"

"Your queens' wing reported it safe two hours past." Asgenar grinned and rocked back and forth on

his heels, his confidence not a bit jarred by today's unpredicted event. F'lar envied him.

Again the bronze rider thanked good fortune that he had Lord Asgenar to deal with this morning

instead of punctilious Raid or suspicious Lord Sifer. He devoutly hoped that the young Lord Holder would

not find his trust misplaced. But the question haunted him: how could Threads change so?

needlessly.”

“But it takes every dragon to protect . . .”

“Are you for or against?” F’lar asked with mild amusement. He gripped Asgenar’s shoulder.

“Instruct your foresters to keep constant watch. Their vigilance is essential.”

“Then you don’t know the pattern in the Thread shifts?”

F’lar shook his head slowly, unwilling to perjure himself to this man. “I’ll leave the long-eyed F’rad with you.”

A wide smile broke the thin troubled face of the Lord Holder.

“I couldn’t ask, but it’s a relief. I shan’t abuse the privilege.”

F’lar glanced at him sharply. “Why should you?”

Asgenar gave him a wry smile. “That’s what the Oldtimers carp about, isn’t it? And instant

transportation to any place on Pern is a temptation.”

F’lar laughed, remembering that Asgenar, Lord of Lemos, was to take Famira, the youngest sister of

Larad, Lord of Telgar Hold, to wife. While the Telgar lands marched the boundaries of Lemos, the Holds

Holder, carefully keeping several dragonlengths between himself and the two beasts. For all that every

Pernese knew the dragons would harm no human, many would never lose their fearfulness. Dragons were

confused by this distrust so that F'lar strolled casually to his bronze and scratched the left eye ridge

affectionately until Mnementh allowed one lid to droop in pleasure over the gleaming opalescent eye.

The runner had come from afar, managing to gasp out his reassuring message before he collapsed

on the ground, his chest heaving with the effort to fill his starved lungs. Asgenar stripped off his tunic and

covered the man to prevent his chilling and made the runner drink from his own flask

“The two infestations on the south slope are char!” Asgenar reported to the Weyrleader as he

rejoined him. “That means the hardwood stands are safe.” Asgenar’s relief was so great that he took a swig

on the bottle himself. Then hastily offered it to the dragonrider. When F'lar politely refused, he went on,

“That runner came from the south slope? He’s fast.”

“My forest men are the best in all Pern. Meron of Nabol has twice tried to lure that man from me.” “And?”

Lord Asgenar chuckled. “Who trusts Meron? My man had heard tales of how that Lord treats his

people.” He seemed about to add another thought but cleared his throat instead, glancing nervously away

as if catching a glimpse of something in the woods.

“What all Pern needs is an efficient means of communication,” remarked the dragonman, his eyes

on the gasping runner.

“Efficient?” and Asgenar laughed aloud. “Is all Pern infected with Fandarel’s disease?”

“Pern benefits by such an illness.” F’lar must contact the Mastersmith the moment he got back to

the Weyr. Pern needed the genius of the giant Fandarel now more than ever.

“Yes, but will we recover from the feverish urge for perfection?” Asgenar’s smile faded as he added,

in a deceptively casual fashion, “Have you heard whether a decision has been reached about Bendarek’s

Lemos!”

“Every single objection raised has been ridiculous,” Asgenar replied, his gray eyes sparkling with

anger. “You know as well as I that a Craftmaster owes no allegiance to a Lord Holder. Bendarek’s as

unprejudiced as Fandarel as far as loyalty to anything but his craft is concerned. All the man thinks of is

wood and pulp and those new leaves or sheets or what-you-ma-callums he’s mucking about with.”

“I know. I know, Asgenar. Larad of Telgar Hold and Corman of Keroon Hold side with you or so

they’ve assured me.”

“When the Lord Holders meet in Conclave at Telgar Hold, I’m going to speak out. Lord Raid and

Sifer will back me, if only because we’re weyrbound.”

“It isn’t the Lords or Weyrleaders who must make this decision,” F’lar reminded the resolute young

Lord. “It’s the other Craftmasters. That’s been my thought since Fandarel first proposed a new craft

designation.”

added to himself, thinking of

this Threadfall.) “is going to alarm certain Weyrleaders and Lord Holders. Sometimes I think that only the

Crafts constantly look for change, are interested and flexible enough to judge what is improvement or

progressive. The Lord Holders and the —” F’lar broke off.

Fortunately another runner was approaching from the north, his legs pumping strongly. He came

straight past the green dragon, right up to his Lord.

“Sir, the northern section is clear. Three burrows have been burned out. All is secure.”

“Good man. Well run.”

The man, flushed with praise and effort, saluted the Weyrleader and his Lord. Then, breathing

deeply but without labor, he strode over to the prone messenger and began massaging his legs.

Asgenar smiled at F’lar. “There’s no point in our rehearsing arguments. We are basically in

agreement. If we could just make those others see!”

Mnementh rumbled that the wings were reporting an all-clear. He so pointedly extended his foreleg

“My regards to your lady.”

Mnemoth bore him upward in an elliptical course that allowed them to make one final check of the

forest lands. Wisps of smoke curled to the north and farther to the east, but Mnemoth seemed

unconcerned. F’lar told him to go between. The utter cold of that dimension painfully irritated the Thread.scores on his face. Then they were above Benden Weyr. Mnemoth trumpeted his return and hung, all but

motionless, until he heard the booming response of Ramoth. At that instant, Lessa appeared on the ledge

of the weyr, her slight stature diminished still further by distance. As Mnemoth glided in, she descended

the long flight of stairs in much the same headlong fashion for which they criticized their weyrling son,

Felessan.

Reprimands were not likely to break Lessa of that habit either, thought F’lar. Then he noticed what

Lessa had in her hands and rounded angrily on Mnemoth. “I’m barely touched and you babble on me like

a weyrling!”

times when the double bond

between riders and dragons became a serious disadvantage. Particularly when Mnementh took the initiative, not generally a draconic characteristic.

Mnementh gave an awkward half jump upward, clearing the way for Lessa. She hadn't changed

from wher-hide riding clothes and looked younger than any Weyrwoman ought as she ran towards them, her

plaited hair bouncing behind her. Although neither motherhood nor seven turns of security had added flesh

to her small-boned body, there was a subtle roundness to breast and hip, and that certain look in her great gray eyes that F'lar knew was for him alone.

"And you complain about the timing of other riders," she said, gasping, as she came to an abrupt

stop at his side. Before he could protest the insignificance of his injuries, she was smearing numbweed on

the burns. "I'll have to wash them once the feeling's gone. Can't you duck ash yet? Virianth will be all right

but Sorenth and Relth took awful lacings. I do wish that glass craftsman of Fandarel's — Wansor's his

line which F'lar had finally catalogued as Lessa veering away from a painful subject.

“Lessa! No, don't look away.” He forced her head up so she had to meet his eyes. She who

couldn't conceive must find it hard, too, to help terminate unwanted pregnancies. Would she never stop

yearning for another child? How could she forget she had nearly died with Felessan? He'd been relieved

that she had never quickened again. The thought of losing Lessa was not even to be thought. “Riding

between so much makes it impossible for a Weyrwoman to carry to term.”

“It doesn't seem to affect Kylara,” Lessa said with bitter resentment. She had turned away, watching

Mnementh rend a fat buck with such an intense expression in her eyes that F'lar had no difficulty guessing

that she'd prefer Kylara thus rendered.

“That one!” F'lar said with a sharp laugh. “Dear heart, if you must model yourself after Kylara to

bear children Weyrwoman, I prefer you barren!”

“It would’ve been courteous of them to have apprised us first,” F’lar said so angrily that Lessa

glanced up at him startled. He told her then what the Lemos Lord Holder had said on the mountain meadow.

“And Asgenar assumed that we all knew? That it was simply a matter of changing the timetables?”

Shock faded from her face and her eyes narrowed, flashing with indignation. “I would I had never gone back

to get those Old-timers. You’d have figured out a way for us to cope.”

“You give me entirely too much credit, love.” He hugged her for her loyalty. “However, the

Oldtimers are here and we’ve got to deal with them.”

“Indeed we will. We’ll bring them up to date if . . .”

“Lessa,” and F’lar gave her a little shake, his pessimism dispersed by the vehemence of her

response and the transparency of her rapid calculations on how to bring about such changes. “You can’t

change a watch-wher into a dragon, my love . . .”.Who’d want to? demanded Mnementh from the Feeding Ground, his appetite sated.

Lessa frowned up at the bright midmorning sky. "Only just. I wanted to get any last details from the Sweepriders."

"I'm as hungry as Mnementh. Feed me, woman."

The bronze dragon had glided up to the ledge to settle in his accustomed spot just as a commotion started in the tunnel. He extended his wings to flight position, neck craned toward the one land entrance to the dragonweyr.

"It's the wine train from Benden, silly," Lessa told him, chuckling as Mnementh gave voice to a loud brassy grumble and began to arrange himself again, completely disinterested in wine trains "Now don't tell

Robinton the new wine's in, F'lar. It has to settle first, you know."

"And why would I be telling Robinton anything?" F'lar demanded, wondering how Lessa knew that he had only just started to think of the Masterharper himself.

"There has never been a crisis before us when you haven't sent for the Masterharper and the Mastersmith." She sighed deeply. "If we only had such cooperation from our own kind." Her body went

you know.”

F'lar waited beside Mnementh as Fidranth circled smartly into the weyr. From the Hatching Cavern came Ramoth's crotchety challenge. Mnementh answered her soothingly that the intruder was only Fidranth and no threat. At least not to her clutch. Then the bronze rolled one scintillating eye toward his rider. The exchange, so like one between himself and Lessa, drained anger from F'lar. Which was as well, for T'ron's opening remarks were scarcely diplomatic.

“I found it! I found what you forgot to incorporate in those so-called inflexible timetables of yours!”

“You've found what, T'ron?” F'lar asked, tightly controlling his temper. If T'ron had found anything that would be of help, he could not antagonize the man.

Mnementh had courteously stepped aside to permit Fidranth landing room, but with two huge bronze bodies there was so little space that T'ron slid in front of the Benden Weyrleader, waving a portion of a Record hide right under his nose.

over Tillek and High Crom

in the past few days!”

The look of shock and horror on T’ron’s face was too genuine to be faked.

“You’d do better to listen to what commoners say, T’ron, instead of immuring yourself in the Weyr,”

F’lar told him. “Asgenar knew of it yet neither T’kul nor R’mar thought to tell the other Weyrs, so we could

prepare and keep watch.

Just luck I had F’rad . . .”

“You’ve not been housing dragonmen in the Holds again?”

“I always send a messenger on ahead the day of a Fall. If I didn’t follow the practice, Asgenar’s

forest lands would be gone by now.”

F’lar regretted that heated reference. It would give T’ron the wedge he needed for another of his

diatribes about overforestration. To divert him, F’lar reached for the piece of Record, but T’ron twitched it

out of his grasp.

“You’ll have to take my word for it . . .”

is predawn T'ron's time."

"I'd appreciate a cup," T'ron admitted, as obviously relieved as F'lar by the interruption.

"I apologize for rousing you . . ."

"I need none, not with this news."

Unaccountably F'lar was relieved to realize that T'ron had obviously not known of Threadfall. He

had come charging in here, delighted at an opportunity to put F'lar and Benden in the wrong. He'd not have

been so quick — witness his evasiveness and contradictions over the belt-knife fight — if he'd known.

When the two men entered the queen's weyr, Lessa was gowned, her hair loosely held by an

intricate net, and seated gracefully at the table. Just as if she hadn't ridden hard all morning and been

suited five minutes before.

So Lessa was all set to charm T'ron again, huh? Despite the unsettling events, F'lar was amused.

Still, he wasn't certain that this ploy would lessen T'ron's antagonism. He didn't know what truth there was

sands and that the Oldtimers' queens laid few gold eggs.

"I do apologize for starting your day so early," she went on, deftly serving him a neatly sectioned fruit

and fixing klah to his taste "Rut we need your advice and help."

T'ron grunted his thanks, carefully placing the Record hide side down on the table.

"Threadfall could come when it would if we didn't have all those blasted forests to care for," T'ron

said, glaring at F'lar through the steam of the klah as he lifted his mug.

"What? And do without wood?" Lessa complained, rubbing her hands on the carved chair which

Bendarek had made with his consummate artistry. "Those stone chairs may fit you and Mardra," she said in

a sweet insinuating voice, "but I had a cold rear end all the time."

T'ron snorted with amusement, his eyes wandering over the dainty Weyrwoman in such a way that

Lessa leaned forward abruptly and tapped the Record.

"I ought not to take your valuable time with chatter. Have you discovered something here which we

missed?"

I happened to remember seeing a

reference to a Pass where all previous Records were no help. One reason we never bothered with timetable nonsense.”

F’lar was about to demand why none of the Oldtimers had seen fit to mention that minor fact, when

he caught Lessa’s stern look. He held his peace.

“See, this phrase here is partly missing, but if you put ‘unpredictable shifts’ here, it makes sense.”

Lessa, her gray eyes wide with an expression of unfeigned awe (her dissembling nearly choked

F’lar), looked up from the Record at T’ron.

“He’s right, F’lar. That would make sense. See — ” and she deftly slipped the Record from T’ron’s

reluctant fingers and passed it to F’lar. He took it from her.

“You’re right, T’ron. Very right. This is one of the older skins which I had to abandon, unable to

decipher them.”

“Of course, it was much more readable when I first studied it four hundred Turns back, before it got

Thread fall out of a pattern they've followed to the second for seven mortal Turns this Pass? You yourself told me that you followed a certain rhythm in your Time. Did it vary much then?"

T'ron frowned down at the blurred lines. "No," he admitted slowly, and then brought his fist down on the offending scrap. "Why have we lost so many techniques? Why have these Records failed us just when we need them most?"

Mnementh began to bugle from the ledge, with Fidranth adding his note. Lessa "listened," head cocked.

"D'ram and G'narish," she said. "I don't think we need expect T'kul, but R'mart is not an arrogant man."

D'ram of Ista and G'narish of Igen Weyrs entered together. Both men were agitated, sparing no time for amenities.

"What's this about premature Threadfall?" D'ram demanded. "Where are T'kul and R'mart? You did send for them, didn't you? Were your wings badly torn up? How much Thread burrowed?"

“My duty, sirs,” the boy gasped out, “but R’mart’s badly hurt and there’re so many wounded men

and dragons at Telgar Weyr, it’s an awful sight. And half the Holds of High Crom are said to be charred.”

The Weyrleaders were all on their feet.

“I must send some help — ” Lessa began, to be halted by the frown on T’ron’s face and D’ram’s odd

expression. She gave a small impatient snort. “You heard the boy, wounded men and dragons, a Weyr

demoralized. Help in time of disaster is not interference. That ancient lay about Weyr autonomy can be

carried to ridiculous lengths and this is one of them. Not to help Telgar Weyr, indeed!”

“She’s right, you know,” G’narish said, and F’lar knew the man was one step closer to gaining a modern perspective.

Lessa left the chamber, muttering something about personally flying to Telgar Weyr. The weyrling

followed her, dismissed by F’lar’s nod.

“T’ron found a reference to unpredictable shifts in this old Record Skin,” F’lar said, seizing control.

his words.

But T'ron wasn't deceived and banged the table so hard that he set the crockery jumping. "Just

waiting for the chance to lodge dragons in Holds and Crafhalls again, huh F'lar? Dragonfolk stick together .

.."

"The way T'kul and R'mart are doing by not warning the rest of us?" asked D'ram in such an acid

tone that T'ron subsided.

"Actually, why should dragonfolk weary themselves when there is so much more manpower

available in the Holds now?" asked G'narish in a surprised way. He smiled slightly with nervousness when

he saw the others staring at him. "I mean, the individual Holds could easily supply the watchers we'll need."

"And they've the means, too," F'lar agreed, ignoring T'ron's surprised exclamation. "It's not so very

long ago that there were signal fires on every ridge and hill, across the plains, in case Fax began another of

his acquisitive marches. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if most of those beacon fireguards are still in place."

licenses. "Let the Holders light fires when Thread masses on the horizon — a few strategically placed riders could oversee great areas. Use the weyrlings; that'd keep them out of mischief and give 'em good practice.

Once we know how the Thread falls now, we'll be able to judge the changes." F'lar forced himself to relax,

smiling. "I don't think this is as serious a matter as it first appears. Particularly if shifts have occurred

before. Of course, if we could find some reference to how long the shift lasted, if Thread went back to the

original pattern, it'd help." "It would have helped if T'kul had sent word as you did," D'ram muttered.

"Well, we all know how T'kul is," F'lar said tolerantly.

"He'd no right to withhold such vital information from us," T'ron said, again pounding the table.

"Weyrs should stick together."

"The Lord Holders aren't going to like this," G'narish remarked, no doubt thinking of Lord Corman of

Keroon, the most difficult one of the Holders bound to his Weyr.

"Oh," F'lar replied with more diffidence than he felt, "if we tell them we've expected such a shift at

“I never explained myself to them, if you’ll think back D’ram I told them what had to be done and they did it.”

“They were scared stupid seven Turns ago,” G’narish remarked. “Scared enough to welcome us with wide-open arms and goods.”

“If they want to protect all those forests and croplands, they’ll do as we suggest or start charring their profits.”

“Let Lord Oterel of Tillek or that idiot Lord Sangel of Boll start disputing my orders and I’ll fire their forests myself,” said T’ron, rising.

“Then we’re agreed,” said F’lar quickly, before the hypocrisy he was practicing overcame him with disgust. “We mount watches, aided by the Holders, and we keep track of the new shift. We’ll soon know how to judge it.”

“What of T’kul?” G’narish asked.

D’ram looked squarely at T’ron. “We’ll explain the situation to him.”

“He respects you two,” F’lar agreed. “It might be wiser, though, not to suggest we knew about . . .”

Lessa came back into the weyr just then, her face flushed, her eyes exceedingly bright. Even D'ram

bowed low to her in making his farewells.

"Don't leave, D'ram, T'ron. I've good word from Telgar Weyr," she cried, but catching F'lar's glance,

did not try to keep them when they demurred.

"R'mart's all right?" G'narish asked, trying to smooth over the awkwardness.

Lessa recovered herself with a smile for the Igen leader.

"Oh that messenger — he's only a boy — he exaggerated. Ramoth bespoke Solth the senior queen

at Telgar Weyr. R'mart is badly scored, yes. Bedella evidently overdosed him with numbweed powder.

She hadn't the wit to send word to anyone. And the Wing-second assumed that we'd all been informed

because he'd heard R'mart telling Bedella to send messengers, never dreaming she hadn't. When R'mart

passed out, she forgot everything." Lessa's shrug indicated her low opinion of Bedella. "The Wing-second

says he'd be grateful for your advice."

extent of the Fall there and

can relay the information to us. I'll see him to the ledge while you start eating." Lessa was so didactic that

G'narish chuckled. She tucked her arm in his and started toward the corridor. "I've not made my duty to

Gyarmath," she said, smiling sweetly up at G'narish, "and he's a favorite of mine, you know."

She was flirting so outrageously that F'lar wondered that Ramoth wasn't roaring protest. As if

Gyarmath could ever catch Ramoth in night! Then he heard Mnementh's rumble of humor and was

reassured..Eat, his bronze advised him. Let Lessa flatter G'narish Gyarmath doesn't mind. Nor Ramoth. Nor I.

"What I do for my Weyr," said Lessa with an exaggerated sigh as she returned a few moments later.

F'lar gave her a cynical look. "G'narish is more of a modern mind than he knows."

"Then we'll have to make him conscious of it," Lessa said firmly.

"Just so long as it is 'we' who make him," F'lar replied with mock severity, catching her hand and pulling her to him.

“But don’t you see that you were right?”

F’lar gave her a long incredulous look.

“By the Egg, Weyrleader, you astonish me. Why can’t there be deviations? Because you, F’lar,

compiled those Records and to spite the Oldtimers they must remain infallible? Great golden eggs, man,

there were such things as Intervals when no Threads fell — as we both know. Why not a change of pace in

Threadfall itself during a Pass?”

“But why? Give me one good reason why.”

“Give me one good reason why not! The same thing that affects the Red Star so that it doesn’t

always pass close enough to cast Thread on us can pull it enough off course to change Fall! The Red Star

is not the only one to rise and set with the seasons. There could be another heavenly body affecting not

only us but the Red Star.”

“Where?”

Lessa shrugged impatiently. “How do I know? I’m not long in the eye like F’rad. But we can try to

dence in his own prophecy that Thread

would fall and fear that nothing would rescue the Dragonriders from their lethargy. Then the crushing

realization that those all too few dragonmen were all that could save an entire world from destruction; the

three days of torture between the initial fall over the impending one at Nerat Hold and Telgar Hold with

Lessa who-knew-where. Did he not have a right to relax his vigilance? Some freedom from the weight of

responsibility?

“I’ve no right to say such things to you,” Lessa was whispering in soft remorse.

“Why not? It’s true enough.”

“I ought never to diminish you, and all you’ve done, to placate a trio of narrow-minded, parochial,

conservative . . .”

He stopped her words with a kiss, a teasing kiss that abruptly became passionate. Then he winced

as her hands curving sensuously around his neck, rubbed against the Thread-bared skin.

didn't F'nor just let T'reb have the knife?"

"F'nor acted with integrity," F'lar said with stiff disapproval.

"He could've ducked quicker then. And you're no better." Her touch was gentle but the burns stung.

"Hmmm. What I have ducked is my responsibility to Our Pern in bringing the Oldtimers forward.

We've let ourselves get bogged down on small issues, like whose was the blame in that asinine fight at the

Mastersmith's Hall. The real problem is to reconcile the old with the new. And we may just be able to make

this new crisis work there to our advantage, Lessa."

She heard the ring in his voice and smiled back at him approvingly.

"When we cut through traditions before the Oldtimers came forward, we also discovered how hollow

and restrictive some of them were; such as this business of minimal contact between Hold, Craft and Weyr.

Oh, true, if we wish to bespeak another Weyr, we can go there in a few seconds on a dragon, but it takes

Holder or Crafter days to get from one place to another. They had a taste of convenience seven Turns ago..I should never have acquiesced and let the Oldtimers talk me out of continuing a dragon in Hold and Craft.

see if it had hardened.

“And of course you’ve eaten and rested, too?”

She got off his lap in one fluid movement, her eyes almost black. “I’ll have sense enough to go to

bed when I’m tired. You’ll keep on talking with Fandarel and Robinton long after you’ve chewed your

business to death. And you’ll drink — as if you haven’t learned yet that only a dragon could out drink that

Harper and that Smith — ” She broke off again, her scowl turning into a thoughtful frown. “Come to think of

it, we’d do well to invite Lytol, if he’d come. I’d like to know exactly what the Lord Holders’ reactions are.

But first, you eat!”

F’lar laughingly obeyed, wondering how he could suddenly feel so optimistic when it was now

obvious that the problems of Pern were coming home to roost on his weyr ledge again.

CHAPTER IV

Midday at Southern Weyr

KYLARA whirled in front of the mirror, turning her head to watch her slender image, observing the

and again, “but do cultivate

a pretty one. Think what would happen if your face froze that way.”

Her posing diverted her until she twisted, trying to assess her profile, and again caught sight of the

swirl of the guilty hem.

“Rannelly!” she called, impatient when the old woman did not answer instantly. “Rannelly!”

“Coming, poppet. Old bones don’t move as fast. Been setting your gowns to air. There do be such

sweetness from that blooming tree. Aye, the wonder of it, a fellis tree grown to such a size.” Rannelly

carried on a continuous monologue once summoned, as if the sound of her name turned on her mind.

Kylara was certain that it did, for her old nurse voiced, like a dull echo, only what she heard and saw.

“Those tailors are no better than they should be, and sloppy about finishing details,” Rannelly

muttered on, when Kylara sharply interrupted her maundering with the problem. She exhaled on the note of

a bass drone as she knelt and flipped up the offending skirt. “Aye and just see these stitches. Taken in

with you. I'm the Weyrwoman here at Southern. I ride the queen. No one can do anything to me. Don't forget that."

"There's none as forgets my poppet's . . ."

"Not that this is a proper Weyr, at all . . ."

". . . And that's an insult to my nursling, it is, to be in . . ."

"Not that they care, but they'll see they can't treat a Telgar of the Blood with such lack of courtesy . . ."

."

". . . And who's been discourteous to my little . . ."

"Fix that hem, Rannelly, and don't be all week about it. I must look my best when I go home," Kylara

said, turning her upper torso this way and that, studying the fall of her thick, wavy blonde hair. "Only good

thing about this horrible, horrible place. The sun does keep my hair bright."

"Like a fall of sunbeams, my sweetling, and me brushing it to bring out the shine. Morning and night

I brushes it. Never miss. Except when you're away. He was looking for you earlier . . .". "Never mind him. Fix that hem."

almost covered the big bruise on her

right arm. She could always blame that on a natural accident. Not that she cared a whistle what T'bor

thought but it made for less recrimination. And he never knew what he did when he was well wined-up.

"No good will come of it," Rannelly was moaning as she gathered up the red gown and began to

shuffle across to her cubby. "You're weyrfolk now. No good comes of weyrfolk mixing with Holders. Stick

to your own. You're somebody here . . ."

"Shut up, you old fool. The whole point of being Weyrwoman is I can do what I please. I'm not my

mother. I don't need your advice."

"Aye, and I know it," the old nurse said with such sharp bitterness that Kylara stared after her.

There, she'd frowned unattractively. She must remember not to screw her brows that way; it made

wrinkles. Kylara ran her hands down her sides, testing the smooth curves sensuously, drawing one hand

across her Rat belly. Flat even after five brats. Well, there'd be no more. She had the way of it now. Just a

dragon's tone; it was a statement of fact. Mainly the fact that Prideth was bored with excursions which

landed her in Holds rather than Weyrs. When Kylara's fancy took them visiting other dragons, Prideth was

more than agreeable. But a Hold, with only the terrified incoherencies of a watch-wher for company was another matter.

"No, he's not a dragonrider," Kylara agreed emphatically a smile of remembered pleasure touching

her full red lips. It gave her a soft, mysterious, alluring look, she thought, bending to the mirror. But the

surface was mottled and the close inspection made her skin appear diseased.

I itch, Prideth said, and Kylara could hear the dragon moving. The ground under her feet echoed the effect.

Kylara laughed indulgently and, with a final swirl and a grimace at the imperfect mirror, she went out

to ease Prideth. If only she could find a real man who could understand and adore her the way the dragon did. If, for instance, F'lar . . .

“Mnemoth could be yours, silly one,” she told her beast, scrubbing the itchy spot with the long-handled brush.

No. I do not contend with Ramoth.

“You would quick enough if you were in mating heat,” Kylara replied, wishing she had the nerve to attempt such a coup. “It’s not as if there was anything immoral about mating with your father or clutching your mother . . .”

Kylara thought of her own mother, a woman too early used and cast aside by Lord Telgar, for

younger, more vital bedmates. Why, if she hadn’t been found on Search, she might have had to marry that

dolt what-ever-his-name-had-been. She’d never have been a Weyrwoman and had Prideth to love her. She

scrubbed fiercely at the spot until Prideth, sighing in an excess of relief, blew three clusters of blooms off their twigs

You are my mother, Prideth said, turning great opalescent eyes on her rider, her tone suffused with

love, admiration, affection, awe and joy.

at peace momentarily with herself, with the world, the balm of Prideth's love assuaging her discontent. Then she heard T'bor's voice in the distance, ordering the weyrlings about, and she pushed away

from Prideth. Why did it have to be T'bor? He was so ineffectual. He never came near making her feel the

way Meron did, except of course when Orth was flying Prideth and then, then it was bearable. But Meron,

without a dragon, was almost enough. Meron was just ruthless and ambitious enough so that together they

could probably control all Pern . . .

“Good day, Kylara.”

Kylara ignored the greeting. T'bor's forcedly cheerful tone told her that he was determined not to

quarrel with her over whatever it was he had on his mind this time. She wondered what attraction he had

ever held for her, though he was tall and not ill-favored; few Dragonriders were. The thin lines of Thread

scars more often gave them a rakish rather than repulsive appearance. T'bor was not scarred but a frown of

apprehension and a nervous darting of his eyes marred the effect of his good looks.

him.

“I need to know how many weyrs are free. Telgar Weyr is asking.”

“Ask Brekke. How should I know?”

T'bor's flush deepened and he set his jaw. “It is customary for the Weyrwoman to direct her own staff . . .”

“Custom be Thread-bared! She knows. I don't. And I don't see why Southern should be constantly host to every idiot rider who can't dodge Thread.”

“You know perfectly well, Kylara, why Southern Weyr . . .”

“We haven't had a single casualty of any kind in seven Turns of Thread.”

“We don't get the heavy, constant Threadfall that the northern continent does, and now I understand . . .”

“Well, I don't understand why their wounded must be a constant drain on our resources . . .”

“Kylara. Don't argue with every word I say.”

Smiling, Kylara turned from him, pleased that she had pushed him so close to breaking his childish resolve.

“Brekke is twice the woman and far more fit to be Weyrwoman than you!” T’bor said In a tight, controlled voice.

“You’ll pay for that, you scum, you sniveling boy-lover,” Kylara screamed at him, enraged by the

unexpectedness of his retaliation. Then she burst out laughing at the thought of Brekke as the Weyrwoman,

or Brekke as passionate and adept a lover as she knew herself to be. Brekke the Bony, with no more

roundness at the breast than a boy. Why, even Lessa looked more feminine.

Thought of Lessa sobered Kylara abruptly. She tried again to convince herself that Lessa would be

no threat, no obstacle in her plan. Lessa was too subservient to F’lar now, aching to be pregnant again,

playing the dutiful Weyrwoman, too content to see what could happen under her nose. Lessa was a fool.

She could have ruled all Pern if she had half-tried. She’d had the chance and lost it. The stupidity of going

back to bring up the Oldtimers when she could have had absolute dominion over the entire planet as

have remembered to invite her, his only full-blood sister, to the wedding, but surely there was no reason why

she should remain distant when her own half sister was marrying the Lord Holder of Lemos.

Brekke was changing the dressing on his arm when F'nor heard T'bor calling her. She tensed at the

sound of his voice an expression of compassion and worry momentarily clouding her face.

"I'm in F'nor's weyr," she said, turning her head toward the open door and raising her light voice.. "Don't know why we insist on calling a hold made of wood a weyr," said F'nor, wondering at Brekke's

reaction. She was such a serious child, too old for her years. Perhaps being junior Weyrwoman to Kylara

had aged her prematurely. He had finally got her to accept his teasing. Or was she humoring him, F'nor

wondered, during the painful process of having the deep knife wound tended.

She gave him a little smile. "A weyr is where a dragon is, no matter how it's constructed."

T'bor entered at that moment, ducking his head, though the door was plenty high enough to

we accommodate?”

“Only four, but Varena at West can handle at least twenty.”

From her expression, F’nor could tell she hoped there weren’t that many wounded.

“R’mart asks to send ten, only one badly injured,” T’bor said, but he was still resentful.

“He’d best stay here then.”

F’nor started to say that he felt Brekke was spreading herself too thin as it was. It was obvious to

him that, though she had few of the privileges, she had assumed all the responsibilities that Kylara ought to

handle, while that one did much as she pleased. Including complaining that Brekke was shirking or stinting

this or that. Brekke’s queen, Wirenth, was still young enough to need a lot of care; Brekke fostered young

Mirrim though she had had no children herself and none of the Southern riders seemed to share her bed.

Yet Brekke also took it upon herself to nurse the most seriously wounded Dragonriders. Not that F’nor

wasn’t grateful to her. She seemed to have an extra sense that told her when numbweed needed renewing,

Dragonriders managed to get well

in their own Weyrs. Why should the Southern ones be burdened with wounded useless men, constantly

dumped on them to recuperate?"

"Benden sends very few," Brekke said quietly.

"I don't mean just Benden. Half the men here right now are from Fort Weyr. They could as well

bask on the beaches of Southern Boll . . ."

"T'ron's no leader — " T'bor said in a disparaging tone.

"So Mardra would like us to believe," Brekke interrupted with such uncharacteristic asperity that

T'bor stared at her in surprise.

"You don't miss much, do you, little lady?" said F'nor with a whoop of laughter. "That's what Lessa

said and I agree."

Brekke flushed.

"What do you mean, Brekke?" asked T'bor.

"Just that five of the men most seriously wounded were flying in Mardra's wing!"

"Her wing?" F'nor glanced sharply at T'bor, wondering if this was news to him, too.

“On an upper level?” F’nor was stunned. And T’ron had the nerve to prate how Fort Weyr kept tradition?

“That’s why so many men are injured in her wing; the dragons fly close to protect their queen. A

flame thrower throws ‘down’ but not out, or wide enough to catch airborne Thread at the speed dragons fly.”

“That is without doubt . . . ouch!” F’nor winced at the pain of an injudicious movement of his arm.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Does F’lar know?”

T’bor shrugged. “If he did, what could he do?”

Brekke pushed F’nor back onto the stool to reset the bandage he had disarranged..“What’ll happen next?” he demanded of no one.

“You sound like an Oldtimer,” T’bor remarked with a harsh laugh. “Be-moaning the loss of order, the

permissiveness of — of times which are so chaotic . . .”

“Change is not chaos.”

T’bor laughed sourly. “Depends on your point of view.”

“What’s your point of view, T’bor?”

The Weyrleader regarded the brown rider so long and hard, his face settling into such bitter lines,

own counsel. And I'll make my weyrfolk behave. All of them. Even Kylara if I have to . . .”

“Shells, what’s Kylara up to now?”

T’bor gave F’nor a thoughtful stare. Then, with a shrug he said, “Kylara means to go to Telgar Hold

four days hence. Southern Weyr hasn’t been invited. I take no offense. “Southern Weyr has no obligation

to Telgar Hold and the wedding is Holder business. But she means to make trouble there, I’m sure. I know

the signs. Also she’s been seeing the Lord Holder of Nabol.”

“Meron?” F’nor was unimpressed with him as a source of trouble. “Meron, Lord of Nabol, was

outmaneuvered and completely discredited at that abortive battle at the Benden Weyr Pass, eight Turns

ago. No Lord Holder would ally himself with Nabol again. Not even Lord Nessel of Crom who never was

very bright. How he got confirmed as Lord of Crom by the Conclave, I’ll never understand.”

“It’s not Meron we have to guard against. It’s Kylara. Anything she touches gets — distorted.”

of surprise.

“She didn’t change Thread patterns. No one knows why that happened,” T’bor said gloomily.

“How what happened?” F’nor stood, pushing aside Brekke’s hands.

“You heard that Thread is dropping out of pattern?”

“No, I didn’t hear,” and F’nor looked from T’bor to Brekke who managed to be very busy with her medicaments.

“There wasn’t anything you could do about it, F’nor,” she said calmly, “and as you were still feverish when the news came . . .”

T’bor snorted, his eyes glittering as if he enjoyed F’nor’s discomposure. “Not that F’lar’s precious

Thread patterns ever included us here in the Southern continent. Who cares what happens in this part of the world?” With that, T’bor strode out of the Weyr. When F’nor would have followed, Brekke grabbed his arm.

“No, F’nor, don’t press him. Please?”

He looked down at Brekke’s worried face, saw the deep concern in her expressive eyes. Was that

had fallen hours too soon over Lemos Hold's wide forests. F'nor was disturbed to learn that R'mart of Telgar

Weyr had been badly scored. He was not surprised that T'kul of High Reaches Weyr hadn't even

bothered to inform his contemporaries of the unexpected falls over his weyrbound territories. But he had to

agree that he would have worried had he known. He was worried now but it sounded as if F'lar was coping

with his usual ingenuity. At least the Oldtimers had been roused. Took Thread to do it.

"I don't understand T'bor's remark about our not caring what happens in this part of the world . . ."

Brekke put her hand on his arm appealingly. "It's not easy to live with Kylara, particularly when it amounts to exile."

"Don't I just know it!" F'nor had had his run-ins with Kylara when she was still at Benden Weyr and,

like many other riders, had been relieved when she'd been made Weyrwoman at Southern. The only problem with convalescing here in Southern, however, was her proximity. For F'nor's peace, her interest in

Meron of Nabol couldn't have been more fortunate.

got curious but the winds

turned them back. And eastward, there's just ocean. It probably extends right around to the desert. This is

the bottom of the earth, you know."

F'nor flexed his bandaged arm.

"Now you listen to me, Wing-second F'nor of Benden," Brekke said sharply, interpreting that gesture

accurately. "You're in no condition to go charging back to duty or to go exploring. You haven't the stamina

of a fledgling and you certainly can't go between. Intense cold is the worst thing for a half-healed wound.

Why do you think you were flown here straight?"

"Why, Brekke, I didn't know you cared," F'nor said, rather pleased at her vehement reaction.

She gave him such a piercingly candid look that his smile faded. As if she regretted that all too

intimate glance, she gave him a half-playful push toward the door.

"Get out. Take your poor lonely dragon and lie on the beach in the sun. Rest. Can't you hear

Canth calling you?"

manded of Canth as he strode

into the sun-baked wallow behind the weyr and stood glaring at his brown dragon.

You never asked, Canth replied. I like Brekke.

“You’re impossible,” F’nor said, exasperated, and looked, back in the direction Brekke had gone.

“Brekke?” And he stared hard at Canth, somewhat disgusted by his obtuseness. Dragons as a rule did not

name people. They tended to project a vision of the person referred to by pronoun, rarely by name. That

Canth, who was of another Weyr, should speak of Brekke so familiarly was a double surprise. He must tell

that to F’lar.

I want to get wet. Canth sounded so wistful that F’nor laughed aloud.

“You swim. I’ll watch.”

Gently Canth nudged F’nor on the good shoulder. You are nearly well. Good. We’ll soon be able

to go back to the Weyr we belong to.

“Don’t tell me that you knew about the Thread pattern changing.”

Of course, Canth replied.

“Why, you, wher-faced, wherry-necked . . .”

lengthy process for someone

used to instantaneous transport from one place to another, F'nor elected to go a good distance west, along

the coastline, until he found a secluded cove with a deep bay, suitable to dragon bathing.

A high dune of sand, probably pushed up from winter storms, protected the beach from the south.

Far, far away, purple on the horizon, he could just make out the headland that marked Southern Weyr.

Canth landed him somewhat above the high-water mark in the cove, on the clean fine sand, and

then, taking a flying leap, dove into the brilliantly blue water. F'nor watched, amused, as Canth cavorted —

an unlikely fish — erupting out of the sea, reversing himself just above the surface and then diving deeply.

When the dragon considered himself sufficiently watered, he floundered out, flapping his wings mightily until

the breeze brought the shower up the beach to F'nor who protested.

Canth then irrigated himself so thoroughly with sand that F'nor was half-minded to send him back to

Open one eye carefully, Canth advised.

Resentful but obedient, F'nor opened one eye. It was all he could do to remain limp. Returning his

gaze was a golden dragon, small enough to perch on his bare forearm. The tiny eyes, like winking green-fired

jewels, regarded him with wary curiosity. Suddenly the miniature wings, no bigger than the span of

F'nor's fingers, unfurled into gilt transparencies, aglitter in the sunlight.

"Don't go," F'nor said, instinctively using a mere mental whisper. Was he dreaming? He couldn't

believe his eyes. The wings hesitated a beat. The tiny dragon tilted its head.

Don't go, little one, Canth added with equal delicacy. We are of the same blood.

The minute beast registered an incredulity and indecision which were transmitted to man and

dragon. The wings remained up but the tautness which preceded flight relaxed. Curiosity replaced

indecision. Incredulity grew stronger. The little dragon paced the length of F'nor's arm to gaze steadfastly

doubt.

To Canth, F'nor remarked that perspective was impossible for the little dragon, one hundredth his size.

Move back then, Canth suggested. Little sister, go with the man.

The little dragon flew up on blurringly active wings, hovering as F'nor slowly rose. He walked several lengths from Canth's recumbent hulk, the little dragon following.

When F'nor turned and slowly

pointed back to the brown, the little beast circled, took one look and abruptly disappeared.

"Come back," F'nor cried. Maybe he was dreaming.

Canth rumbled with amusement. How would you like to see a man as large to you as I am to her?

"Canth, do you realize that that was a fire lizard?"

Certainly.

"I actually had a fire lizard on my arm! Do you realize how many times people have tried to catch

one of those creatures?" F'nor stopped, savoring the experience. He was probably the first man to get that

realize that the big beast's

draconic complacency was a little shaken.

F'nor grinned and stroked Canth's muzzle affectionately. "How could you, big one? When we-men-have

lost so much knowledge and we can record what we know."

There are other ways of remembering important matters, Canth replied.

"Just imagine being able to breed tiny fire lizards into a creature the size of you!" He was awed,

knowing how long it had taken to breed faster landbeasts.

Canth rumbled restlessly. I am useful. She is not.

"I'd wager she'd improve rapidly with a little help." The prospect fascinated F'nor. "Would you mind?"

Why?

F'nor leaned against the great wedge-shaped head, looping his arm under the jaw, as far as he

could reach, feeling extremely fond and proud of his dragon.

"No, that was a stupid question for me to ask you, Canth, wasn't it?"

Yes.

"I wonder how long it would take me to train her."

To do what?

Above your head.

Very slowly, F'nor raised one arm, hand outstretched, palm down.

“Little beauty, come where we can admire you. We mean you no harm.”

F'nor saturated his mental

tone with all the reassuring persuasiveness at his command.

A shimmer of gold flickered at the corner of his eye. Then the little lizard hovered at F'nor's eye

level, just beyond his reach. He ignored Canth's amusement that the tiny one was susceptible to flattery.

She is hungry, the big dragon said.

Very slowly F'nor reached into his pouch and drew out a meatroll. He broke off a piece, bent slowly

to lay it on the rock at his feet, then backed away.

“That is food for you, little one.”

The lizard continued to hover, then darted down and, grabbing the meat in her tiny claws,

disappeared again.

F'nor squatted down to wait.

In a second, the dragonette returned, ravenous hunger foremost in her delicate thoughts along with

The inner lids of the tiny opalescent eyes closed one by one as she abandoned herself to the
caress.

She is a hatchling. You have Impressed her, Canth told him very softly.

“A hatchling?”

She is the little sister of my blood after all and so must come from an egg, Canth replied reasonably.

“There are others?”

Of course. Down on the beach.

F'nor, careful not to disturb the little lizard, turned his head over his shoulder. He had been so

engrossed in the one at hand, he hadn't even heard above the surf sounds the, pitiful squawks which were

issuing from the litter of shining wings and bodies. There seemed to be hundreds of them on the beach,

above the high-tide mark, about twenty dragon lengths from him.

Don't move, Canth cautioned him. You'll lose her.

“But if they're hatching . . . they can be Impressed . . . Canth, rouse the Weyr! Speak to Prideth.

Speak to Wirenth. Tell them to come. Tell them to bring food. Tell them to hurry. Quickly or it'll be too

already beating to a height, preparing

to dive at the unprotected weak fledglings. Every nerve in F'nor's body yearned to go to their rescue, but

Canth repeated his warning. F'nor would jeopardize his fragile rapport with the little queen if he moved. Or,

F'nor realized, if he communicated his agitation to her. He closed his eyes. He couldn't watch.

The first shriek of pain vibrated through his body as well as the little lizard's. She darted into the

folds of his arm sling, trembling against his ribs. Despite himself, F'nor opened his eyes. But the wherries

had not stooped yet though they circled lower and lower with rapacious speed. The fledglings were

voraciously attacking each other. He shuddered and the little queen rattled her pinions, uttering a delicate

fluting sound of distress.

"You're safe with me. Far safer with me. Nothing can harm you with me," F'nor told her repeatedly,

and Canth crooned reassurance in harmony with that litany.

The strident shriek of the wherries as they plunged suddenly changed to their piercing wail of terror.

right into the middle, they somehow managed to stop.

Brekke said she has alerted as many as she could, Canth told him.

“Brekke? Why’d you call her? She’s got enough to do.”

She is the best one, Canth replied, ignoring F’nor’s reprimand.

“Are they too late?” F’nor glanced anxiously at the sky and at the dune, willing more men to arrive.

Brekke was wading toward the struggling hatchlings now, her hands extended. The other two were

following her example. Who had she brought? Why hadn’t she got more riders? They’d know instantly how to approach the beasts.

Two more dragons appeared in the sky, circled and landed with dizzying speed right on the beach

their riders racing in to help. The skyborne green flamed off the insistent wherries, bugling to her fellows to help her.

Brekke has one. And the girl. So does the boy but the beast is hurt. Brekke says that many are dead.

Why, wondered F’nor suddenly, if he had only just seen the truth of the legend of fire lizards, did he ache for

the green's rider had a bronze, and the other two riders had blues, one with a wrenched wing which Brekke feared might never heal properly for flight.

"Seven out of over fifty," said Brekke sadly after they had disposed of the broken bodies with

agenothree. A precaution which Brekke suggested as a frustration for the carrion eaters and to prevent

other fire lizards from avoiding the beach as dangerous to their kind. "I wonder how many would have

survived if you hadn't called us."

"She was already far from the others when she discovered us," F'nor remarked. "Probably the first

to hatch, or on top of the others."

Brekke'd had the wit to bring a full haunch of buck, though the Weyr might eat light that evening. So

they had gorged the hatchlings into such a somnolent state that they could be carried, unresisting, back to

the Weyr, or to Brekke's Infirmary.

"You're to fly home straight," Brekke told F'nor, in much the way a woman spoke to a rebellious

weyrling.

When F'nor reached Southern, it was obvious the news had raced through the Weyr. There was

such an aura of excitement that F'nor began to worry that it might frighten the tiny creatures between.

No dragon can fly when he is belly-bloated, Canth said. Even a fire lizard. And took himself off to

his sun-warmed wallow, no longer interested.

"You don't suppose he's jealous, do you?" F'nor asked Brekke when he found her in her Infirmary, splinting

the little blue's wrenched wing.

"Wirenth was interested, too, until the lizards fell asleep," Brekke told him, a twinkle in her green

eyes as she looked up at him briefly. "And you know how touchy Wirenth is right now. Mercy, F'nor, what is

there for a dragon to be jealous of? These are toys, dolls as far as the big ones are concerned. At best,

children to be protected and taught like any fosterling."

F'nor glanced over at Mirrim, Brekke's foster child. The two green lizards perched asleep on her

shoulders. The injured brown, swathed from neck to tail in bandage, was cradled in her lap. Mirrim was

“Oh-ho. The female of the species in staunch defense . . .” “It’s no teasing matter, F’nor,” Brekke replied with a sharpness that put F’nor in mind of Lessa.

“Mirrim will do very well. She takes every responsibility to heart.” The glance Brekke shot her fosterling was anxious as well as tender.

“I still say she’s young . . .”

“Is age a prerequisite for a loving heart? Does maturity always bring compassion? Why are some

weyrbred boys left standing on the sand and others, never thought to have a chance, walk off with the

bronzes? Mirrim Impressed three, and the rest of us, though we tried, with the creatures dying at our feet,

only managed to attach one.”

“And why am I never told what occurs in my own Weyr?” Kylara demanded in a loud voice. She

stood on the threshold of the Infirmary, her face suffused with an angry flush, her eyes bright and hard.

“As soon as I finished this splinting, I was coming to tell you,” Brekke replied calmly, but F’nor saw

her shoulders stiffen

one yourself.”

Kylara halted, the full skirts of her robe swirling around her feet. She glared at him, twitching the

sleeve of her dress but not before he saw the black bruise on her arm. Unable to attack Brekke, she turned,

spotting Mirrim. She swept up to the girl, staring down in such a way that the child looked appealingly

toward Brekke. At this point, the tension in the room roused the lizards. The two greens hissed at Kylara

but it was the crystal bugle of the bronze on G’sel’s shoulder that diverted the Weyrwoman’s attention.

“I’ll have the bronze! Of course. The bronze’ll do fine,” she exclaimed. There was something so

repellent about the glitter in her eyes and the nasty edge to her laugh that F’nor felt the hair rise on the back

of his neck.

“A bronze dragon on my shoulder will be most effective I think,” Kylara went on, reaching for G’sel’s

bronze lizard.

G’sel put up a warning hand.

“And from what creature on Pern do you think dragons were bred?”

“Not that old nursery nonsense. How could you possibly make a fighting dragon from a fire lizard?”

She reached again for the little bronze. It spread its wings, flapping them agitatedly.

“If it bites you, don’t blame G’sel,” F’nor told her in a pleasant drawl though it cost him much to keep

his temper. It was too bad you couldn’t beat a Weyrwoman with impunity. Her dragon wouldn’t permit it but

a sound thrashing was what Kylara badly needed.

“You can’t be certain they’re that much like dragons,” Kylara protested, glancing suspiciously around

at the others. “No one’s ever caught one and you just found them.”

“We’re not certain of anything about them,” F’nor replied, beginning to enjoy himself. It was a

pleasure to see Kylara frustrated by a lizard. “However, look at the similarities. My little queen . . .”

“You? Impressed a queen?” Kylara’s face turned livid as F’nor casually drew aside a fold of his

slings to expose the sleeping gold lizard.

the dragons admit a blood relationship and they have ways of knowing beyond ours.”

“Just how did you Impress them?” Kylara demanded, her intentions transparent. “No one’s ever caught one before.”

If it got her out of the Weyr and kept her on sandy beaches and off Brekke’s back, F’nor was quite agreeable to telling her.

“You Impress them by being there when they hatch, same as with dragons. After that, I assume the ones which survive stay wild. As to why no one ever caught any before, that’s simple; the fire lizards hear them coming and disappear between.” And, my dear, may it be a warm night between before you catch one.

Kylara stared hard at Mirrim and so resentfully at G’sel that the young rider began to fidget and the little bronze rustled his wings nervously.

“Well, I want it clearly understood that this is a working Weyr. We’ve no time for pets who serve no purpose. I’ll deal severely with anyone shirking their duties or — ” She broke off.

the Infirmary.

“There’s no protection against someone like Kylara,” Brekke said, motioning the rider to take his

bandaged blue. “One learns to live with her.”

G’sel gave an odd gargle and rose, almost unsettling his lizard.

“How can you say that, Brekke, when she’s so mean and nasty to you?” Mirrim cried, and subsided

at a stern look from her foster mother.

“Make no judgments where you have no compassion,” Brekke replied. “And I, too, will not tolerate

any shirking of duties to care for these pretties. I don’t know why we saved them!”

“Make no judgments where you have no compassion,” F’nor retorted.

“They needed us.” Mirrim said so emphatically that even she was surprised at her temerity, and

immediately became absorbed in her brown.

“Yes, they did,” F’nor agreed, aware of the little queen’s golden body nestled trustingly against his

ribs. She had twined her tail as far as it would reach around his waist.

“And true weymen one and all, we responded to the cry for succor.”

catching a fire lizard, simply because they resemble small dragons — no, don't interrupt me. You know perfectly well that it's just in these last eight Turns that commoners were permitted on the Ground as candidates at Impression. Why, I remember my brothers plotting night after night in the hope of catching a fire lizard, a personal dragon of their own. I don't think it ever occurred to anyone, really, that there might be some truth in that old myth that dragons — weyrdragons — were bred from lizards. It was just that fire lizards were not proscribed to commoners, and dragons were. Out of our reach.”

Her eyes softened with affection as she stroked the tiny sleeping bronze in the crook of her arm.

“Odd to realize that generations of commoners were on the right track and never knew it. These creatures have the same talent dragons have for capturing our feelings. I oughtn't to take on another responsibility but nothing would make me relinquish my bronze now he's made himself mine.” Her lips curved in a very tender

Brekke was a sackful of unexpected reactions.

She gave him such a stern look that he began to regret his words.

“If you’ll pardon me, F’nor,” G’sel spoke up, “I think Brekke’s got a good thought there. I’m holdbred

myself. You’re weyrbred. You can’t imagine how I used to feel about Dragonriders. I honestly didn’t know

myself — until I Impressed Roth.” His face lit with a startling joy at the memory. He paused, unabashed, to

savor the moment anew. “It’d be worth a try. Even if the fire lizards are dumb, it’d make a difference. They

wouldn’t understand how much more it is with a dragon. Look, F’nor, here’s this perfectly charming

creature, perched on my shoulder, adoring me. He was all ready to bite the Weyrwoman to stay with me.

You heard how angry he was. You don’t know how — spectacular — it’d make a commoner feel.”

F’nor looked around, at Brekke, at Mirrim, who did not evade his eyes this time, at the other riders.

“Are you all holdbred? I hadn’t realized. Somehow, once a man becomes a rider, you forget he

Midmorning at Ruatha Hold

Early Evening at Benden Weyr

JAXOM'S PLEASURE in riding a dragon, in being summoned to Benden Weyr, was severely

diminished by his guardian's glowering disapproval. Jaxom had yet to learn that most of Lord Warder Lytol's

irritation was for a far larger concern than his ward's mischievous habit of getting lost in the unused and

dangerous corridors of Ruatha Hold. As it was, Jaxom was quite downcast. He didn't mean to irritate Lytol,

but he never seemed able to please him, no matter how hard he tried. There was such an unconscionable

number of things that he, Jaxom, Lord of Ruatha Hold, must know, must do, must understand, that his head

swam until he had to run away, to be by himself, to think. And the only empty places to think in in Ruatha,

where no one ever went or would bother you, were in the back portions of the hollowed-out cliff that was

Ruatha Hold. And while he could, just possibly, get lost or trapped behind a rockfall (there hadn't been a

Ruatha, though his mother had been of Crom Hold and Fax his father, of the High Reaches. It was Lessa, who was now Weyrwoman at Benden, who had been the last of Ruathan Blood. These were contradictions he didn't understand and must.

He had changed his clothes now, from the dirty everyday ones to his finest tunic and trousers, with a wher-hide over-tunic and knee boots. Not that even they could stop the horrible cold of between. Jaxom shuddered with delighted terror. It was like being suspended nowhere, until your throat closed and your bowels knotted and you were scared silly that you'd never again see the light of day, or even night's darkness, depending on local time of day where you were supposed to emerge. He was very jealous of Felessan, despite the fact that it was by no means sure his friend would be a dragonrider. But Felessan lived at Benden Weyr, and he had a mother and a father, and Dragonriders all around him, and . . .

"Lord Jaxom!" Lytol's call from the Great Courtyard broke through the boy's reverie and he ran,

The green's rider grinned a welcome as Jaxom scrambled up the extended leg.

"Good morning, Jeralte," he said, slightly startled because he'd played in the Lower Caves with the

young man only two Turns back. Now he was a full-fledged rider.

"J'ralt, please, Lord Jaxom," Lytol corrected his ward.

"That's all right, Jaxom," J'ralt said and looped the riding belt deftly around Jaxom's waist.

Jaxom wanted to sink; to be corrected by Lytol in front of Jer — J'ralt, and not to remember to use

the honorific contraction! He didn't enjoy the thrill of rising, a-dragonback over the great towers of Ruatha

Hold, of watching the valley, spread out like a wall hanging under the dragon's sinuous green neck. But as

they circled, Jaxom had to balance himself against the dragon's unexpectedly soft hide, and the warmth of

that contact seemed to ease his inner misery. Then he saw the line of weeders in the fields and knew that

they must be looking up at the dragon. Did those bullying Hold boys know that he, Jaxom, Lord of Ruatha,

was a-dragon-back? Jaxom was himself again.

the Lord of Ruatha Hold. Which was no little honor, even if it wasn't being a dragonrider.

Jaxom's reflections were brought to an abrupt stop as the dragon took them between.

You count to three slowly, Jaxom told his frantic mind as he lost all sense of sight and sound, of

contact, even of the soft dragon hide beneath his hands. He tried to count and couldn't. His mind seemed

to freeze, but just as he was about to shriek, they burst out into the late afternoon, over Benden Weyr.

Never had the Bowl seemed so welcome, with its high walls softened and colored by the lambent sun. The

black maws of the individual weyrs, set in the face of the inner wall, were voiceless mouths, greeting him all astonished.

As they circled down, Jaxom spotted bronze Mnementh, surely the hugest dragon ever hatched,

lounging on the ledge to the queen's weyr. She'd be in the Hatching Ground, Jaxom knew, for the new

clutch was still hardening on the warm sands. There'd be another Impression soon. And there was a

because the twitch in his Warder's cheek would start jumping. It didn't when Lessa visited. Except that

lately Lessa had stopped coming to Ruatha Hold.

The young Lord of Ruatha spotted Lessa now, as they circled again to bring the queen's weyr in

flight line. She and F'lar were on the ledge. The green called, answered by Mnementh's bass roar. A

muffled bellow reverberated through the Weyr. Ramoth, the queen, took notice of their arrival.

Jaxom felt much better, particularly when he also caught sight of a small figure, racing across the

Bowl floor to the stairs up to the queen's weyr. Felessan. His friend. He hadn't seen him in months. Jaxom

didn't want the flight to end but he couldn't wait to see Felessan.

Jaxom was nervously conscious of Lytol's critical eyes as he made his duty to the Weyrwoman and

to Weyrleader. He'd rehearsed words and bows often enough. He ought to have it down heart-perfect, yet

he heard himself stammering out the traditional words and felt the fool.

"You came, you came. I told Gandidan you'd come," cried Felessan, dashing up the steps, two at a

drew himself up and, still all

smiles, bowed with commendable grace to Lytol,

“Good afternoon to you, Lord Warder Lytol. And thank you for bringing Lord Jaxom. May we be excused?”

Before any adult could answer, Felessan had Jaxom by the hand and was leading him down the steps.

“Stay out of trouble, Lord Jaxom,” Lytol called after them.

“There’s little trouble they can get into here,” Lessa laughed.

“I had the entire Hold mustered this morning, only to find him in the bowels of the Hold itself, where a rock-fall . . .”

Now why did Lytol have to tell Lessa? Jaxom groaned to himself, with a flash of his previous discontent.

“Did you find anything?” Felessan demanded as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Find anything?”

“Yes, in the bowels of the Hold.” Felessan’s eyes widened and his voice took on Lytol’s inflections.

The weyrboy led Jaxom into the Lower Cavern, the main chamber with a vaulting roof where the

Weyr met for sociability and evening meals. There was a smell of warm bread and simmering meats..Dinner preparations were well along, tables set and women and girls bustling about, making pleasant

chatter. As Felessan veered past a preparation table, he snatched up a handful of raw roots.

“Don’t you dare spoil your dinner, you young wher-whelp,” cried one of the women, swinging at the

retreating pair with her ladle. “And a good day to you, Lord Jaxom,” she added.

The attitude of the weyrfolk toward himself and Felessan never failed to puzzle Jaxom. Why,

Felessan was just as important as a Lord Holder, but he wasn’t always being watched, as if he might break apart or melt.

“You’re so lucky,” Jaxom sighed as he accepted his share of Felessan’s loot.

“Why?” the younger boy asked, surprised.

“You’re — you just are, that’s all.”

the looms now, of course, with dinner being prepared, nor was anyone bathing at the large pool to one side

of the Cavern, but a group of boys Felessan's age were gathered by the miggys circle. One boy made a

loud, meant-to-be-over-heard remark which was fortunately lost in the obedient loud cackles of laughter from the others.

"C'mon, Jaxom. Before one of those baby boys wants to tag along," Felessan said.

"Where are we going?"

Felessan shushed him peremptorily, looking quickly over his shoulder to see if they were being

observed. He walked very fast, making Jaxom lengthen his stride to keep up.

"Hey, I don't want to get in trouble here, too," he said when he realized they were heading still

farther into the caves. It was one thing, according to Jaxom's lexicon, to be adventurous in one's own Hold,

but quite another to invade the sanctity of another's, much less a Weyr! That was close to blasphemy, or so

into the Weyr, the other

bending right. This one was ill-lit and Jaxom faltered. You didn't waste glows on unused corridors.

"What's the matter?" Felessan asked, frowning back at his reluctant guest. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"Afraid?" Jaxom quickly stepped to Felessan's side. "It's not a question of fear."

"C'mon then. And be quiet."

"Why?" Jaxom had already lowered his voice.

"You'll see. Only be quiet now, huh? And take this."

From a hidey-hole, Felessan handed Jaxom a half-shielded basket with one feebly gleaming glow.

He had another for himself. Whatever objections Jaxom might have had were stilled by the challenge in the

younger boy's eyes. He turned haughtily and led the way down the shadowy corridor. He was somewhat

reassured by the footprints in the dust, all leading the same way. But this hall was not frequented by adults.

All the footprints were smallish, not a bootheel among 'em. Where did it lead?

couldn't ask. What could there possibly be this far back in the Weyr? A huge rectangle of absolute black

rose on his left and he swallowed against terror, as Felessan marched purposefully past it, his weak glow

back-lighting the threatening maw into another innocently empty corridor junction.

"Hurry up," Felessan said, sharply.

"Why?" Jaxom was pleased with the steady, casual tone he managed.

"Because she always goes to the lake about this time of day and it's the only chance you'll ever get."

"Chance to what? Who's she?"

"Ramoth, thickwit," Felessan stopped so quickly that Jaxom bumped into him and the glow in his

basket began to flicker.

"Ramoth?". "Sure. Or are you afraid to sneak a look at her eggs?"

"At her eggs? Honest?" Breathless terror battled with insatiable curiosity and the knowledge that

this would really put him one up on the Hold boys.

"Honest! Now, C'mon!"

The other corridors they passed held no unknown evils for Jaxom now, with such a promised end to

these great cracks appeared.

Zigzaggy ones down the eggs, longwise,” Felessan excitedly illustrated the point with his glow basket.

“Then, all of a sudden,” and his voice dropped to a more dramatic pitch, “one enormous, dragon-sized split and the head — comes through. You know what color the first one was?”

“Don’t you know that from the color of the shell?”

“No, except for the queen. They’re biggest and they gleam kinda. You’ll see.”

Jaxom gulped but nothing could have kept him from continuing now. None of the Hold boys or even the other young lordlings had seen eggs, or an Impression. Maybe he could lie a little . . .

“Hey, keep off my heels,” Felessan commanded.

The sliver of light ahead widened, touching the smooth wall opposite with a comforting rectangle.

As they got closer and their glows augmented the outside light, Jaxom could make out the end of the

corridor just beyond the fissure of the slot. The jumble of rock gave evidence of an ancient slide. But sure

“It’s kinda to that side, out of sight.”

Jaxom craned his neck up and down, trying to get a glimpse of the golden egg.

“You really want to see it?”

“Sure. Talina’s been taken on Search from my Hold and she’ll be a Weyrwoman. Ruathan girls always become Weyrwomen.”

Felessan gave him a long stare, then shrugged. He twisted sideways and inserted his body into the slit, easing his way past the rocks.

“C’mon,” he urged his friend in a hoarse whisper.

Jaxom eyed the slit dubiously. He was heavier as well as taller than Felessan. He presented the

side of his body to the slit and took a deep breath. His left leg and arm got through fine but his chest was

caught against the rocks. Helpfully, Felessan grabbed his left arm and yanked. Jaxom manfully suppressed

a yelp as knee and chest were scraped skin deep by rock.

“Eggshells, I’m sorry, Jaxom.”

“I didn’t tell you to pull!” Then he added as he saw Felessan’s contrite expression, “I’m all right, I

sense of sacrilege. Only the weyrbred had the right to see the Eggs.

Felessan was casting a judicious eye over the gold egg.

“And big, too. Bigger’n the last queen egg at Fort. Their stock is falling off noticeably,” he remarked with critical detachment.

“Not to hear Mardra talk. She says it’s obvious Benden stock is in trouble; the dragons are too large to maneuver properly.”

“N’ton says Mardra’s a pain in the ass, the way she treats T’ron.”

Jaxom didn’t like the trend of the conversation now. After all, Ruatha Hold was weyrbound to Fort

Weyr and while he didn’t much like Mardra, he ought not listen to such talk..“Well, this one’s not so big. Looks like a wherry egg. It’s half the size of even the smallest one of

the others,” and he touched the smooth shell of an egg that lay almost against the rock wall, apart from the others.

“Hey, don’t touch it!” Felessan protested, visibly startled.

“Why not? Can’t hurt it, can I? Hard as leather,” and Jaxom rapped it gently with his knuckles and

then spread his hand flat on the curve. “It’s warm.”

unless you're a candidate. And you're not. And neither am I, yet."

"No, I'm a Lord Holder," and Jaxom drew himself up proudly. He couldn't resist the urge to pat the

small egg once more because, while it was all right to be a Lord Holder, he was more than a little jealous of

Felessan, and fleetingly wished that he, too, could look forward to being a dragonrider one day. And that

egg looked lonely, small and unwanted, so far from the others.

"Your being a Lord Holder wouldn't matter a grain of sand in Igen if Ramoth came back and caught

us here," Felessan reminded him and jerked Jaxom firmly toward the slit.

A sudden rumble at the far end of the Hatching Ground startled them. One look at the shadow on

the sand by the great entrance was enough. Felessan, being more agile and faster, got to the exit first and

squeezed through. This time Jaxom did not object at all as Felessan frantically yanked him past the rock.

They didn't even stop to see if it really was Ramoth, returning. They grabbed the glow baskets and ran.

looks bad. We'd better get you to Manora quick."

"I . . . got . . . to . . . catch . . . my . . . breath."

In rhythm with his labored exhalations, his glow sputtered and darkened completely.

"We'll have to walk slow then," Felessan said, his voice now shakier with anxiety than from running.

Jaxom got to his feet, determined not to show the panic he was beginning to feel; a cold pressure

gripped his belly, his chest was hot and painful, while sweat was starting to creep down his forehead. The

salty drops fell on his chest and he swore one of the wardguard's favorites.

"Let's walk fast," he said and, holding onto the now use less glow basket, suited action to words.

By common consent they kept to the outer edge of the corridor, where the now dimly seen footsteps

gave them courage.

"It's not much further, is it?" Jaxom asked as the second glow flickered ominously.

"Ah — no. It better not be."

"What's the matter?"

long.”

“Not if Lytol gets asked to dinner and he will, if dinner is as close as you said it was.” Jaxom

couldn't suppress his bitterness at this whole ill-advised exploration. “Haven't you any idea where we are?”

“No,” Felessan had to admit, sounding suddenly out of his depth. “I always followed the footprints, just like I did now. There were footprints. You saw them.”

Jaxom didn't care to agree for that would mean he was in part to blame for their predicament.

“Those other corridors we passed on the way to the hole, where do they go?” he finally asked.

“I don't know. There's an awful lot of the Weyr that's empty. I've — I've never gone any farther than

the slit.” “What about the others? How far in have they gone?”

“Gandidan's always talking about how far he's gone but — but — I don't remember what he said.”

“For the Egg's sake, don't blubber.”

“I'm not blubbing. I'm just hungry!”

“Hungry? That's it. Can you smell dinner? Seemed to me we could smell it an awful long ways

companiment to his blood.

With a sigh, he backed up against the smooth wall and, sliding down it, settled to the ground with a

bump.

“Jaxom?”

“I’m all right. I’m just tired.”

“Me, too,” and with a sigh of relief, Felessan sat down, his shoulder touching Jaxom’s. The contact

reassured them both.

“I wonder what it was like,” Jaxom mused at length.

“Wonder what what was like?” asked Felessan in some surprise.

“When the Weyrs and the Holds corridors were lighted and used.”

“They’ve never been used.”

“Nonsense. No one wastes time carving out corridors that’ll lead nowhere. And Lytol said there are

over five hundred weyrs in Benden and only half-used . . .”

“We have four hundred and twelve fighting dragons at Benden now.”

“Sure, but ten Turns ago there weren’t two hundred, so why so many weyrs if they weren’t all used

once? And why are there miles and miles of halls and unused rooms in Ruatha Hold if they weren’t used

turned and ran his hand

down the wall behind him. It was smooth. He gulped and his chest hurt more than the throb of the

scratches. “Felessan . . . ?”

“What — what’s the matter?”

“This wall is smooth.”

“So what?”

“But it’s smooth. It’s not rough!”

“Say what you mean.” Felessan sounded almost angry.

“It’s smooth. It’s an old wall.”

“So?”

“We’re in the old part of Benden.” Jaxom got to his feet, running a hand over the wall, walking a few

paces.

“Hey!” Jaxom could hear Felessan scrambling to his feet. “Don’t leave me. Jaxom! I can’t see

you.”

Jaxom stretched his hand back, touched fabric, and jerked Felessan to his side.

“Now hang on. If this is an old corridor, sooner or later it’ll run out. Into a dead end, or into the main

“Hey, warn a guy!” cried Felessan, who had bumped into him.

“I found something.”

“What?” “A crack up and down, evenly.” Excitedly Jaxom stretched both arms out, trying to find the other side of what might even be a doorway.

At shoulder height, just beyond the second cut, he found a square plate and, in examining it, pressed. With a rumbling groan, the wall under his other hand began to slide back and light came up on the other side.

The boys had only a few seconds to stare at the brightly lit wonders on the other side of the threshold before the inert gas with which the room had been flooded rushed out to overcome them. But the light remained a beacon to guide the searchers.

“I had the entire Hold mustered this morning, only to find him in the bowels of the Hold itself where a rockfall had barred his way,” Lytol said to Lessa as he watched the boys running toward the Lower Cavern.

“You’ve forgotten your own boyhood then,” F’lar laughed, gesturing courteously for Lytol to proceed

may be proud of him.”

“Carries himself like a Lord, too,” F’lar ventured to say.

“I do my best.”

“And your best is very well indeed,” Lessa said enthusiastically. “Why, he’s grown so since the last time I saw him!”

But the tic started in Lytol’s cheek and Lessa fumed, wondering what Mardra had been complaining

about in the boy lately. That woman had better stop interfering . . . Lessa caught herself, grimly reminded

that she could be accused of interfering right now, having invited Jaxom here on a visit. When Mardra heard that Lytol had been to Benden Weyr . . .

“I’m glad you think so,” Lytol replied, confirming Lessa’s suspicions.

Harper Robinton rose to greet Lytol, and the Mastersmith Fandarel’s face broke into the almost feral

expression that passed as his smile. While F’lar seated them, Lessa poured wine.

“The new train is in, Robinton, but not settled enough to serve,” she said, grinning down at him. It

for taking you from your business at such short notice, but I . . .”

“Always glad to come to Benden,” Robinton murmured, his eyes twinkling as he tipped his cup again.

“I have news for you so I was glad of this opportunity,” Fandarel rumbled.

“And I,” Lytol said in a dark voice, the tic moving agitatedly.

“My news is very serious and I need to know your reactions. There has been premature Threadfall .

. .” F’lar began.

“Threadfalls,” Robinton corrected him with no vestige of his previous levity. “The drumroll brought me the news from Tillek and Crom Holds.”

“I wish I’d as reliable messengers,” F’lar said bitterly, gritting his teeth. “Didn’t you question the

Weyrs’ silence, Robinton?” He had counted the Harper his friend.

“My Craft is weyrbound to Fort, my dear F’lar,” the Craftmaster replied, an odd smile on his lips,

“although Weyrleader T’ron does not appear to follow custom in keeping the Master Harper advised of

dispatch any messengers.”

“You mean, that numbwitted Weyrwoman Bedella forgot to,” Lessa interjected. F’lar nodded and went on. “The first Benden knew of this was when Thread fell in Lemos northeast,

midmorning, when the table indicated southwest and evening. Because I always send a rider on ahead to

act as messenger for any last moment problems, we were able to reach Lemos before the leading Edge.”

Robinton whistled with appreciation.

“You mean, the timetables are wrong?” Lytol exclaimed. All the color had drained from his swarthy

face at the news. “I thought that rumor had to be false.”

F’lar shook his head grimly; he’d been watching for Lytol’s reaction to this news.

“They’re not accurate any more; they don’t apply to this shift,” he said. “Lessa reminded me, as I do

you, that there have been deviations in the Red Star’s passage that cause long intervals. We must assume

that something can cause a change in the rhythm of the Fall as well. As soon as we can gauge a pattern

again, we’ll correct the tables or make new ones.”

wine.

“What do you mean, on top of everything else?” F’lar asked, startled.

“Why, the way the Weyrs are behaving. That disaster in Esvay valley in Nabol, those plantations of Lord Sangel’s.”

“Tell me about the Esvay Valley and Lord Sangel.”

“You hadn’t heard that either?” Robinton asked in real surprise. ‘ Don’t the Weyrs talk to one

another?” And he glanced from F’lar to Lessa.

“The Weyrs are autonomous,” F’lar replied. “We don’t interfere . . .”

“You mean, the Oldtimers keep exchanges with us contemporary radicals to a bare minimum,”

Lessa finished, her eyes flashing indignantly. “Don’t scowl at me, F’lar. You know it’s true. Though I’m sure

D’ram and T’ron were as shocked as we were that T’kul would keep premature Threadfall a secret. Now,

what happened at Esvay Vale and in Lord Sangel’s Southern Boll?”

It was Robinton who answered her in an expressionless voice. “Several weeks back, T’kul refused

to help Meron of Nabol clear some furrows from wooded slopes above the Esvay valley. Said it was the job

Sangel protested to T'ron, he was
told that the wings had reported the Fall under control.

“On another level but disturbing in the over-all picture, I've heard of any
number of girls, snatched on
the pretext of Search . . .”

“Girls beg to come to the Weyr,” Lessa put in tartly.

“To Benden Weyr, probably,” Robinton agreed. “But my harpers tell me
of unwilling girls, forced

from their babes and husbands, ending as drudges to Weyrladies.
There is deep hatred building, Lady

Lessa. There has always been resentment, envy, because Weyrlife is
different and the ease with which

Dragonriders can move across the continent while lesser folk struggle,
the special privileges riders enjoy — ”

The Harper waved his hands. “The Oldtimers really believe in special
privilege, and that exacerbates the

dangers inherent in such outdated attitudes. As for matters in the
Crafthalls, the belt knife incident at

Fandarel's is a very minor item in the list of depredations. The crafts
generously tithe of their products, but

so, "Benden is the backsliding Weyr

which has forgotten true custom and usage, become lax in their dealings. Why, they permit Holds bound to

Benden Weyr to retain dignity, possession and forest. They encourage the Crafts to proliferate, hatching

bastard breeds of who-knows-what. But Benden Weyr," and Robinton was himself again, and angry, "is respected throughout Pern."

"As a dragonrider, I ought to take offense," F'lar said, so disturbed by this indictment that he spoke

lightly.. "As Benden's Weyrleader, you ought to take charge," Robinton retorted, his voice ringing. "When

Benden stood alone, seven Turns ago, you said that the Lord Holders and Craftsmen were too parochial in

their views to deal effectively with the real problem. They at least learned something from their mistakes.

The Oldtimers are not only incurably parochial, but worse — adamantly inflexible. They will not, they cannot

adapt to our Turn. Everything we accomplished in the four hundred Turns that separate our thinking is

“Who will change? The Weyrleaders? The Holders? Don’t count on it, Lady Lessa.”

“I have to agree with Robinton,” Lytol said in a tired voice. “There’s been precious little cooperation

from the Weyrs. They’re overbearing, wrongheaded and demanding. I find that I, Lytol, ex-dragonrider,

resent any more demands on me as Lytol, Lord Warder. And now it appears they are incapable even of

doing their job. What, for instance, can be done right in the present crisis? Are they willing to do anything?”

“There’ll be cooperation from the Weyrs, I can guarantee it,” F’lar told Lytol. He must rouse the man

from his dejection. “The Oldtimers were shaken men this morning. Ruatha Hold’s weyrbound to Fort and

T’ron’s setting up Sweepriders. You’re to man the watch fires on the heights and light them when Thread

mass is sighted. You’ll get prompt action the instant a watch fire is seen.”

“I’m to rely on shaken men and fires on the heights?” Lytol demanded, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Fire is not efficient,” Fandarel intoned. “Rain puts it out. Fog hides it.”

knowing there was instant communication with the Weyr.”

“As I was saying,” Fandarel boomed in such a portentous voice that they all turned to him a little

startled, “there has been a regrettable lack of efficient communication on this planet which I believe my craft

can effectually end. That is the news I brought.”

“What?” Lytol was on his feet.

“Why didn’t you speak up sooner, you great lout?” demanded the Harper.

“How long would it take to equip all major Holds and Weyrs?” F’lar’s question drowned the others.

Fandarel looked squarely at the Weyrleader before he answered what had been almost a plea.

“More time, unfortunately, than we apparently have as margin in this emergency. My halls have

been overbusy turning out flame throwers. There’s been no time to devote to my little toys.”

“How long?”

“The instruments which send and receive distance writing are easy to assemble, but wire must be

laid between them. That process is time-consuming.”

trust you!”

“F’lar couldn’t approach other Lords, not without antagonizing the Weyrleaders,” Lessa objected, but she too was alert with hope.

“What the other Weyrleaders don’t know — ” Robinton suggested slyly, warming to the strategy.

“Come, come, F’lar. This is not the time to stick at principles — at least ones which have proved untenable.

Look beyond affiliations. man. You did before and we won. Consider Pern, all Pern, not one Weyr,” and he

pointed a long callused finger at F’lar; “one Hold,” and he swiveled it to Lytol; “or one Craft,” and he cocked it

at Fandarel. “When we five combined our wits seven Turns ago, we got ourselves out of a very difficult position.”

“And I set the stage for this one,” Lessa said with a bitter laugh.

Before F’lar could speak, Robinton was wagging his finger at her. “Silly people waste time

assigning or assuming guilt, Lessa. You went back and you brought the Oldtimers forward. To save Pern.

weyrbound to Benden . . .”

He leaned back suddenly, smiling with great anticipation.

F'lar said quietly, “Disaffection is apparently universal. We are going to need more than words and

example to change minds.”

“The Crafts will back you, Weyrleader, to the last Hall,” Fandarel said. “You champion Bendarek.

F'nor defended Terry, and against dragonmen because they were in the wrong. F'nor is all right, is he not?”

The Smith turned questioningly to Lessa.

“He'll be back in a week or so.”

“We need him now,” Robinton said. “He'd be useful at Telgar Hold, the commoners account him a

hero. What do you say, F'lar? We're yours to command again.”

They all turned to him, Lessa slipping a hand to his knee her eyes eager. This was what she

wanted, all right; for him to assume the responsibility. It was what he knew he had to do, finishing the task

he had relinquished, hopefully, to those he thought better qualified than he to protect Pern.

modic leap and stopped.

“Marvelous idea,” Robinton cried. “Hope’s a great encourager. Give the Lords a reliable means of

keeping in touch and you’ve undone much of the Weyrs isolation policies.”

“Can you do it, Fandarel?” F’lar asked the Smith.

“To Telgar I could lay wire. Yes. It could be done.”

“How is this distance writing done? I don’t understand.”

Fandarel inclined his head toward the Masterharper. “Thanks to Robinton, we have a code that

permits us to send long and complicated messages. One must train a man to understand it, to send and

receive it. If you could spare an hour of your time . . .”

“I can spare you as much time as you need, Fandarel,” F’lar assured him.

“Let’s go tomorrow. There’s nothing could fall here tomorrow,” Lessa urged, excited.

“Good. I shall arrange a demonstration. I shall put more people to work on the wire.”

“I shall speak to Lord Sangel of Southern Boll and Lord Groghe of Fort Hold,” Lytol said. “Discreetly,

hopes of a surer

deliverance.” Lytol bowed to Lessa. “My duty to you, my lady. I’ll collect Lord Jaxom and beg the favor of a return flight . . .”

“You’ve missed your lunch, stay for our dinner.”

Lytol shook his head regretfully. “There’ll be much to set in motion.”

“In the interests of conserving dragon strength, I’ll ride with Lytol and Jaxom,” Robinton said,

swallowing the rest of his wine after a rueful toast to such haste. “That will leave you two beasts to share the burden of Fandarel.”

Fandarel stood up, a tolerantly smiling giant, his massive bulk dwarfing the Harper, who was by no

measure a short man. “I sympathize with dragons, forced to endure the envy of frail, small creatures.”

None of them left, however, because neither Jaxom nor Felessan could be located. One of

Manora’s women remembered seeing them pilfering vegetables and thought they’d gone to join the boys

playing miggys. On questioning, one of the children, Gandidan, admitted seeing them go toward the back

“What?” Lessa exclaimed, as startled as the boys who had turned to guilty statues.

Before she could berate them, F’lar laughed aloud. “That’s where they are, then.” “Where?”

The boys huddled together, terrified by the coldness in her voice, even if it was directed toward the

Weyrleader.

“In the corridor behind the Hatching Ground. Oh, don’t fuss, Lessa. That’s all part of growing up in

the Weyr, isn’t it, Lytol? I did it when I was Felessan’s age.”

“You’ve been aware of these excursions, Manora?” Lessa demanded imperiously, ignoring F’lar.

“Certainly, Weyrwoman,” Manora replied unintimidated. “And kept track to be sure they all returned.

How long ago did they set out, Gandidan? Did they play with you for a time?”

“No wonder Ramoth’s been so upset; I kept thinking she was only being broody. How could you

allow such activities to continue?”

“Come now, Lessa,” F’lar said soothingly. “It’s a matter of adolescent pride,” and F’lar dropped his

When he seemed unable

to speak, she glanced at the scared expressions of the others. "I think we'd better look. It's easy to take the wrong turning if you have inadequate glows. And they did."

There was no lack of searchers, and F'lar quickly split them up into sections to explore each corridor

segment. Sounds echoed through halls undisturbed for hundreds of Turns. But it was not long before F'lar

and Lytol led their group to the guiding light. Once they saw the figures lying in the patch of light, F'lar sent for the others.

"What's the matter with them?" Lytol demanded, supporting his ward against him, and anxiously

feeling for his pulse. "Blood?" He held up stained fingers, his face bleak, cheek a-twitch.

So, thought F'lar, Lytol's heart had unfrozen a little. Lessa was wrong to think Lytol too numb to

care for the boy. Jaxom was a sensitive boy and children needed affection, but there are many ways of loving.

first gently, then more

insistently.

“There isn’t a mark on Felessan,” the Weyrleader said, turning his son in his arms.

Manora and Lessa came running then, kicking up dust in spite of F’lar’s urgent caution. But Manora

reassured them that the boys were all right and briskly delegated two men to carry them back to the Weyr

proper. Then she turned to the curious crowd that had assembled in the corridor.

“The emergency is over. Everyone back. Dinner’s ready, my lady, my lords. Pick up your feet,

Silon. No need to stir up more dust.” She glanced at the Weyrleader and the Mastersmith. As one, the two

men approached the mysterious doorway, Lessa and Lytol joining them.

Her crisp instructions cleared the corridor quickly until there were only the five remaining.

“The light is not made by glows,” announced the Mastersmith as he peered cautiously into the bright

room. “And from the smoothness of the walls, this is part of the original Weyr.” He scowled at F’lar. “Were

treasure rooms like this one,”

Robinton suggested slyly. “And what under the sun could this represent? Lessa, you’re our expert on wall

hangings, what do you say?”

He pointed to a drawing, composed of weird interconnecting varicolored rods and balls which

spread in several ladder-like columns from floor to ceiling.

“I wouldn’t call it artistic, but the colors are pretty,” she said, peering closely at the wall. She

touched a portion with a finger. “Why, the color is baked on the wall. And look here! Someone didn’t like it.although I don’t think their correction helps. It’s more a scribble than a design. And it’s not even in the same type of coloring.”

Fandarel scrutinized the drawing, his nose an inch from the wall. “Odd. Very odd.” Then he moved

off to other wonders, his huge hands reverently caressing the metallic counters, the hanging shelves. His

expression was so rapt that Lessa suppressed a giggle. “Simply amazing. I believe that this countertop was

extruded in a single sheet.” He clucked to himself. “If it has been done, it can be done. I must think about

“eureka” to older eyes, “is the same. I’d

swear it. And it was obviously added after the rest of this picture.”

“If you want to call it a picture,” Lessa said dubiously. “But I do think you’re right. Only why would

they circle this part of the ladder — and that one over there — with a scribble?”

“There are so many, many puzzles in this room,” Fandarel intoned. He’d opened a cabinet door,

struggling briefly with the magnetic catch, then opened and closed it several times, smiling absently in

delight for such efficiency. Only then did he notice the strange object on the deep shelf.

He exhaled in wonder as he took the ungainly affair down.

“Have a care. It may waddle away,” Robinton said, grinning at the Smith’s performance.

Though the device was as long as a man’s arm, the Smith’s great hands seemed to envelop it as his

fingers explored its exterior. “And they could roll metal without seam. Hmm. It’s coated,” and he glanced

up at F’lar, “with the same substance used in the big kettles. Coated for protection? With what?” He looked

very badly eroded diagram which Wansor showed me not long ago. A device,” and his fingers rested lightly on the wheels placed alongside the barrel, “which magnifies objects hundreds of times their proper size. But it takes so long to make lenses, polish mirrors. Hmmm.” He bent again and with extremely careful fingers played with the knobs at the side of the tube. He glanced quickly at the mirror, wiped it with one stained finger and looked at it once with his own eye, then again through the tube. “Fascinating. I can see every imperfection in the glass.” He was completely unconscious of the fact that everyone else was watching him, fascinated by his behavior. He pulled a coarse short hair from his head and held it under the end of the barrel, above the mirror, right across a small aperture. Another careful adjustment and he gave a bellow of joy. “Look. Look. It is only my hair. But look at the size of it now. See dust like stones, see the scales, see the broken end.” Exuberantly, he pulled Lessa into position, all but holding her head down to the eyepiece. “If you

his monopoly.

Taking his place, F'lar in turn had to check the specimen to believe in what he saw through the

instrument. The strand of hair became a coarse rope, motes of dust sparkling in the light along it, fine lines

making visible segmentation points.

When he lifted his head, he turned toward Fandarel, speaking softly because he almost dared not

utter this fragile hope aloud. "If there are ways of making tiny things this large, are there ways of bringing

distant objects near enough to observe closely?"

He heard Lessa's breath catch, was aware that Robinton was holding his, but F'lar begged the

Smith with his eyes to give him the answer he wanted to hear.

"I believe there ought to be," Fandarel said after what seemed to be hours of reflection.

"F'lar?"

He looked down at Lessa's white face, her startled eyes black with awe and fear, her hands half-raised

in frightened protest.. "You can't go to the Red Star!" Her voice was barely audible.

bravely, scared though he was, expecting darkness. Instead, above him was a curving roof of stone, its

expanse sparkling from the full basket of glows in its center. He gave an inarticulate gasp of relief.

“Are you all right, lad? Does your chest hurt?” Manora was bending over him.

“You found us? Is Felessan all right?”

“Right as rain, and eating his dinner. Now, does your chest hurt?”

“My chest?” His heart seemed to stop when he remembered how he got that injury. But Manora

was watching him. He felt cautiously. “No, thank-you — for-inquiring.”

His stomach further embarrassed him with its grinding noises.

“I think you need some dinner, too.”

“Then Lytol’s not angry with me? Or the Weyrleader?” he dared to ask.

Manora gave him a fond smile, smoothing down his tousled hair.

“Not to worry, Lord Jaxom,” she said kindly. “A stern word or two perhaps. Lord Lytol was beside

himself with worry.”

Jaxom had the most incredible vision of two Lytols side by side, cheeks a-twitch in unison.

scolded. You could always trust

Manora. And if she knew and wasn't angry . . . But if she didn't know and he asked, she might be angry .

. .

“You found those rooms, Lord Jaxom. I'd rest on my honors, now, were I you.”

“Rooms?”

She smiled at him and held out her hand. “I thought you were hungry.”

Her hand was cool and soft as she led him onto the balcony which circled the sleeping level. It must

be late, Jaxom thought, as they passed the tightly drawn curtains of the sleeping rooms. The central fire

was banked. A few women were grouped by one of the worktables, sewing. They glanced up as Manora

and Jaxom passed, and smiled.

“You said ‘rooms?’ “ Jaxom asked with polite insistence.

“Beyond the room you opened were two others and the ruins of a stairway leading up.”

Jaxom whistled. “What was in the rooms?”

Manora laughed softly. “I never saw the Mastersmith so excited. They found some odd-shaped

errupted the lively

conversations of the dragonmen and women seated around the big dining area. Accustomed as he was to

such scrutiny, Jaxom straightened his shoulders and walked with measured stride. He turned his head

slowly, giving a grave nod and smile to the riders he knew and those of the women he recognized. He

ignored a sprinkle of laughter, being used to that, too, but a Lord of the Hold must act with the dignity

appropriate to his rank, even if he were not quite turned twelve and in the presence of his superiors.

It was full dark, but around the great inner face of the Bowl, he could see the lambent circles of

dragon eyes on the weyr ledges. He could hear the muted rush of air as several stirred and stretched their

enormous pinions. He looked up toward the star Rocks, black knobs against the lighter sky, and saw the

giant silhouette of the watch dragon. Far down the Bowl, he could even hear the restless tramping of the

Do dragons have a sense of humor? he wondered. The watch-wher certainly didn't and he was the same breed.

The relationship is very distant.

"I beg your pardon?" Jaxom said, startled, glancing up at Manora.

"For what, young Lord?"

"Didn't you say something?"

"No."

Jaxom glanced back at the bulky shadow of the dragon, but Mne-menth's head was turned. Then he could smell roasted meats and walked faster.

As they rounded the bend, Jaxom saw the golden body of the recumbent queen and was suddenly

guilt-struck and fearful. But she was fast asleep, smiling with an innocent serenity remarkably like his foster

mother's newest babe. He looked away lest his gaze rouse her, and saw the faces of all those adults at the

table. It was almost too much for him. F'lar, Lessa, Lytol and Felessan he'd expected, but there was the

Mastersmith and the Masterharper, too.

that escaped Jaxom. "Jaxom missed

lunch at the Hold and is several hours hungrier in consequence. He is well, Manora?"

"He took no more harm than Felessan."

"He looked a little glassy-eyed as you crossed the weyr." Lessa bent to peer at Jaxom who politely

looked at her, chewing with sudden self-consciousness. "How do you feel?"

Jaxom emptied his mouth hurriedly, trying to swallow a half-chewed lump of vegetable. Felessan

tendered a cup of water and Lessa deftly swatted him between the shoulder blades as he started to choke.

"I feel fine," he managed to say. "I feel fine, thank you." He waited, unable to resist looking at his

plate and was relieved when the Weyrleader laughingly reminded Lessa that she was the one who said the

boy should eat before anything else.

The Mastersmith tapped his stained, branchlike finger on the faded Record skin which draped the

table, except where the boys were sitting. Fandarel had one arm wrapped possessively around something

upside down to him.

“I’d swear there were no upper weyr entrances on that side of the Bowl,”

F’lar muttered, shaking his

head.

“There was access to the Bowl on the ground level,” Fandarel said, his forefinger covering what he

ought to be showing. “We found it, sealed up. Possibly because of that rockfall.”

Jaxom looked anxiously at Felessan who became engrossed in his plate. When Felessan made

those faces, had he meant he hadn’t told them? Or he had? Jaxom wished he knew.

“That seam was barely discernible,” the Masterharper said. “The sealing substance was more

effective than any mortar I’ve ever seen; transparent, smooth and strong.”

“One could not chip it,” rumbled Fandarel, shaking his head.

“Why would they seal off an exit to the Bowl?” Lessa asked.

“Because they weren’t using that section of the Weyr,” F’lar suggested.

“Certainly no one has used

teachings?."We found enough of interest in the dusty, moldy old Records that had been ignored as useless,"

F'lar's voice went on.

Jaxom hazarded a glance and saw the Weyrleader tousle Felessan's hair; watched as the man

actually grinned at him, Jaxom. Jaxom was almost sick with relief. None of the adults knew what he and

Felessan had done in the Hatching Grounds.

"These boys have already led us to exquisite treasures, eh, Fandarel?"

"Let us hope that they are not the only legacies left in forgotten rooms," the Mastersmith said in his

deep rumble of a voice. Absently he stroked the smooth metal of the magnifying device cradled in the crook

of his arm.

CHAPTER VI

Midmorning at Southern Weyr

Early Morning at Nabol Hold:

Next Day

HOT, sandy and sticky with sweat and salt, triumph over-rode all minor irritations as Kylara stared

down at the clutch she had unearthed.

inbred sodality. Well, let's see if

mighty Meron could Impress a fire lizard. She wasn't sure which would please her more: if he could or if he

couldn't. Either way'd work for her. But if he could Impress a fire lizard, a bronze, say, and she had a queen

on her wrist, and the two mated . . . It might not be as spectacular as with the larger beasts, but then,

given Meron's natural endowment . . . Kylara smiled in sensuous anticipation.

"You'd better be worth this," she told the eggs.

She put the thirty-four hardened eggs into several thicknesses of the firestone bagging she'd

brought along. She wrapped that bundle in wher-hides and then in her thick wool cloak. She'd been

Weyrwoman long enough to realize that a suddenly cooled egg would never hatch. And these were mighty

close to cracking shell.

So much the better.

Prideth had been tolerant of her rider's preoccupation with fire-lizard eggs. She had obediently

The watchguard knew the Southern Weyrwoman too well to protest her entry and some poor wit was

dispatched to wake his Lord. Kylara blithely disregarded Meron's angry frown when he appeared on the stairs of the Inner Hold.

"I've fire-lizard eggs for you, Lord Meron of Nabol," she cried, gesturing to the lumpy bundle she'd had a man bring in. "I want tubs of warm sand or we'll lose them."

"Tubs of warm sand?" Meron repeated with overt irritation.

So, he'd someone else in his bed, had he? Kylara thought, of half a mind to take her treasure and disappear.

"Yes, you fool. I've a clutch of fire-lizard eggs about to hatch. The chance of your lifetime. You

there," and Kylara pointed imperiously at Meron's holdkeeper who'd come shuffling in, half-dressed. "Pour

boiling water over all the cleansing sand you've got and bring it here instantly."

Kylara, born to a high degree in one Hold, knew exactly the tone to take with lesser beings, and

just in time," she said in triumph. "Assemble your men, quickly.

We'll want to Impress as many as possible."

"I'm trying," Meron said through gritted teeth as he watched her performance with some skepticism

and much malice, "to apprehend exactly how this will benefit anyone."

"Use your wits, man," Kylara replied, oblivious to the Lord Holder's sour reaction to her

imperiousness. "Fire lizards are the ancestors of dragons and they have all their abilities."

It took only a moment longer for Meron to grasp the significance. Even as he shouted orders for his

men to be roused, he was beside Kylara, helping her to lay the eggs out before the fire.

"They go between? They communicate with their owners?"

"Yes. Yes."

"That's a gold egg," Meron cried, reaching for it, his small eyes glittering with cupidity.

She slapped his hand away, her eyes flashing. "Gold is for me. Bronze for you. I'm fairly sure that

that second one — no, that one — is a bronze."

“I have but I doubt you will, whoever you are,” Kylara snapped.

There was something, she decided, in what the Oldtimers said: Holders were getting far too

arrogant and aggressive. No one would have dared speak up in her father’s Hold when he was giving

instructions. No one in the Weyrs interrupted a Weyrwoman.

“You’ll have to be quick,” she said. “They hatch ravenous and eat anything in reach. They turn

cannibal if you don’t stop them.”

“I want to hold mine till it hatches,” Meron told Kylara in an undertone. He’d been stroking the three

eggs whose mottled shells he fancied contained bronzes.

“Hands aren’t warm enough” Kylara replied in a loud, flat voice. “We’ll need red meat, plenty of it.

Fresh-slaughtered is the best.”

The platter which was subsequently brought in was contemptuously dismissed as inadequate. Two

additional loads were prepared, still steamy from the body heat of the slaughtered animals. The smell of the

bloody raw meat was another odor to mingle with the sweat of men, the overheated crowded hall and the

“I thought you said they were about to hatch,” Meron said in an ag-grieved voice. He was as restless

as his men and beginning to have second thoughts about this ridiculous project of Kylara’s.

Kylara awarded him a slightly contemptuous smile. “They are, I assure you. You Holders ought to

learn patience. It’s needed in dealing with Dragonkind. You can’t beat dragons, you know, or fire lizards, as

you do a landbeast. But it’ll be worth it.”

“You’re sure?” Meron’s eyes glittered with unconcealed irritation.

“Think of the effect on dragonmen when you arrive at Telgar Hold in a few days with a fire lizard

clinging to your arm.”

The slight smile on Meron’s face told Kylara that her suggestion ap-pealed to him. Yes, Meron could

be patient if it gave him any advantage over dragonmen.

“It will be at my beck and call?” Meron asked, his gaze avidly caressing his trio.

Kylara didn’t hesitate to reassure him, though she wasn’t at all sure a fire lizard would be faithful, or

“Yes, to have solid, dependable communications would mean I’d have control. I could tell that wherry-blooded High Reaches Weyrleader T’kul to . . .”

One of the eggs rocked on its long axis and Meron started from his chair. Hoarsely he ordered his men to come closer, swearing as they halted at the normal distance from him. “Tell them again, Weyrwoman, tell them exactly how they are to capture these fire lizards.”

It never troubled Kylara that even after nine Turns in a Weyr and seven Turns as a Weyrwoman herself, she could not have given the criteria by which one candidate was accepted by a dragon and another, discernibly as worthy, was rejected by an entire Hatching. Nor why the queens invariably chose women raised outside the Weyr. (For instance, at the time that boy-thing Brekke had Impressed Wirenth, there had been three other girls, any of whom Kylara would have thought considerably more interesting to a dragonette queen. But Wirenth had made a skyline directly to the craft-bred girl. The three rejected

who did not become riders usually left, finding places in one of the crafts.

Now, of course, with Benden and Southern Weyrs producing more dragons' eggs than the

Weyrwomen bore babies, it was necessary to range Pern to find enough candidates to stand on the

Hatching Grounds. Evidently a commoner simply couldn't realize that the dragons, usually the browns or

bronzes, did the choosing, not their riders.

There seemed to be no accounting for draconic tastes. A well-favored commoner might find himself

passed over for the skinny, the unattractive.

Kylara looked around the hall, at the variety of anxious expressions on the rough men assembled. It

could be hoped that fire lizards weren't as discriminating as dragons for there wasn't much to offer them in

this motley group. Then Kylara remembered that that brat of Brekke's had Impressed three. In that case,

anything on two legs in this room would stand a chance. It had been handed them, their one big opportunity

them to you with thoughts of affection. A dragon cannot be possessed.”

“We have fire lizards here, not dragons.”

“They are the same for our purposes,” Kylara said sharply. “Now heed me or you’ll lose the lot of

them.” She wondered why she’d bothered to sweat and toil and bring him a gift, an opportunity which he

was obviously unable to accept or appreciate. And yet, if she had a gold and he a bronze, when they mated

it ought to be worth her troubles. “Shut out any thought of fear or profit,” she told the listening circle. “The

first puts a dragon off, the second he can’t understand. As soon as one will approach you, feed it. Keep

feeding it. Get it on your hand, if possible, and move to a quiet corner and keep feeding it. Think how much

you love it, want it to stay with you, how happy its presence makes you. Think of nothing else or the fire

lizard will go between. There’s just the short time between its hatching and its first big meal in which to

make Impression. You succeed or you don’t. It’s up to you.”

“You heard what she said. Now do it. Do it right. The man who fails — ” Meron’s voice trailed off

“Laughter is better than threats, Lord Meron. Even you can’t order the preference of Dragonkind.

And tell me, good Lord Meron, will you be subject to the same dire un-speakable punishment if you fail?”

Meron grabbed her arm in a painful grip, his eyes riveted on the cracks now showing in one of his

chosen eggs. He snapped his fingers for meat. Blood oozed from the raw handful as he knelt by the eggs,

his body bowed tautly in his effort to effect an Impression.

Trying to show no concern, Kylara rose languidly from her chair. She strolled to the table and

picked over the meaty gobbets until she had a satisfactory heap on the trencher. She signaled the tense

guardsmen to supply themselves as she moved sedately back to the hearth.

She could not suppress her own excitement and heard Prideth warbling from the heights above the

Hold. Ever since Kylara had seen the tiny fledglings F’nor and Brekke had Impressed, she had craved one

of these dainty creatures. She would never understand that her imperious nature had subconsciously fought

easily control — and physically

dominate in a way she could not dominate Prideth.

And in presenting these fire-lizard eggs to a Holder, particularly the most despised Holder of all,

Meron of Nabol, Kylara struck back at all the ignominies and imagined slights she had endured at the hands

of both dragonmen and Pernese. The most recent insult — that the dishfaced fosterling of Brekke's had

Impressed three, rejecting Kylara — would be completely avenged.

Well, Kylara would not be rejected here. She knew the way of it and, whatever else, she would be a

winner.

The golden egg rocked violently, and a massive crack split it lengthwise.

A tiny golden beak

appeared.

“Feed her. Don't waste time,” Meron whispered to her hoarsely.

“Don't tell me how to hatch eggs, you fool. Tend to your own.”

The head had emerged, the body struggled to right itself claws scrabbling against the wet shell.

Kylara concentrated on thoughts of welcoming affection, of joy and admiration, ignoring the cries and

Hunger, hunger, hunger was the

pulse of the creature's thoughts and Kylara, reassured by receipt of this broadcast, intensified her thoughts of love and welcome.

She had the fire-lizard queen on her hand by the fifth lure. She rose carefully to her feet, popping

food into the wide maw every time it opened, and moved away from the hearth and the chaos there.

For it was chaos, with the over anxious men making every mistake in the Record, despite her

advice. Meron's three eggs cracked almost at once. Two hatchlings immediately set upon each other while

Meron was awkwardly trying to imitate Kylara's actions. In his greed, he'd probably lose all three, she

thought with malicious pleasure. Then she saw that there were other bronzes emerging. Well, all was not

lost when her queen needed to mate.

Two men had managed to coax fire lizards to their hands and had followed Kylara's example by

removing themselves from the confused cannibalism on the hearth.

often she'd told that to weyrings

when she'd had to lecture them as Weyrwoman. Well, Brekke did that now, thank the First Egg.

"But what happens if they go between? How do we keep them?"

"You can't keep a dragon. He stays with you. You don't chain a dragon like a watch-wher, you know."

She became bored with her role as instructor and replenished her supply of meat. Then,

disgustedly observing the waste of creatures dying on the hearth, she mounted the steps to the Inner Hold.

She'd wait in Meron's chambers — there'd better be no one else there now — to see if he had, after all,

managed to Impress a fire lizard.

Prideth told her that she wasn't happy that she had transported the clutch to death on a cold, alien hearth.

"They lost more than this at Southern, silly one," Kylara told her dragon. "This time we've a pretty darling of our own."

already aloft and waiting.

“F’nor said it was urgent. It’s about the —” G’nag said.

“I’ll read it as soon as I can,” F’lar interrupted him. The man would talk your ear off. “My thanks and my apologies.”

“But, F’lar . . .” The rest of the man’s sentence was lost as Mnementh’s claws rattled against the stone of the ledge and the bronze dragon began to beat his way up.

It didn’t help F’lar’s temper to realize that Mnementh was making a gentle ascent. Lessa had been

so right when she had teased him about staying up drinking and talking with Robinton. The man was a

sieve for wine. Around midnight Fandarel had left, taking his treasure of a contraption. Lessa had wagered

that he’d never go to bed, and likely no one in his Hall would either. After extracting a promise from F’lar

that he’d get some rest soon, too, she’d retired.

He had meant to, but Robinton knew so much about the different Holds, which minor Holders were

important in swaying their Lords’ mind — essential information if F’lar was going to effect a revolution.

the root of Threadfighting from the Oldtimers. Had learned the many tricks of dodging Thread, gauging the varieties of Fall, of conserving the strength of beast and rider, of turning the mind from the horrors of a full scoring or a phosphine emission too close. What F'lar didn't realize was how his Weyr and the Southerners had improved on the teaching; improved and surpassed, as they could on the larger, stronger, more intelligent contemporary dragons. F'lar had been able, in the name of gratitude and loyalty to his peers, to ignore, forget, rationalize the Oldtimers' shortcomings. He could do so no longer as the weight of their insecurity and insularity forced him to re-evaluate the results of their actions. In spite of this disillusionment, some part of F'lar, that inner soul of a man which requires a hero, a model against which to measure his own accomplishments, wanted to unite all the dragonmen; to sweep away the Oldtimers' intractable resistance to change, their tenacious hold on the outmoded. Such a feat rivaled his other goal — and yet, the distance separating Pern and the Red Star was

Kylara was doing later.

He glanced below, squeezing his lids shut briefly as the dizzying speed affected his unfocusing

eyes. Yes, N'ton was already directing a crew of men and dragons in the removal of the sealed entrance.

With more light and fresher air flooding the abandoned corridors, exploration could go on effectively. They'd

keep Ramoth out of the way so she'd not complain that men were coming too close to her maturing clutch.

She knows, Mnementh informed his rider.

“And?”

She is curious.

They were now poised above the Star Rocks, above and beyond the watchrider, who saluted them.

F'lar frowned at the Finger Rock. Now, if a man had a proper lens, fitted into the Eye Rock, would he be

able to see the Red Star? No, because at this time of year you did not see the Red Star at that angle. Well

. . .

F'lar glanced down at the panorama, the immense cup of rock at the top of the mountain, the tail-like

Raid had sent a stiff reply in acknowledgment, Sifer a contentious rebuke, although that old fool would come round after a night's thought on the alternatives.

Ramoth dipped her wings suddenly and disappeared from sight. Mnementh followed. A cold instant

later they were wheeling above Telgar's chain of brilliant stair lakes, startlingly blue in the early morning sun..Ramoth was gliding downward, framed briefly against the water, sunlight unnecessarily gilding her bright body.

She's almost twice the size of any other queen, F'lar thought with a surge of admiration for the magnificent dragon

A good rider makes a good beast, Mnementh remarked voluntarily.

Ramoth coyly swooped into a high banking turn before matching her speed with her Weyrmate's.

The two flew, wingtip to wingtip, up the lake valleys to the Smithcraft. Behind them the terrain dropped

slowly seaward, the river which was fed by the lakes running through wide farm and pasture lands,

converging with the Great Dunto River which finally emptied into the sea.

“Swimming, indeed!” was her comment and she caught her arm around his waist.

“So I must suffer uncomforted?” But he put an arm around her shoulders and matched his long stride to hers as they crossed the distance to Terry.

“You are indeed well come,” Terry said, bowing continuously and grinning from ear to ear.

“Fandarel’s already developed a long-distance glass?” asked F’lar.

“Not quite yet,” and the Craft-second’s merry eyes danced in his tired face, “but not for want of trying all night.”

Lessa laughed sympathetically but Terry quickly demurred.

“I don’t mind, really. It’s fascinating what the fine-viewer can make visible. Wansor is jubilant and depressed by turns. He’s been raving all night to the point of tears for his own inadequacy.”

They were almost at the door of the small hall when Terry turned, his face solemn.

“I wanted to tell you how terribly I feel about F’nor. If I’d only given them that racketsy knife in the first

desist from his apologies.

The Hall, though apparently two-storied to judge by the windows, was in fact a vast single room.

There was a small forge at one of the two hearths that were centered in each end. The black stone walls,

smoothed and apparently seamless, were covered with diagrams and numbers. A long table dominated the

center of the room, its wide ends deep sand trays, the rest a conglomerate of Record skins, leaves of paper

and a variety of bizarre equipment. The Smith was standing to one side of the door, spread-legged, fists

jammed against the wide waist belt, chin jutting out, a deep frown scoring his brow. His bellicose mood was

directed toward a sketch on the black stone before him.

"It must be a question of the visual angle, Wansor," he muttered in an aggrieved tone, as if the

sketch were defying his will. "Wansor?"

"Wansor is as good as between, Craftmaster," Terry said gently, gesturing toward the sleeping body

all but invisible under skins on the outsized couch in one corner.

The Smith glanced crossly at the sleeper, grunted with resignation and only then noticed Lessa and

F'lar. He smiled down at the Weyrwoman with real pleasure.

“You come early, and I'd hoped to have some progress to report on a distance-viewer,” he said,

gesturing toward the sketch. Lessa and F'lar obediently inspected the series of lines and ovals, innocently

white on the black wall. “It is regrettable that the construction of perfect equipment is dependent on the

frailty of men's minds and bodies. I apologize . . .”

“Why? It is barely morning,” F'lar replied with a droll expression. “I will give you until nightfall before

I accuse you of inefficiency.”

Terry tried to smother a laugh; what came out was a slightly hysterical giggle..They were all somewhat startled to hear the booming gargle that was Fandarel's laugh. He nearly

knocked F'lar down with a jovial slap on the shoulder blades as he whooped with mirth.

You give me . . . until nightfall . . . before . . . inefficiency . . .” the Smith gasped between

howls.

to stoke that hulk of his with food once a week.”

Her insinuation that the Smith was a dragon was not lost on Terry, who this time began to laugh uncontrollably.

“I’ll rouse them myself. You’re all next to useless, you men,” she complained and started for the door.

Terry intercepted her, masterfully suppressing his laughter, and reached for a button in the base of a square box on the wall. In a loud voice he bespoke a meal for the Smith and four others.

“What’s that?” F’lar asked, fascinated. It didn’t look capable of sending a message all the way to Telgar.

“Oh, a loudspeaker. Very efficient,” Terry said with a wry grin, “if you can’t bellow like the Craftmaster. We have them in every hall. Saves a lot of running around.”

“One day I will fix it so that we can channel the message to the one area we want to speak to.” The

writer!"

It was difficult for Lessa and F'lar to see anything to be proud of in that mystifying jumble.

"The wallbox looks more efficient," F'lar said at length, bending to test the mixture in a pot with a finger.

The Smith struck his hand away.

"That would burn your skin as quick as pure agenothree," he exclaimed. "Based on that solution,

too. Now, observe. these tubs contain blocks of metal, one each of zinc and copper, in a watered solution

of sulfuric acid which makes the metal dissolve in such a way that a chemical reaction occurs. This gives us

a form of activity I have called chemical reaction energy. The c.r. produced can be controlled at this point,"

and he ran a finger down the metal arm which was poised over an expanse of thin grayish material, attached

at both ends to rollers. The Smith turned a knob. The pots began to bubble gently He tapped the arm and a

series of red marks of different lengths began to appear on the material which wound slowly forward. "See,

other needle at the

Masterminer's in Crom or at the Crafhall at Igen repeats the line simultaneously."

"That would be faster than dragon flight," Lessa whispered, awed. "What do these lines say?"

Where did they go?" She inadvertently touched the material with her finger, snatching it back for a quick

examination. There was no mark on her finger but a blotch of red appeared on the paper.

The Smith chuckled raspily.

"No harm in that stuff. It merely reacts to the acidity of your skin."

F'lar laughed. "Proof of your disposition, my dear!"

"Put your finger there and see what occurs," Lessa ordered with a flash of her eyes.

"It would be the same," the Smith remarked didactically. "The roll is made of a natural substance,

litmus, found in Igen, Keroon and Tillek. We have always used it to check the acidity of the earth or

solutions. As the chemical reaction energy is acid, naturally the litmus changes color when the needle

touches its surface, thus making the message for us to read."

send messages to either Crom or Igen, or both, by adjusting this dial.”

“To which did you send that?” Lessa asked, pointing to the lines.

“Neither, my lady, for the c.r. was not being broadcast. I had the dial set to receive messages, not

send. It is very efficient, you see.”

At this point, two women, dressed in the heavy wher-hide garb of smith-crafters, entered the room,

laden with trays of steaming food. One was evidently solely for the Smith’s consumption, for the woman

jerked her head at him as she placed the heavy platter on a rest evidently designed to receive it and not

disturb work in the sand tray beneath. She bobbed to Lessa as she crossed in front of her, gesturing

peremptorily to her companion to wait as she cleared space on the table. She did this by sweeping things

out of her way with complete disregard for what might be disarranged or broken. She gave the bared

surface a cursory swipe with a towel, signaled the other to put the tray down, then the two of them swept out

before Lessa, stunned by such perfunctory service, could utter a sound.

got kicked under the long table, seating himself with a fluid movement that proved he had long familiarity with such makeshift repasts.

Now that he had food before him, the Smith was eating with single-minded intensity.

“Then it is the wire-laying process that holds you up,” F’lar said, accepting the klah Lessa poured for him and Terry. “How long did it take you to extend it from here to Crom Hold, for instance?”

“We did not stick to the work,” Terry replied for his Craftmaster whose mouth was too full for speech.

“The posts were set up first by apprentices from both halls and those Holders willing to take a few hours from their own tasks. It was difficult to find the proper wire, and it takes time to extrude perfect lengths.”

“Did you speak to Lord Larad? Wouldn’t he volunteer men?”

Terry made a face. “Lord Holder Larad is more interested in how many flame throwers we can make him, or how many crops he can plant for food.”

Lessa had taken a sip of the klah and barely managed to swallow the acid stuff. The bread was

“I wonder you can achieve as much as you do if you have to survive on this,” she went on, ignoring

F’lar’s reprimand.

“What’s your wife’s name?”

“Lessa,” F’lar repeated, more urgently.

“No wife,” the Smith mumbled, but the rest of his sentence came out more as bread crumbs than

words and he was reduced to shaking his head from side to side.

“Well, even a headwoman ought to be able to manage better than this.”

Terry cleared his mouth enough to explain. “Our headwoman is a good enough cook but she’s so

much better at bringing up faded ink on the skins we’ve been studying that she’s been doing that instead.”

“Surely one of the other wives . . .”

Terry made a grimace. “We’ve been so pressed for help, with all these additional projects,” and he

waved at the distance-writer, “that anyone who can has turned crafter —” He broke off, seeing the consternation on Lessa’s face.

“Well, I’ve women sitting around the Lower Cavern doing make-work. I’ll have Kenalas and those

managed Benden Weyr's domestic affairs. "I'm making a decent brew of klah. How you could have choked down such bitter dregs as this is beyond my comprehension!" She swept out the door, pot in hand, her angry monologue drifting back to amused listeners.

"Well, she's right," F'lar said, laughing. "This is worse than the worst the Weyr ever got."

"To tell the truth, I never really noticed before," Terry replied, staring at his plate quizzically.

"That's obvious."

"It keeps me going," the Smith said placidly, swallowing a half-cup of klah to clear his mouth.

"Seriously, are you that short of men that you have to draft your women, too?"

"Not short of men, exactly, but of people who have the dexterity, the interest some of our projects require," Terry spoke up, in quick defense of his Craftmaster.

"I mean no criticism, Master Terry," F'lar said, hastily.

"We've done a good deal of reviewing of the old Records, too," Terry went on, a little defensively

illegible now . . .”

“I contend that we lost more than was saved and useful. Some skins were worn out with handling and their message obliterated.”

The two smiths seemed to be exchanging portions of a well-rehearsed complaint.

“Did it never occur to you to ask the Masterharper for help in transcribing your Records?” asked

F’lar.

Fandarel and Terry exchanged startled glances.

“I can see it didn’t. It’s not the Weyrs alone who are autonomous. Don’t you Craftmasters speak to

each other?” F’lar’s grin was echoed by the big Smith, recalling Robin-ton’s words of the previous evening.

“However, the Harperhall is usually overflowing with apprentices, set to copying whatever Robin-ton can find

for them. They could as well take that burden from you.”

“Aye, that would be a great help,” Terry agreed, seeing that the Smith did not object.

“You sound doubtful — or hesitant? Are any Crafts secret?”

Craftmaster — would like to see all knowledge available to all who need it,” Terry said.

F’lar gazed with increased respect at the stoop-shouldered Craft-second. He’d known that Fandarel

relied heavily on Terry’s executive ability and tactfulness. The man could always be counted on to fill in the

gaps in Fandarel’s terse explanations or instructions, but it was obvious now that Terry had a mind of his

own, whether it concurred with his Craftmaster’s or not.

“Knowledge has less danger of being lost, then,” Terry went on less passionately but just as

fervently. “We knew so much more once. And all we have are tantalizing bits and fragments that do almost

more harm than good because they only get in the way of independent development.”

“We will contrive,” Fandarel said, his ineffable optimism complementing Terry’s volatility.

“Do you have men enough, and wire enough, to install one of those things at Telgar Hold in two

days?” asked F’lar, feeling a change of subject might help.

see so clearly what needs to be done, without any hedging and hemming.”

“You’ve had problems with R’mart?” asked F’lar with quick concern.

“It’s not that, Weyrleader,” Terry said, leaning forward earnestly. “You still care what happens,

what’s happening.” “I’m not sure I understand.”

The Smith rumbled something but there seemed to be no interrupting Terry.

“I see it this way, and I’ve seen riders from every Weyr by now. The Oldtimers have been fighting

Thread since their birth. That’s all they’ve known. They’re tired and not just from skipping forward in time

four hundred Turns. They’re heart-tired, bone-tired. They’ve had too much rising to alarms, seen too many

friends and dragons die, Thread-scored. They rest on custom, because that’s safest and takes the least

energy. And they feel entitled to anything they want. Their minds may be numb with too much time

between, though they think fast enough to talk you out of anything. As far as they’re concerned, there’s

ours. And fought in both Times. We can see a way out, a life without Thread. They knew only one thing and they've taught us that. How to fight Thread. They simply can't see that we, that anyone, could take it just one step further and destroy Thread forever."

F'lar returned Terry's earnest stare.

"I hadn't seen the Oldtimers in just that light," he said slowly.

"Terry's absolutely right, F'lar," said Lessa. She'd evidently paused on the threshold, but moved

now briskly into the room, filling the Smith's empty mug from the pitcher of klah she'd brewed. "And it's a

judgment we ought to consider in our dealings with them." She smiled warmly at Terry as she filled his cup.

"You're as eloquent as the Harper. Are you sure you're a smith?"

"That is klah!" announced Fandarel, having drunk it all.

"Are you sure you're a Weyrwoman?" retorted F'lar, extending his cup with a sly smile. To Terry he

said, "I wonder none of us realized it before, particularly in view of recent events. A man can't fight day after

day, Turn after Turn — though the Weyrs were eager to come forward —" He looked questioningly at

“Talk makes no miracles. To effect an end to Thread we must get the dragons to the source. Terry,

pour a cup of that excellent klah for Wansor and let us attack the problem with good heart.”

As F’lar rose with Lessa, F’nor’s message rustled at his belt.

“Let me take a look at F’nor’s message, Lessa, before we go.”

He opened the closely written pages, his eye catching the repetition of “fire lizard” before his mind

grasped the sense of what he was reading.

“Impressing? A fire lizard?” he exclaimed, holding the letter so that Lessa could verify it.

“No one’s ever managed to catch a fire lizard,” Fandarel said.

“F’nor has,” F’lar told him, “and Brekke, and Mirrim. Who’s Mirrim?”

“Brekke’s fosterling,” the Weyrwoman replied absently, her eyes scanning the message as rapidly

as possible. “One of L’trel’s by some woman or other of his. No, Kylara wouldn’t have liked that!”

F’lar shushed her, passing the sheets over to Fandarel who was curious now.

“Are fire lizards related to dragons?” asked the Craft-second.

entered, immediately lost in thought.

“A good point,” F’lar said with a laugh to his remaining audience.

“F’lar? Remember that flawed piece of metal, with that garble of words?

The one with the scribble

like last night’s. It mentioned fire lizards, too. That was one of the few words that made sense.”

“So?”

“I wish we hadn’t given that plate back to Fort Weyr. It was more important than we realized.”

“There may be more at Fort Weyr that’s important,” F’lar said, gloomily.

“It was the first Weyr. Who

knows what we might find if we could search there!”.Lessa made a face, thinking of Mardra and T’ron.

“T’ron’s not hard to manage,” she mused.

“Lessa, no nonsense now.”

“If fire lizards are so much like dragons, could they be trained to go between, as dragons can, and

be messengers?” asked Terry.

“How long would that take?” asked the Smith, less unaware of his surroundings than he looked.

“How much time have we got this Turn?”

limped out of the Weyrhall.

Brekke had finally found time to see to Mirrim's wounded brown. He was so stuffed with juicy tidbits

from the hand of his overzealous nurse that he barely opened one lid when Brekke inspected him.

Numbweed worked as well on lizard as on dragon and human.

"He's doing just fine, dear," Brekke told the anxious girl, the greens fluttering on the child's shoulders

in response to her exaggerated sigh of relief. "Now, don't overfeed them. They'll split their hides."

"Do you think they'll stay?"

"With such care as you lavish on them, sweeting, they're not likely to leave. But you have chores

which I cannot in conscience permit you to shirk . . ."

"All because of Kylara . . ."

"Mirrim!"

Ashamed, the girl hung her head, but she deeply resented the fact that Kylara gave all the orders

and did no work leaving her tasks to fall to Brekke. It wasn't fair. Mirrim was very very glad that the little

lizards had preferred her to that woman.

“The green riders are bringing back some of the meat hung in the salt caves,” she said, issuing

quick instructions instead. “None of that is to go to the lizards, Mirrim. Now, mind. The boys can trap wild

wherries. Their meat is as good, if not better. We’ve no idea what effect too much red-blood meat will have

on lizards.” With that caution to inhibit Mirrim’s impulsive generosity, Brekke went out to meet F’nor.

“There’s been no rider in from Benden?” he asked her, easing the arm sling across his shoulder.

“You’d’ve heard instantly,” she assured him, deftly adjusting the cloth at his neck. “In fact,” she

added in mild rebuke, “there are no riders in the Weyr at all today.”

F’nor chuckled. “And not much to show for their absence, either. There isn’t a beach along the

coastline that doesn’t have a dragon couchant, with rider a-coil, feigning sleep.”

Brekke put her hand to her mouth. It wouldn’t do for Mirrim to hear her giggling like a weyrling.

“Oh, you laugh?”

or else he's lost it."

"You are not going between with that wound, F'nor. And if G'nag said he delivered the letter, he did.

Perhaps something has come up."

"More important than Impressing fire lizards?"

"There could be something. Threads are falling out of phase — " Brekke broke off, she oughtn't to

have reminded F'nor of that, judging by the bleak expression on his face. "Maybe not, but they've got to get the Lord Holders to supply watchers and fires and it may be F'lar is occupied with that. It certainly isn't your fault you're not there to help. Those odious Fort riders have no self-control. Imagine taking a green out of

her Weyr close to mating — " Brekke stopped again, snapping her mouth closed. "But Rannelly said 'my queen,' not 'her' queen."

The girl turned so white that F'nor thrust his good hand under her elbow to steady her.

"What's the matter? Kylara hasn't ducked Prideth out of here when she's due to mate? Where is

Kylara, by the way?"

"I don't know. I must check Wirenth. Oh, no, she couldn't be!"

She is the same age as Lessa was when Mnemeth first flew Ramoth, Canth informed him.

“Is Wirenth ready to rise?” F’nor asked his brown, stopping dead in his tracks.

Soon. Soon. Bronzes will know.

F’nor ticked over in his mind the bronze complement of Southern. The tally didn’t please him. Not

that the bronzes were few in number, a discourtesy to a new queen, but that their riders had always

contended for Kylara, whether Prideth’s mating was at stake or not. No matter whose bronze flew Wirenth,

the rider would have Brekke and the thought of anyone who had vyed for Kylara’s bed favor making love to

Brekke irritated the brown rider.

Canth’s as big or bigger than any bronze here, he thought resentfully. He had never entertained

such an invidious comparison before and ruthlessly put it out of his mind.

Now, if N’ton, a clean-cut lad and a top wingrider just happened to be in Southern? Or B’dor of Ista

Pleased with this solution, though he hadn't a notion how to accomplish it, F'nor continued along the path to Wirenth's sun-baked clearing.

He paused at the edge, affected by the sight of Brekke, totally involved with her queen. The girl

stood at Wirenth's head, her body gracefully inclined against the dragon, as she tenderly scratched the near

eye ridge. Wirenth was somnolent, one lid turning back enough to prove she was aware of the attention, her

wedge-shaped head resting on one foreleg, her hindquarters neatly tucked under and framed by her long,

graceful tail. In the sun she gleamed with an orange-yellow of excellent health — a color which would very

shortly turn a deeper-burnished gold. All too shortly, F'nor realized, for Wirenth had lost every trace of the

fatty softness of adolescence; her hide was sleek and smooth, not a blemish to suggest imperfect care. She

was an extremely well-proportioned dragon; not one bit too leggy, short-tailed or wherry-necked. Despite

her size, for she was easily the length of Prideth, she had a more lithe-some appearance. She was one of

“Yes, I think she will, my beauty. I wonder how that will affect him,” Brekke asked, her expression altering.

She stepped to one side and pointed to the tiny bronze tucked between Wirenth’s jaw and forearm.

“Can’t tell, can we?” F’nor replied and, with another series of throat-clearings, covered his savagery

at the thought of Brekke mating any of the bronze riders at Southern.

“You’re not sickening with something, are you?” she asked with concern and was abruptly

transformed back into the Brekke he knew best.

“No. Who’s going to be the lucky rider?” he heard himself asking. It was a civil enough question.

He was, after all, F’lar’s Wing-second and had a right to be curious about such matters. “You can ask for an

open flight, you know,” he added defensively.

She turned pale and leaned back against Wirenth. As if for comfort.

As if for comfort, F’nor repeated the observation to himself, and remembered, with no relief, the way

Brekke had looked at T’bor the day before. “It doesn’t matter if the rider’s already attached, you know, not in a first mating.” He blurted it out, then realized, like the greenest dolt that that was stupid. Brekke’d know

Weyr. Both are fine men with good beasts. Then you could leave Southern . . .”

Brekke’s eyes were closed and she seemed to go limp in his grasp.

“No! No!” The denial was so soft he barely heard it. “I belong here. Not — Benden.”

“N’ton could transfer.”

A shudder went through Brekke’s body and her eyes flew open. She slipped away from his grip.

“No, N’ton — shouldn’t come to Southern,” she said in a flat voice

“He’s got no use for Kylara, you know,” F’nor continued, determined to reassure her. “She doesn’t

succeed with every man, you know. And you’re a very sweet person, you know.”

With a shift of mood as sudden as any of Lessa’s, Brekke smiled up at him.

“That’s nice to know.”

And somehow F’nor had to laugh with her, at his own blundering interference, at the notion of him, a

brown rider giving advice to someone like Brekke, who had more sense in her smallest finger than he.

them that's not how it's

done, they may conform to time-honored couplings.”

“What I meant was, if the fire lizards — who seem to be miniature dragons — can be Impressed by

anyone who approaches them at the crucial moment, then fighting dragons — not just queens who don't

chew firestone anyhow — could be Impressed by women, too.”

“Fighting Thread is hard work. Leave it to men.”

“You think managing a Weyr isn't hard work?” Brekke kept her voice even but her eyes darkened

angrily. “Or plowing fields and hollowing cliffs for Holds? And . . .”

F'nor whistled. “Why, Brekke, such revolutionary thoughts from a craft-bred girl? Where women

know there's only one place for them . . . Oh, you've got Mirrim in mind as a rider?”

“Yes. She'd be as good or better than some of the male weyrlings I know,” and there was such

asperity in Brekke's voice that F'nor wondered just which boys she found so lacking. “Her ability to Impress

three fire lizards indicates . . .”

dragons on Hatching. Others are real

riders, heart and soul and mind. Dragons are the beginning and end of their ambition. Mirrim . . .”

A dragon broke into the air above the Weyr, trumpeting.

“F’lar!” With such a wingspan, it could be no other.

F’nor broke into a run, motioning Brekke to follow him to the Weyr landing field.

“No. You go. Wirenth’s waking. I’ll wait.”

F’nor was relieved that she preferred to stay. He didn’t want her to come out with that drastic theory

in front of F’lar, particularly when he wanted his half-brother to shift N’ton and B’dor here for her sake.

Anything to spare Brekke the kind of scene Kylara would throw if T’bor’s Orth flew Wirenth.

“Where is everyone?” was F’lar’s curt greeting as his brother joined him.

“Where’s Kylara?”

Mnementh can’t find Prideth. She’s not to be haring off on her own.”

“Everyone’s out trying to trap fire lizards.”

“With Thread falling out of pattern? Of all the stupidities . . . This continent is by no means

“That was inexcusable of me, F’nor. I beg your pardon.”

“Accepted, of course. That’s Orth wheeling in right now.” F’nor decided to wait before asking F’lar

what was really bothering him. He could just imagine what Raid of Benden Hold or Sifer of Bitra Hold had

had to say about new levies of manpower. Probably felt that the change of Threadfall was a personal insult,

dreamed up by Benden Weyr to annoy the faithful Holds of Pern.

T’bor landed and strode toward the waiting men.

Perhaps Brekke was not so far off in her heretical doctrine, F’nor thought. T’bor had made Southern

Weyr self-sufficient and productive, no small task. He’d obviously have made a good Holder.

“Orth said you were here, F’lar. What brings you to Southern? You heard our news about the fire

lizards?” T’bor called, brushing the sand from his clothes as he walked.

“Yes, I did,” replied F’lar in so formal a tone that T’bor’s welcoming smile faded. “And I thought

you’d heard ours, that Thread is dropping out of pattern.”

“There’s a rider along every inch of coastline, F’lar, so don’t accuse me of negligence,” T’bor said,

shell or corpse. The wherries can make fast work of anything edible.”

“Were I you, T’bor, I’d not release an entire Weyr to search for lizard eggs. There’s no guarantee

Thread will move in on this continent from the ocean.”

“But it always has. What little we get.”

“Thread fell ten hours before schedule across Lemos north when it should have fallen on Lemos

south and Telgar southeast,” F’lar told him in a hard voice. “I have since heard that Thread fell, unchecked,”

and he paused to let that sink in to T’bor’s mind, “in Telgar Hold and Crom Hold, both times out of phase

with the tables, though we do not yet know the time differential. We can’t rely on any previous

performance.”

“I’ll mount guards immediately and send the wings to sweep as far south as we’ve penetrated,” T’bor

said briskly and, shrugging into his riding jacket, trotted back to Orth. They were aloft in one great leap.

“Orth looks well,” F’lar said and then eyed his half-brother closely before he smiled, jabbing a fist

before I go back to Benden.” He glanced northeast, frowning.

“Shells, can’t I leave Benden Weyr for a week without everything falling apart?” F’nor demanded so

vehemently that F’lar stared at him in momentary surprise before he chuckled and seemed to relax. “That’s

better,” F’nor said, echoing the grin. “Come. There are a couple of the lizards in the Weyrhall and I need

some klah. I was out hunting clutches all morning myself, you know. Or would you prefer to sample some of Southern’s wine?”

“Ha!” F’lar made the exclamation a challenge.

When they entered the Weyrhall, Mirrim was there alone stirring the stew in the big kettles. The two

greens were watching her from the long, wide mantel. She gave the appearance of having an odd deformity

of chest until F’nor realized that she had rigged a sling around her shoulders in which the wounded brown

was suspended, his little eyes pinpoints of light. At the sound of their boots on the paving, she swung round,

her eyes wide with an apprehension which turned to surprise as she glanced from F’nor to F’lar. Her mouth

real beauty! Canth in

miniature,” and F’lar glanced slyly at his half-brother to see if the jibe registered. “Will he recover from his

wounds — ah . . .”. “Mirrim is her name,” F’nor prompted in a bland tone that implied his brother’s memory was failing him.

“Oh, no, Weyrleader — he’s healing nicely,” the girl said with another bob.

“Full stomach, I see,” F’lar commented approvingly. He glanced at the pair huddled together on the

mantel and crooned soft encouragement. They began to preen, stretching fragile, translucent green wings,

arching their backs and emitting an echoing hum in pleasure. “You’ll have your hands full with this trio.”

“I’ll manage them, sir. I promise. And I won’t forget my duties, either,” she said breathlessly, her

eyes still wide. With a gasp, she turned to give a splashing stir to the contents of the nearest pot, then

whirled back again before the men could turn. “Brekke’s not here. Would you like some klah? Or the stew?

Or some . . .”

“Can you hear anything from the lizards?” he asked in a low voice.

“From hers, you mean? No, but I can easily see what they must be thinking from their reactions.

Why?”

“Idle question. But she’s not from a Search, is she?”

“No, of course not. She’s Brekke’s fosterling.”

“Hmmm. Then she’s not exactly proof, is she?”

“Proof of what, F’lar? I’ve suffered no head injury but I can’t follow your thought.”

F’lar gave his brother an absent smile and then exhaled wearily.

“We’re going to have trouble with the Lord Holders — they’re disillusioned and dissatisfied with the

Oldtime Weyrs and are going to balk at any more expeditious measures against Thread.”

“Raid and Sifer give you a hard time?”

“I wish it were only that, F’nor. They’d come round.” F’lar gave his half-brother a terse account of

what he’d learned from Lytol, Robinton and Fandarel the day before.

“Brekke was right when she said something really important had come up,’ F’nor said afterward.

“But . . .”

“And the Threads will wait for that?”

F’lar snorted. “They may be the lesser evil, frankly. The Threads prove to be more flexible in their ways than the Oldtimers and less trouble than the Lord Holders.”

“One of the basic troubles between Lord Holders and Weyrmen are dragons, F’lar, and those fire lizards might just ease matters.”

“That’s what I was thinking earlier, considering that young Mirrim had Impressed three. That’s really astonishing, even if she is weyrbred.”

“Brekke would like to see her Impress a fighting dragon,” F’nor said in a casual way, watching his half-brother’s face closely.

F’lar gave him a startled stare and then threw back his head and laughed.

“Can you . . . imagine . . . T’ron’s reaction?” . . . he managed to say.

“Well enough to spare myself your version, but the fire lizard may do the trick! And, have the added talent of keeping Hold in contact with Weyr if these creatures prove amenable to training.”

“If — if! Just how similar to dragons are fire lizards?”

detect basic emotions in the thoughts of mine and they generally inspire affection in those who handle them.”

“And they can go between?” “Grall — my little queen — did. About chewing firestone I couldn’t hazard a guess. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“And we don’t have time,” F’lar said, clenching his fists, his eyes restless with the current of his thoughts.

“If we could find a hardened clutch, all set to Hatch, in time for that wedding — that, combined with Fandarel’s gadget — ” F’nor let his sentence trail off.

F’lar got up in a single decisive movement. “I’d like to see your queen. You named her Grall?”

“You’re solid dragonman, F’lar,” F’nor chuckled, remembering what Brekke had said. “You had no trouble remembering the lizard’s name but the girls — ? Never mind, F’lar. Grall’s with Canth.”

“Any chance you could call her — here?”

F’nor considered the intriguing possibility but shook his head.

“She’s asleep, full up to the jawline.”

half-smile on his face as he

jumped down from Canth's forearm on which he'd stood to observe her.

"Hope she grows a little. Canth

could yawn and inadvertently inhale her."

Never, and the brown's comment did not need to be passed to the bronze rider.

"If we'd only an estimate of how long it would take to train them, if they are trainable. But time's as

inflexible as an Oldtimer." F'lar looked his half-brother squarely in the eye, no longer hiding the deep worry

that gnawed at him.

"Not entirely, F'lar," the brown rider said, returning his gaze steadily. "As you said, the greater evil is

the sickness in our own . . ."

A dragon's brassy scream, the klaxon of Thread attack, stopped F'nor mid-sentence. The brown

rider had swung toward his dragon, instinctively reacting to the alert, when F'lar caught him by the arm.

"You can't fight thread with an unhealed wound, man. Where do they keep firestone here?"

from Tillek and Ista had established a settlement. They acted as ground crew. By the time F'lar was equipped and aloft, T'bor was issuing the coordinates.

Thread was falling in the west, at the edge of the desert where the terrain was swampy, where

sharp broad-edged grasses were interspersed with dwarfed sponge-woods and low berry bushes. For

Thread, the muddy swamp was superb burrowing ground, with sufficient organisms on which to feed as the burrow proliferated and spread.

The wings, fully manned and in good order, went between at T'bor's command. And, in a breath,

the dragons hung again in sultry air and began to flame at the thick patches of Thread.

T'bor had signaled a low altitude entry, of which F'lar approved. But the wing movement was

upward, seeking Thread at ever higher levels as they eliminated the immediate airborne danger. Weyrfolk

and convalescents swelled the seahold group as ground crew but F'lar thought they'd need low ground

turned due north, his head barely skimming the vegetation. He back-winged so abruptly that he nearly offset

his rider. He hovered, peering so intently at the ground, that F'lar leaned over the great neck to see what

attracted him. Dragons could adjust the focus of their eyes to either great distances or close inspection.

Something moved — away, the dragon said.

The gusts of his backwinging flattened grasses. Then F'lar saw the pin-sized, black-rimmed

punctures of Thread on the leaves of the berry bushes. He stared hard, trying to discern the telltale

evidence of burrows, the upheaval of soil, the consumption of the lush swamp greenery. The bush, the

grass, the soil stood still.

“What moved?”. Something bright. It's gone.

Mnementh landed, his feet sinking into the oozing terrain. F'lar jumped off and peered closely at the

bush. Had the holes been made by droplets of hot Thread during a previous Fall? No. The leaves would

long since have dropped off. He examined every nearby hummock of grass. Not a sign of burrows. Yet

gray, gnarly taproots of the bush were thick with the black earth but not a sign of Thread.

Mystified, F'lar raised his eyes in answer to a summons from the hovering weyrlings.

They wish to know if this is the Edge of Threadfall, Mnementh reported to his rider.

"It must be further south," F'lar replied and waved the weyrlings in that direction. He stood looking

down at the overturned earth, at the grubs burrowing frantically away from sunlight. He picked up a stout

barkless branch and jabbed the earth of the trench Mnementh had made, prodding for the cavities that

meant Thread infestations. "It has to be further south. I don't understand this." He ripped a handful of the

leaves from a berry bush and sifted them through his gloves. "If this happened some time ago, rain would

have washed the char from the punctures. The damaged leaves would have dropped."

He began to work his way south, and slightly east, trying to ascertain exactly where Thread had

passage of time. He was

somewhat startled, then, to have T'bor appear overhead, announcing the end of Fall. And both men were

alarmed when the ground-crew chief, a young fisherman from Ista named Toric, verified that the Fall had

lasted a scant two hours since discovery.

“A short Fall, I know, but there’s nothing above, and Toric here says the ground crews are mopping

up the few patches that got through,” T'bor said, rather pleased with the efficient performance of his Weyr.

Every instinct told F'lar that something was wrong. Could Thread have changed its habits that

drastically? He had no precedent. It always fell in four-hour spans — yet clearly the sky was bare.

“I need your counsel, T'bor,” he said and there was that edge of concern in his voice that brought

the other to his side instantly.

F'lar scooped up a handful of the brackish water, showing him the filaments of drowned Thread.

“Ever notice this before?”

way he had come, where

ground crews moved without one belch of flame from their throwers.

“You mean, it’s like that? How far back?”

“To Threadfall Edge, an hour’s fast walk,” F’lar replied grimly. “Or rather, that’s where I assume

Thread Edge is.”

“I’ve seen bushes and grasses marked like that in these swampy deltas closer to the Weyr,” T’bor

admitted slowly his face blanched under the tan, “but I thought it was char. We mark so few infestations —

and there’ve been no burrows.”

T’bor was shaken.

Orth says there have been no infestations, Mnementh reported quietly and Orth briefly turned

glowing eyes toward the Benden Weyrleader.

“And Thread was always short-timed?” F’lar wanted to know.

Orth says this is the first, but then the alarm came late.

T’bor turned haunted eyes to F’lar.

“It wasn’t a short Fall, then,” he said, half-hoping to be contradicted.

Just then Canth veered in to land. F’lar suppressed a reprimand when he saw the flame thrower on

“Thread apparently is falling when and where it chooses.”

“How can Thread choose?” T’bor demanded with the anger of a frightened man. “It’s mindless!”

F’lar gazed up at tropical skies so brilliant that the fateful stare of the Red Star, low on the horizon, wasn’t visible.

“If the Red Star deviates for four hundred Turn Intervals, why not a variation in the way it falls?”

“What do we do then?” asked T’bor, a note of desperation in his voice. Thread that pierces and doesn’t burrow! Thread falling days out of phase and then for only two hours!”

“Put out Sweepriders, to begin with, and let me know where and when Thread falls here. As you said, Thread is mindless. Even in these new Shifts, we may find a predictable pattern.” F’lar frowned up at the hot sun; he was sweating in the wher-hide fighting clothes more suited to upper levels and cold between.

“Fly a sweep with me, F’lar,” T’bor suggested anxiously. “F’nor, are you up to it? If we missed even one burrow here . . .”

Threadfree.

The clearance made T'bor even more apprehensive, but another tour seemed pointless. The

fighting wings went between to the Weyr then, leaving the convalescents to fly straight.

As T'bor and F'lar glided in over the Weyr compound, the roofs of the weyrholds and the bare black

soil and rock of the dragonbeds flashed under them like a pattern through the leaves of the giant fellis and

spongewood trees. In the main clearing by the Weyrhall, Prideth extended her neck and wings, bugling to

her Weyrmates.

"Circle once again, Mnementh," F'lar said to his bronze. First he'd better get over the urge to beat

Kylara, and give T'bor the chance to reprimand her privately. He regretted once more, that he had ever

suggested to Lessa that she pressure that female into being a Weyrwoman. It had seemed a logical

solution at the time. And he was sincerely sorry for T'bor although the man did manage to keep her worst

“Fighting Thread with no casualties?”

I like that, Mnementh remarked.

Somehow that aspect of the day’s encounter unsettled F’lar the most.

Rather than delve into that,

F’lar judged it time to land. He didn’t relish the thought of confronting Kylara, but he hadn’t had the chance

to tell T’bor what had been happening north.

“I told you,” Kylara was saying in sullen anger, “that I found a clutch and Impressed this queen.

When I got back, there wasn’t anyone left here who knew where you’d all gone. Prideth has to have

coordinates, you know.” She turned toward F’lar now, her eyes glittering. “My duty to you, F’lar of Benden,”

and her voice took on a caressing tone which made T’bor stiffen and clench his teeth. “How kind of you to

fight with us when Benden Weyr has troubles of its own.”

F’lar ignored the jibe and nodded a curt acknowledgment.

“See my fire lizard. Isn’t she magnificent?” She held up her right arm, exhibiting the drowsing

golden lizard, the outlines of her latest meal pressing sharp designs against her belly hide.

“See, you’ve made her uneasy and she’s so near mating again.

T’bor looked dangerously close to an outburst which, as Weyrleader, he could not risk. Kylara’s

tactic was so obvious that F’lar wondered how the man could fall for it. Would it improve matters to have

T’bor supplanted by one of the other bronze riders here? F’lar considered, as he had before, throwing

Prideth’s next mating flight into open competition. And yet, he owed T’bor too much for coping with this —

this female to insult him by such a measure. On the other hand, maybe one of the more vigorous Oldtime

bronzes with a rider just sufficiently detached from Kylara’s ploys, and interested enough in retaining a

Leadership, might keep her firmly in line.

“T’bor, the map of this continent’s in the Weyrhall, isn’t it?” F’lar asked, diverting the man. “I’d like

to set the co-ordinates of this Fall in my mind. . .“

“Don’t you like my queen?” Kylara asked, stepping forward and raising the lizard right under F’lar’s

nose.

do not push others to their

limit!”

“I’ve limits, too, F’lar of Benden,” she screamed as the two men strode quickly toward the Weyrhall.

“Don’t push me. D’you hear? Don’t push me!” She kept up her curses until Prideth, now highly agitated, drowned her out with piteous cries.

At first the two Weyrleaders went through the motions of studying the map and trying to figure out where Thread might have fallen elsewhere undetected on the Southern continent. Then Prideth’s complaints died away and the clearing was vacant.

“It comes down to manpower again, T’bor,- F’lar said. There ought to be a thorough search of this continent. Oh, I’m aware,” and he held up his hand to forestall a defensive rebuttal, “that you simply don’t have the personnel to help, even with the influx of holderfolk from the mainland. But Thread can cross mountains,” he tapped the southern chain, “and we don’t know what’s been happening in these uncharted

problem.

“You’ve had more than your share of grief with that woman, T’bor. Why not throw the next flight open?”

“No!” And Orth echoed that vehement refusal with a roar.

F’lar looked at T’bor in amazement.

“No, F’lar. I’ll keep her in hand. I’ll keep myself in hand, too. But as only as Orth can fly Prideth, Kylara’s mine.”

F’lar looked quickly away from the torment in the other’s face.

“And you’d better know this, too,” T’bor continued in a heavy low voice. “She found a full clutch.

She took them to a Hold. Prideth told Orth.”

“Which Hold?”

T’bor shook his head wearily. “Prideth doesn’t like it so she doesn’t name it. She doesn’t like taking fire lizards away from the weyrs either.”

F’lar brushed his forelock back from his eyes in an irritated movement. This was the most unhealthy development. A dragon displeased with her rider? The one restraint they had all counted on was Kylara’s

another anticipating his rider's questions! And F'lar had thought he'd had problems seven Turns ago! "I can't sort this all out right now, T'bor. Please mount guards and let me know the instant you've

any news of any kind. If you do uncover another clutch, I would very much appreciate some of the eggs.

Let me know, too, if that little queen returns to Kylara. I grant the creature had reason, but if they frighten between so easily, they may be worthless except as pets."

F'lar mounted Mnementh and saluted the Southern Weyrleader, reassured by nothing in this visit.

And he'd lost the advantage of surprising the Lord Holders with fire lizards. In fact, Kylara's precipitous donation would undoubtedly cause more trouble. A Weyrwoman meddling in a Hold not bound to her own

Weyr? He almost hoped that these creatures would be nothing more than pets and her action could be soft-talked.

Still, there was the psychological effect of that miniature dragon, impressionable by anyone. That

would have been a valuable asset in improving Weyr-Hold relations.

As Mnementh climbed higher, to the cooler levels. F'lar worried most about that Threadfall. It had

western swamp. The bronze obediently brought him right to the trench his claw had made. F'lar slid from his shoulder, opening the wher-hide tunic as the humid, sticky, sun-steamed swamp air pressed against him like a thick wet skin. There was a ringing, rasping chorus of tiny sound all around him, splashings and burblings, none of which he'd noted earlier in the day. In fact, the swamp had been remarkably silent, as if hushed by the menace of Thread.

When he turned back the hummock of grass by the roots of the berry bush, the earth was untenanted, the gray roots sleekly damp. Kicking up another section, he did find a small cluster of the larvae, but not in the earlier profusion. He held the muddy ball in his hand, watching the grubs squirm away from light and air. It was then that he saw that the foliage of that bush was no longer Thread-scored. The char had disappeared and a thin film was forming over the hole, as if the bush were mending itself.

Something writhed against the skin of his palm and he hastily dropped the ball of dirt, rubbing his

would be at zenith.”

Mnementh didn't grumble but his thoughts were plain. F'lar was tired, F'lar ought to go back to

Benden and rest, talk to Lessa. Jumping between time was hard on a rider.

Cold between enveloped them and F'lar hastily closed the tunic he'd opened, but not before the cold

seemed to eat into his chest bone. He shivered, with more than physical chill, as they burst out over the

steamy swamp again. It took more than a few minutes under that blazing sun to counteract the merciless

cold. Mnementh glided briefly northward and then hovered, facing due south.

They didn't have long to wait. High above, the ominous grayness that presaged Threadfall

darkened the sky. As often as he had watched it, F'lar never rid himself of fear. And it was harder still to

watch that distant grayness begin to separate into sheets and patches of silvery Thread. To watch and to

permit it to fall unchecked on the swamp below. To watch as it pierced leaf and green, hissing as it

hummock, smoking with Thread

penetration Grubs feverishly active, populated the concourse of the roots. As he held the hummock up,

bloated grubs dropped to the ground and frantically burrowed into the earth. He dropped that clump,

uprooted the nearest bush, baring the gray, twisted rootball. It also teemed with grub life that burrowed

away from the sudden exposure to air and light. The leaves of the bush were still smoldering from Thread

puncture.

Not quite certain why, F'lar knelt, pulled up another hummock and scooped up a clump of squirming

grubs into the fingers of his riding glove. He twisted it tightly shut and secured it under his belt. Then he mounted Mnementh and gave him the coordinates of the Masterherdsman's Craffthall in

Keroon, where the foothills that rose eventually to the massive heights of Benden range gently merged with

the wide plains of Keroon Hold.

Masterherdsman Sograny, a tall, bald, leathery man so spare of flesh that his bones seemed held in

importance of the event, F'lar

thought it odd that no one had left his tasks. He was led past neat cots of immaculately cleaned stone, well-tended

gardens, past forcing sheds and equipment barns. F'lar thought of the absolute chaos that prevailed

at the Smith's, but then remembered what marvels that man accomplished.

"You've a problem for the Masterherdsman, have you, Weyrleader?" Sograny asked, giving F'lar a

curt nod, his eyes on the laboring beast in the box stall. "How does that happen?"

The man's attitude was so defensive that F'lar wondered what D'ram of Ista Weyr might have been

doing to irritate him.

"Mastersmith Fandarel suggested that you would be able to advise me, Masterherdsman," F'lar

replied, no trace of levity in his manner and no lack of courtesy in his address.

"The Smithcrafter?" Sograny looked at F'lar with narrowed, suspicious eyes. "Why?"

“Agreed, but he can Impress one. And certainly did. We believe that the fire lizards are directly related to the dragons.”

“That cannot be proved!” Sograny pulled himself straight up, his eyes darting toward his assistants who suddenly found tasks far from F’lar and the Masterherdsman.

“By inference, yes. Because the similar characteristics are obvious. Seven fire lizards were

Impressed on the sands of a beach at Southern. One by my Wing-second, F’nor, Canth’s rider . . .”

“F’nor? The man who fought those two thieving weyrmen at the Smith-crafthall?”

F’lar swallowed his bile and nodded. That regrettable incident had hatched an unexpected brood of benefits.

“The fire lizards exhibit undeniable draconic traits. Unfortunately, one of them is to stay close to their Impressor or I’d have proof positive.”

Sograny only grunted, but he was suddenly receptive.

“I was hoping that you, as Masterherdsman, might know something about the fire lizards. Igen

probability.

“Well, they weren’t bred up from watch-whers.”

“Man can alter size but only so far. He can, of course, breed the largest to the largest and improve

on the original stock,” and Sograny gestured toward the long-legged cow. “But to breed a dragon from a fire lizard? Absolutely impossible.”

F’lar wasted no further time on that subject but took the glove from his belt and emptied the grubs into the other, gloved palm.

“These, sir. Have you seen such as these . . .”

Sograny’s reaction was immediate. With a cry of fear, he grabbed F’lar’s hand, tumbling the grubs

to the stone of the barn. Yelling for agenothree, he stamped on the squirming grubs as if they were essence of evil.

“How could you — a dragonman — bring such filth into my dwellings?” “Masterherdsman, control yourself!” F’lar snapped, grabbing the man and shaking him. “They

devour Thread. Like sandworms. Like sandworms!”

wasted on the man. Sograny

turned back to his laboring cow as though F'lar had never interrupted him.

F'lar strode off, pulling on his gloves, his forefinger coming into contact with the wet, slippery body of a grub.

“See the Masterherdsman, eh?” he muttered under his breath, waving aside the services of the

guide as he left the breeding barn. A bellow from a herdbeast followed him out. “Yes, he breeds animals,

but not ideas. Ideas might waste time, be useless.”

As he and Mnementh circled upward, F'lar wondered how much trouble D'ram was having with that

old fool.

CHAPTER IX

Afternoon at Southern Weyr: Same Day

IT WAS a long flight, the straight way, from the western swamps to Southern Weyr's headland. At

first, F'nor rebelled. A short hop between would not affect his healing arm, but Canth became unexpectedly

The brown rider had noticed the widespread Thread-scoring. He had turned back bush after bush, heavily pitted by Threadmark, to find no trace of burrow at all in the swamp mud around them. Not once had he used his flame thrower. And the ground crews told him they had so little to do they wondered the Weyr called them at all. Many were from the fishing settlement and they were beginning to resent being taken from their labors, for they were trying to complete stone holds against the winter storms. They all preferred Southern to their old homes, though they did not complain against Tillek's Lord Oterel, or Lord Warbret of Ista. It had always amused F'nor that people he had scarcely met were willing to confide in him, but he had found that this was often an advantage, despite the hours he'd had to spend listening to maundering tales. One of the younger men, the ground-crew chief, Toric, informed him that he'd staked out a sandy cove near his hold. It was almost inaccessible from the landside, but he'd seen certain fire-lizard signs. He

when F'nor brusquely cut off his carping recital.

It was this curious ambivalence of Holder feeling toward dragonmen that occupied F'nor's thought.

Holder claimed that weyfolk held themselves aloof, acted patronizing or condescending, or plain arrogant

in their presence. Yet there wasn't a man or woman, Holder or Crafter, who hadn't at one time or another

wished he or she had Impressed a dragon. And in many this turned to bitter envy. Weyrmen insisted they

were superior to commoners even while they consistently exhibited the same appetites as other men for

material possessions and nubile women. Yet they did indeed refute the Crafter contention that dragonriding

was a skill no more exacting than any craft on Pern, for in no other craft did a man risk life as a matter of

course. And far worse, the loss of half his life. Reflexively, F'nor's thought sheered sharply away from any

hint of threat to the great brown he rode.

The little queen stirred inside the heavy arm sling where he had been carrying her..Young Toric, now, would lose some of his bitterness if he did Impress a fire lizard. He would feel

pierce the Oldtimers' blind parochiality. Yet even they, at a crucial moment in the sensitive awareness of

adolescence, had appealed to Dragonkind; they endured cold and possible death to fight an endless and

mindless enemy. But there was more to living than that initial achievement and that eternal alert.

Adolescence was only a step of life, not a career in itself. When one matured, one knew there was more to

living.

Then F'nor remembered that he'd not had the chance to mention Brekke's problem to F'lar. And

F'lar would probably have gone back to Benden Weyr by now. F'nor upbraided himself for what was

downright interference. Comes from being a wing-second so long, he thought. You cannot go around

meddling in another's Weyr. T'bor had enough stress. But, by the First Egg, F'nor hated to think of the

scenes Kylara would subject Brekke to, if Orth flew Wirenth.

He grew restless with traveling and wasn't even amused when Canth began to croon soothingly.

ately. He stood aside watching

until the brown settled himself in the warmth of his dusty wallow.

Grall peeked out of the folds of the sling and F'nor transferred her to his shoulder. She squeaked a

protest as he strode quickly toward Brekke's weyrhold and dug her claws into the shoulder pad for balance.

She was thinking hungry thoughts.

Brekke was feeding her lizard, Berd, when F'nor entered. She smiled as she heard Grall's shrill

demand, and pushed the bowl of meat toward F'nor.

"I was worried that you might fly between."

"Canth wouldn't let me."

"Canth has sense. How's the arm?"

"Took no hurt. There wasn't much to be done."

"So I hear." Brekke frowned. "Everything's askew. I have the oddest sensation . . ."

"Go on," F'nor urged when she broke off. "What kind of a sensation?"
Was Wirenth about to rise?

Brekke seemed to remain untouched by so many disturbances, a serene competent personality, tranquilly

dragon? Handing out fire lizards to placate the common mass?"

"That's change. I'm talking about a disorientation, a violent upheaval . . .

."

"And your suggestions don't rank under that heading? Oh, my dear girl,"
and F'nor suddenly gave

her a long, penetrating look. Something in her candid gaze disturbed
him deeply.

"Kylara pestering you?"

Brekke's eyes slid from his and she shook her head.

"I told you, Brekke, you can request other bronzes. Someone from an-
other Weyr, N'ton of Benden

or B'dor of Ista . . . That would shut Kylara up."

Brekke shook her head violently, but kept her face averted. "Don't keep
foisting your friends on me!"

Her voice was sharp. "I like Southern. I'm needed here."

"Needed? You're being shamelessly exploited and not just by Southern-
ers!"

She stared at him, as surprised by the impulsive outburst as he was. For
one moment he thought

he understood why, but her eyes became guarded and F'nor wondered
what Brekke could want to hide.

more than you get. You don't know what a kind, generous, useful — oh, shells!" and F'nor broke off in confusion.

"Useful, worthwhile, wholesome, capable, dependable, the list is categorical, F'nor, I know the entire litany," Brekke said with a funny little catch in her voice. "Rest assured, my friend, I know what I am."

There was such a bitterness in her light words, and such a shadow in her usually candid green eyes that F'nor could not tolerate it. To erase that self-deprecation, to make amends for his own maladroitness,

F'nor leaned across the table to kiss her on the lips.

He meant it as no more than a guerdon and was totally unprepared for the reaction in himself, in Brekke. Or for Canth's distant bugle.

His eyes never leaving Brekke's, F'nor rose slowly and circled the table. He slid beside her on the bench, pulling her against him with his good arm. Her head fell back on his shoulder and he bent to the

incredible sweetness of her lips. Her body was soft and pliable, her arms went around him, pressing him to

forced her head up.

“Why have you deliberately let it be assumed that you and T’bor . . .”

She was shaking her head slightly from side to side, her eyes concealing nothing, her face a mask of sorrow.

“To keep other men from you?” F’nor demanded, giving her a little shake. “Why? Whom are you keeping yourself for?”

He knew the answer before she spoke, knew it when she placed her finger on his lips to silence him.

But he couldn’t understand her sorrow. He’d been a fool but . . .

“I have loved you since the first day I saw you. You were so kind to us, yanked away from Craft and

Hold, dazed because we’d been brought all the way here on Search for Wirenth. One of us would actually

be a Weyrwoman. And you — you were all a dragonman should be, tall and handsome, so kind. I didn’t

know then — ” and Brekke faltered. To F’nor’s concern, tears filmed her eyes. “How could I know that only bronze dragons fly queens!”

teasing voice taking the sting from his words. He patted her shoulder and sighed exaggeratedly. “And

craftbred as well. Have you taken in nothing you’ve been told about dragonfolk? Weyrwomen can’t be

bound by any commoner moralities. A Weyrwoman has to be subservient to her queen’s needs, including

mating with many riders if her queen is flown by different dragons. Most craft and holdbred girls envy such

freedom . . .”

“Of that I’m all too aware,” Brekke said and her body seemed to resent his touch.

“Does Wirenth object to me?”

“Oh, no,” and Brekke looked startled. I meant — oh, I don’t know what I meant. I love Wirenth, but

can’t you understand? I’m not weyrbred. I don’t have that kind of — of — wantonness in my nature. I’m —

I’m inhibited. There! I said it. I am inhibited and I’m terrified that I’ll inhibit Wirenth. I can’t change all of me

to conform to Weyr customs. I’m the way I am.”

F’nor tried to soothe her. He wasn’t sure now how to proceed, for this over wrought girl was a

never saw any man I wanted to

— to have — ” The word was an aspirated whisper. “Not that way. Not until I saw you. I don’t want any

other man to possess me. I’ll freeze. I won’t be able to draw Wirenth back. And I love her. I love her so

and she’ll be rising soon and I can’t . . . I thought I’d be able to, but I know I’ll . . .”.She tried to break away from him, but even with one arm the brown rider was stronger. Trapped,

she began to cling to him with the strength of utter despair.

He rocked her gently against him, removing his arm from the sling so he could stroke her hair.

“You won’t lose Wirenth. It’s different when dragons mate, love. You’re the dragon, too, caught up

in emotions that have only one resolution.” He held her tightly as she seemed to shrink with revulsion from

him as well as the imminent event. He thought of the riders here at Southern, of T’bor, and he experienced

a disgust of another sort. Those men, conditioned to respond to Kylara’s exotic tastes, would brutalize this

inexperienced child.

He wanted to be gentle but, unaccountably, Brekke fought him. She pleaded with him, crying out

wildly that they'd rouse the sleeping Wirenth. He wasn't gentle but he was thorough, and, in the end, Brekke

astounded him with a surrender as passionate as if her dragon had been involved.

F'nor raised himself on his elbow, pushing the sweaty, fern-entangled hair from her closed eyes,

pleased by the soft serenity of her expression; excessively pleased with himself. A man never really knew

how a woman would respond in love. So much hinted at in play never materialized in practice.

But Brekke was as honest in love, as kind and generous, as wholesome as ever; in her innocent

wholeheartedness more sensual than the most skilled partner he had ever enjoyed. Her eyes opened, met

his in a wondering stare for a long moment. With a moan, she turned her head, evading his scrutiny

“Surely no regrets, Brekke?”

“Oh, F'nor, what will I do when Wirenth rises?”

compromised her values and was probably destroying her.

Instinctively his confused thoughts reached out to Canth, and he found himself trying to suppress

that contact. Canth must never know his rider could fault him for not being a bronze.

I am as large as most bronzes, Canth said with unruffled equanimity. Almost as if he was surprised

he had to mention the fact to his rider. I am strong. Strong enough to out last any bronze here.

F'nor's exclamation roused Brekke.

"There's no reason Canth can't fly Wirenth. By the Shell, he could out fly any bronze here. And

probably Orth, too, if he puts his mind to it."

"Canth fly Wirenth?"

"Why not?"

"But browns don't fly queens. Bronzes do."

F'nor hugged her fiercely, trying to impart his jubilation, his almost inarticulate joy and relief.

"The only reason browns haven't flown queens is that they're smaller. They don't have the stamina

She permitted him to caress her but there was a shadow lingering in her eyes and a reluctance in her body.

“I want to, oh how I want to, F’nor, but I’m so scared. I’m scared to my bones.”

He kissed her deeply, ruthlessly employing subtleties to arouse her. “Please, Brekke?”

“It can’t be wrong to be happy, can it, F’nor?” she whispered, a shiver rippling along her body.

He kissed her again, using every trick learned from a hundred casual encounters to wed her to him, body, soul and mind, aware of Canth’s enthusiastic endorsement.

Seething with fury, Kylara watched the men walk off and leave her, standing in the clearing. Her

conflicting emotions made it impossible for her to retaliate suitably, but she’d make them both regret their words. She’d pay F’lar back for losing the lizard queen. She’d score T’bor for daring to reprimand her, the

Weyrwoman of Southern, of the Telgar Bloodline, in the presence of F’lar. Oh, he’d regret that insult.

They’d both regret it. She’d show them.

her queen.

“Your color isn’t good,” she said, her stream of mental vituperation deflected by the habit of concern

for Prideth’s well-being and the instinctive awareness that she must not alienate her dragon.

Well, she didn’t want to have to look at Brekke’s broad commoner face. She certainly didn’t want to

see a lizard. Not now. Horrible creatures, no gratitude. No real sensitivity or the thing would have known it

was only being shown off. Prideth jumped them to the Feeding Ground and landed so smartly that Kylara

gave a gasp of pain as her arm was jarred. Tears formed in her eyes. Prideth, too?

But Prideth gave a flying jump to the back of a fat, stupid herdbeast and began to feed with a

savagery that fascinated Kylara out of her self-pity. The queen finished the beast with ravenous speed. She

was upon a second buck and disemboweling it so voraciously that Kylara could not escape the fact that she

had indeed been neglecting Prideth. She felt herself caught up in the hunger and vicariously dissipated her

“Forgive me, Prideth. I didn’t mean to neglect you. But they’ve slighted me so often. And a blow at me is a slam at your prestige, too. Soon they won’t dare ignore us. And we won’t stay immured in this dreary, underside Weyr. We’ll have strong men and the most powerful bronzes begging us for favors. You’ll be oiled and fed and scrubbed and scratched and pampered as you ought. You’ll see. They’ll regret their behavior.”

Prideth’s eyes were completely lidded now, and her breath came and went with a faint whistle.

Kylara glanced at the bulging belly. She’d sleep a long time with that much to content her.

“I ought not to have let her gorge so,” Kylara murmured, but there had been something so gratifying

in the way Prideth tore into her meat; as if all indignities and affronts and discourtesy had leaked out of

Kylara as blood from the slaughtered animals had seeped into the pasture grass.

Her arm began to hurt again. She’d removed the wher-hide tunic to groom Prideth, and sand and

ished by the rippling quality of the

girl's voice. She peered in, unobserved, because Brekke had eyes only for the dark head bent toward her.

F'nor! And Brekke?

The brown rider raised his hand slowly, stroked back a wayward strand of hair from Brekke's cheek

with such loving tenderness that there was no doubt in Kylara's mind that they had only recently been

lovers.

Kylara's half-forgotten anger burst into cold heat. Brekke and F'nor! When F'nor had repeatedly

turned aside her favors? Brekke and F'nor indeed!

Because Kylara moved on, Canth did not tell his rider.

CHAPTER X

Early Morning in Harpercrafthall at

Fort Hold

Afternoon at Telgar Hold. Robinton, Masterharper of Pern, adjusted his tunic, the rich green pile of the fabric pleasing to the

touch as well as the eye. He turned sideways, to check the fit of the tunic across his shoulders.

boots were a shade darker. They fit

snug to his calf and foot.

Green! Robinton grinned to himself. Neither Zurg nor Belesdan had been in favor of that shade,

though it was easily obtainable. About time we shed another ridiculous superstition, Robinton thought.

He glanced out of his window, checking the sun's position. It was above the Fort range now. That

meant mid-afternoon at Telgar Hold and the guests would be gathering. He'd been promised transport.

T'ron of Fort Weyr had grudgingly acceded to that request, though it was a tradition of long standing that the

Harper could request aid from any Weyr.

A dragon appeared in the northwest sky.

Robinton grabbed up his overcloak — the dress tunic would never keep out the full cold of between

— his gloves and felted case that contained the best gitar. He'd hesitated about bringing it. Chad had a fine

instrument at Telgar Hold, but fine wood and gut would not be chilled by those cold seconds of between as

mere flesh would.

does?) at Telgar Hold, where he'd expected it.

Green, blue — and ah-ha — bronze dragon wings in the early morning sun.

“Sebell, Talmor, Brudegan, Tagetarl, into your fine rags. Hurry or I'll skin you and use your lazy

innards for strings,” Robinton called in a voice that projected into every room facing the Court.

Two heads popped out of an upper window of the apprentice barracks, two more at the journeyman's Hold.

“Aye, sir.” “Coming, sir.” “In a moment!”

Yes, with four harpers of his own, and the three at Telgar Hold — Sebell played the best bass line,

not to mention Chad the Telgar Harper improvising in the treble — they'd have a grand loud group.

Robinton tossed his overcloak to his shoulder, forgetting that the pile of the green tunic might crush, and

grinned sardonically at the wheeling dragons. He half-expected them all to wink out again at the discovery of this multiplicity.

was obvious that's where the
beasts were landing.

The bronze landed last, which canceled that method of impartial choice.
The three riders met mid-field,
some few dragonlengths from the disputed passenger. Each man began
arguing his claim at once.

When the bronze rider became the target of the other two, Robinton felt
obliged to intervene.

"He's weyrbound to Fort Weyr. We have the right," said the green rider
indignantly.

"He's guest of Telgar Hold. Lord Holder Larad himself requested . . ."

The bronze rider (Robinton recognized him as N'ton, one of the first
non-weyrbred to Impress a
dragon at Benden Weyr Turns ago) appeared neither angry nor discon-
certed.

"The good Masterharper will know the right of it," and N'ton bowed gra-
ciously to Robinton.

The others gave him scarcely a glance but renewed their quarrel.

"Why, there's no problem at all," Robinton said in the firm, decisive tone
he rarely employed and
which was never contradicted.

“I was told to take you,” the Fort Weyr man said in a sour voice.

“And took such joy of the assignment, it has made my morning merry,”

Robinton replied crisply. He

saw the smug look on the blue rider’s face. “And while I appreciate Weyrleader R’mart’s thoughtfulness in

spite of his recent — ah — problems at Telgar Hold, I shall ride the Benden Weyr dragon. For they do not

grudge the Masterharper the prerogative.”

His craftsmen came racing out of the Hall, riding cloaks askew on their shoulders, fitting their

instruments in felt wrappings as they came. Robinton gave each a cursory glance as they came to a ragged

line in front of him, breathless, flushed and, thank the Shell, happy. He nodded toward Sebell’s pants,

indicated that Talmor should adjust his twisted belt, approved Brudegan’s immaculate appearance, and

murmured that Tagetarl was to smooth his wild hair.

“We’re ready, sirs,” Robinton announced and, giving a curt bow of his head to the other riders,

turned on his heel to follow N’ton.

“I’ve half a mind — ” the green rider began.

be played around the land.

There were no further protests. And Robinton was rather pleased to notice that N'ton gave no

indication that there'd been any display of ill nature.

Robinton on N'ton's bronze arrived in the air, facing the cliff-palisade that was Telgar Hold. The

swift river that had its source in the great striding eastern range of mountains had cut through the softer

stone and made a deep incision that gradually widened until a series of high palisades flanked the green,

wide Telgar valley. Telgar Hold was situated in one such soaring palisade, at the apex of a slightly

triangular section of the cliffs. It faced south, with sides east and west and its hundred or so windows, on

five distinct levels, must make pleasant and well lit rooms. All had the heavy bronze shutters which marked

Telgar Hold for a wealthy one.

Today the three cliff faces of Telgar Hold were brilliant with the pennants of every minor Hold which

had ever aligned its Blood with theirs. The Great Court was festooned with hundreds of flowering branches

superfluous; every Harper who could must have wangled his way in here today. Maybe it would be a happy occasion, after all.

I'll concentrate on positive, happy thoughts, Robinton mused to himself, coining Fandarel's phrase.

"You'll be staying on, N'ton?"

The young man grinned back at the Harper, but there was a serious shadow in his eyes. "Lioth and

I have a sweep to ride, Master Robinton," he said, leaning forward to slap his bronze affectionately on the

neck. "But I did want to see Telgar Hold, so when Lord Asgenar asked me to oblige him by bringing you, I was glad of the chance."

"I, too," Robinton said in farewell, as he slid down the dragon's shoulder. "My thanks to you, Lioth, for a smooth journey."

The Harper has only to ask.

Startled, Robinton glanced up at N'ton, but the young man's head was turned toward a party of

brightly garbed young women who were walking up from the pasture.

was a bit glassy in the

eye. “Brudegan, you know the hall. Take them to the Harper’s room so they’ll know their way. And take my

instrument, too. I’ll not need it until the banquet. Then, lads, you’re to mingle, play, talk, listen. You know

the ditties I’ve been rehearsing. Use them..You’ve heard the drum messages. Utilize them. Brudegan, take Sebell with you, it’s his first public

performance. No, Sebell, you’d not be with us today if I’d no faith in your abilities. Talmor, watch that

temper of yours. Tagetarl, wait until after the banquet to charm the girls. Remember, you’ll be a full Harper

too soon to jeopardize a good Holding. All of you, mind the distilled wines.”

He left them so advised and went up the busy ramp into the Great Court, smiling and bowing to

those he knew among the many Holders, Craftsmen and ladies passing to and fro.

Larad, Lord of Telgar Hold, resplendent in dark yellow, and the bridegroom Asgenar, Lord of Lemos,

in a brilliant midnight blue, stood by the great metal doors to the Hold’s Main Hall. The women of Telgar

oughtn't to look as if he smelled

something distasteful. Probably not the vicinity, but his neighbors. Sograny disapproved of wasting time.

Masterweaver Zurg and his nimble wife moved constantly from group to group. Robinton wondered if they

were inspecting fabric and fit. Hard to tell, for Weaver Zurg and spouse nodded and beamed at everyone with good-natured impartiality.

Masterminer Nigot was deep in talk with Mastertanner Belesden and the Masterfarmer Andemon,

while their women formed a close conversation knot to one side. Lord Corman of Keroon was apparently

lecturing the nine young men ringing him: sons, foster and blood undoubtedly, since most of them bore the

old man's nosy signature. They must be recently arrived for, at a signal from him, the boys all smartly

turned on their heels and followed their parent, right up to the steps. Lord Raid of Benden was talking to his

host and, seeing Corman approach, bowed and stepped away. Lord Sifer of Bitra gestured for Lord Raid to

most of them leaped skyward again, toward the fire ridges above the Hold.

Robinton made his way hastily to his host then, before the newest arrivals swarmed up the ramp to the Great Court.

There was a hearty cheerfulness about Lord Larad's greeting that masked a deep inner anxiety. His

eyes, blue and candid, restlessly scanned the Court. The Lord of Telgar was a handsome man though there

was scant resemblance between him and his only full sibling, Kylara. Evidently it was Kylara who had

inherited their sire's appetites. Just as well.

"Well come, Master Harper, we all look forward to your entertaining songs," Lord Larad said,

according the Harper a deep bow.

"We shall play in tune with the times and the occasion, Lord Larad," Robinton replied, grinning

broadly at such bluntness. They both heard the ripple of music as the young harpers began to move among

the guests.

ness, to have and to hold.”

The girl blushed prettily, glancing shyly at Lord Asgenar. Her eyes were as blue as her half-brother’s.

She had her hand on Asgenar’s arm, having known him a long time. Larad and Asgenar had

been fosterlings at the Hold of Lord Corman of Keroon, though Larad had been elected earlier to his

dignities than Asgenar. There’d be no problem with this wedding, although it remained for the Conclave of

Lord Holders to ratify it, since the progeny of this marriage might one day Hold either Telgar or Lemos. A

man cast his seed widely if he was a Lord Holder. He had many sons in the hope that one male of his Blood

would train up strong enough to be acceptable to the Conclave, when the question of Succession arose.

Not that that ancient custom was as scrupulously observed as it had been. The wise Lord extended

fosterage to the Blooded children of other Lords, to gain support in Conclave as well as to insure his own

progeny being well-fostered.

that the discussion wouldn't be

limited to the Bloodlines of Telgar and Lemos Holds.)

So he wandered, every perception tuned high, every nuance, shrug, laugh, gesture and frown

weighed and measured. He observed the groupings, who shifted between the lines of region, craft and

rank. When he realized he had seen nothing of the Mastersmith Fandarel or his Craft-second, Terry, or,

indeed, any smithcrafters, he began to wonder. Had Fandarel's distance-writer been installed? He took a

look down the side of the Hold and could see no posts as had been described to him. He chewed

thoughtfully at a rough spot on his lower lip.

Voices and laughter seemed to have a strident edge. From his detached vantage point, he

surveyed the Great Court, now so full it appeared as a moving carpet of solid bodies, here and there a tight

knot of bent heads. As if — as if everyone were determined to enjoy themselves, frantically grasping

pleasure . . .

Bloods of Telgar Hold and drew

Robinton further from the nearest guests.

“How do you think the Lords will react to Lord Meron of Nabol?”

“React to Meron?” Robinton snorted derisively. “By ignoring him, of course. Not that his opinion

would influence the Conclave . . .”

“I don’t mean that. I mean his possession of a fire lizard — ” Lytol broke off as the Harper stared at

him. “You didn’t hear? The messenger went through Ruatha Hold yesterday, bound for Fort Hold and your

Craffhall.”

“He missed me or — was he free with his news?”

“To me, yes. I seem to attract confidences . . .”

“Fire lizard? What about them? I used to spend hours trying to catch one. Never did In fact I never

heard of one being caught. How did Meron manage the trick?”

Lytol grimaced, the tic beginning in his cheek. “They can be Impressed. There always was that

nursery tale that fire lizards are the ancestors of dragons.”

“And Meron of Nabol Impressed one?”

a draconic trait.”

“How Lord Meron of Nabol acquired one is what bothers me the most,” Lytol said, glowering. “That

Southern Weyrwoman, Kylara, brought him a whole clutch of eggs. Of course, they lost most in the

Hatching, but the few that survived are making quite a stir in Nabol Hold. The messenger had seen one,

and he was all bright-eyed in the telling. ‘A regular dragon in miniature’ he said, and he’s all for trying his

luck on the sandy beaches in Southern Boll and Fort from the gleam in his eye.”

“ ‘A regular dragon in miniature,’ huh?” Robinton began to turn the significance of this around in his

mind. He didn’t like the angles he saw.

There wasn’t a boy alive on Pern that hadn’t at one time dreamed of suddenly becoming acceptable

to Dragonkind, of Impressing. Of having at his beck and call (little dreaming it was more the other way

round) an immense creature, capable of going anywhere on Pern in a breath, of defeating all enemies with

become Lord Holders, unless they were properly Blooded. But there was always that tantalizing possibility

that a dragonrider might choose you to go to the Weyr for an Impression. So generations of boys had vainly

tried to catch a fire lizard, symbolic of that other yearning..And a “regular miniature dragon” in the possession of a sly-faced underhanded malcontent like

Meron of Nabol, who was sour about dragonmen anyway (with some justification in the matter of the Esvay

valley against T'kul of the High Reaches Weyr), could be an embarrassment for F'lar at the least, and might

disrupt their plans for the day at the worst.

“Well, if Kylara brought the fire-lizard eggs to Nabol Hold, F'lar will know,” Robinton told the worried

Lord Warder. “They keep pretty close tabs on that woman.”

Lytol's glower deepened. “I hope so. Meron of Nabol will certainly let no chance pass to irritate or

embarrass F'lar. Have you seen F'lar?”

They both glanced around, hopefully. Then Robinton caught sight of a familiar grizzled head,

bobbing toward himself and the Warder.

have no choice but to sing it. He felt no compunction about leaving Lytol exposed to Lord Raid's pompous manner. Lytol enjoyed an unusual status with the Lord Holders. They weren't certain how to treat a man who'd been a dragonrider, Weaverhallmaster, and was now Lord Warder of a Ruatha prospering under his guidance. He could deal with Raid.

The Masterharper halted at a point where he could look up at the cliff, trying to spot Ramoth or Mnementh among the dragons lining the edge.

Fire lizards? How was Meron going to use a fire lizard? Unless it was because Kylara, a Weyrwoman, had given him one. Yes. That was guaranteed to sow dissension. Undoubtedly every Lord Holder here would want one, so as to be equal to Meron. There couldn't be enough eggs to go around.

Meron would capitalize on forgotten yearnings, and chalk up one more irritation against dragonmen.

Robinton found that the meatrolls sat heavily in his stomach. Suddenly Brudegan detached himself

stance, they refer to 'that

Weyrleader' meaning their own weyrbound leader. 'The Weyrleader' always means F'lar of Benden. 'The

Weyrleader' had understood. 'The Weyrleader' had tried. 'She' means Lessa. 'Her' means their own

Weyrwoman. Interesting?"

"Fascinating. What's the feeling about Threadfall?"

Brudegan bent his head to the gitar, twanged strings discordantly. He drew his hand across all eight

in a dissonant chord that ran a chill down the Masterharper's spine. Then Brudegan turned away with a gay

song.

Robinton wished that F'lar and Lessa would arrive. He did see D'ram of Ista Weyr talking earnestly

to Igen's Weyrleader, G'narish. He liked that pair best of the Oldtimers, G'narish being young enough to

change and D'ram essentially too honest to deny a truth when his nose was in it. Trouble was, he kept his

nose inside Ista Weyr too much.

Neither man looked at ease, as much because there was an island of empty space around them —

“Have you seen T’ron or T’kul about? We just arrived.”

“No, in fact, none of the western people seem to be here except Lord Warder Lytol of Ruatha.”

D’ram clenched his teeth with an audible snap.

“R’mart of Telgar can’t come,” the Oldtimer said. “He took a bad scoring.”

“I’d heard it was wicked at Crom Hold,” Robinton murmured, sympathetically. “No way to predict it’d fall there at that time, either.”

“I see Lord Nessel of Crom and his Holders are here in strength, though,” D’ram said, his voice

bitter..“He could scarcely stay away without insulting Lord Larad. How bad were the Telgar Weyr’s casualties? And if R’mart’s out of action, who’s leading?”

D’ram gave the Harper the distinct feeling that he’d asked an impertinent question, but G’narish answered easily.

“The wing-second, M’rek, took over but the Weyr is so badly under strength that D’ram and I talked it

over and sent replacements. As it happens, we’ve enough weyrlings who’ve just started chewing stone so

tion, Weyrleaders,” Robinton

said. “Tell me, though, have you had any luck Impressing some fire lizards? Igen and Ista ought to be good hunting grounds.”

“Impressing? Fire lizards?” D’ram snorted with as much incredulity as Robinton had expressed earlier.

“That’d be a trick,” G’narish laughed. “Look, there’s Ramoth and Mnementh now.”

There was no mistaking the two beasts who were gliding to the fire heights. It was also

unmistakable that the dragons already perched on the pinnacle moved aside to make room for them.

“Now, that’s the first time — ” G’narish muttered under his breath and stopped, because a sudden

lull in the conversation had swept through the assembly, punctuated by audible hushings and scrapings as people turned to the Gate.

Robinton watched, with fond pride, as Lessa and F’lar mounted the steps to their hosts. They were

Gate. There was a spate of screams and angry protests from those discommoded which settled into an ominous murmur.

Robinton, his height giving him an advantage, noticed Lord Larad hesitate in the act of bowing to

Lessa. He saw Lord Asgenar and the ladies staring intently beyond. Irritated that he was missing something, Robinton pushed urgently on.

He broke through to the corner of the stairs, took the first four in two big strides and halted.

Resplendent in red, her golden hair unbound like a maiden's, Kylara approached the Hall entrance,

her smile composed of pure malice, not pleasure. Her right hand rested on the arm of Lord Meron of Nabol

Hold, whose red tunic was slightly too orange in cast to blend with hers. Such details Robinton remembered

at another time. Now all he saw were the two fire lizards, wings slightly extended for balance; a gold one on

Kylara's left arm, a bronze on Meron's. "Regular miniature dragons," beautiful, evoking a feeling of envy and

The golden lizard screamed at his approach, and the little bronze hissed in warning. There was an irritatingly smug smirk on Meron's face.

"Did you know Meron had one?" D'ram demanded in a harsh whisper at the Harper's elbow.

Robinton raised a hand to still further questions.

"And here come Kylara of Southern and Lord Meron of Nabol Hold with living examples of this small

token of our best wishes for the happy couple," F'lar's voice rang out.

Utter silence fell as he and Lessa presented felt-wrapped round bundles to Lord Asgenar and his

bride, Lady Famira.

"They are just now hard," F'lar said in a loud voice that carried over the murmurings, "and must be

kept in heated sands to crack, of course. They come to you through the generosity of one Toric, a

seaholder at Southern Weyr, from a clutch he discovered only hours ago. Weyrleader T'bor brought them to me."

Robinton glanced back at Kylara. Her flushed face now matched Meron's tunic while he looked

had all they could do to soothe their creatures. To Robinton it was plain that whatever effect Meron of Nabol

had planned had been foiled. He was not the only Lord Holder to own “a regular miniature dragon.”

Two minor Holders, from Nerat to judge by their devices, bore down on D’ram and G’narish.

“As you love your dragons, pretend you knew about the lizards,” Robinton said in an urgent

undertone to the two. D’ram started to protest but the anxious Holders closed in with a barrage of eager

questions on how to acquire a fire lizard just like Meron’s.

Recovering first, G’narish answered with more poise than Robinton thought he’d have. Pressing

against the stone wall, the Harper inched his way up the stairs, to push in around the women clustered

about Lord Asgenar, his lady Famira and F’lar.

“LORD HOLDERS, OF MAJOR AND MINOR DEGREE, PRESENT YOURSELVES FOR THE

CONCLAVE, boomed out the Telgar Hold guard captain. A brass chorus of dragons echoed from the

heights, satisfactorily stunning the guests into momentary silence.

against the current. She was arguing heatedly with Meron who gave an angry shrug, left her and began shoving roughly into the Hall, past more polite Holders.

There was another exodus, Robinton noticed, of Craftmasters who congregated near the kitchen.

F'lar needs the Harper.

Robinton glanced around him, wondering who had spoken amazed that so soft a voice had reached

him over the gabbling. He was alerted by a dissonant twang of strings and turning his head unerringly

toward the sound, spotted Brudegan up on the sentry walk with Chad, from the look of him. Had the

resident Harper of Telgar Hold found a way to over hear the Conclave?

As Robinton changed his direction for the tower steps, a dragonrider confronted him.

“F'lar wants you, Masterharper.”

Robinton hesitated, looking back to the two harpers who were urgently signaling him to hurry.

Lessa listens.

“Did you speak?” Robinton demanded of the rider.

“Yes, sir. F'lar wants you to join him. It's important.”

Brudegan strummed an “understand” chord with which Chad apparently disagreed. Marks for the

journeyman, Robinton thought, and whistled the strident trill for “comply.” He wished the harpers had as

flexible a code as the one he’d developed for the Smith — and where was he?

That was one man easily spotted in a crowd but, as Robinton followed the dragonrider, he didn’t see

a Smithcrafter anywhere. Of course, the impact of the distance-writer would be anticlimactic to the

introduction of the lizards. Robinton felt sorry for the Smith, quietly perfecting an ingenious means of

communication only to have it overshadowed by Thread-eating miniature dragons. Creatures who could be

impressed by non-weyfolk. The average Pernese would be far more struck by a draconic substitute than by

any mechanical miracle.

The dragonrider had led him to the watchtower to the right of the Gate. When Robinton looked back

over his left shoulder, Brudegan and Chad were no longer visible on the sentry walk.

entered. Kylara was standing right under it, glaring furiously at T'bor..“Yes, I went to Nabol. My queen lizard was there. And well I did, for Prideth saw Thread sign

across the High Reaches Range!” She had everyone’s attention now. Her eyes gleamed, her chin lifted

and, Robinton noted, the shrewish rasp left her voice. Kylara was a fine looking female, but there was a hard ruthlessness about her that repelled him.

“I flew instantly to T’kul.” Her face twisted with anger. “He’s no dragon-man! He refused to believe

me. Me! As if any Weyrwoman wouldn’t know the sign when she sees it. I doubt he’s even bothered with

Sweepriders. He kept harping on the fact that Thread had fallen six days ago at Tillek Hold and couldn’t be

falling this soon at High Reaches. So I told him about Falls in the western swamp and north Lemos Hold, and he still wouldn’t believe me.”

“Did the Weyr turn out in time?” F’lar interrupted her coldly.

“Of course,” and Kylara drew herself up, her posture tightening the dress against her full-bosomed

obliquely at D'ram and G'narish, to see

what effect T'kul's behavior had on them. Surely now . . . They looked strained.

"You're a good Weyrwoman, Kylara, and you did well. Very well," F'lar said with such conviction

that she began to preen and her smile was a smirk of self-satisfaction. Then she stared at him.

"Well, what are you going to do about T'kul? We can't permit him to endanger the world with that

Oldtime attitude of his."

F'lar waited, half-hoping that D'ram might speak up. If just one of the Oldtimers . . .

"It seems that the Dragonriders had better call a conclave too," he said at length, aware of the

tapping of Kylara's foot and the eyes on him. "T'ron of Fort Weyr must hear of this. And perhaps we'd all

better go on to Telgar Weyr for R'mart's opinion."

"Opinion?" demanded Kylara, infuriated by this apparent evasion. "You ought to ride out of here

now, confront T'kul with flagrant negligence and . . ."

"And what, Kylara?" F'lar asked when she broke off.

pression bleak. "Something

will have to be done. By all of us. When T'ron comes."

More temporizing? F'lar wondered. "Kylara," he said aloud, "you mentioned your lizard eating

Thread." There was a lot more to be discussed in this matter than T'kul's incredible behavior. "And may I

inquire how you knew your lizard had returned to Nabol?"

"Prideth told me. She Hatched there so she returned to Nabol Hold when you frightened her at

Southern."

"You had her at High Reaches Weyr, though?"

"No. I told you. I saw Thread over the High Reach Range and went to T'kul. First! Once I'd roused

the Weyr, I realized that there might have been Thread over Nabol so I went to check."

"And told Meron about the premature Threadfall?"

"Of course."

"Then?"

"I took the lizard back with me. I didn't want to lose her again." When F'lar ignored that jibe, she

“Did you give her firestone?” D’ram asked, his eyes keen with real interest.

“I didn’t have any. Besides, I want her to mate,” and Kylara’s smile had a very odd twist to it as she

stroked the lizard’s back. “She’ll burrow, too,” she added, extolling her creature’s abilities. “A ground

crewman said he’d seen her enter one. Of course I didn’t know that until later.” “Is the High Reaches Hold clear of Thread now?”

Kylara shrugged indifferently. “If they aren’t, you’ll hear.”

“How long did Threadfall continue after you saw it? Were you able to determine the leading Edge

when you flew over to Nabol?”

“It lasted about three hours. Under, I’d say. That is, from the time the wings finally got there.” She

gave a condescending smile. “As to the leading Edge, I’d say it must have been high up in the Range,” and

she dared them to dispute it, hurrying on when no one did. “It’d fall on bare rock and snow there. I did

sweep the Nabol side but Prideth saw no sign.”

“You did extremely well, Kylara, and we are exceedingly grateful to you,” F’lar said, and the other

but if the Fort Weyrleader found

himself in a minority of one against the other four Leaders, would he decide to act against T'kul, even if it did

mean siding with F'lar? "At Tillek Hold, eight days ago; Upper Crom Hold, five; high Lemos Hold north,

three; Southern far west, two; and now High Reaches Hold. Undoubtedly Thread fell in the Western Sea but

there is no question that Falls are more frequent and increasing in scope. No point on Pern is safe. No

Weyr can afford to relax its vigil to a traditional six-day margin." He smiled grimly. "Tradition!"

D'ram looked about to argue, but F'lar caught and held his eyes until the man slowly nodded.

"That's easy to say, but what are you going to do about T'kul? Or T'ron?" Kylara had just realized

no one was paying her any attention. "He's just as bad. He refuses to admit times have changed. Even

when Mardra deliberately . . ."

There was a brisk knock on the door but it swung open instantly, to admit the giant frame of

Fandarel.

such creatures remain to be seen.”

“The merits —” Kylara began, ready to explode with outrage.

Robinton the Harper was beside her, whispering in her ear.

Grateful to Robinton, F’lar turned to attend the Smith, who had stepped to the door, obviously

wanting the dragonmen to accompany him. F’lar was reluctant to see the distance-writer. It wouldn’t

receive the attention it deserved from the Lords or the people or the riders. The distance-writer made so

much more sense in this emergency than unreliable lizards. And yet, if they did eat Thread . . .

He paused on the threshold, looking back toward Kylara and the Harper. Robinton looked directly at

him.

Almost as if the Harper read his mind, F’lar saw him smile winningly down at Kylara (though F’lar

knew the man detested her).

“F’lar, do you think it’s wise for Kylara to go out into that mob! They’ll scare the lizard,” said the

Harper.

F'lar to leave.

As they stepped out into the bright sunlight, the crowd swirling noisily around them, F'lar saw the

merry-faced young man, gitar in hand, who had answered the Harper's whistle. Undoubtedly Robinton

would be free to join them in a few moments if he read matters rightly. The young journeyman would

definitely appeal to Kylara's — ah — nature.

Fandarel had set up his equipment in the far corner of the Court, where the outside wall abutted the

cliff-Hold, a dragonlength from the stairs. Three men were perched atop the wall, carefully handing

something down to the group working on the apparatus. As the Weyrleaders followed Fandarel's swath through the press of bodies (the fellis blossom fragrance had long since given way to other odors), F'lar was the object of many sidelong glances and broken conversations.

"You watch, you'll see," a young man in the colors of a minor Hold was saying in a carrying voice.

"Those dragonmen won't let us near a clutch . . ."

"The Lord Holders, you mean," another said. "Fancy anything trusting that Nabolese. What? Oh.

tackle T'ron.

"Mnemoth, what is happening at the Conclave?"

Talk. They await the other two Lord Holders.

F'lar tried to see if the Fort Weyrleaders had brought the missing Lords Groghe of Fort and Sangel

of South Boll. Those two wouldn't take kindly to a Conclave adjudicating without them. But if Lord Groghe

had heard about High Reaches Hold . . .

F'lar suppressed a shudder, trying to smile with sincere apologies as he edged past a group of small

Holders who apparently couldn't see him. As if recognizing the smith-crafters as neutral, the Weyrwomen

had gathered in a wary group to the right of the mass of equipment which Fandarel's people were setting up.

They were pretending great interest, but even G'narish's pretty Weyr-mate, Nadira, looked troubled and she

was a sweet-tempered lady. Bedella, representing Telgar Weyr, looked completely confused but she wasn't

bright.

Just then Mardra broke through the guests, demanding to know what was going on. Had T'kul and

slit, widened slightly to allow the

two Lord Holders to enter. Judging by their expression, it would take time and more talk before these two were pacified.

“How much more needs to be done?” asked F’lar as he joined the Smith. He tried to remember how

the distance-writer had looked in the Hall. This collection of tubes and wire seemed much too big.

“We need only attach this wire so,” Fandarel replied, his huge fingers deftly fitting word to action,

“and that one, here. Now. I place the arm in position over the roll and we shall send out a message to the

Hall to be sure all is in order.” Fandarel beamed down at his instrument as fondly as any queen over a golden egg.

F’lar felt someone rather too close behind him and looked irritably over his shoulder to see

Robinton’s intent face. The Harper gave him an abstracted smile and nodded for him to pay attention.

The Smith was delicately tapping out a code, the irregular lengths of red lines appearing on the gray

mass movement blotted out the sun

which was lowering over the Telgar Cliffs and sent shadows over the guests to still their chatter.

Groghe told the Lords that T'ron has found a distance-viewer at Fort. He has seen the Red Star

through it. They are upset. Be warned, said Mnementh.

The doors of the Great Hall swung wide and the Lord Holders came striding out. One look at Lord

Groghe's face confirmed Mnementh's report. The Lord Holders ranged themselves on the steps, in a solid

front against the Dragonmen gathered in the corner. Lord Groghe had lifted his arm, pointed it accusingly at

F'lar, when a disconcerting hiss split the pregnant silence.

"Look!" the Smith bellowed and all eyes followed his hand as the distance-writer began receiving a

message.

"Igen Hold reports Thread falling. Transmission broken off mid-sentence."

Robinton reported the sounds as they were printed, his voice growing hoarser and less confident

The dragons bugled on the heights just as a green burst into the air over the court, causing the crowd to scream and duck, scurrying to the walls for safety.

Threads fall at Igen southwest, came the message loud and clear. To be echoed by the

Dragonriders in the court.

“Where are you going, F’lar?” bellowed Lord Groghe as the Benden Weyrleader followed G’narish’s

plunge to the Gate. The air was full of dragon wings now, the screams of frightened women counterpointing the curses of men.

“To fight Thread at Igen, of course,” F’lar shouted back.

“Igen’s my problem,” G’narish cried, halting and wheeling toward F’lar, but there was gratitude, not rebuke in his surprised face.

“G’narish, wait! Where in Igen?” Lord Laudey was demanding. He pushed past the infuriated Lord

Groghe to catch up with his Weyrleader.

“And Ista? Is the island in danger?” Lord Warbret wanted to know.

“We’ll go and see,” D’ram reassured him, taking his arm and urging him toward the Gate.

“Let Ista and Igen fend for themselves!”

Ramoth screamed on high. The other queens answered her. What she challenged no one knew,

but she suddenly winked out. F’lar had no attention to spare to wonder that she’d gone between without

Lessa riding for he saw T’ron’s hand on his belt knife.

“We can settle our difference of opinion later, T’ron. In private! Thread falls . . .”

The bronzes had begun to land outside the Gate, juggling to let as many land close as possible.

The green rider from Igen had directed his beast to perch on the Gate. He was repeatedly yelling

his message to the static, tense group below.

T’ron would not stop. “Thread falls, huh, F’lar? Noble Benden to the rescue! And it’s not Benden’s

concern.” He let out a raucous shout of derisive contempt.

“Enough, man!” D’ram stepped up to pull T’ron aside. He gestured sharply at the silent spectators.

But T’ron ignored the warning and shook him off so violently that the heavy-set D’ram staggered.

was no chance T'ron could change his direction. Then he ducked under the blade, yanking his own out of its ornamental sheath.

It was a new knife, a gift from Lessa. It had cut neither meat nor bread and must now be christened with the blood of a man. For this duel was to the death and its outcome could well decide the fate of Pern.

F'lar had sunk to a semicrouch, flexing his fingers around the hilt testing its balance. Too much

depended on a single belt knife, a half-hand shorter than the blade in his opponent's fingers. T'ron had the

reach of him and the added advantage of being in wher-hide riding gear whereas F'lar wore flimsy cloth. His

eyes never left T'ron as he faced the older man. F'lar was aware of the hot sun on the back of his neck, the

hard stones under his feet, of the deathly hush of the great Court, of the smells of bruised fellis blooms,

spilled wines and fried food, of sweat — and fear.

T'ron moved forward, amazingly light on his feet for a man of his size and age. F'lar let him come,

backward to avoid, by the thickness of a hair, the hissing stroke of the foot long blade. He backed, his arm

half-numbed, aware of the shock that coursed through him like a drenching of icy water.

For a man blind with anger, T'ron was a shade too controlled for F'lar's liking. What possessed the

man to pick a quarrel — here and now? For T'ron had pushed this fight, deliberately baiting F'lar with that

specious quibble. D'ram and G'narish had been relieved at his offer of help. So T'ron had wanted to fight.

Why? Then suddenly, F'lar knew. T'ron had heard about T'kul's flagrant negligence and knew that the

other Oldtimers could not ignore or obliquely condone it. Not with F'lar of Benden likely to insist that T'kul

step aside as Weyrleader of High Reaches. If T'ron could kill F'lar, he could control the others. And F'lar's

public deal would leave the modern Lord Holders without a sympathetic Weyrleader. The domination of

Weyrs over Hold and Craft would continue unchallenged, and unchanged.

another, to save Pern in a duel before half the world.

F'lar shook his head sharply, rejecting the angry line his thoughts were taking. This wasn't the way

to survive, not with the odds against him.

He saw T'ron's arm move suddenly, swayed back in automatic evasion, saw the opening, lunged . .

.

The watchers gasped as the sound of torn fabric was clearly heard. The pain at his waist had been

such a quick stab that F'lar had all but decided T'ron's swipe was only a scratch when a wave of nausea

swept him.

"Good try. But you're just not fast enough, Oldtimer!" F'lar heard himself saying; felt his lips stretch

into a smile he was far from feeling. He kept to the crouch, the belt pressing against his waist, but the torn

fabric dangled, jerking as he breathed.

T'ron threw him a half-puzzled look, his eyes raking him, pausing at the hanging rag, flicking to the

knife blade in his hand. It was clean, unstained. A second realization crossed T'ron's face, even as he

ther, he knew, as he ignored the hot
agony in his midriff.

“Yes, Oldtimer,” he said, forcing himself to breathe easily, keeping his words light, mocking.

“Benden Weyr concerns itself with Ista and Igen. And the Holds of Nabol, and Crom, and Telgar, because

Benden dragonmen have not forgotten that Thread burns anything and anyone it touches, Weyr and

commoner alike. And if Benden Weyr has to stand alone against the fall of Thread, it will.”

He flung himself at T’ron, stabbing at the horny leather tunic, praying the knife was sharp enough to

pierce it. He spun aside barely in time, the effort causing him to gasp in pain. Yet he made himself dance

outside T’ron’s reach, made himself grin at the other’s sweaty, exertion-reddened face.

“Not fast enough, are you, T’ron? To kill Benden. Or muster for a Fall.”

T’ron’s breathing was ragged, a hoarse rasping. He came on, his knife arm lower. F’lar backed,

keeping to a wary crouch, wondering if it was sweat he felt trickling down his belly or blood. If T’ron noticed .

aiming for the throat. F'lar's knife hand flashed up, struck the attacking wrist aside, slashed downward at the other's neck, where the wher-hide tunic had parted. A dragon screamed. T'ron's right fist caught him below the belt. Agony lashed through him. He doubled over the man's arm. Someone screamed a warning. With an unexpected reserve of energy, F'lar somehow managed to pull himself sharply up from that vulnerable position. His head rocked from the impact against T'ron's descending knife, but it was miraculously deflected. Both hands on the hilt of his decorative blade, F'lar rammed it through wher-hide until it grated against the man's ribs.

He staggered free, saw T'ron waver, his eyes bulging with shock, saw him step back, the jeweled hilt standing out beneath his ribs. T'ron's mouth worked soundlessly. He fell heavily to his knees, then sagged slowly sideways to the stones.

The tableau held for what seemed hours to F'lar, desperately sucking breath into his bruised body, forcing himself to keep to his feet for he could not, could not collapse.

noring the blood that oozed out around

the knife.

Someone screamed and beat at his hands. It was Mardra.

“You’ve killed him. Isn’t that enough? Leave him alone!”

F’lar stared up at her, frowning.

“He’s not dead. Fidrath hasn’t gone between.” It made him feel stronger somehow to know he

hadn’t killed the man. “Get wine, someone. Call the physician!”

He got the belt loose and was pulling at the right sleeve when other hands began to help.

“I need it to fight in,” he muttered. A clean cloth was waved in his direction. He grabbed it and,

holding his breath, jerked loose the knife. He looked at it a second and then cast it from him. It skittered

across the stone, everyone jumping from its path. Someone handed him the tunic. He got up, struggling

into it. T’ron was a heavier man; the tunic was too big. He was belting it tightly to him when he became

aware again of the hushed, awed audience. He looked at the blur of expectant faces.

“Well? Do you support Benden?” he cried.

“The Harpers do!” Robinton’s baritone was answered by Chad’s tenor from the sentry walk.

“The Miners!”

“The Weavers!”

“The Tanners!”

The Lord Holders began to call out their names, loudly, as if by volume they could redeem

themselves. A cheer rose from the guests to fall almost instantly to a hush as F’lar turned slowly to the other

Weyrleaders.

“Ista!” D’ram’s cry was a fierce, almost defiant hiss, over-taken by G’narish’s exultant “Igen” and

T’bor’s enthusiastic “Southern!”

“What can we do?” cried Lord Asgenar, striding to F’lar. “Can Lemos runners and groundmen help

Igen Hold now?”

F’lar lost his immobility, tightened the belt one further notch, hoping the stricture would dull the pain.

“It’s your wedding day, man. Enjoy what you can of it. D’ram, we’ll follow you. Ramoth’s already

harsh and steely enough to be heard

throughout the listening Court. “Let it be known,” and he stared down at Mardra, “that any of Fort Weyr who

do not care to follow Benden’s lead must go to Southern.” He looked away before she could protest. “And

that applies to any craftsman, Lord Holder or commoner, as well as dragonfolk. There isn’t much Thread in

Southern to worry you. And your indifference to a common menace will not endanger others.”

Lessa was trying to undo his belt. He caught her hands tightly, ignoring her gasp as his grip hurt.

“Where was Thread seen?” he yelled up to the Igen rider still perched atop the Gate Wall.

“South!” The man’s response was an anguished appeal. “Across the bay from Keroon Hold.

Across the water.” “How long ago?”

“I’ll take you there and then!”

The ripple of cheering grew as it spread back, as people were reminded that the Weyrs would go

between time itself and catch Thread, erasing the interval of time lost in the duel.

“You can’t come, love,” F’lar told Lessa, confused that she was following him out to Mnementh. She

could handle Mardra. She’d have to. He couldn’t be everywhere at once.

“Not till you’ve had this numbweed.” She glared up at him as fiercely as Mardra had an fumbled at

his belt again. “You won’t last if you don’t. And Mnementh won’t take you up until I do.”

F’lar stared at her, saw Mnementh’s great eye gleaming at him and knew she meant it.

“But — he wouldn’t — ” he stammered.

“Oh, wouldn’t he?” flashed Lessa, but she had the belt loose, and he gasped as he felt the cold of

the salve on the burning lips of the wound. “I can’t keep you from going. You’ve got to, I know. But I can

keep you from killing yourself with such heroics.” He heard something rip, saw her tearing a sleeve from her

new gown into bandage-length strips. “Well, I guess they’re right when they say green is an unlucky color.

You certainly don’t get to wear it long.”

She quickly pressed the material against him, his wound already numbing. Deftly overlapping the

As Mnementh wheeled smartly upward, F'lar heard the sound of music, guitars accompanying a ragged chorus. How like the Harper to have the appropriate music for this occasion, he thought.

Drummer, beat, and piper, blow.

Harper, strike, and soldier, go.

Free the flame and sear the grasses

Till the dawning Red Star passes.

Odd, thought F'lar, four hours later, as he and Mnementh returned to Telgar with the wings from

Igen, it was over Telgar, seven Turns ago, that the massed Weyrs flew against the second Fall of Thread.

He stifled keen regret at the recollection of that triumphant day when the six Weyrs had been solidly

in accord. And yet, the duel at Telgar Hold today had been as inevitable as Lessa's flight backward in time

to bring up the Oldtimers. There was a subtle symmetry, a balance of good and bad, a fateful

compensation. (His side ached. He suppressed pain and fatigue. Mnementh would catch it and then he'd

circle of the Old Weyrs and Benden's
resurgence.

He hoped T'ron would live; he'd enough on his conscience. Though it might be better if T'ron . . .

He refused to consider that, in spite of the fact that he knew it would avoid another problem. And yet, if

Thread could fall in Southern to be eaten by those grubs . . .

He wanted very much to see that distance-viewer T'ron had discovered. He groaned with a mental

distress. Fandarel! How could he face him? That distance-writer had worked. It had relayed a very crucial

message — faster than dragon wings! No fault of the Smith's that his finely extruded wire could be severed

by hot Thread. Undoubtedly he would overcome that flaw in an efficient way — unless he'd thrown up his

hands at the idea, what with being presented with a powerful, fully operative distance-viewer to compound

the day's insults. Of all the problems undoubtedly awaiting him, he dreaded Fandarel's reproach the most.

Below, Dragonriders streamed into the Court illumined by hundreds of glow baskets, to be met and

menth to land.

About time, the bronze grumbled.

F'lar slapped his neck affectionately. The beast had known perfectly well why they'd been hovering.

A man needed a few minutes to digest chaos and restore order to his thinking before he plunged into more confusions.

Mnementh agreed as he landed smoothly. He craned his neck around, his great eyes gleaming affectionately at his rider.

"Don't worry about me, Mnementh!" F'lar murmured in gratitude and love, stroking the soft muzzle.

There was a faint odor of firestone and smoke though they'd done little flaming. "Are you hungry?"

Not yet. Telgar feeds enough tonight. Mnementh launched himself toward the fire ridge above the

Hold, where the perching dragons made black, regular crags against the darkening sky, their jeweled eyes gleaming down on the festal activities.

F'lar laughed aloud at Mnementh's consideration. It was true that Lord Larad was stinting nothing,

wouldn't let him bend to kiss her.

"Come, love, I've fresh clothes and bandages for you."

"Mnementh's been telling on me?"

She nodded, still unusually subdued for Lessa.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she assured him hastily, smiling. "Ramothe said you were thinking hard."

He squeezed her and the gesture pulled the muscles, making him wince.

"You're a trial to me," she said with mock exasperation and led him into the tower room.

"Kylara came back, didn't she?"

"Oh, yes," and there was an edge to Lessa's voice as she added, "she and Meron are as inseparable as their lizards."

She'd had a standing tub brought in, the water steaming invitingly. She insisted on bathing him

while she reported what had happened while he'd fought Thread. He didn't argue, it was too pleasant to

relax under her ministrations, though her gentle hands sometimes reminded him of other occasions and . . .

When she discovered that her arrogance and shrewishness had robbed her of all but a few adherents, she'd retired meekly to Southern with them.

"We nearly had a fight between Kylara and Mardra but Robinton intervened. Kylara was proclaiming herself Fort Weyrwoman."
F'lar groaned.

"Don't worry," Lessa assured him, briskly kneading the tight muscles across his shoulders. "She changed her mind directly she learned that T'kul and his riders were leaving the High Reaches Weyr. It's more logical for T'bor and the Southerners to take over that Weyr than Fort since most of the Fort riders are staying."

"That puts Kylara too near Nabol for my peace of mind."

"Yes, but that leaves the way clear for P'zar, Roth's rider, to take over as Fort Weyrleader. He's not strong but he's well-liked and it won't upset the Fort people as much. They're relieved to be free of both T'ron and Mardra but we oughtn't to press our luck too far."
"N'ton'd be a good Wing-second there."

ons shadowing me and

Mnementh. I don't think we went between more than twice."

"The dragons appreciate you, bronze rider," Lessa said tartly, encircling him with clean, soft

bandages.

"The Oldtimers, too?"

"Most of them. And more of their riders than I'd estimated. Only twenty riders and women followed

Madra, you know, from Fort. Of course," and she grimaced, "most of T'kul's people went. The fourteen

who stayed are young riders, Impressed since the Weyr came forward. So there'll be enough at Southern .

. ."

"Southern is no longer our concern."

She was in the act of handing him the fresh tunic and hesitated, the fabric gathered up in her hands.

He took it from her, pulling on the sleeves, ducking his head into the opening, giving her time to absorb his

dictum.

She sat slowly down on the bench, her forehead creased with a slight, worried frown.

“Loranth, the Weyr queen at High Reaches and the other two . . . Oh!”

“Yes. All old queens, well past their prime. I doubt Loranth will rise more than once. The clutches

at High Reaches have produced only one queen since they came forward. And the young queen, Segrith, stayed, didn’t she, with Pilgra?”

Lessa nodded and suddenly her face cleared. She eyed him with growing exasperation. “Anyone

would think you’ve been planning this for Turns.”

“Then anyone could call me a triple fool for underestimating T’ron, closing my mind to the facts in

front of me and defying fortune. What’s the mood among Holders and crafters?”

“Relief,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I admit the laughter has a slightly hysterical tinge, but Lytol and

Robinton were right. Pern will follow Benden . . .”

“Yes, until my first mistake!”

She grinned mischievously at him, wagging a finger under his nose.

“Ah-ha, but you’re not allowed

to make mistakes Benden. Not while . . .”

She gave a languorous sigh when he finally released her. He laughed down at her closed eyes,

kissing them, too. She struggled to a sitting position and, with another reluctant sigh, rose determinedly to her feet.

“Yes, Pern will follow you, and your loyal advisers will keep you from making mistakes, but I do hope you’ve an answer for pop-eyed old Lord Groghe!”

“Answer for Groghe?”

“Yes,” and she gave him a stern look, “though I’m not surprised you’ve forgotten. He was going to

demand that the dragonmen of Pern go directly to the Red Star and put an end to Thread forever.”

F’lar got slowly to his feet.

“I’ve always said that you solve one problem and five more appear from between.”

“Well, I think we’ve contrived to keep Groghe away from you tonight, but we promised to have a joint meeting of Hold and Craft at Benden Weyr tomorrow morning.”

“That’s a blessing.”

In the act of opening the door, he hesitated and groaned again.

he needn't've dismantled the first apparatus." She tucked her arm in his, lengthening her stride to match his.

"The man who's really put out is Robinton."

"Robinton?"

"Yes. He'd composed the most marvelous ballad and teaching songs and now there's no reason to play them."

Whether Lessa had deliberately saved that until now, F'lar didn't know, but they crossed the courtyard, laughing, though it hurt his side.

Their passage would have been noted anyhow, but their smiling faces subtly reassured the diners seated at the make-shift tables about the yard. And suddenly F'lar felt there was indeed something to celebrate.

CHAPTER XI

Early Morning at Benden Weyr

"I WISH you'd give me fair warning the next time you rearrange the social and political structure of this planet," F'nor told his half-brother when he strode into the queen's weyr at Benden the next morning.

went with T'kul and Merika. Most of the Fort Weyr people wanted to stay . . .”

F'nor chuckled nastily. “Bet that was hard for Mardra to swallow.” He looked expectantly at Lessa,

knowing how often his Weyrwoman had mastered resentment and indignation at Mardra's hands. Lessa

returned his gaze with polite unconcern.

“So P'zar is acting Weyrleader until a queen rises . . .”

“Any chance of making that an open flight for any bronze?”

“That is my intention,” F'lar replied. “However, I think the biggest of the modern bronzes had better

be conspicuous by their absence.”

“Then why have you assigned N'ton there as Wing-second?” demanded Lessa in surprise.

F'lar grinned at his Weyrmate. “Because by the time a Fort queen rises in flight, N'ton will be known

and well-liked by the Fort Weyrfolk and they won't mind. He'll be considered a Fort rider, not a Benden

replacement.”

Lessa wrinkled her nose. “He doesn't have much choice at Fort Weyr.”

I'd — " He broke off, sliding into the chair Lessa motioned him to. "Say, F'lar, what's the matter with you?

You been time — betweening or something?"

"No, he's been knifed between his top and bottom," Lessa answered with a sour glance at her

Weyrmate. "And it is with exceptional difficulty that I can keep him in a chair. He belongs in a bed."

F'lar waved her recriminations aside good-humoredly.

"If you're — " F'nor half-rose, his face concerned.

"If you're — " mocked F'lar, his look indicating a growing irritation with his disability and their protectiveness.

F'nor laughed, reseating himself. "And Brekke said I was a cantankerous patient. Ha! How bad is

it? I heard various tales about that duel, well embroidered already, but not that you'd been clipped. Must it

always be belt knives — for our Blood? And the other man armed with a wherry-skewer?"

"And dressed in wher-hide," Lessa added.

"Look, F'lar, Brekke has pronounced me fit to fly between," and F'nor flexed his arm, fully but

“No, nor did I want to. I heard him.” F’nor’s right hand clenched. The fighting wings had already

gone to join you at Igen for the Threadfall. T’kul ordered everyone, including the wounded, out of Southern

in an hour’s time. What they couldn’t pack and take, he confiscated. He made it clear that the southern

continent was his to have and hold. That his Sweepriders were challenging any dragon and would flame

them down like Thread if they didn’t get the proper response. Some of those Oldtimer dragons are stupid

enough to do it, too.” F’nor paused. “You know, I’ve been noticing lately . . .”

“Did the Fort Weyr people arrive?”

“Yes, and Brekke checked T’ron to be sure he’d survived the trip.” F’nor scowled.

“He’ll live?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Good. Now, I rather suspected that T’kul would react in that fashion To be sure we’ve all of Igen,

Ista and Southern Boll as breeding ground for fire lizards, but I want you to get Manora to rig you something

stuffy?”

“Yes,” F’lar replied so emphatically that F’nor pretended alarm. “That courtesy did more good than

harm. It’ll be standard procedure at all the Weyrs now.”

“And you’ve talked the Leaders into assigning riders to Hold and Hall?” F’nor’s eyes gleamed when

F’lar nodded.

Can you slip through whatever patrol T’kul has mounted in Southern?” F’lar asked.

“No problem. There isn’t a bronze there that Canth can’t out fly. Which reminds me . . .”

“Good. I’ve two errands for you. Pick up those fire-lizard eggs and, do you remember the

coordinates for the Threadfall in the western swamp?”

“Of course, but I wanted to ask you . . .”

“You saw the grub life in the soil there?”

“Yes . . .”

“Ask Manora for a tightly covered pot. I want you to bring me back as many of those grubs as you

can. Not a pleasant job, I know, but I can’t go myself and I don’t want this — ah — project discussed.”

“The day F’nor doesn’t tease you I’ll start to worry,” Lessa said, encircling his neck with her arms.

She laid her cheek against his for an instant. “It’s T’bor,” she added, moving away just as the new High

Reaches Weyrleader strode in.

The man looked as if he hadn’t slept enough but he carried his shoulders back and his head high

which made the Benden Weyrleader more aware of the worried and wary expression on his face.

“Kylara’s — ” F’lar began, remembering that she and Meron had been gabbling together all the last night.

“Not Kylara. It’s that T’kul who thought himself such a great Weyrleader,” T’bor said with utter

disgust. “As soon as we brought our people up from Southern, I had the wings do a sweep check, really

more to familiarize themselves with the coordinates than anything else. By the first Egg, I don’t like seeing

anyone run from dragonmen. Run. And hide!” T’bor sat down, automatically taking the cup of klah Lessa

Weyr.”

T’bor took a deep breath. “It took time to calm Lord Holder Oterel down to the point where I could

tell him what had happened. And it seemed to me “ and the Southerner looked nervously first at Lessa and

then at F’lar, “that the only way to restore his confidence was to leave him a dragon. So — I left him a

bronze and stationed two greens in those minor Holds along the Bay. I also left weyrings at vantage

heights along the Tillek Hold range. Then I asked Lord Oterel to accompany me to Lord Bargaen’s Hold at

High Reaches. I’d a good idea I might not get past his guard at all. Now, we’d six eggs left over from that

clutch Toric of the Seahold unearthed and so — I gave two each to the Lords and two to the

Masterfisherman. It seemed the only thing to do. They’d heard Lord Meron had one — at Nabol Hold.”

T’bor straightened his shoulders as if to endure F’lar’s opprobrium.

“You did the right thing, T’bor,” F’lar told him heartily. “You did exactly the right thing. You couldn’t

have done better!”

with P'zar, the acting

Weyrleader from Fort, very close behind them. The Telgar Weyr Wing-second introduced himself as M'rek,

Zigeth's rider. He was a lanky, mournful-looking man, with sandy hair, about F'lar's age. As they settled

themselves at the big table, F'lar tried to read D'ram's mood. He was the crucial one still, the oldest of the

remaining Oldtimers and, if he'd cooled down from the stimulus of yesterday's tumultuous events and had

changed his mind after sleeping, the proposal F'lar was about to suggest might die a-hatching. F'lar

stretched his long legs under the table trying to make himself comfortable.

"I asked you here early because we had little chance to talk last night. M'rek, how's R'mart?"

"He rests easily at Telgar Hold, thanks to the riders from Ista and Igen." M'rek nodded gravely to

D'ram and K'dor.

"How many at Telgar Weyr wish to go south?"

"About ten, but they're old riders. Do more harm than good, feeding nonsense to the weyrlings.

“There was talk about an expedition to the Red Star,” F’lar replied in a casual tone. Apprehension

made the Telgar Weyrman’s face more mournful than ever. “But there’re more immediate undertakings.”

F’lar straightened cautiously. He couldn’t get comfortable. “And the Lord Holders and other craftsmen will

be here soon to discuss them. D’ram, tell me frankly, do you object to placing riders in Holds and Craffhalls

while we can’t pattern Thread — that is, until we can find another reliable form of quick communication?”

“No, F’lar, I’ve no objections,” the Istan Weyrleader replied, slowly, not looking at anyone. “After

yesterday — ” He stopped and, turning his head, looked at F’lar with troubled eyes. “Yesterday, I think I

finally realized just how big Pern is and how narrow a man can get, worrying so much about what he ought

to have, forgetting what he’s got. And what he’s got to do. Times have changed. I can’t say I like it. Pern

had got so big — and we Oldtimers kept trying to make it small again because, I guess, we were a little

yet — so different. T'ron was a good man, F'lar. I don't say I knew him well. None of us ever really got to

know each other, you know, keeping to our Weyrs mostly and resting between Threadfalls. But all

dragonmen are — are dragonmen. For a dragonman to go to kill another one — ” D'ram shook his head

slowly from side to side. “You could've killed him.” D'ram looked F'lar straight in the eye. “You didn't. You

fought Thread over Igen Hold. And don't think I didn't know T'ron's knife got you.”

F'lar began to relax.

“Nearly made two of me, in fact.” D'ram gave another one of his snorts but the slight smile on his face as he leaned back in his chair

indicated his approval of F'lar.

Mnementh remarked to his rider that everyone was arriving at once. A bigger ledge was needed.

F'lar swore softly to himself. He'd counted on more time. He couldn't jeopardize the fragile new accord with

D'ram by springing distasteful innovations on the man.

“I don't believe the Weyrs can remain autonomous these days,” F'lar said, discarding all the ringing,

man grows stale, careless, riding over ground he knows too well. We need public Impressions . . .”

They could all hear the rumble of greetings and the scuffling of heavy boots in the corridor.

“Ista Weyr followed Benden Weyr yesterday,” D’ram interrupted him, his slow smile reaching his

dark eyes. “But have a care which traditions you overset. Some cannot be discarded with impunity . . .”

They rose then as Lord Holders and Craftmasters strode into the weyr. Lord Asgenar, Mastersmith

Fandarel and his wood Craftmaster, Bendarek, were first; Lord Oterel of Tillek Hold and Meron, Lord Holder

of Nabol, his fire lizard squawking on his arm, arrived together, but Lord Oterel immediately sought

Fandarel. A restless, eager atmosphere began to build, palpable with questions unanswered the previous

evening. As soon as most were assembled, F’lar led the way into the Council Room. No sooner had the

Weyrleaders arranged themselves behind him, facing the gathering of Lords and Craftsmen, than Larad,

Lord of Telgar Hold, rose.

Keroon, staring pointedly at

D'ram on F'lar's left.

"Until every Hold and Craft has an efficient communications system."

"I'll need men," Mastersmith Fandarel rumbled from his cramped position in the far corner. "Do you

all really want those flame throwers you've been plaguing me for?"

"Not if the dragonmen come when we call." It was Lord Sangel of Boll Hold who answered, his face grim, his voice bitter.

"Is Telgar Weyr prepared to ride today?" Lord Larad went on, still holding the floor.

M'rek, the Telgar Weyr Wing-second, rose, glanced hesitantly at F'lar, cleared his throat and then nodded.

"High Reaches Weyr will fly with Telgar riders!" T'bor said.

"And Istal" D'ram added.

The unexpected unanimity sent a murmurous ripple through the meeting, as Lord Larad sat down.

"Will we have to burn the forests?" Lord Asgenar of Lemos rose to his feet. The quiet question was the plea of a proud man.

self. Enough time's been wasted.

You keep saying your dragons'll go anywhere, anywhen you tell 'em to."

"A dragon's got to know where he's going first, man," G'narish, the Igen Leader, protested, jumping up excitedly.

"Don't put me off, young man! You can see the Red Star, plain as my fist," and Lord Groghe thrust out his closed hand like a weapon, "in that distance-viewer! Go to the source. Go to the source!"

D'ram was on his feet beside G'narish now, adding his angry arguments to the confusion. A dragon roared so loudly that all were deafened for a moment.

"If that is the desire of the Lords and Craftsmen," F'lar said, "then we shall mount an expedition to fly on the morrow." He knew D'ram and G'narish had turned to stare at him, dumbfounded. He saw Lord

Groghe bristle suspiciously, but he had the attention of the entire room. He spoke quickly, clearly. "You've

seen the Red Star, Lord Groghe? Could you describe the land masses to me? Would you estimate that we had to clear as large an area as, say, the northern continent? D'ram, would you agree that it takes about

flame thrower on the continent. Now, dragonmen, I admit we don't know if we can traverse such a distance without harm to ourselves and the dragons. I assume that since Thread survives on this planet, we can exist on that one. However . . .”

“Enough!” Groghe of Fort Hold bellowed, his face flushed, his eyes protruding from their sockets.

F'lar met Groghe's eyes steadily so that the choleric Lord Holder would realize that he was not being mocked; that F'lar was in earnest.

“To be at all effective, Lord Groghe, such an undertaking would leave Pern totally unprotected. I

could not in conscience order such an expedition now that I see how much is involved. I hope you will agree

that it is far more important, at this time, to secure what we have.” Better to risk Groghe's pride if necessary

to defeat that premature ambition. He couldn't afford to evade an issue that could become a convenient

rallying cry for the disaffected. “I'd want to get a good look at the Red Star before I took such a leap, Lord

The fire lizard on Lord Meron's arm squawked nervously, causing an instant, violent reaction from every man.

"Probably that Record deteriorated, too," F'lar said, raising his voice to a level audible above the restless scraping and throat-clearing. "Lord Groghe, Fort is the oldest of the Holds. Is there a chance that your back corridors, too, hide treasures we can use?"

Groghe's reply was a curt nod of his head. He seated himself abruptly, staring straight ahead. F'lar wondered if he had alienated the man beyond reconciliation.

"I don't think I'd ever fully appreciated the enormity of such a venture," Corman of Keroon Hold remarked in a thoughtful drawl.

"One jump ahead of us, again, Benden?" asked Larad of Telgar Hold with a rueful grin.

"I shouldn't say that, Lord Larad," F'lar replied. "The destruction of all Thread at its source has been a favorite preoccupation of dragonmen Turn after Turn. I know how much territory one Weyr can cover, for

where as difficult a condition as we

were seven Turns ago but we have all been guilty of misunderstandings which have deflected us from the

important concern. We have no time to waste in assigning guilt or awarding compensation. We are still at

the mercy of Thread though we are better equipped to deal with it.

“Once before we found answers in old Records, in the helpful recollections of Master Weaver Zurg,

Masterfarmer Andemon, Masterharper Robinton, and the efficiencies of Mastersmith Fandarel. You know

what we’ve found in abandoned rooms at Benden and Fort Weyrs — objects made long Turns ago when we

had not lost certain skills and techniques.

“Frankly,” and F’lar grinned suddenly, “I’d rather rely on skills and techniques we, in our Turn, right

now, can develop.”

There was an unexpected ripple of assent to that.

“I speak of the skill of working together, the technique of crossing the arbitrary lines of land, craft

and status, because we must learn more from each other than the simple fact that none of us can stand

caught his eye and smiled broad

encouragement. So F'lar had no choice but to let them unwind. They might as well infect each other with enthusiasm — probably with more effect than his best — chosen arguments. He looked around for Lessa

and saw her slipping toward the hallway where she stopped, evidently warned of a late arrival.

It was F'nor who appeared in the entrance.

"I've fire-lizard eggs," he shouted. "Fire-lizard eggs," and he pushed into the room, an aisle opening

for him straight to the Council Table.

There was silence as he carefully placed his cumbersome felt-wrapped burden down and glanced

triumphantly around the room.

"Stolen from under T'kul's nose. Thirty-two of them!"

"Well, Benden," Sangel of Southern Boll demanded in the taut hush, "who gets preference here?"

F'lar affected surprise. "Why, Lord Sangel, that is for you," and his gesture swept the room

impartially, "to decide."

Clearly that had not been expected.

so much more to do this

morning but he'd do it the better for a little break. And the eggs would occupy the Lords and Craftsmen.

They wouldn't notice his absence.

CHAPTER XII

Morning at Benden Weyr

Predawn at High Reaches Weyr

As SOON as he could, F'nor left the Council Room in search of F'lar. He retrieved the pot of

revolting grubs which he'd left in a shadowed recess of the weyr corridor.

He's in his quarters, Canth told his rider.

"What does Mnementh say of F'lar?"

There was a pause and F'nor found himself wondering if dragons spoke among themselves as men

spoke to them.

Mnementh is not worried about him.

F'nor caught the faintest emphasis on the pronoun and was about to question Canth further when

little Grall swooped, on whirring wings, to his shoulder. She wrapped her tail around his neck and rubbed

F'lar emerged from the sleeping room, his face lighting with eagerness as he realized F'nor was alone and awaiting him.

"You've the grubs? Good. Come."

"Now, wait a minute," F'nor protested, catching F'lar by the shoulder as the Weyrleader began to move toward the outer ledge.

"Come! Before we're seen." They got down the stairs without being intercepted and F'lar directed

F'nor toward the newly opened entrance by the Hatching Ground. "The lizards were parceled out fairly?" he

asked, grinning as Grall tucked herself as close to F'nor's ear as she could when they passed the Ground entrance.

F'nor chuckled. "Groghe took over, as you probably guessed he would. The Lord Holders of Ista

and Igen, Warbret and Laudey, magnanimously disqualified themselves on the grounds that their Holds

were more likely to have eggs, but Lord Sangel of Boll took a pair. Lytol didn't!"

F'lar sighed, shaking his head regretfully.

“Huh?” F’lar looked startled. “Oh, that. Yes. Lessa said it upset Ramoth too much. And

Mnementh agreed.” He gave his half brother a bemused grin, half for Lessa’s quirk, half for the mutual

nostalgic memory of their own terror-ridden exploration of that passage, and a clandestine glimpse of

Nemorth’s eggs. “There’s a chamber back here that suits my purpose . . .”

“Which is?”

F’lar hesitated, giving F’nor a long, thoughtful look.

“Since when have you found me a reluctant conspirator?” asked F’nor.

“It’s asking more than . . .”

“Ask first!”

They had reached the first room of the complex discovered by Jaxom and Felessan. But the bronze

rider did not give F’nor time to examine the fascinating design on the wall or the finely made cabinets and

tables. He hurried him past the second room to the biggest chamber where a series of graduated,

rectangular open stone troughs were set around the floor. Other equipment had obviously been removed at

medium-sized one. Then he started to distribute the squirming grubs.

“Proving what?”

F’lar gave him a long deep look so reminiscent of the days when they had dared each other as

weyrings that F’nor couldn’t help grinning.

“Proving what?” he insisted.

“Proving first, that these southern grubs will prosper in northern soil among northern plants . . .”

“And . . .”

“That they will eliminate Thread here as they did in the western swamp.”

They both watched, in a sort of revolted fascination, as the wriggling gray mass of grubs broke apart

and separately burrowed into the loose dark soil of the biggest tub.

“What?”

F’nor experienced a devastating disorientation. He saw F’lar as a weyring, challenging him to

explore and find the legendary peekhole to the Ground. He saw F’lar again, older, in the Records Room,

surrounded by moldering skins, suggesting that they jump between time itself to stop Thread at Nerat. And

activity of the grubs. And I'll bet you had a hard time finding enough to fill that pot because they only rise to the surface when Thread falls. In fact, you can go back in time and see it happen."

F'nor grimaced, remembering that it had taken a long time to find enough grubs. It'd been a strain,

too, with every nerve of man, dragon and lizard alert for a sign of T'kul's patrols. "I should have thought of

that myself. But — Thread's not going to fall over Benden . . ."

"You'll be at Telgar and Ruatha Holds this afternoon when the Fall starts. This time, you'll catch

some Thread."

If there had not been an ironical, humorous gleam in his half-brother's eyes, F'nor would have

thought him delirious.

"Doubtless," F'nor said acidly, "you've figured out exactly how I'm to achieve this."

F'lar brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"Well, I am open to suggestion . . ."

"That's considerate, since it's my hand that's to be scored."

"You've got Canth, and Grall to help . . ."

thick patch. Follow it down. Canth's skillful enough to let you get close with one of those long-handled

hearthpans. And Grall can wipe out any Thread which burrows. I can't think of any other way to get some.

Unless, of course, we were flying over one of the stone plateaus, but even then . . .”

“All right, let us assume I can catch some live, viable Thread,” and the brown rider could not

suppress the tremor that shook him, “and let us assume that the grubs do — dispose of them. What then?”

With a ghost of a smile on his lips, F'lar spread his arms wide. “Why then, son of my father, we

breed us hungry grub by the tankful and spread them over Pern.”

F'nor jammed both fists into his belt. The man was feverish.

“No, I'm not feverish, F'nor!” the bronze rider replied, settling himself on the edge of the nearest

tank. “But if we could have this kind of protection,” and he picked up the now empty pot, turning it back and

forth in his hand as if it held the sum of his theory, “Thread could fall when and where it wanted to without

creating the kind of havoc and revolution we're going through.

dragon?"

"Lessa told me about Lord Groghe's demand," F'nor said, to give himself time to absorb his

brother's remarkable and logical questions.

"It isn't just that we couldn't see the Star to find coordinates," F'lar went on urgently. "The Ancients

had the equipment. They preserved it carefully, though not even Fandarel can guess how. They preserved

it for us, perhaps? For a time when we'd know how to overcome the last obstacle?"

"Which is the last obstacle?" F'nor demanded, sarcastically, thinking of nine or ten off hand.

"There're enough, I know." And F'lar ticked them off on his fingers. "Protection of Pern while all the

Weyrs are away — which might well mean the grubs on the land and a well organized ground crew to take

care of homes and people. Dragons big enough, intelligent enough to aid us. You've noticed yourself that

our dragons are both bigger and smarter than those four hundred Turns older. If the dragons were bred for

man was not as certain of

this outrageous notion as he sounded. And yet, wasn't the recognized goal of dragonmen the complete

extermination of all Thread from the skies of Pern? Or was it? There wasn't a line of the Teaching Ballads

and Sagas that even suggested more than that the dragonmen prepare and guard Pern when the Red Star

passed. Nothing hinted at a time when there would be no Thread to fight.

"Isn't it just possible that we, now, are the culmination of thousands of Turns of careful planning and

development?" F'lar was suggesting urgently. "Look, don't all the facts corroborate? The large population

in support, the ingenuity of Fandarel, the discovery of those rooms and the devices, the grubs — everything

. . ."

"Except one," F'nor said slowly, hating himself.

"Which?" All the warmth and fervor drained out of F'lar and that single word came in a cold, harsh

voice.

hearthpan I'm supposed to catch Thread in?"

When they had thoroughly discussed and rejected every other possible method of securing Thread,

and how they were to keep this project a secret — only Lessa and Ramoth knew of it — they parted, both

assuring the other that he'd eat and rest. Both certain that the other could not..If F'nor appreciated the audacity of F'lar's project, he also counted up the flaws and the possible

disasters. And then he realized that he still hadn't had a chance to broach the innovation he himself desired

to make. Yet, for a brown dragon to fly a queen was far less revolutionary than F'lar wanting to terminate

the Weyrs' duties. And, reinforced by one of F'lar's own theories, if the dragons were now big enough for

their ultimate breeding purpose, then no harm was done the species if a brown, smaller than a bronze, was

mated to a queen — just this once. Surely F'nor deserved that compensation. Comforted that it would be

merely an exchange of favors, rather than the gross crime it might once have been considered, F'nor went

to borrow the long-handled hearthpan from one of Manora's helpers.

The scar on his arm itched a

little and he rubbed it.

Oil is for itching skin, said Canth. Imperfect hide cracks in between.

“Be quiet, you. I’ve got skin, not hide.”

Grall appeared in his room, hovering over his chest, her wings wafting cool air across his face. She

was curious, a curiosity with slight overtones of alarm.

He smiled, generating reassurance and affection. The gyrations of her lovely jewel-faceted eyes

slowed and she made a graceful survey of his quarters, humming when she discovered the bathing room.

He could hear her splashing about in the water. He closed his eyes. He would need to rest. He did not look

forward to the afternoon’s endeavor.

If the grubs did live to eat Thread, and if F’lar could maneuver the scared Lords and Craftsmen into

accepting this solution, what then? They weren’t fools, those men.

They’d see that Pern would no longer be

dependent on Dragonriders. Of course, that’s what they wanted. And what under the sun did out-of-work

with T'kul, could he? Or

maybe — well, they didn't know how large the southern continent was.

Past the deserts to the west or the

unexplored sea to the east, maybe there were other, hospitable lands.

Did F'lar know more than he said?

Grall chirruped piteously in his ear. She was clinging to the fur rug by his shoulder, her supple hide

gleaming golden from her bath. He stroked her, wondering if she needed oil. She was growing, but not at

the tremendous rate dragons did in the first few weeks after Hatching.

Well, his thoughts were disturbing her as well as himself. "Canth?"

The dragon was asleep. The fact was oddly consoling.

F'nor found a comfortable position and closed his eyes, determined to rest. Grall's soft stirrings

ended and he felt her body resting against his neck, in the curve of his shoulder. He wondered how Brekke

was doing at the High Reaches. And if her small bronze was as unsettled by Weyrlife in a cliff as Grall. A

memory of Brekke's face crossed his mind. Not as he had last seen her, anxious, worried, rapidly mobilizing

customed to doing in the

morning, except that the dark stillness around her was not simply that of an inner room in the weyr cliff, but

was full of the soft solitude of night. The fire lizard, Berd, roused too, his brilliant eyes the only light in the

room. He crooned apprehensively. Brekke stroked him, listening for Wirenth, but the queen was sound

asleep in her stony couch.

Brekke tried to compose herself back into sleep, but even as she made her body relax, she realized

it was a useless attempt. It might be late watch here at High Reaches, but it was dawn in Southern, and

that's the rhythm her body was still tuned to. With a sigh, she rose, reassuring Berd who rustled around

anxiously. But he joined her in the pool — bath, splashing with small vehemence in the warm water, utilizing

the superfluous suds from her cleansing sands to bathe himself. He preened on the bench, uttering those soft voluptuous croons that amused her. In a way, it was good to be up and about with no one to interrupt

her for there was so much to be done to settle the weyrfolk in their new habitation. She'd have to plan

She sighed. Obviously Merika had been a worse Weyrwoman than Kylara, for High Reaches was in a bad state of disrepair. Those Holds which tithed to High Reaches Weyr would be in no mood to make up the differences now. Maybe a discreet word to F'nor would remedy the worst of the lacks. . . No, that would suggest incompetency. First, she'd inventory what they did have, discover the most pressing needs, see what they could manufacture themselves . . . Brekke stopped. She'd have to adjust her thinking to an entirely new way of life, a life dependent on the generosity of the Holds. In Southern, you had so much to work with. In her father's Craffthall, you always made what you could from things to hand — but there were always raw materials — or you grew it — or did without.

"One thing certain, Kylara will not do without!" Brekke muttered. She had dressed in riding gear which was warmer and less hampering if she was to delve into storage caves.

She didn't like the pinched-faced Meron Lord of Nabol Hold. To be indebted to him would be

as transparent as pool water — and she must check and see if Rannelly was right about the Weyr lake. The

old woman had complained bitterly last evening that the water was fouled — deliberately; maliciously fouled by T'kul.

It was startling to come out into crisply cold air with the pinch of late frost in the early hour chill.

Brekke glanced up at the watchrider by the Star stones and then hurried down the short flight of steps to the

Lower Caverns. The fires had been banked but the water kettle was comfortingly hot. She made klah,

found bread and fruit for herself and some meat for Berd. He was beginning to eat with less of the

barbarous voracity, and no longer gorged himself into somnolence.

Taking a fresh basket of glows, Brekke went into the storage section to begin her investigations.

Berd cheerfully accompanied her, perching where he could watch her industry.

By the time the Weyr began to stir, four hours later, Brekke was full of contempt for past domestic

any quantity from the nearby mountain streams. It seemed silly to send a dragon out for a couple of bucketsful, she reported to T'bor and Kylara.

"I'll get kegs from Nabol," Kylara announced, once she had recovered from ranting about T'kul's pettiness.

While it was obvious to Brekke that T'bor was not pleased to hear her solution, he had too much else to occupy his time to protest. At least, Brekke thought, Kylara was taking an interest in the Weyr and some of the responsibility.

So Kylara circled out of the Bowl, Prideth shining golden in the early morning sun. And T'bor took

off with several wings for low-altitude sweeps, to get familiar with the terrain and set up appropriate watch

fires and patrol check points. Brekke and Vanira, with the help of Pilgra, the only High Reaches

Weyrwoman to stay behind, settled who would supervise which necessary duties. They set the weyrlings to dragging the lake, sent others for immediate supplies of fresh water.

raced through the corridors, to be met in the Lower Cavern by Pilgra, wide-eyed with excitement.

“Wirenth’s ready to rise, Brekke. I’ve called back the riders! She’s on her way to the Feeding

Ground. You know what to do, don’t you?”.Brekke stared at the girl, stunned. In a daze she let Pilgra pull her toward the Bowl. Wirenth was

screaming, as she glided into the Feeding Ground. The terrified herd-beasts stampeded, keening their

distress, adding to the frightening tension in the air.

“Go on, Brekke,” Pilgra cried, pushing her. “Don’t let her gorge. She won’t fly well!”

“Help me!” Brekke pleaded.

Pilgra embraced her reassuringly, with an odd smile. “Don’t be scared. It’s wonderful.”

“I — I can’t . . .”

Pilgra gave Brekke a shake. “Of course you can. You must. I’ve got to scoot with Segrith. Vanira’s

already taken her queen away.”

“Taken her away?”

“Of course. Don’t be stupid. You can’t have other queens around right now. Just be thankful

Suddenly the air was again full of dragon wings — the bronzes had returned. And the urgency of

mating, the necessity of protecting Wirenth roused Brekke. She began to run toward the Feeding Ground,

aware of the rising hum of the bronzes, the expectant sensuality of the browns and blues and greens who

now perched on their ledges to watch the event. Weyrfolk crowded the Bowl.

“F’nor! F’nor! What shall I do?” Brekke moaned. And then she was aware that Wirenth had come

down on a buck, shrieking her defiance; an altered, unrecognizable Wirenth, voracious with more than a blood urge.

“She mustn’t gorge!” someone shouted at Brekke. Someone gripped her arms to her sides, tightly.

“Don’t let her gorge, Brekke!”

But Brekke was with Wirenth now, was feeling the insatiable desire for raw, hot meat, for the taste of

blood in her mouth, the warmth of it in her belly. Brekke was unaware of extraneous matters. Of anything

queen. When Wirenth rose from the blooded carcass, Brekke became momentarily aware of the heavy, hot, musty bodies crowding around her. Frantic, she glanced up at the circle of bronze riders, their faces intent on the scene on the Feeding Ground, intent and sensual, their expressions changing them from well-known features into strange parodies.

“Brekke! Control her!” Someone shouted hoarsely in her ear and her elbow was seized in a painful vise.

This was wrong! All wrong! Evil, she moaned, desperately crying with all her spirit for F’nor. He had said he’d come. He had promised that only Canth would fly Wirenth . . . Canth! Canth!

Wirenth was going for the throat of the buck, not to blood it, but to rend and eat the flesh.

Two disciplines warred with each other. Confused, distraught, torn as violently as the flesh of the dead buck Brekke nevertheless forced Wirenth to obey her. And yet, which force would finally win? Weyr or

And Brekke was conscious of nothing but Wirenth. For she was suddenly Wirenth, contemptuous of
the bronzes trying to catch her as she sped upward, eastward, high above the mountains, until the land
below was hollow black and sand, the flash of blue lake in the sun blinding. Above the clouds, up where the
air was thin but speed enhanced.
And then, out of the clouds below her, another dragon. A queen, as glowingly golden as herself. A
queen? To lure her dragons from her?
Screaming in protest, Wirenth dove at the intruder, her talons extended, her body no longer exulting
in flight but tensed for combat.
She dove and the intruder veered effortlessly, turning so swiftly to rake her talons down Wirenth's
exposed flank that the young queen could not evade the strike. Injured, Wirenth fell, recovering valiantly and swooping into cloud cover. The bronzes had caught up and bugled their distress. They wanted to
mate. They wanted to interfere. The other queen — it was Prideth — believing her rival vanquished, called
enticingly to the bronzes.

Prideth writhed, her wings fouled by the talons which she could not disengage. Both queens fell like Thread, toward the mountains, escorted by the distraughtly bugling bronzes.

With the desperation born of frenzy, Prideth wrenched herself free, Wirenth's talons leaving gouges to the bone along her shoulders. But as she twisted free, beating for altitude, she slashed at Wirenth's unprotected head, across one gleaming eye.

Wirenth's tortured scream pierced the heavens just as other queens broke into the air around them; queens who instantly divided, one group flying for Prideth, the other for Wirenth.

Implacably they circled Wirenth, forcing her back, away from Prideth, their circles ever decreasing, a living net around the infuriated, pain-racked queen. Sensing only that she was being deprived of revenge on her foe, Wirenth saw the one escape route and folding her wings, dropped out the bottom of the net and darted toward the other group of queens.

queens, the circling bronzes. Then

something seized her body roughly from above, giving her a tremendous jerk.

Unable to see on the right, Wirenth was forced to relinquish her hold to contend with this new

menace. But as she turned, she caught a glimpse of a great golden body directly below Prideth. Above her

— Canth! Canth? Hissing at such treachery, she was unable to realize that he was actually trying to rescue

her from sure death on the dangerously close mountain peaks. Ramoth, too, was attempting to stop their

plunge, supporting Prideth with her body, her great wings straining with effort.

Suddenly teeth closed on Wirenth's neck, close to the major artery at the junction of the shoulder.

Wirenth's mortal scream was cut off as she now struggled for breath itself. Wounded by foe, hampered by

friends, Wirenth desperately transferred between, taking Prideth with her, jaws death-locked on her life's

blood.

All other considerations forgotten, F'nor ran with Canth to the ledge. Grall grabbed at her perch on his shoulder, wrapping her tail so tightly around F'nor's neck that he had to loosen it forcibly. Then Berd could not be brought to roost and precious moments were lost while Canth managed to calm the little bronze sufficiently to accept instruction. As Berd finally settled, Canth let out so mighty a bugle that Mnementh challenged from the ledge and Ramoth roared back from the Hatching Ground.

With no thought of the effect of their precipitous exit or Canth's exceptional behavior, F'nor urged his dragon upward. The small pulse of reason that remained untouched by emotion was trying to estimate how long it had taken the little bronze to reach him, how long Wirenth would bleed before rising, which bronzes were at High Reaches. He was thankful that F'lar had not had time to throw mating flights open. There were some beasts against whom Canth stood no chance.

When they broke into the air again over High Reaches Weyr, F'nor's worst fears were realized. The

Prideth also rises! The thought and the brown's scream of fear were simultaneous. From the

heights the other dragons answered, extending their wings in alarm.

"Rouse Ramoth!" F'nor shouted, mind and voice, his body paralyzed with shock. "Rouse Ramoth!

Bronze riders! Prideth also rises!"

Weyrfolk rushed from the Lower Cavern, riders appeared on their ledges around the Weyr face.

"Kylara! T'bor! Where's Pilgra? Kylara! Varena!" Shouting with a panic that threatened to choke

him. F'nor raced for Brekke's weyr, shoving aside the people who crowded him, demanding explanations.

Prideth rising! How could that happen? Even the stupidest Weyrwoman knew you didn't keep a

queen near her weyr during a mating flight — unless they were broody. How could Kylara . . .

"T'bor!"

F'nor raced up the short flight of steps, pounded down the corridor in strides that jolted his half-healed

arm. But the a pain cleared his head of panic. Just as he burst into the weyr cavern, Brekke's angry

“My eye! My eye! My eye!” Brekke was covering her right eye, her body writhing in an

uncontrollable, unconscious mimicry of the aerial battle to which she was tuned.

“Kill! I’ll kill her! No! No! She cannot escape. Go away!” Suddenly Brekke’s face turned crafty and

her whole body writhed sensuously.

The bronze riders were changing now, no longer completely in the thrall of the strange mental

rapport with their beasts. Fear, doubt, indecision, hopelessness registered on their faces. Some portion of

the human awareness was returning, fighting with the dragon responsiveness and the interrupted mating

flight. When T’bor reached for Brekke, human fear was reflected in his eyes.

But she was still totally committed to Wirenth, and the incredible triumph on her face registered

Wirenth’s success in evading capture, in dragging Prideth from the encircling queens.

“Prideth has risen, T’bor! The queens are fighting,” F’nor shouted.

her lips bared as her teeth

fastened on an imaginary target, her body arching with the empathic effort.

Suddenly she hissed, craning her head sideways, over her right shoulder, while her face reflected

incredulity, horror, hatred. As suddenly, her body was seized with a massive convulsion. She screamed

again, this time a mortal shriek of unbelievable terror and anguish. One hand went to her throat the other

batted at some unseen attacker. Her body, poised on her toes, strained in an agonized stretch. With a cry

that was more gasp than scream, she whirled. In her eyes was Brekke's soul again, tortured, terrified. Then

her eyes closed, her body sagged in such an alarming collapse that F'nor barely caught her in time.

The stones of the weyr itself seemed to reverberate with the mourning dirge of the dragons.

"T'bor, send someone for Manora," F'nor cried in a hoarse voice as he bore Brekke to her couch.

Her body was so light in his arms — as if all substance had been drained from it. He held her tightly to his

“Don’t know. I left this morning to fly patrols.” T’bor scrubbed at his face, shock bleaching the ruddy

color from his skin. “The lake was polluted . . .”

F’nor piled furs around Brekke’s motionless body. He held his hand against her chest, feeling its

barely perceptible rise and fall.

F’nor?. It was Canth, his call so faint, so piteous that the man closed his eyes against the pain in his

dragon’s tone.

He felt someone grip his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see the pity, the understanding in T’bor’s.

“There’s nothing more you can do for her right now, F’nor.”

“She’ll want to die. Don’t let her!” he said. “Don’t let Brekke die!”

Canth was on the ledge, his eyes glowing dully. He was swaying with exhaustion. F’nor encircled

the bowed head with his arms, their mutual grief so intense they seemed afire with pain.

It was too late. Prideth had risen. Too close to Wirenth. Not even the queens could help. I tried,

F’nor. I tried. She — she fell so fast. And she turned on me. Then went between. I could not find her

Ramoth had informed them

that Wirenth was rising. And Ramoth knew instantly when Prideth rose, too, and had gone between to

Nabol to stop the mortal combat if she could.

Once Wirenth had dragged Prideth between, Ramoth had returned to Benden Weyr for Lessa. The

Benden dragons set up their keen so that the entire Weyr soon knew of the disaster. But Lessa waited only

long enough for Manora to gather her medicines.

As she and the headwoman reached the ledge of Brekke's weyr and the motionless mourners,

Lessa looked anxiously to Manora. There was something dangerous in such stillness.

"They will work this out together. They are together, more now than ever before," Manora said in a

voice that was no more than a rough whisper. She passed them quietly, her head bent and her shoulders

drooping as she hurried down the corridor to Brekke.

"Ramoth?" asked Lessa, looking down to where her queen had settled on the sands. It was not

halted mid-step. The tragedy was only minutes past so the nine bronze riders were still in severe shock.

As well they might be, Lessa realized with deep sympathy. To be roused to performance intensity

and then be, not only disappointed, but disastrously deprived of two queens at once! Whether a bronze won

the queen or not, there was a subtle deep attachment between a queen and the bronzes of her Weyr . . .

However, Lessa concluded briskly, someone in this benighted Weyr ought to have sense enough to

be constructive. Lessa broke this train of thought off abruptly. Brekke had been the responsible member.

She turned, about to go in search of some stimulant for the dazed riders when she heard the uneven steps

and stertorous breathing of someone in a hurry. Two green fire lizards darted into the weyr, hovering,

chirping excitedly as a young girl came in at a half-run. She could barely manage the heavy tray she carried

and she was weeping, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Oh!” she cried, seeing Lessa. She stifled her sobs, tried to bob a curtsey and blot her nose on her

rider. But the child was

motionless, staring at the curtain, her face twisted with grief, the tears flowing unnoticed down her cheeks.

She was washing her hands together with such violent motions that the skin stretched white across her

knuckles.

“You’re Mirrim?”

The child nodded, her eyes not leaving the closed entrance. Above her the greens whirred, echoing

her distress.

“Manora is with Brekke, Mirrim.” “But — but she’ll die. She’ll die. They say the rider dies, too, when the dragon is killed. They say .

. .”

“They say entirely too much,” Lessa began and then Manora stood in the doorway.

“She lives. Sleep is the kindest blessing now.” She flipped the curtain shut and glanced at the men.

“These could do with sleep. Have their dragons returned? Who’s this?” Manora touched Mirrim’s cheek,

gently. “Mirrim? I’d heard you had green lizards.”

get his fingers to the cup.

“My lady,” murmured Manora, “we need the Weyrleader. Ista and Telgar Weyrs would be fighting

Thread by now and . . .”

“I’m here,” F’lar said from the weyr entrance. “And I’ll take a shot of that, too. Cold between is in my bones.”

“We’ve more fools than we need right now,” Lessa exclaimed, but her face brightened to see him there.

“Where’s T’bor?”

Manora indicated Brekke’s room.

“All right. Then where’s Kylara?”

And the cold of between was in his voice.

By evening some order had been restored to the badly demoralized High Reaches Weyr. The

bronze dragons had all returned, been fed, and the bronze riders weyred with their beasts, sufficiently drugged to sleep.

Kylara had been found. Or, rather, returned, by the green rider assigned to Nabol Hold.

cycle, you know. But she settled down all right on the ridge with my green so I went about teaching those Holders how to manage their fire lizards.” S’goral evidently did not have much use for his pupils. “She went in with the Nabolese Holder. Later I saw their lizards sunning on the ledge outside the Lord’s sleeping room.” He paused, glancing at his audience and looking grimmer still. “We were taking a breather when my green cried out. Sure enough, there were dragons, high up. I knew it was a mating flight. You can’t mistake it. Then Prideth started to bugle. Next thing I knew, she was down among Nabol’s prize breeding stock. I waited a bit, sure that she’d be aware of what was happening, but when there wasn’t a sign of her, I went looking. Nabol’s bodyguards were at the door. The Lord didn’t want to be disturbed. Well, I disturbed him. I stopped him doing what he was doing. And that’s what was doing it! Setting Prideth off. That and being so close to rising herself, and seeing a mating flight right over her, so to speak. You don’t abuse your

“We were lucky you were there at all,” Lessa said. “We might never have known where Kylara was.”

“What I want to know is what’s going to happen to her — now?” A hard vindictiveness replaced the

half-shame, half-guilt in the rider’s face.

“Isn’t loss of a dragon enough?” T’bor roused himself to ask.

“Brekke lost her dragon, too,” S’goral retorted angrily, “and she was doing what she should!”

“Nothing can be decided in heat or hatred, S’goral,” F’lar said, rising to his feet. “We’ve no

precedents — ” He broke off, turning to D’ram and G’narish. “Not in our time, at least.”

“Nothing should be decided in heat or hatred,” D’ram echoed, “but there were such incidents in our

time.” Unaccountably he flushed. “We’d better assign some bronzes here, F’lar. The High Reaches men and beasts may not be fit tomorrow.

And with Thread falling every day, no Weyr can be allowed to relax its vigilance. For anything.”

CHAPTER XIII

Night at Fort Weyr:

Six Days Later

Robinton wished that they could have put off this Red Star viewing until minds and eyes had cleared and were ready for this challenge. And yet, perhaps the best solution was to press this proposed expedition to the Red Star as far and as fast as possible — as an anodyne to the depression that had followed the death of the two queens. Robinton knew that F'lar wanted to prove to the Lord Holders that the dragonmen were in earnest in their desire to clear the air of Thread, but for once, the Masterharper found himself without a private opinion. He did not know if F'lar was wise in pushing the issue, particularly now. Particularly when the Benden Weyrleader wasn't recovered from T'ron's slash. When no one was sure how T'kul was managing in Southern Weyr or if the man intended to stay there. When all Pern was staggered by the battle and deaths of the two queens The people had enough to rationalize, had enough to do with the vagaries of Threadfall complicating the seasonal mechanics of plowing and seeding. Leave the attack of the Red Star until another time.

I've had my turn, I

daresay."

"Has Wansor mounted it permanently at Fort Weyr?"

"It was discovered at Fort Weyr," the rider replied, a little defensively.

"Fort's the oldest Weyr, you

know. P'zar feels it should stay at Fort. And the Mastersmith, he agrees.

His man Wansor keeps saying

that there may be good reason. Something to do with elevation and angles and the altitude of Fort Weyr

mountains. I didn't understand."

No more do I, Robinton thought. But he intended to. He was in agreement with Fandarel and Terry

that there should be an interchange of knowledge between Crafts. Indisputably, Pern had lost many of the

bemoaned techniques due to Craft jealousy. Lose a Craftmaster early, before he had transmitted all the

Craft secrets, and a vital piece of information was lost forever. Not that Robinton, nor his predecessor, had

ever espoused that ridiculous prerogative. There were five senior harpers who knew everything that

of the cliff, down into the Bowl, making room for someone else to land.

Glows had been set on the narrow crown of the height, leading toward the massive Star Stones,

their black bulk silhouetted against the lighter night sky. Among those gathered there, Robinton could

distinguish the Mastersmith's huge figure, Wansor's pear-shaped and Lessa's slender one.

On the largest and flattest rock of the Star Stones, Robinton saw the tripod arrangement on which

the long barrel of the distance-viewer had been mounted. At first glance he was disappointed by its

simplicity, a fat, round cylinder, with a smaller pipe attached to its side. Then it amused him. The Smith

must be tortured with the yearning to dismantle the instrument and examine the principles of its simple

efficiency.

"Robinton, how are you this evening?" Lessa asked, coming toward him, one hand outstretched.

He gripped it, her soft skin smooth under the calluses of his fingers.. "Pondering the elements of efficiency," he countered, keeping his voice light. But he couldn't keep

Robinton said nothing and, after a moment, Lessa went on.

“We don’t like losing Brekke as a Weyrwoman — ” She paused and added, her voice a little harsher,

“And since it is now obvious that a person can Impress more than once, and more than one Dragonkind,

Brekke will be presented as a candidate when the Benden eggs Hatch. Which should be soon.”

“I perceive,” Robinton said, cautiously choosing his words “that not everyone favors this departure from custom.”

Although he couldn’t see her face in the darkness, he felt her eyes on him.

“This time it’s not the Oldtimers. I suppose they’re so sure she can’t re-Impress, they’re indifferent.”

“Who then?”

“F’nor and Manora oppose it violently.”

“And Brekke?”

Lessa gave an impatient snort. “Brekke says nothing. She will not even open her eyes. She can’t

be sleeping all the time. The lizards and the dragons tell us she’s awake. You see,” and Lessa’s

“Brekke is not — not actively suicidal. She’s craftbred, you know,” Lessa said in a flat, disapproving tone of voice.

“No, I didn’t know,” Robinton murmured encouragingly after a pause. He was thinking that Lessa wouldn’t ever contemplate suicide in a similar circumstance and wondered what Brekke’s “breeding” had to do with a suicidal aptitude.

“That’s her trouble. She can’t actively seek death so she just lies there. I have this incredible urge,” and Lessa bunched her fists, “to beat or pinch or slap her — anything to get some response from the girl.

It’s not the end of the world, after all. She can hear other dragons. She’s not bereft of all contact with Dragonkind, like Lytol.”

“She must have time to recover from the shock . . .”

“I know, I know,” Lessa said irritably, “but we don’t have time. We can’t get her to realize that it’s better to do things . . .”

“Lessa . . .”

her reply.

“He is feverish. He ought never to have come to High Reaches with that open wound. You know

what cold between does to wounds!”

“I’d hoped he’d be here tonight.”

Lessa’s laugh was sour. “I dosed his klah when he wasn’t looking.”

Robinton chuckled. “And stuffed him with mosstea, I’ll bet.”

“Packed the wound with it, too.”

“He’s a strong man, Lessa. He’ll be all right.”

“He’d better be. If only F’nor — ” and Lessa broke off. “I sound like a wherry, don’t I?” She gave a

sigh and smiled up at Robinton.

“Not a bit, my dear Lessa, I assure you. However, it’s not as if Benden were inadequately

represented,” and he executed a little bow which, if she shrugged it off, at least made her laugh. “in fact,” he

went on, “I’m a trifle relieved that F’lar isn’t here, railing at anything that keeps him from blotting out any

Thread he happens to see in that contraption.” “True enough.” And Robinton caught the edge to her voice. “I’m not sure . . .”

keep him in sight, if you

know what I mean.”

“But he’s got no influence on the other Lords . . .”

Robinton gave a harsh laugh. “My dear Weyrwoman, considering the influence he’s been exerting

in other areas, he doesn’t need the Lords’ support.”

Robinton did wonder at the gall of the man, appearing in public anywhere a scant six days after he’d

been involved in the deaths of two queen dragons.

The Lord Holder of Nabol strode insolently to the focal point of the gathering, his bronze fire lizard

perched on his forearm, its wings extended as it fought to maintain its balance. The little creature began to

hiss as it became aware of the antagonism directed at Meron.

“And this — this innocuous tube is the incredible instrument that will show us the Red Star?” Meron

of Nabol asked scathingly.

“Don’t touch it, I beg of you.” Wansor jumped forward, intercepting Nabol’s hand.

“What did you say?” The lizard’s hiss was no less sibilantly menacing than Meron’s tone. The

Wansor glanced questioningly at the big Smith, who made a slight movement of his head, excusing him. Wansor gratefully stepped back and let Fandarel preside. With two gnarled fingers, the Smith delicately held the small round protuberance at the top of the smaller cylinder.

“This is the eyepiece. Put your best seeing eye to it,” he told Meron.

The lack of any courteous title was not lost on the Nabolese. Plainly he wanted to reprimand the Smith. Had Wansor spoken so, he would not have hesitated a second Robinton thought.

Meron’s lips slid into a sneer and, with a bit of a swagger, he took the final step to the distance-viewer.

Bending forward slightly, he laid his eye to the proper place. And jerked his body back hastily, his face wearing a fleeting expression of shock and terror. He laughed uneasily and then took a second, longer look. Far too long a look to Robinton’s mind.

“If there is any lack of definition in the image, Lord Meron — ” Wansor began tentatively.

into the eyepiece.

“Very interesting. Very interesting,” he said, his tone oily with amusement.

“That is quite enough, Meron,” Lessa said, striding to the instrument. The man could not be allowed any privilege.

He regarded her as he might a body insect, coldly and mockingly.

“Enough of what — Weyrwoman?” And his tone made the title a vulgar epithet. In fact, his pose

exuded such a lewd familiarity that Robinton found he was clenching his fists. He had an insane desire to

wipe that look from Meron’s face and change the arrangement of the features in the process.

The Mastersmith, however, reacted more quickly. His two great hands secured Meron’s arms to his

sides and, in a fluid movement, Fandarel picked the Nabolese Lord up, the man’s feet dangling a full

dragonfoot above the rock, and carried him as far away from the Star Stones as the ledge permitted.

Fandarel then set Meron down so hard that the man gave a startled exclamation of pain and staggered

the Red Star reached her brain, such trivial annoyance evaporated. There was the Red Star, seemingly no farther away than her arm could reach. It swam, a many-hued globe, like a child's miggysy, in a lush black background. Odd whit-ish-pink masses must be clouds. Startling to think that the Red Star could possess clouds — like Pern. Where the cover was pierced, she could see grayish masses, a lively gray with glints and sparkles. The ends of the slightly ovoid planet were completely white, but devoid of the cloud cover. Like the great icecaps of northern regions of Pern. Darker masses punctuated the grays. Land? Or seas? Involuntarily Lessa moved her head, to glance up at the round marks of redness in the night sky that was this child's toy through the magic of the distance-viewer. Then, before anyone might think she'd relinquished the instrument she looked back through the eyepiece. Incredible. Unsettling. If the gray was land — how could they possibly rid it of Thread? If the darker masses were land . . . Disturbed, and suddenly all too willing that someone else be exposed to their ancient enemy at such close range, she

Groghe would need to be kept . . .

She retreated and knew it for a retreat — to Robinton. The Harper's presence was always

reassuring. He was eager to have his turn but resigned to waiting. Groghe naturally would give the other

Lord Holders precedence over a Harper, even the Masterharper of Pern.

"I wish he'd go," Lessa said, glancing sideways at Meron. The Nabolese had made no attempt to

re-enter the group from which he had been so precipitously expelled. The offensive stubbornness of the

man in remaining where he clearly was not welcome provided a counter irritant to worry and her renewed fear of the Red Star.

Why must it appear so — so innocent? Why did it have to have clouds? It ought to be different.

How it ought to differ, Lessa couldn't guess, but it ought to look — to look sinister. And it didn't. That made it more fearful than ever.

"I don't see anything," Sangel of Boll was complaining.

"A moment, sir." Wansor came forward and began adjusting a small knob. "Tell me when the view

taste of honest dread, perhaps . . .

“Why does it glow? Where does it get light? It’s dark here,” the Lord Holder of Boll babbled.

“It is the light of the sun, my Lord,” Fandarel replied, his deep, matter-of-fact voice reducing that miracle to common knowledge.

“How can that be?” Sangel protested. “The sun’s on the other side of us now. Any child knows that —”

“Of course, but we are not obstructing the Star from that light. We are below it in the skies, if you will, so that the sun’s light reaches it directly.”

Sangel seemed likely to monopolize the viewer, too.

“That’s enough, Sangel,” Groghe said testily. “Let Oterel have a chance.”

“But I’ve barely looked, and there was trouble adjusting the mechanism,” Sangel complained.

Between Oterel’s glare and Groghe trying to shoulder him out of the way, Sangel reluctantly stepped aside.

“Let me adjust the focus for you, Lord Oterel,” Wansor murmured politely.

The man shivered, pulling his cloak around him though the night air was not more than mildly cool

for spring. "It's nothing more than a child's miggys," exclaimed the Lord of Tillek. "Fuzzy. Or is it supposed to

be?" He glanced away from the eyepiece at Lessa.

"No, my Lord," Wansor said. "It should be bright and clear, so you can see cloud formations."

"How would you know?" Sangel asked testily.

"Wansor set the instrument up for this evening's viewing," Fandarel pointed out.

"Clouds?" Tillek asked. "Yes, I see them. But what's the land? The dark stuff or the gray?"

"We don't know yet," Fandarel told him.

, "Land masses don't look that way as high as dragons can fly a man," said P'zar the Fort

Weyrleader, speaking for the first time.

"And objects seen at a far greater distance change even more," Wansor said in the dry tone of

someone who does know what he's talking about. "For example, the very mountains of Fort which surround

authority in his manner. Lessa

approved more and more of Wansor. A man ought not be afraid to say he didn't know. Nor a woman.

The Lord of Tillek did not want to leave the instrument. Almost as if he hoped, Lessa thought, that if

he looked long enough, he'd discover a good argument for mounting an expedition.

Tillek finally responded to Nessel of Crom's acid remarks and stepped aside.

"What do you think is the land, Sangel? Or did you really see anything?"

"Of course I did. Saw the clouds plain as I see you right now."

Oterel of Tillek snorted contemptuously. "Which doesn't say much, considering the darkness."

"I saw as much as you did, Oterel. Gray masses, and black masses and those clouds. A star

having clouds! Doesn't make sense. Pern has clouds!"

Hastily Lessa changed her laugh at the man's indignation to a cough, but she caught the Harper's

amused look and wondered what his reaction to the Red Star would be. Would he be for, or against this

expedition? And which attitude did she want him to express?

Lord out of the way.

“Now, wait a minute there, Tillek.” And Nessel put a proprietary hand on the instrument. As Tillek

jostled him, the tripod tottered and the distance-viewer, on its hastily rigged swivel, assumed a new direction.

“Now you’ve done it,” Oterel cried. “I only wanted to see if you could distinguish the land from the water.”

Wansor tried to get between the two Lords so that he could adjust his precious instrument.

“I didn’t get my full turn,” Nessel complained, trying to keep physical possession of the distance-viewer.

“You’ll not see anything, Lord Nessel, if Wansor cannot have a chance to sight back on the Star,”

Fandarel said, politely gesturing the Crom Lord out of the way.

“You re a damned wherry fool, Nessel,” Lord Groghe said, pulling him to one side and waving

Wansor in.

“Tillek’s the fool.”

affronted Lessa that the little creature was humming with pleasure.

“It will take many observations, by many eyes,” Fandarel said in his bass rumble, “before we will be

able to say what the Red Star looks like with any certitude. One point of similarity is not enough. Not at all.”

“Oh, indeed. Indeed.” Wansor seconded his Craftmaster, his eyes glued to the piece as he slowly

swung it across the night sky..“What’s taking you so long?” Nessel of Crom demanded irritably. “There’s the Star. We can all see

it with our naked eyes.”

“And it is so easy to pick out the green pebble you drop on the sands of Igen at high noon?” asked

Robinton.

“Ah. I’ve got it,” Wansor cried. Nessel jumped forward, reaching for the tube. He jerked his hand

back, remembering what an unwise movement could do. With both hands conspicuously behind him, he

looked again at the Red Star.

Nessel, however, did not remain long at the distance-viewer. When Oterel stepped forward, the

Masterharper moved quicker.

toward the Red Star in the dark

heavens above them.

“Well, Harper?” asked Meron superciliously. “You’ve a glib word for every occasion.”

Robinton regarded the Nabolese for a longer moment than he had the Star.

“I think it wiser that we keep this distance between us.”

“Ha! I thought as much.” Meron was grinning with odious triumph.

“I wasn’t aware you thought,” Robinton remarked quietly.

“What do you mean, Meron?” Lessa asked in a dangerously edged voice, “you thought as much?”

“Why, it should be obvious,” and the Lord of Nabol had not tempered his attitude toward her much

since his first insult.

“The Harper does as Benden Weyr decrees. And since Benden Weyr does not care to exterminate

Thread at source . . .

“And how do you know that?” Lessa demanded coldly.

“And, Lord Nabol, on what grounds do you base your allegation that the Harper of Pern does as

“But it’s so obvious. Surely you can all see that,” Meron replied with malicious affability and a feigned surprise at the obtuseness of the others. “He has a hopeless passion for — the Benden Weyrwoman.”

For a moment Lessa could only stare at the man in a stunned daze. It was true that she admired and respected Robinton. She was fond of him, she supposed. Always glad to see him and never bothering to disguise it but — Meron was mad. Trying to undermine the country’s faith in dragonmen with absurd, vicious rumors. First Kylara and now . . . And yet Kylara’s weakness, her promiscuity, the general attitude of the Hold and Craft toward the customs of the Weyrs made his accusation so plausible . . .

Robinton’s hearty guffaw startled her. And wiped the smile from Nabol’s face.

“Benden’s Weyrwoman has not half the attraction for me that Benden’s wine has!”

There was such intense relief in the faces around her that Lessa knew, in a sinking, sick way, that

“Furthermore,” the Harper went on, “the Masterharper of Pern has no opinion, one way or another, about the Red Star — not even a verse. Because that — that — child’s miggys scares him juiceless and makes him yearn for some of that Benden wine, right now, in limitless quantity.” Robinton had not the slightest trace of laughter in his voice now. “I’m too steeped in the history and lore of our beloved Pern, I’ve sung too many ballads about the evil of the Red Star to want to get any closer to it. Even that — ” and he pointed to the distance-viewer, “brings it far too near me. But the men who have to fight Thread day after day, Turn after Turn, can look upon it with less fearfulness than the poor Harper. And, Meron, Lord Holder of Nabol, you can wager every field and cot and hall upon your lands that the dragonmen of every Weyr would like to be quit of any obligation to keep your hide Threadfree even if it means wiping Thread from every squared length of that Star.” The vehemence in the Harper’s voice caused Meron to take a backward step, to clap a hand on the violently agitated fire lizard. “How can a you, any of you,” and the Harper’s

when a dragon dies. Or

must I remind you of that, too? Do you honestly believe that the Dragonriders wish to prolong such

conditions, such occurrences? What do they get out of it? Not much! Not much! Are the scores they suffer

worth a few bags of grain, or a blade from the Smith's? Is a dragon's death truly recompensed by a length of goods or a scrawny herdbeast?

"And if there have been instruments for man with his puny eyes to view that bauble in the sky, why

do we still have Thread? If it's just a question of finding coordinates and taking that jump? Could it be that it

has been tried by Dragonriders before? And they failed because those gray masses we see so clearly are

not water, or land, but uncountable Threads, seething and writhing, until the topmost can, by some

mysterious agency, win free to plague us? Could it be because, although there are clouds, they do not

consist of water vapor as Pern's clouds, but something deadly, far more inimical to us than Thread? How do

soulless, that the dragonmen of Pern will go to the Red Star.”

“That is F’lar’s intention,” Lessa said in a strong, ringing voice, her head high, her shoulders straight.

Unlike the Harper, she could not admit her fear, even to herself.

“Aye,” rumbled Fandarel, nodding his great head slowly up and down, “for he has enjoined me and

Wansor to make many observations on the Red Star so that an expedition can be sent as soon as possible.”

“And how long must we wait until this expedition takes place?” Meron asked, as if the Harper’s words had never been spoken.

“Come now, man, how can you expect any one to give a date — a time?” asked Groghe.

“Ah, but Benden Weyr is so adept at giving times and dates and patterns, is it not?” Meron replied

so unctuously that Lessa wanted to scratch his face.

“And they saved your profit, Nabol,” Oterel put in.

“Have you any idea, Weyrwoman?” Sangel asked Lessa in an anxious tone.

“I must complete the observations,” Wansor put in, nervously dithering. “It would be folly —

“It could be a lifelong project,” he went on.

“Not if I know F’lar,” the Harper said dryly. “I’ve recently entertained the notion that Benden’s

Weyrleader takes these latest vagaries of our ancient scourge as a personal insult since we had rather

thought we’d got them neatly slotted in time and place.”

There was such good-humored raillery in the Harper’s tone that Oterel of Tillek gave a snort. Lord

Groghe looked more thoughtful, probably not quite recovered from F’lar’s rebuttal the other day.

“An insult to Benden?” asked Sangel, baffled. “But his time tables were accurate for Turns. Used

them myself and never found them wrong until just recently.”

Meron stamped his foot, his affected pose gone.

“You’re all fools. Letting the Harper sweet-talk you into complacency. We’ll never see the end of

Thread. Not in his lifetime or ours. And we’ll be paying tithes to shiftless Weyrs deferring to Dragonriders

and their women as long as this planet circles the sun. And there’s not one of you great Lords, not one, with

launch position. A single clear note from Ramoth all but deafened those on the heights. The fire lizard

disappeared with a shriek. Strangling on his curses, Meron stamped down the lighted path to the landing,

calling harshly for his dragon. The green appeared with such alacrity that Lessa was certain Ramoth had

summoned him, even as she had warned the little lizard against attacking Lessa.

“You wouldn’t order T’bor to stop patrolling Nabol, would you, Weyrwoman?” asked Nessel, Lord of

Crom. “After all, my lands march with his . . .”

“Lord Nessel,” Lessa began, intending to reassure him that she had no such authority in the first

place and in the second . . . “Lord Nessel,” she repeated instead, smiling at him, “you notice that the Lord

of Nabol did not request it, after all. Though,” and she sighed with dramatic dedication, “we have been

sorely tempted to penalize him for his part in the death of the two dragon queens.” She gave Nessel a wan,

brave smile. “But there are hundreds of innocent people on his lands, and many more about him, who

queens and you're doing nothing .

. .”

“Are the Lord Holders doing anything about Meron?” she asked, glancing sternly at the four present.

There was a long silence. “I must return to Benden Weyr. The dawn and another day's watch come all too

soon there. We're keeping Wansor and Fandarel from the observations that will make it possible for us to

go to that Star.”

“Before they monopolize the thing, I'd like another look,” Oterel of Tillek said loudly. “My eyes are

keen . . .”

Lessa was tired as she called Ramoth to her. She wanted to go back to Benden Weyr, not so much

to sleep as to reassure herself about F'lar. Mnementh was with him, true, and he'd have reported any

change in his rider's condition . . .

And I'd've told you, Ramoth said, sounding a little hurt.

“Lessa,” the Harper's low voice reached her, “are you in favor of that expedition?”

just doesn't seem logical . . .”

“Is there any record that anyone, besides yourself, ever jumped so far between times?”

“No.” She had to admit it. “Not so far. But then, there hadn't been such need.”

“And there's no need now to take this other kind of a jump?”

“Don't unsettle me more.” Lessa was unsure of what she felt or thought, or what anyone felt or

thought, should or shouldn't do. Then she saw the kind, worried expression of the Harper's eyes and

impulsively gripped his arm. “How can we know? How can we be sure?”

“How were you sure that the Question Song could be answered — by you?”

“And you've a new Question Song for me?”

“Questions, yes.” He gave her a smile as he covered her hand gently with his own. “Answer?” He

shook his head and then stepped back as Ramoth alighted.

But his questions were as difficult to forget as the Question Song which had led her between times.

When she returned to Benden, she found that F'lar's skin was hot to the touch; he slept restlessly. So much

ried about her report on the
viewing.

“I can’t imagine what you expected me to see,” she said with some ex-
asperation after she had

patiently described for the fourth time what she had seen through the
distance-viewer. “I expected,” and he paused significantly, “to find some —
some characteristic for which the dragons

could fly between.” He plucked at the bed fur, then pulled the recalci-
trant forelock back from his eyes. “We

have got to keep that promise to the Lord Holders.”

“Why? To prove Meron wrong?”

“No. To prove it is or is not possible to get rid of Thread permanently.”
He scowled at her as if she

should have known the answer.

“I think someone else must have tried to discover that before,” she said
wearily. “And we still have
Thread.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” he countered in such a savage tone that
he began to cough, an

exercise which painfully contracted the injured muscles across his waist.

“That isn’t . . .”

“If it’s your pet project you’re worrying about, I had N’ton secure Thread . . .”

“N’ton?” F’lar’s eyes flew open in surprise.

“Yes. He’s a good lad and, from what I heard at Fort Weyr last night, very deft in being exactly where he is needed, unobtrusively.”

“And . . . ?”

“And? Well, when the next queen at Fort Weyr rises, he’ll undoubtedly take the Leadership. Which is what you intended, isn’t it?”

“I don’t mean that. I mean, the Thread.”

Lessa felt her guts turn over at the memory. “As you thought, the grubs rose to the surface the instant we put the Thread in. Very shortly there was no more Thread.”

F’lar’s eyes shone and he parted his lips in a triumphant smile.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

At that, Lessa jammed both fists against her waist and awarded him one of her sternest looks.

“Because there have been a few other things to occupy my mind and time. This is not something we can

carry on. That's what we need the

most, Lessa. Men who think, who can carry on. That's what happened before." His eyes flew open,

shadowed with a vague fear and a definite worry. "What time is it at Fort Weyr now?"

Lessa made a rapid calculation. "Dawn's about four hours away."

"Oh. I want N'ton here as soon as possible."

"No wait a minute, F'lar, he's a Fort rider . . ."

F'lar grabbed for her hand, pulling her down to him. "Don't you see," he demanded, his voice

hoarse, his urgency frightening, "he's got to know. Know everything I plan. Then, if something happens . .

."

Lessa stared at him, not comprehending. Then she was both furious with him for frightening her,

irritated with his self-pity, and terrified that he might indeed be fatally ill.

"F'lar, get a grip on yourself, man," she said, half-angry, half-teasing; he felt so hot.

He flung himself back down on the bed, tossing his head from side to side.

yet.” The green is a messenger and the man he bears is very excited, Mnementh reported, and he sounded mildly curious.

Ramoth, who had taken herself to the Hatching Ground after Lessa awakened, rumbled a challenge to bronze Lioth. N'ton came striding down the passageway, accompanied by Wansor, certainly the last person Lessa expected to see. The rotund little man's face was flushed with excitement, his eyes sparkling despite red rims and bloodshot whites.

“Oh, Weyrlady, this is the most exciting news imaginable. Really exciting!” Wansor babbled, shaking the large leaf under her nose. She had an impression of circles.

Then Wansor saw F'lar. All the excitement drained out of his face as he realized that the Weyrleader was a very sick man. “Sir, I had no idea — I wouldn't have presumed . . .”

“Nonsense, man,” F'lar said irritably. “What brings you? What have you there? Let me see.

You've found a coordinate for the dragons?”

one, too, which became visible

toward morning, didn't it, N'ton?"

The young bronze rider nodded solemnly but there was a gleam of amusement in his blue eyes for

the glassman's manner of exposition. "And very faintly, but still visible as a sphere, is this third heavenly

neighbor, to our northeast, low on the horizon. Then, directly south — it was N'ton's notion to look all

around — we found this larger globe with the most unusual cluster of objects moving with visible speed

about it. Why, the skies around Pern are crowded!" Wansor's dismay was so ludicrous that Lessa had to

stifle her giggle.

F'lar took the leaf from the glassman and began to study it while Lessa pushed Wansor onto the

stool by the sick man.

F'lar tapped the circles thoughtfully as though this tactile contact made them more real.

"And there are four stars in the skies?"

"Indeed there are many more, Weyrleader," Wansor replied. "But only these," and his stained

F'lar looked up from the rude sketches, a terrible expression on his face.

"If these are so near, then does Thread really come from the Red Star?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," moaned Wansor softly and began caressing his fingertips with his thumbs in little fluttery gestures.

"Nonsense," said Lessa so confidently that the three men glanced at her in surprise. "Let's not make more complications than we already have. The ancients who knew enough to make that distance-viewer definitely stipulate the Red Star as the origin of Thread. If it were one of these others, they'd have

said so. It is when the Red Star approaches Pern that we have Thread."

"In that drawing in the Council Room at Fort Weyr there is a diagram of globes on circular routes,"

N'ton said thoughtfully. "Only there are six circles and," his eyes widened suddenly; he glanced quickly

down at the sheet in Wansor's hand, ". . . one of them, the next to the last, has clusters of smaller satellites."

"Well, then, except that we've seen it with our own eyes, what's all the worry?" demanded Lessa,

asked, “What of the Red Star? Did you see anything that could guide us in?”

“As to that, sir,” N’ton answered after a questioning glance at Wansor, “there is an odd-shaped

protuberance which puts me in mind of the tip of Nerat, only pointed east instead of west — ” His voice

trailed off and he gave a diffident shrug of his shoulders..F’lar sighed and leaned back again, all the eagerness gone from his face.

“Insufficient detail, huh?”

“Last night,” N’ton added in hurried qualification. “I doubt the following nights will alter the view.”

“On the contrary, Weyrleader,” said Wansor, his eyes wide, “the Red Star turns on its own axis much as Pern does.”

“But it is still too far away to make out any details,” Lessa said firmly.

F’lar shot her an annoyed look. “If I could only see for myself . . .”

Wansor looked up brightly. “Well, now, you know, I had about figured out how to utilize the lenses

from the magnifier. Of course, there’d be no such maneuverability as one can achieve with the ancient

are wrong for any other time of year. But then, I could — no,” Wansor’s face was puckered with his intense frown. Only his eyes moved, restlessly, as the myriad thoughts he was undoubtedly sifting were reflected briefly. “I will think about it. But I am sure that I can devise a means of your seeing the Red Star, Weyrleader, without moving from Benden.”

“You must be exhausted, Wansor,” Lessa said, before F’lar could ask another question.

“Oh, not to mention,” Wansor replied, blinking hard to focus on her.

“Enough to mention,” Lessa said firmly and took the cup from his hand, half-lifting him from the stool. “I think Master Wansor, that you had better sleep here at Benden a little while.”

“Oh, could I? I’d the most fearful notion that I might fall off the dragon between. But that couldn’t happen, could it? Oh, I can’t stay. I have the Craft’s dragon. Really, perhaps I’d just better . . .”

His voice trailed off as Lessa led him down the corridor.

“He was up all last night too,” N’ton said, grinning affectionately after Wansor.

“There must be some way to get to the Red Star.”

“I’m sure you’ll find it, sir, when you’re feeling better.”

F’lar grimaced, thinking that “unobtrusive” was an apt description of this young man. He had deftly

expressed confidence in his superior, that only ill-health prevented immediate action, and that the ill-health

was a passing thing.

“Since that’s the way matters stand in that direction, let us proceed in another. Lessa said that you

procured Thread for us. Did you see how those swamp grubs dealt with Thread?”

N’ton nodded slowly, his eyes glittering.

“If we hadn’t had to cede the dissidents the continent, I’d’ve had a straight-flown Search discover the

boundaries of the southern lands. We still don’t know its extent. Exploration was stopped on the west by

the deserts, and on the east by the sea. But it can’t be just the swampy area that is infested with these

grubs.” F’lar shook his head. He sounded querulous to himself. He took a breath, forcing himself to speak

Threadfall is light in the south, but I wished I'd known."

"And what would you have thought?" asked Lessa with her usual asperity as she rejoined them.

"Nothing. Because until Thread started falling out of phase, and you had been at the swampfall, you'd never have correlated the information."

She was right, of course, but N'ton didn't have to look so torn between agreement with her and

sympathy for him. Silently F'lar railed at this infuriating debility. He ought to be up and around, not forced to rely on the observations of others at a critical time like this.

"Sir, in the Turns I've been a dragonrider," said N'ton, considering his words even as he spoke, "I've

learned that nothing is done without purpose. I used to call my sire foolish to insist that one tanned leather in just one way, or stretched hide only a little at a time, well-soaked, but I've realized recently that there is an

order, a reason, a rhyme for it." He paused, but F'lar urged him to go on. "I've been most interested in the

methods of the Mastersmith. That man thinks constantly." The young man's eyes shone with such intense

developed the grubs to protect growing fields?”

“They developed the dragons from fire lizards, didn’t they? Why not grubs as ground crews?” And

N’ton grinned at the whimsy of his thesis.

“That makes sense,” Lessa said, looking hopefully at F’lar. “Certainly that explains why the dragons

haven’t jumped between to the Red Star. They didn’t need to. Protection was being provided.”

“Then why don’t we have grubs here in the north?” asked F’lar contentiously.

“Ha! Someone didn’t live long enough to transmit the news, or sow the grubs, or cultivate them, or

something. Who can tell?” Lessa threw wide her arms. It was obvious to F’lar that she preferred this

theory, subtle as she may have been in trying to block his desire to go to the Red Star.

He was willing to believe that the grubs were the answer, but the Red Star had to be visited. If only

to reassure the Lord Holders that the dragonmen were trustworthy.

“We still don’t know if the grubs exist beyond the swamps,” F’lar reminded her.

that F'nor was involved with a woman; he was a dragonrider first, wasn't he? Then F'lar suppressed such

uncharitable thoughts. Brekke had been a Weyrwoman; through no fault of hers (and F'lar still berated

himself that he had not thought of keeping a closer check on Kylara's activities — he'd been warned),

Brekke was deprived of her dragon. If she found some comfort in F'nor's presence, it was unforgivable to

deprive her of his company. "Go, N'ton. Spot-check. And bring back samples of those grubs from every

location. I wish Wansor had not dismantled that other contraption. We could look closely at the grubs. That

Masterherder was a fool. The grubs might not be the same in every spot."

"Grubs are grubs," Lessa mumbled.

"Landbeasts raised in the mountains are different from landbeasts raised on the plains," N'ton said.

"Fellis trees grown south are larger with better fruit than Nerat's best."

"You know too much," Lessa replied, grinning to take the sting from her words.

N'ton grinned. "I'm a bronze rider, Weyrwoman."

oath that brought Lessa, all

consideration, to his side.

“I’ll get well, I’ll get well,” he fumed. He held her hand against his cheek, grateful, too, for the cool of

her fingers as they curved to fit against his face.

“Of course you’ll get well. You’re never sick,” she murmured softly, stroking his forehead with her

free hand. Then her voice took on a teasing note. “You’re just stupid. Otherwise you wouldn’t have gone

between, let cold into a wound, and developed fever.”

F’lar, reassured as much by her caustic jibe as her cool and loving caresses, lay back and willed

himself to sleep, to health.

CHAPTER XIV

Early Morning at Ruatha Hold

Midday at Benden Weyr. WHEN WORD CAME that the Hatching was likely to occur that bright spring day, Jaxom didn’t know

whether he was glad or not. Ever since the two queens had killed each other ten days before, Lytol had

been sunk in such a deep gloom that Jaxom had tiptoed around the Hold. His guardian had always been a

off his sense of blasphemy for

invading the Hatching Ground, and wondered if this were his punishment. But he was a logical boy and the

death of the two queens had not occurred at Ruatha, not over Fort Weyr to which Ruatha Hold was bound.

He'd never met Kylara or Brekke. He did know F'nor and felt sorry for him if half what he'd heard was true

— that F'nor had taken Brekke into his weyr and had abandoned his duties as a Wing-second to care for

her. She was very sick. Funny, everyone was sorry for Brekke but no one mentioned Kylara, and she'd lost

a queen, too.

Jaxom wondered about that but knew he couldn't ask. Just as he couldn't ask if he and Lytol were

really going to the Hatching. Why else would the Weyrleader send them word? And wasn't Talina a

Ruathan candidate for the queen egg? Ruatha ought to be represented at the Hatching. Benden Weyr

always had open Impressions, even when the other Weyrs didn't. And he hadn't seen Felessan in ages.

Everything was going wrong on Pern. Dragon queens killing each other, Weyrleaders dueling in public,

Thread falling here and there, with no rhyme or reason. Order had slipped away from life; the constants that

made his routine were dissolving, and he was powerless to stop the inexorable slide. It wasn't fair.

Everything had been going so well. Everyone had been saying how Ruatha Hold had improved. Now, this

past six days, they'd lost that northeastern farmhold and, if things kept up, there wouldn't be much left of all

Lytol's hard work. Maybe that's why he was acting so — so odd. But it wasn't fair. Lytol had worked so

hard. And now, it looked as though Jaxom was going to miss the Hatching and see who Impressed that

littlest egg. It wasn't at all fair.

"Lord Jaxom," gasped a breathless drudge from the doorway, "Lord Lytol said for you to change to

your best. The Hatching's to start. Oh, sir, do you think Talina has a chance?"

"More than a chance," Jaxom said, rude with excitement, "She's Ruathan-bred after all. Now get

raced down into the Great

Court where the blue dragon waited.

Sight of the blue, however, inevitably reminded Jaxom that Groghe's eldest son had been given one

of the fire-lizard eggs, Lytol had deliberately refused the pair to which Ruatha Hold was entitled. That, too,

was a rankling injustice. Jaxom should have had a fire-lizard egg, even if Lytol couldn't bear to Impress one.

Jaxom was Lord of Ruatha and an egg had been his due. Lytol had no right to refuse him that perquisite.

"Be a good day for Ruatha if your Talina Impresses, won't it?" D'wer, the blue's rider, greeted him.

"Yes," Jaxom replied, and he sounded sullen even to himself.

"Cheer up, lad," D'wer said. "Things could be worse."

"How?"

D'wer chuckled and, while it offended Jaxom, he couldn't very well call a dragonman to task.

"Good morning, Trebith," Jaxom said to the blue, who turned his head, the large eye whirling with color.

farsighted, and that's harder to endure than a draught or two.”

Lytol gave Jaxom a cursory inspection and an absent good morning.

The tic started in the Lord

Holder's face the moment he climbed up Trebith's shoulder to take his seat against the neck ridges. He

motioned curtly to his ward to get in front of him and then nodded to D'wer.

The blue dragonman gave a slight smile of response, as if he expected no more notice from Lytol,

and suddenly they were aloft. Aloft, with Ruatha's fire height dwindling below. And between with Jaxom

holding his breath against the frightening cold. Then above Benden's Star Stones, so close to other dragons

also wincing into the Weyr that Jaxom feared collision at any moment.

“How — how do they know where they are?” he asked D'wer.

The rider grinned at him. “They know. Dragons never collide — ” And a shadow of memory

crossed D'wer's usually cheerful face.

Jaxom groaned. How stupid of him to make any reference to the queens' battle.

dragon also veering in that
direction.

But suddenly they were inside the wide mouth of the upper entrance, a
dark core that led into the

immense Hatching Ground. The whir of wings, a concentration of the
musty scent of dragons, and then they

were poised above the slightly steaming sands, in the great circle thea-
tre with its tiers of perches for men
and beasts.

Jaxom had a dizzying view of the eggs on the Hatching Ground, of the
colored robes of those

already assembled, and the array of dragon bodies, gleaming eyes and
furred wings, the great, graceful,

blue, green and brown hides.

Where were the bronzes?

“They’ll bring in the candidates, Lord Jaxom. Ah, there’s the young
scamp.” D’wer said, and

suddenly Jaxom’s neck was jerked as Trebith backwinged to land neatly
on a ledge. “Off you go.”

“Jaxom! You did come!”

It all came out in such a rush that the blue rider grinned. Lytol bowed in such solemn

acknowledgment that Jaxom felt a surge of irritation for his stuffy guardian.

Felessan was impervious to such nuances and pulled Jaxom eagerly away from the adults. Having

achieved a certain physical distance, the boy chattered away in so loud a whisper that everyone two ledges

up could hear him distinctly.

“I was sure you wouldn’t be allowed to come. Everything’s been so sour and horrible since the —

you know — happened.”

“Don’t you know anything, Felessan?” Jaxom said in a rebuking hiss that startled his friend into

wide-eyed silence.

“Huh? What’d I do wrong?” he demanded, this time in a more circum-spect tone, glancing around

him apprehensively. “Don’t tell me something’s gone wrong at Ruatha Hold?”

Jaxom pulled his friend as far from Lytol as they could go on that row of seats and then sat the

Ground. They obviously wore thin-soled shoes for they kept picking their feet up and putting them down in a

curious mincing motion, totally at variance with their physical appearance.

“Didn’t think so many people would come what with all that’s been happening,” Felessan murmured

excitedly, his eyes dancing. “Look at them!” and he pointed out three boys, all with the Nerat device on

their chests. “They look as if they smelled something unpleasant. You don’t think dragons smell, do you?” “No, of course not. Only a little and it’s pleasant. They aren’t candidates, are they?” Jaxom asked, disgusted.

“Nooo. Candidates wear white.” Felessan made a grimace for Jaxom’s ignorance. “They don’t come in till later. Ooops! And later may be sooner. Didja see that egg rock?”

The motion had been observed, for the dragons began to hum. There were excited cries from late

arrivals who now scurried for places. And Jaxom could scarcely see the rest of the eggs for the sudden

I didn't," Felessan said firmly, glaring at Jaxom. "You touched it "

"I may have touched it but that doesn't mean I hurt it," the young Lord Holder begged for reassurance.

"No, touching 'em doesn't hurt 'em. The candidates've been touching 'em for weeks and they're rocking."

"Why isn't that one then?"

Jaxom had difficulty making Felessan understand him for the humming had increased until it was a constant, exciting thrum reverberating back and forth across the Hatching Ground.

"I dunno," Felessan shrugged diffidently. "It may not even Hatch. That's what they say, at any rate."

"But I didn't do anything," Jaxom insisted, mostly for his own comfort.

"I told you that! Look, here come the candidates." Then Felessan leaned over, his lips right at

Jaxom's ear, whispering something so unintelligible that he had to repeat it three times before Jaxom did hear him.

his attention was on the

young boys marching toward the rocking eggs, their faces white and purposeful, their bodies in the white tunics taut with excitement and anticipation.

“What do you mean about Brekke re-Impressing? Why? How?” Jaxom demanded, his mind

assaulted by simultaneous conflicts: Lytol astride a dragon all his own, Brekke re-Impressing, Talina left out

and crying because she was Ruathan-bred and should be dragonwoman.

“Just that. She Impressed a dragon once, she’s young. They said she was a far better Weyrwoman

than that Kylara.” Felessan’s tone echoed the universally bad opinion of the Southern ex-Weyrwoman.

“That way Brekke’d get well. You see,” and Felessan lowered his voice again, “F’nor loves her! And I heard

— ” he paused dramatically and looked around (as if anyone could overhear them), “I heard that F’nor was going to let Canth fly her queen.”

Jaxom stared at his friend, shocked. “You’re crazy! Brown dragons don’t fly queens.”

“Do they — do they think she can re-impress?” asked Jaxom, staring at the stern profile of his guardian and wondering.

Felessan shrugged. “We’ll know soon. Here they come.”

And sure enough, out of the black maw of the upper tunnel, flew bronze dragons in such rapid succession that they seemed nose to tail.

“There’s Talina!” Jaxom exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “There’s Talina, Lytol,” and he crossed to pull at his guardian’s arm. Lytol wouldn’t have noticed either Jaxom’s importunities or Talina’s entrance.

The man had eyes only for the girl entering from the Ground level. Two figures, a man and a woman, stood by the wide opening, as if they could accompany her this far, no further. “That’s Brekke all right,” Felessan said in a hushed tone as he slid beside Jaxom.

She stumbled slightly, halted, seeming impervious to the uncomfortably hot sands. She straightened her shoulders and slowly walked across to join the five girls who wailed near the golden egg.

crooning, their wedge-shaped heads too big for the thin, sinuous necks.
The young boys stood very still,
their bodies tense with the mental efforts of attracting the dragonets to them.

The first was free of its encumbrance, staggering beyond the nearest boy who jumped adroitly out of
its way. It fell, nose first at the feet of a tall black-haired lad. The boy knelt, helped the dragonet balance on
his shaky feet, looked into the rainbow eyes. Jaxom saw Lytol close his, and saw the fact of Lytol's terrible
loss engraved on the man's gray face, as much of a torture now as the day his Larth had died of phosphine
burns.

"Look," Jaxom cried, "the queen egg. It's rocking. Oh, how I wish . . ."
Then he couldn't go on without compromising himself in his friend's good opinion. For much as he
wanted Talina to Impress which would mean three living Ruathan-bred Weyrwomen, he knew that Felessan
was betting on Brekke.

Felessan was so intensely involved in the scene below that he hadn't been aware of Jaxom's

Brekke.

She was oblivious. To Jaxom, it seemed she didn't care. She seemed limp, broken, pathetic, listing

to one side. A dragon crooned softly and she shook her head as if only then aware of her surroundings.

The queen's head turned to Brekke, the glistening eyes enormous in the outsized skull. The queen

lurched forward a step.

At that moment a small blur of bronze streaked across the hatching Ground. With defiant screams,

a fire lizard hung just above the queen's head. So close, in fact, that the little queen reared back with a

startled shriek and bit at the air, instinctively spreading her wings as protection for her vulnerable eyes.

Dragons protested from their ledges. Talina interposed her body between the queen and her small

attacker.

"Berd! Don't!" Brekke moved forward, arm extended to capture the irate bronze. The little queen

cried out in protest, hiding her face in Talina's skirts. The two women faced one another, their bodies tense,

sounds that ranged from scolding to

entreaty. The racket sounded so like the cook at Ruatha Hold at dinner-time that Jaxom grinned.

“She didn’t want the queen,” Felessan said, stunned. “She didn’t try!”

“That fire lizard wouldn’t let her,” Jaxom said, wondering why he was defending Brekke.

“It would be wrong, terribly wrong for her to succeed,” Lytol said in a dead voice. He seemed to

shrink in on himself, his shoulders sagging, his hands dangling limply between his knees.

Some of the newly Impressed boys were beginning to lead their beasts from the Ground. Jaxom

turned back, afraid to miss anything. It was all happening much too quickly. It’d be over in a few minutes.

“Didja see, Jaxom?” Felessan was saying, pulling at his sleeve. “Didja see? Birto got a bronze and

Pellomar only Impressed a green. Dragons don’t like bullies and Pellomar’s been the biggest bully in the

Weyr. Good for you, Birto!” Felessan cheered his friend.

“The littlest egg hasn’t cracked yet,” Jaxom said, nudging Felessan and pointing. “Shouldn’t it be

“What would a boy your age know of birthing?”

“I know about mine,” Jaxom replied stoutly, jerking his chin up. “I nearly died. Lessa told me so

and she was there. Can a dragonet die?”

“Yes,” Lytol admitted heavily because he never lied to the boy. “They can die and better so if the embryo is malformed .”

Jaxom looked at his body quickly although he knew perfectly well he was as he should be; in fact, more developed than some of the other Hold boys.

“I’ve seen eggs that never hatched. Who needs to live — crippled?”

“Well, that egg’s alive,” Jaxom said. “Look at it rocking right now “

“You’re right. It’s moving. But it isn’t cracking,” Felessan said.

“Then why is everyone leaving?” Jaxom demanded suddenly, jumping to his feet. For there was no one anywhere near the wobbling small egg.

The Ground was busy with riders urging their beasts down to help the weyrlings, or to escort guests

of the Weyr back to their Holds. Most of the bronzes, of course, had gone with the new queen. Vast as the

“Small eggs can occur in any queen’s laying life,” Lytol said “This is not my concern. Nor yours.”

He turned and began to make his way toward the steps, plainly certain that the boys would follow.

“But they’re not doing anything,” Jaxom muttered, rebelliously,

Felessan gave him a helpless shrug. “C’mon. We’ll be eating soon at this rate. And there’s all

kinds of special things tonight.” He trotted after Lytol.

Jaxom looked back at the egg, now wildly rocking. “It just isn’t fair! They don’t care what happens

to you. They care about that Brekke, but not you. Come on, egg. Crack your shell! Show ‘em. One good

crack and I’ll bet they’ll do something!”

Jaxom had edged along the tier until he was just over the little egg. It was rocking in time with his

urgings now, but there was no one within a dragonlength. There was something frenzied about the way it

rocked, too, that made Jaxom think the dragonet was desperate for help.

Without thinking, Jaxom swung over the wall and let himself drop to the sands. He could now see

by the bright tip of the dragonet's nose, which battered at the tough shell.

"You want to get born. Just like me. All you need is a little help, same as me," Jaxom was crying,

pounding at the crack with his fists. Thick pieces fell off, far heavier than the discarded shells of the other hatchlings.

"Jaxom, what are you doing?" someone yelled at him but it was too late.

The thick inner membrane was visible now and this was what had been impeding the dragonet's

emergence. Jaxom ripped the slippery stuff open with his belt knife and, from the sac, fell a tiny white body,

not much larger than Jaxom's torso. Instinctively Jaxom reached out, helping the back-stranded creature to its feet.

Before F'lar or anyone could intervene, the white dragon had raised adoring eyes to the Lord of

Ruatha Hold and Impression had been made.

Completely oblivious to the dilemma he had just originated, the incredulous Jaxom turned to the stunned observers.

chitter of the two fire lizards.

Berd had led her out of the Ground to F'nor and Manora. She'd been surprised at how tired and sad

they both looked. She'd tried to talk but they'd hushed her. F'nor had carried her up to his weyr. She

smiled now, opening her eyes, to see him bending over her. Brekke put her hand up to the dear, worried

face of her lover; she could say that now, her lover, her Weyrmate, for he was that, too. Deep lines from the

high-bridged nose pulled F'nor's mouth down at the corners. His eyes were darkly smudged and bloodshot,

his hair, usually combed in crisp clean waves back from his high forehead, was stringy, oily.

"You need cozening, love," she said in a low voice which cracked and didn't seem to be hers at all.

With a groan that was close to a sob, F'nor embraced her. At first as if he were afraid of hurting her.

Then, when he felt her arms tightening around him — for it was good to feel his strong back under her

seeking hands — he almost crushed her until she cried out gladly for him to be careful.

my body. I think that's what was

wrong with me. Oh, F'nor," and all the grief that she'd not been able to express before came bursting out of

her, "I even hated Canth!"

The tears poured down her cheeks and shuddering sobs shook a body already weakened by

fasting. F'nor held her to him, patting her shoulders, stroking her until he began to fear that the convulsions

would tear her apart. He beckoned urgently to Manora.

"She's got to cry, F'nor. It'll be an easing for her."

Manora's anxious expression, the way she folded and unfolded her hands, was strangely reassuring

to F'nor. She, too, cared about Brekke, cared enough to let concern pierce that imperturbable serenity.

He'd been so grateful to Manora for opposing a re-Impression, though he doubted his blood mother knew

why he'd be against it. Or perhaps she did. Manora in her calm detachment missed few nuances or

evasions.

Brekke's frail body was trembling violently now, torn apart by the paroxysm of her grief. The fire

several sharp blows before

F'nor could shield her face. "Now into the bathing pool with her. The water's warm enough to relax those

muscles." "You didn't have to slap her," F'nor said, angrily.

"She did, she did," said Brekke in a ragged gasp, shuddering as they bundled her into the warm pool

water. Then she felt the heat penetrate and relax muscles knotted by racking sobs. As soon as she felt

Brekke's body easing, Manora dried her with warmed towels and gestured for F'nor to tuck her back under

the furs.

"She needs feeding up now, F'nor. And so do you," she said, looking sternly at him. "And you are

to kindly remember that you've duties to others tonight. It's Impression Day."

F'nor snorted at Manora's reminder and saw Brekke smiling wanly up at him.

"I don't think you've left me at all since . . ."

"Canth and I needed to be with you, Brekke," he cut in when she faltered. He smoothed her hair

turned toward her, his eyes flashing a little. She was startled by the unhealthy green tinge to his color.

“We didn’t want to. That was F’lar’s idea. And Lessa’s. They thought it might work and they were afraid we’d lose you.”

The empty ache she tried not to remember threatened to become a hole down which she must go if only to end that tearing, burning pain of loss.

No, cried Canth.

Two warm lizard bodies pressed urgently against her neck and face, affection and worry so palpable in their thoughts it was like a physical touch.

“Brekke!” The terror, the yearning, the desperation in F’nor’s cry were louder than the inner roaring and pushed it back, dispersed its threat.

“Never leave me! Never leave me alone. I can’t stand being alone even for a second,” Brekke cried.

I am here, said Canth, as F’nor’s arms folded hard around her. The two lizards echoed the brown’s

they love.”

“Oh, F’nor, if I hadn’t Impressed Berd that day, what would have happened to me?”

F’nor didn’t answer. He held her against him in loving silence until Mirrim, her lizards flying in joyous

circles around her, came briskly into the weyr, carrying a well-laden tray.

“Manora had to attend to the seasoning, Brekke,” the girl said in a didactic tone. “You know how

fussy she is. But you are to eat every bit of this broth, and you’ve a portion to drink for sleeping. A good

night’s rest and you’ll be feeling more yourself.”

Brekke stared at the young girl, watching in a sort of bemusement while Mirrim deftly pushed F’nor

out of her way, settled pillows behind her patient, a napkin at her throat, and began to spoon the rich wherry

broth to Brekke’s unprotesting lips.

“You can stop staring at me, F’nor of Benden,” Mirrim said, “and start eating the food I brought you

before it gets cold. I carved you a portion of spiced wherry from the breast, so don’t waste prime servings.”

“Now, F’nor, are you going to let poor Canth waste away to a watch-
wher?” Mirrim asked as she

began to settle Brekke for the night. “He’s a sorry shade for a brown.”

“He did eat — ” F’nor began contritely.

“Ha!” Mirrim sounded like Lessa now.

I’ll have to take that child in hand, Brekke thought idly, but an enervating
lassitude had spread

throughout her body and movement was impossible.

“You get that lazy lump of brown bones out of his couch and down to the
Feeding Ground, F’nor.

Hurry it up. They’ll be out to feast soon and you know what a feeding
dragon does to commoner appetites.

C’mon now. You, Canth, get out of your weyr.”

The last thing Brekke saw as F’nor obediently followed Mirrim out of the
sleeping room was Canth’s

surprised look as she bore down on him, reached for his ear and began
to tug.

They were leaving her, Brekke thought with sudden terror. Leaving her
alone . . .

I am with you, was Canth’s instant reassurance.

shields on the glow baskets so that the room was dark enough for sleeping.

“F’nor says you don’t like to be left alone so I’ll wait until he comes back.”

But I’m not alone, Brekke wanted to tell her. Instead, her eyes closed and she fell into a deep sleep.

As Lessa looked around the Bowl, at the tables of celebrants lingering long past the end of the

banquet, she experienced a wistful yearning to be as uninhibited as they. The laughter of the hold and

craftbred parents of the new riders, the weyrlings themselves fondling their hatchlings, even the weyrfolk,

was untinged by bitterness or sorrow. Yet she was aware of a nagging sadness, which she couldn’t shake,

and had no reason to feel.

Brekke was herself, weak but no longer lost to reason; F’nor had actually left the girl long enough to

eat with the guests; F’lar was recovering his strength and had come to realize that he must delegate some of

his new responsibilities. And Lytol, the most distressing problem since Jaxom had Impressed that little white

bass voices are dark.

She toyed with the remains of the sweet cake on her platter. Manora's women had outdone

themselves: the fowls had been stuffed with fermented fruits and breads, and the result was a remission of

the "gamy" taste that wherry often had. River grains had been steamed so that each individual morsel was

separate and tender. The fresh herbs must have come from Southern. Lessa made a mental note to speak

to Manora about sneaking down there. It simply wouldn't do to have an incident with T'kul. Maybe N'ton

had gathered them when he went on his "grubbing" expeditions. She'd always liked the young bronze rider.

Now that she'd got to know him better . . .

She wondered what he and F'lar were doing. They'd left the table and gone to the Rooms. They

were always there these days, she thought irritably. They must be cleaning the grubs' orifices. Could she,

too, slip away? No, she'd better stay here. It wasn't courteous for both Weyrleaders to absent themselves

on such an auspicious occasion. And people ought to be leaving soon.

until the beast died. The consensus was that Ruth would not mature.

At the other end of the long “high” table were Larad, Lord of Telgar, Sifer of Bitra, Raid of Benden

Hold, and Asgenar of Lemos with Lady Famira (she really did blush all the time). The Lemos Hold pair had

brought their fire lizards — fortunately a brown and a green — which had been the object of much overt

interest by Lord Larad, who had a pair hardening on his hearth, and covert inspection by old Raid and Sifer

of Bitra, who also had eggs from F’nor’s last find. Neither older Lord Holder was entirely sure of the

experiment with fire lizards but they had watched the Lemos pair all evening. Sifer had finally unfrosted

enough to ask how to care for one. Would this influence their minds in the matter of Jaxom and his Ruth?

By the Egg, they couldn’t want to disrupt the territorial balance because Jaxom had Impressed a

sport dragon that hadn’t a chance in Threadfall of surviving! How could you make an honorific out of

Jaxom? J’om, J’xom? Most Weyrwomen chose names for their sons that could be contracted decently.

as Lord Holder at Ruatha. Just like men to make a piece of work over something so simple. The little beast

would not survive. He was too small, his color — who ever heard of a white dragon? — indicated other

abnormalities. Manora'd mentioned that white-skinned, pink-eyed child from Nerat Hold who hadn't been

able to endure daylight.

A nocturnal dragon?

Obviously Ruth would never grow to full size; new-hatched, he was more like a large fire lizard.

Ramoth rumbled from the heights, disturbed by her rider's thoughts, and Lessa sent a hundred

apologies to her..“It's no reflection on you, my darling,” Lessa told her. Why, you've spawned more queens than any

other three. And the largest of their broods is no better than the smallest of yours, love.”

Ruth will prosper, Ramoth said.

Mnementh crooned from the ledge and Lessa stared up at them, their eyes glowing in the shadows

over the glow-lit Bowl.

loud, belligerent voice.

The Harper beamed up at him in an idiotish way. “Tha’s what I say. Why should you?”

“I love the boy. I love him more than if he were flesh and blood of me, of me, Lytol of Ruatha Hold.

Proved I love him, too. Proved I care for him. Ruatha’s rich. Rich as when the Ruathan Bloodline ruled it.

Undid all Fox’s harm. And did it all, not for me. My life’s spent. I’ve been everything. Been a dragonrider.

Oh, Larth, my beautiful Larth. Been a weaver so I know the Crafts. Know the Holds now, too. Know

everything. Know how to take care of a white runt. Why shouldn’t the boy keep his dragon? By the First

Shell, no one else wanted him. No one else wanted to Impress him. He’s special. I tell you. Special!

“Now, just a moment, Lord Lytol,” Raid of Benden said, rising from his end of the table and stalking

down to confront Lytol. “Boy’s Impressed a dragon. That means he must stay in the Weyr.”

“Ruth’s not a proper dragon,” Lytol said, neither speaking nor acting as drunk as he must be.

deftness for a man swaying on his feet. The Harper motioned wildly for his own glass to be filled but had trouble keeping it steady under the flow of wine.

“Never a whi’ dragon,” the Harper intoned and touched cups with Lytol.

“May not live,” Lytol added, taking a long gulp.

“May not!”

“Therefore,” and Lytol took a deep breath, “the boy must remain in his Hold. Ruatha Hold.”

“Absolutely must!” Robinton held his cup high, more or less daring Raid to contradict him. Raid favored him with a long inscrutable look.

“He must remain in the Weyr,” he said finally, though he didn’t sound as definite.

“No, he must come back to Ruatha Hold,” said Lytol steadying himself with a firm grip on the table edge. “When the dragon dies, the boy must be where obligations and responsibilities give him a hold on life.

I know!”

To that Raid could give no answer, but he glowered in disapproval. Lessa held her breath and began to “lean” a little on the old Lord Holder.

when the Harper began to snore

gently.

“Hey, don’t go to sleep. We haven’t finished this bottle.” When Robinton made no response, Lytol

shrugged and drained his own cup. Then he seemed to collapse slowly until his head was on the table, too,

his snores filling the pause between Robinton’s.

Raid regarded the pair with sour disgust. Then he turned on his heel and walked back to his end of

the head table.

“I don’t know but what there isn’t truth in the wine,” Larad of Telgar Hold commented as Raid

reseated himself.

Lessa “leaned” quickly against Larad. He was nowhere near as insensitive as Raid. When he

shook his head, she desisted and turned her attentions to Sifer. If she could get two of them to agree . . .

“Dragon and his rider both belong in the Weyr,” Raid said. “You don’t change what’s natural for man

and beast.” “Well now, take these fire lizards,” Sifer began, nodding toward the two across the table from him, in

“Catch ‘em now, in nestful,” Sifer interrupted him. “Pretty things they are. Must say I look forward to mine hatching.”

Somehow their quarreling reminded Lessa of old R’gul and S’lel, her first “teachers” in the Weyr,

contradicting themselves endlessly as they purportedly taught her “all she’d need to know to become a

Weyrwoman.” It was F’lar who had done that.

“Boy has to stay here with that dragon.”

“The boy in question is a Lord Holder, Raid,” Larad of Telgar reminded him. “And the one thing we

don’t need is a contested Hold. It might be different if Lytol had male issue, or if he’d fostered long enough

to have a promising candidate. No, Jaxom must remain Lord at Ruatha Hold,” and the Telgar Lord scanned

the Bowl in search of the boy. His eyes met Lessa’s and he smiled in absent courtesy.

“I don’t agree, I don’t agree,” Raid said, shaking his head emphatically. “It goes against all custom.”

“Some customs need changing badly,” said Larad, frowning.

ing Ground. He realized what he'd

done. He was as white as the little dragon." Then Asgenar nodded in Lytol's direction. "Yes, Jaxom's all

too aware of what he's done."

Raid harumphed irritably. "You don't ask youngsters anything. You tell 'em!"

Asgenar turned to his lady, touching her shoulder lightly, but there was no mistaking the warmth of

his expression as he asked her to request young Jaxom's presence. Mindful of her sleepy green lizard, she

rose and went on her errand.

"I've discovered recently that you find out a great deal by asking people," Asgenar said, looking after

his wife with an odd smile on his face.

"People, yes, but not children!" Raid managed to get a lot of anger into that phrase.

Lessa "leaned" against him. He'd be more susceptible in this state of mind.

"Why doesn't he just pick the beast up?" the Benden Lord Holder demanded irritably as he watched

ment Lessa couldn't tell. He

began to fidget, rubbing the back of his head with one hand, so she stopped her "pushing."

The whirl of dragon wings back-beating to land caught her attention. She turned and saw the gleam

of a bronze hide in the darkness by the new entrance to the Rooms.

Lioth brings the Masterfarmer, Ramoth told her rider.

Lessa couldn't imagine why Andemon would be required, nor why N'ton would be bringing him. The

Masterfarmerhall had its own beast now. She started to rise.

"D'you realize the trouble you've caused, young man?" Raid was asking in a stiff voice.

Lessa swung round, torn between two curiosities. It wasn't as if Jaxom were without champions in

Asgenar and Larad. But she did wonder how the boy would answer Raid.

Jaxom stood straight, his chin up, his eyes bright. Ruth's head was pressed to his thigh as if the

dragonet were aware that they stood on trial.

"Yes, my good Lord Raid, I am fully aware of the consequences of my actions and there may now

dissembler, probably was, for all that

act he'd pulled earlier.

“Fully aware, are you?” Raid echoed, and suddenly launched himself to his feet. The old Lord

Holder had lost inches as he gained Turns, his shoulders now rounding slightly, his belly no longer flat and

his legs stringy in the tight hide of his trousers. He looked a caricature confronting the slim proud boy.

“D’you know you’ve got to stay at Benden Weyr now you’ve Impressed a dragon? D’you realize that

Ruatha’s lordless?”

“With all due respect, sir, you and the other Lords present do not constitute a Conclave since you

are not two-thirds of the resident Holders of Pern,” replied Jaxom. “If necessary, I should be glad to come

before a duly constituted Conclave and plead my case. It’s obvious, I think, that Ruth is not a proper

dragon. I am given to understand that his chances of maturing are slight. Therefore he is of no use to the

Weyr which has no space for the useless. Even old dragons no longer able to chew firestone are retired to

I would be an embarrassment here in Benden Weyr. We can help Ruatha Hold just as the other fire lizards do.”

“Well said, young Lord of Ruatha, well said,” cried Asgenar of Lemos, and his applause started his lizard shrieking.

Larad of Telgar Hold nodded solemnly in accord.

“Humph. Shade too flip an answer for me,” Raid grumbled. “All you youngsters act before you think these days.”

“I’m certainly guilty of that, Lord Raid,” Jaxom said candidly. “But I had to act fast today — to save the life of a dragon. We’re taught to honor Dragonkind, I more than most.” Jaxom gestured toward Lytol.

His hand remained poised and a look of profound sorrow came over his face.

Whether Jaxom’s voice had roused him or the position of his head was too uncomfortable was

debatable, but the Lord Warder of Ruatha Hold was no longer asleep. He rose gripping the table, then

“Lord Jaxom of Ruatha Hold is not to blame for today’s events. As his guardian, I am responsible —

if it is an offense to save a life. If I chose to stress reverence for Dragonkind in his education, I had good reason!”

Lord Raid looked uneasily away from Lytol’s direct gaze.

“If,” and Lytol stressed the word as though he felt the possibility was remote, “the Lords decide to

act in Conclave I shall strongly urge that no man fault Lord Jaxom’s conduct today. He acted in honor and

at the promptings of his training. He best serves Pern, however, by returning to his Hold. At Ruatha, young

Ruth will be cared for and honored — for as long as he is with us.”

There was no doubt that Larad and Asgenar were of Lytol’s mind. Old Sifer sat pulling at his lip,

unwilling to look toward Raid.

“I still think dragonfolk belong in Weyrs!” Raid muttered, glum and resentful.

That problem apparently settled, Lessa turned to leave and nearly fell into F’nor’s arms.

“Yes,” and there was a wealth of relief in the man’s soft affirmative.

“So, you’d better come with me to the Rooms. I want to find out why Masterfarmer Andemon has just flown in. And it’s about time you got back to work!”

F’nor chuckled. “It is, if someone else has been doing my work. Did anyone bring F’lar his

Threads?” There was a note in his voice that told Lessa he was concerned.

F’ton did!” “I thought he was riding Wing-second to F’lar at Fort Weyr!”

“As you remarked the other morning, whenever you’re not here to keep him under control, F’lar

rearranges matters.” She saw his stricken look and caught his arm, smiling up at him reassuringly; he

wasn’t up to teasing yet. “No one could take your place with F’lar — or me. Canth and Brekke needed you

more for a while.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “But that doesn’t mean things haven’t been happening

and you’d better catch up. N’ton’s been included in our affairs because F’lar had a sudden glimpse of his

mortality when he was sick and decided to stop being secretive. Or it might be another four hundred Turns

There was no doubt that he was steady on his feet as the three walked toward the glow-marked entrance to the Rooms. The stars were brilliant in the soft black spring sky, and the glows on the lower levels threw bright circles of light on the sands. Above, on weyr ledges, dragons watched with gleaming opalescent eyes, occasionally humming with pleasure. High up, Lessa saw three dragon silhouettes by the Star Stones: Ramoth and Mnementh were perched to the right of the watch-dragon, their wings overlapping. They were both smug tonight; she'd heard Ramoth's tenor often that evening. It was such a relief to have her in an agreeable mood for a while. Lessa rather hoped there'd be a long interval before the queen felt the urge to mate again.

When they entered the Rooms, the spare figure of the Masterfarmer was bending over the largest of the tubs, turning the leaves of the fellis sapling. F'lar watched him with a wary expression while N'ton was grinning, unable to observe the solemnity of the moment.

He recovered and drew F'nor to the tubs.

"N'ton was able to get Thread and we infected three of the big tubs," F'lar told him, speaking in a low

undertone as if he didn't wish to disturb the Masterfarmer's investigations. "The grubs devoured every

filament. And where the Thread pierced the leaves of that fellis tree, the char marks are already healing.

I'm hoping Master Andemon can tell us how or why."

Andemon straightened his body but his lantern jaw remained sunk to his chest as he frowned at the

tub. He blinked rapidly and pursed his thin lips, his heavy, thick-knuckled hands twitching slightly in the folds

of a dirt-stained tunic. He had come as he was when the Weyr messenger summoned him from the fields.

"I don't know how or why, Good Weyrleader. And if what you have told me is the truth," he paused,

finally raising his eyes to F'lar, "I am scared."

"Why, man?" And F'lar spoke on the end of a surprised laugh. "Don't you realize what this means?"

If the grubs can adapt to northern soil and climate, and perform as we — all of us here," his gesture took in

“You saw the Thread devoured by these grubs?”

The Harper nodded.

“And that was five days ago?”

The Harper confirmed this.

A shudder rippled the cloth of the Masterfarmers tunic. He looked down at the tub with the

reluctance of fear. Stepping forward resolutely, he peered again at the young fellis tree. Inhaling and

holding that deep breath, he poised one gnarled hand for a moment before plunging it into the dirt. His eyes

were closed. He brought up a moist handful of earth and, opening his eyes, turned the glob over, exposing

a cluster of wriggling grubs. His eyes widened and, with an exclamation of disgust, he flung the dirt from

him as if he'd been burned. The grubs writhed impotently against the stone floor..“What's the matter? There can't be Thread!”

“Those are parasites!” Andemon replied, glaring at F'lar, badly disillusioned and angry. “We've

been trying to rid the southern parts of this peninsula of these larvae for centuries.” He grimaced with

Andemon stared at him. F'lar moved, grabbing a handful of soil from each tub as he circled, showing the grubs as proof.

"It's impossible," Andemon insisted, the shadow of his earlier fear returning.

"Don't you recall, F'lar," Lessa said, "when we first brought the grubs here, the plants did seem to droop?"

"They recovered. All they needed was water!"

"They couldn't." Andemon forgot his revulsion enough to dig into another tub as if to prove to

himself that F'lar was wrong. "There're no grubs in this one!" he said in triumph.

"That's never had any. I used it to check the others. And I must say, the plants don't look as green or healthy as the other tubs."

Andemon stared around. "Those grubs are pests. We've been trying to rid ourselves of them for hundreds of Turns."

"Then I suspect, good Master Andemon," F'lar said with a gentle, rueful smile, "that farmers have

“They were meant to spread, bred by the same ancestors who bred the dragons?”

“That’s what we believe,” Robinton said. “Oh, I can appreciate your incredulity. I had to sleep on

the notion for several nights. However, if we check the Records, we find that, while there is no mention that

dragonmen will attack the Red Star and clear it of Thread, there is the strong, recurring belief that Thread

will one day not be the menace it is now. F’lar is reasonably . . .”

“Not reasonably, Robinton; completely sure,” F’lar interrupted. “N’ton’s been going back to Southern

— jumping between time, as far back as seven Turns, to check on Threadfalls in the southern continent.

Wherever he’s probed, there’re grubs in the soil which rise when Thread falls and devour it.

That’s why there have never been any burrows in Southern

The land itself is inimical to Thread.”

In the silence, Andemon stared at the tips of his muddy boots.

“In the Farmercraft Hall Records, they mention specifically that we are to watch for these grubs.” He

to shake, his whole torso became involved. Lessa caught F'lar's eyes, concerned, for the man. But he was

laughing, if only at the cruel irony. "Watch for the grubs, the Records say. They do not, they do not say

destroy the grubs. They say most emphatically 'watch for the grubs.' So we watched. Aye, we have watched."

The Harper extended the wine bottle to Andemon.

"That's a help, Harper. My thanks," Andemon said, wiping his lips with the back of one hand after a long pull at the bottle.

"So someone forgot to mention why you were to watch the grubs, Andemon," F'lar said, his eyes

compassionate for the man's distress. "If only Sograny'd been as reasonable. Once, so many men must

have known why you were to watch for the grubs, they didn't see a need for further implicit instructions.

Then the Holds started to grow and people drifted apart. Records got lost or destroyed, men died before

they'd passed on the vital knowledge they possessed." He looked around at the tubs. "Maybe they

holds ink, stacks neatly and is impervious to anything except fire. We can combine knowledge and disseminate it.”

Andemon looked at the Harper, his eyes puzzled. “Master Robinton, there are some matters within a Craft that must remain secret or . . .”

“Or we lose a world to the Thread, is that it, Andemon? Man, if the truth about those grubs hadn’t been treated like a Craft secret, we’d have been hundreds of Turns free of Thread by now.”

Andemon gasped suddenly, staring at F’lar. “And dragonmen — we wouldn’t need dragonmen?”

“Well, if men kept to their Holds during Threadfall, and grubs devoured what fell to the ground, no, you wouldn’t need dragonmen,” F’lar replied with complete composure.

“But dragonmen are su — supposed to fight Thread — ” the Farmer was stuttering with dismay.

“Oh, we’ll be fighting Thread for a while yet, I assure you. We’re not in any immediate danger of unemployment. There’s a lot to be done. For instance, how long before an entire continent can be seeded

suddenly, shaking his head from side

to side.

“Get a grip on yourself, man,” F’lar said, but it was his attitude which caused Andemon the most

distress.

“What — what will dragonmen do?”

“Get rid of Thread, of course. Get rid of Thread.”

Had F’lar been a feather less confident, F’nor would have had trouble maintaining his composure.

But his half-brother must have some plan in mind. And Lessa looked as serene as — as Manora could.

Fortunately Andemon was not only an intelligent man, he was tenacious. He had been confronted

with a series of disclosures that both confused and disturbed basic precepts. He must reverse a long-standing

Craft practice. He must rid himself of an inborn, carefully instilled prejudice, and he must accept

the eventual abdication of an authority which he had good reason to respect and more reason to wish to

perpetuate.

it was.

Andemon was very thoughtful as he watched the unharmed larva burrow quickly back into the tub

dirt from which he'd extracted it.

"One wishes fervently," he said, "to find a release from our long domination by Thread. It is just —

just that the agency which frees us is . . ."

"Revolting?" the Harper suggested obligingly.

Andemon regarded Robinton a moment. "Aye, you're the man with words, Master Robinton. It is

rather leveling to think that one will have to be grateful to such a — such a lowly creature. I'd rather be

grateful to dragons." He gave F'lar a rather abashed grin.

"You're not a Lord Holder!" said Lessa, wryly, drawing a chuckle from everyone.

"And yet," Andemon went on, letting a handful of soil dribble from his fist, we have taken the

bounties of this rich earth too much for granted. We are from it, part of it, sustained by it. I suppose it is only

mete that we are protected by it. If all goes well."

“Whether or not the grubs were adaptable to northern conditions.”

“They are, Weyrleader, they are.” The Farmer was grimly sardonic. “I shouldn’t think that would be the major problem, F’lar,” F’nor said.

“Oh?” The quiet syllable was almost a challenge to the brown rider. F’nor hesitated, wondering if

F’lar had lost confidence in him, despite what Lessa had said earlier.

“I’ve been watching Master Andemon, and I remember my own reaction to the grubs. It’s one thing

to say, to know, that these are the answer to Thread. Another — quite another to get the average man to

accept it. And the average dragonrider.”

Andemon nodded agreement and, judging by the expression on the Harper’s face, F’nor knew he

was not the only one who anticipated resistance.

But F’lar began to grin as he settled himself on the edge of the nearest tub.

“That’s why I brought Andemon here and explained the project. We need help which only he can

give us, once he himself is sure of matters. How long, Masterfarmer, does it take grubs to infest a field?”

F'lar chuckled. "Lemos Hold."

"Lemos!"

"Where else?" and F'lar looked smug. "The forests are the hardest areas to protect. Asgenar and

Bendarek are determined to preserve them. Asgenar and Bendarek are both flexible enough to accept such

an innovation and carry it through. You, Masterfarmer, have the hardest task. To convince your crafters to

leave off killing . . ."

Andemon raised a hand. "I have my own observations to make first."

"By all means, Master Andemon," and F'lar's grin broadened, "I'm confident of the outcome. I

remind you of your first journey to the Southern Weyr. You commented on the luxuriant growths, the

unusual size of the trees and bushes common to both continents, the spectacular crops, the sweetness of

the fruits. That is not due to the temperate weather. We have similar zones here in the north. It is due,"

and F'lar pointed his finger first at Andemon and then toward the tubs, "to the stimulation, the protection of the grubs."

with Old-timers; we've all got re-education

to do."

"Yes, there will be problems." The magnitude of the undertaking had suddenly burst on the

Masterfarmer.

"Many," F'lar assured him blithely. "But the end result is freedom from Thread."

"It could take Turns and Turns," Andemon said, catching F'lar's glance and, as if that consoled him

somehow, straightened his shoulders. He was committed to the project.

"And well may take Turns. First," and F'lar grinned with pure mischief in his eyes, "we've got to stop you farmers from exterminating our saviors."

An expression of pure shock and indignation passed across Andemon's weather-lined face. It was

swiftly replaced by a tentative smile as the man realized that F'lar was ribbing him. Evidently an unusual

experience for the Masterfarmer.

"Think of all the rewriting I have to do," complained the Harper "I'm dry just considering it." He

looked mournfully at the now empty wine bottle.

use.

“One drink then.” “To seal the bargain of Pern’s fate,” said the Harper, dropping his voice to a sepulchral bass and

looking solemnly portentous and amazingly like Lord Groghe of Fort.

As they all trooped out of the Rooms, Andemon looked down at Lessa.

“If it isn’t presumptuous of me, the young woman, Brekke, who lost her queen — how is she?”

Lessa hesitated only a second. “F’nor here can answer you better than I. They’re Weyrmates.”

F’nor was forced to step up. “She’s been ill. Losing one’s dragon is a tremendous shock. She has

made the adjustment. She won’t suicide now.”

The Masterfarmer halted, staring at F’nor. “That would be unthinkable.”

Lessa caught F’nor’s eye and he remembered he was talking to a commoner.

“Yes, of course, but the loss is unsettling.”

“Certainly. Ah, does she have any position at all now?” The words came slowly from the Farmer,

then he added in a rush, “she is from my Crafhall you see, and we . . .”

“She is well loved and respected by all Weys,” Lessa broke in when Andemon faltered. “Brekke is

“My apologies for being so brusque! my lady. It would be hard for her to live simply again.” His

voice turned hard and lost all hesitancy. “What of that adulterous transgressor?”

“She — lives,” and there was an uncompromising echo of the Farmer’s coldness in Lessa’s voice.

“She lives?” The Masterfarmer stopped again, dropping Lessa’s arm and staring at her with anger.

“She lives? Her throat should be cut, her body . . .”

“She lives, Masterfarmer, with no more mind or wit than a babe. She exists in the prison of her guilt!

Dragonfolk take no lives!”

The Farmer stared hard at Lessa for a moment longer, then nodded slowly. With great courtesy he

offered Lessa his arm when she indicated they should continue.

F’nor did not follow for the events of the day were taking a revenge of fatigue on him.

He watched as Andemon and Lessa joined the others at the main table, saw the Lemos and Telgar

Lords come over. Lytol and young Jaxom with his white Ruth were nowhere to be seen. F’nor hoped Lytol

the soft throat, warm and steady. He could “hear” the soft loving thoughts of the two lizards curled by Brekke’s head.

How long he stood there he couldn’t gauge, his mind rehearsing the Impression, Brekke’s release,

Jaxom’s performance, the dinner, everything that had jammed into one eventful afternoon.

There was much to be done, certainly, but he felt unable to move from the presence of Canth. Most

vividly he recalled Andemon’s shock when the man realized that F’lar had proposed the end of dragonmen.

Yet — F’lar hadn’t. He certainly had some alternate in mind.

Those grubs — yes, they devoured Thread before it could burrow and proliferate. But they were

repulsive to look at and commanded neither respect nor gratitude. They weren’t obvious, or awesome, like

dragons. People wouldn’t see grubs devouring Thread. They wouldn’t have the satisfaction of watching

dragons flame, sear, char, destroy Thread mid-air before the vicious stuff got to earth. Surely F’lar realized

commoner and dragonman.

CHAPTER XVI

Evening at Benden Weyr

Later Evening at Fort Weyr. FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, F'nor was too busy to worry. Brekke was recovering her strength and

insisted that he return to his duties. She prevailed on Manora to permit her to come down to the Lower

Caverns and be of some use. So Manora put her to tying off the woof ends of some finished wall hangings

where Brekke could also be part of the busy Cavern activities. The fire lizards rarely left her side. Grall

twittered with conflicting wishes when F'nor went off on errands, so he would order her to stay with Brekke.

F'lar estimated correctly that Asgenar and Bendarek would accept any solution that might preserve

the forests. But the incredulity and initial resistance he encountered showed him what a monumental task

he had undertaken. Both Lord Holder and Craftmaster were frankly contemptuous of his claims until N'ton

came in with a panful of live Thread — it could be heard hissing and steaming — and dumped it over a tub

could be considered “Threadproof”;

the length of the grub life cycle, what density of grub life would be necessary to ensure the chain of protection

But they did decide where to start in Lemos Hold: among the precious softwoods so in demand for furniture, so vulnerable to Thread incursion.

Since the former residents of the Southern Weyr had not been farmcraft trained they had been

oblivious to the significance of the larval sacks in the southern woods. It was fall now in the southern

hemisphere but F'nor, N'ton and another rider had agreed to jump between to the previous spring. Brekke

helped, too, knowing as she did so many facets of the Southern management that she was able to tell them

where they would not collide with others in the past. Though farmcraft-bred, Brekke had been occupied with

nursing during her tenure at Southern, and had deliberately stayed away from the farming aspects of the

Weyr to sever connections with her past life.

grubs and horror at being so close to

live Thread, Terry had been as enthusiastic as anyone could wish. The performance of the grubs elicited

only a deep grunt from the Mastersmith. He had limited his comments to a scornful criticism of the long-handled

hearthpan in which the Thread was captured.

“Inefficient. Inefficient. You can only open it once to catch the things,” and he had taken the pan,

stalking off toward his waiting dragon-messenger.

Terry had been profuse in his assurances that the Mastersmith was undoubtedly impressed and

would cooperate in every way. This was indeed a momentous day. His words were cut off by Fandarel’s

impatient bellow and he’d bowed his way out, still reassuring the some what disconcerted Dragonriders.

“I’d’ve thought Fandarel would at least have found the grubs efficient,” F’lar had remarked.

“He was struck dumb with amazement?” F’nor suggested.

“No,” and Lessa grimaced, “he was infuriated by inefficiency!”

They’d laughed and gone on to the next job. That evening a messenger arrived from the

The messenger also confided to F'lar that the Mastersmith was having difficulties with his distance-writer.

All wire must be covered with a protective tubing or Thread cut right through the thinly extruded

metal. The Smith had experimented with ceramic and metal casings but he could turn neither out in great or

quick enough quantity. With Threadfall coming so frequently now, his halls were besieged with demands to

fix flame throwers which clogged or burned out. Ground crews panicked when equipment failed them mid-Fall

and it was impossible not to accede to every urgent request for repair. The Lord Holders, promised the

distance-writers, as links between help and isolated Holds, began to press for solutions. And for the ultimate

— to them — solution: the proposed expedition to the Red Star..F'lar had begun to call a council of his intimate advisors and Wing-seconds daily so that no facet of

the over-all plan could be lost. They also decided which Lords and Mastercraftsmen could accept the

radical knowledge, but had moved cautiously.

her Lord who had bodily forced his

blood relative to Benden Weyr for a full explanation and demonstration.

Larad had been unconvinced and

furious with what he called “a cruel deception and treacherous breach of faith” by dragonmen. When

Asgenar then insisted Larad come to the softwood tract that was being protected and had live Thread

poured over a sapling, uprooting the young tree to prove that it had been adequately protected, the Telgar

Lord Holder’s rage began to subside.

Telgar’s broad valleys had been hard hit by the almost constant Threadfalls. Telgar’s ground crews

were disheartened by the prospect of ceaseless vigilance.

“Time is what we haven’t got,” Larad of Telgar had cried when he heard that grub protection would

be a long-term project. “We lose fields of grain and root every other day. The men are already weary of

fighting Thread interminably, they’ve little energy for anything. At best we’ve only the prospect of a lean

winter, and I fear for the worst if these past months are any indication.”

“Yes,” F’lar replied, holding firmly to an attitude of patient reasonableness. “It’s been viewed every

clear night. Wansor has trained a wing of watchers and borrowed the most accurate draftsmen from

Masterweaver Zurg and the Harper. They’ve made endless sketches of the masses on the planet. We

know its faces now . . .”

“And . . .” Larad was adamant.

“We can see no feature distinct enough to guide the dragons.”

The Lord of Telgar sighed with resignation.

“We do believe,” and F’lar caught N’ton’s eyes since the young bronze rider did as much of the

investigating as Wansor, “that these frequent Falls will taper off in a few more months.”

“Taper off? How can you tell that?” Hope conflicted with suspicion in the Telgar Lord’s face.

“Wansor is of the opinion that the other planets in our sky have been affecting the Red Star’s

motion; slowing it, pulling it from several directions. We have near neighbors, you see; one is now slightly

tests. "You've surely noticed the

brightest stars, which are our sister planets, move from west to east during the year. Look tonight, you'll see

the blue one slightly above the green one, and very brilliant. And the Red Star below them. Now, remember

the diagram in the Fort Weyr Council Room? We're positive that that is the diagram of skies around our

sun. And you've watched your fosterlings play stringball. You've played it yourself. Substitute the planets

for the balls, the sun for the swinger, and you get the general idea. Some balls swing more rapidly than

others, depending on the speed of the swing, the length and tension of the cord. Basically, the principle of

the stars around the sun is the same."

Robinton had been sketching on a leaf and passed the diagram over to Larad.

"I must see this in the skies for myself," the Telgar Lord replied, not giving an inch.

"It's a sight, I assure you," Asgenar said. "I've become fascinated with the study and if," he grinned,

time I go to Fort I'm contending with

Meron of Nabol for a chance to use the viewer."

"Nabol?"

Asgenar was a little surprised at the impact of his casual remark.

"Yes, Nabol's forever at the viewer. Apparently he's more determined than any dragonrider to find

coordinates." No one else shared his amusement.

F'lar looked inquiringly at N'ton.

"Yes, he's there all right. If he weren't a Lord Holder — " and N'ton shrugged

"Why? Does he say why?"

N'ton shrugged again "He says he's looking for coordinates. But so are we. There aren't any

features distinct enough. Just shapeless masses of gray and dark gray-greens. They don't change and

while it's obvious they're stable, are they land? Or sea?" N'ton began to feel the accusatory tension in the

room and shifted his feet. "So often the face is obscured by those heavy clouds. Discouraging."

"Is Meron discouraged?" asked F'lar pointedly.

appreciate the difficulty.” Larad

stiffened defensively and his lizard hissed, its eyes rollinr. F’lar was not put off. ‘The fact that no Records

exist of any previous attempt to go there stronrly i ndicates that the ancients — who built the distance-viewer,

who knew enough to plot the neighbors in our sky — did not go. They must have had a reason, a

valid reason. What would you have Me do, Larad?” F’lar demanded, pacing in his agitation. “Ask for

volunteers? You, you and you,” F’lar whirled, jabbing a finger at an imaginary line of riders, “you go, jump

between to the Red Star. Coordinates? Sorry, men, I have none. Tell your dragons to take a long look

halfway there. If you don’t come back, we’ll keen to the Red Star for your deaths. But men, you’ll die

knowing you’ve solved our problem. Men can’t go to the Red Star.” Larad flushed under F’lar’s sarcasm.

“If the ancients didn’t record any intimate knowledge of the Red Star,” said Robinton quietly into the

charged silence, “they did provide domestic solutions. The dragons, and the grubs.”

be reassured by today's demonstrations, I don't know what more we can do or say."

"It's the loss of the summer crops which bothers him," Asgenar said. "Telgar Hold has been

spreading out, you know. Larad's attracted many of the small Holders who've been dissatisfied in Nerat,

Crom and Nabol and switched their allegiances. If the crops fail, he's going to have more hungry people —

and more trouble — than he can handle in the winter."

"But what more can we do?" demanded F'lar, a desperate note in his voice. He tired so easily. The

fever had left him little reserve strength, a state he found more frustrating than any other problem. Larad's

obduracy had been an unexpected disappointment. They'd been so lucky with every other man

approached.

"I know you can't send men on a blind jump to the Red Star," Asgenar said, distressed by F'lar's

anxiety. "I've tried to tell my Rial where I want him to go. He gets frantic at times because he can't see it

Holders really expect you to provide a second miracle in similar short order.”

The remark was so preposterous that F'nor laughed out loud before he could stop himself. But the

tension and anxiety dissolved and the worried men regained some needed perspective.

“Time is all we need,” F'lar insisted.

“Time is what we don't have,” Asgenar said wearily..“Then let's use what time we have to the best possible advantage,” F'lar said decisively, his moment

of doubt and disillusion behind him. “Let's work on Telgar. F'nor, how many riders can T'bor spare us to

hunt larval sacks between time at Southern? You and N'ton can work out coordinates with them.”

“Won't that weaken Southern's protection?” asked Robinton.

“No, because N'ton keeps his eyes open. He noticed that a lot of sacks started in the fall get blown

down or devoured during the winter months. So we've altered our methods. We check an area in spring to

place the sacks that survive, go back to the fall and take some of those which didn't last. There were a few

be an asset. Let him strain his

eyes and crick his neck nightly watching the Red Star. As long as he is occupied that way, we'll know we

have time. The eyes of a vengeful man miss few details he can turn to advantage."

"Good point, Robinton. N'ton," and F'lar turned to the young bronze rider. "I want to know every

remark that man makes, which aspects of the Red Star he views, what he could possibly see, what his

reactions are. We've ignored that man too often to our regret. We might even be grateful to him."

"I'd rather be grateful to grubs," N'ton replied with some fervor. "Frankly, sir," he added, hesitant for

the first time about any assignment since he'd been included in the council, ' I'd rather hunt grubs or catch

Thread."

F'lar eyed the young rider thoughtfully for a moment.

"Think of this assignment then, N'ton, as the ultimate Thread catch."

Brekke had insisted on taking over the care of the plants in the Rooms once she was stronger. She

Lord's bitter repudiation of what the

Weyrs were trying to accomplish, she was visibly disturbed.

"Larad's wrong,' she said in the slow deliberate way she'd adopted lately. "The grubs are the

solution, the right one. But it's true that the best solution is not always easy to accept. And an expedition to

the Red Star is not a solution, even if it's the one Pernese instinctively crave. It's obvious. Just as two

thousand dragons over Telgar Hold was rather obvious seven Turns ago." She surprised F'nor with a little

smile, the first since Wirenth's death. "I myself, like Robinton, would prefer to rely on grubs. They present

fewer problems. But then I'm craftbred."

"You use that phrase a lot lately," F'nor remarked, turning her face toward him, searching her green

eyes. They were serious, as always, and clear in the candid gaze was the shadow of a sorrow that would

never lift.

She locked her fingers in his and smiled gently, a smile which did not disperse the sorrow. "I was

nails broke the skin.

“What’s the matter?” He put both arms around her protectively.

“He has a warped mind,” Brekke said, staring at him with frightened eyes. “And he also has a fire

lizard, a bronze, as old as Grall and Berd. Does anyone know if he’s been training it? Training it to go between?”

“All the Lords have been shown how — ” F’nor broke off as he realized the trend of her thought.

Berd and Grall reacted to Brekke’s fright with nervous squeals and fanning wings. “No, no, Brekke. He

can’t,” F’nor reassured her. “Asgenar has one a week or so younger and he was saying how difficult he found it to send his Rial about in his own hold.”

“But Meron’s had his longer. It could be further along . . .”

“Nabol?” F’nor was skeptical. “That man has no conception of how to handle a fire lizard.” “Then why is he so fascinated with the Red Star? What else could he have in mind but to send his bronze lizard there?”

“But he knows that dragonmen won’t attempt to send dragons. How can he imagine that a fire lizard

“Promise you’ll tell F’lar.”

“I’ll tell him. I’ll tell him, but not in the middle of the night.”

With a wing of riders to direct between time for larval sacks the next day, his promise slipped F’nor’s

mind until late that evening. Rather than distress her with his forgetfulness, he asked Canth to bespeak

N’ton’s Lioth to pass the theory on to N’ton. If the Fort Weyr bronze rider saw anything that gave Brekke’s

premise substance, then they’d tell F’lar.

He had a chance to speak to N’ton the following day as they met in the isolated valley field which

Larad of Telgar Hold had picked to be seeded by grubs. The field, F’nor noticed with some jaundice, was

planted with a new hybrid vegetable, much in demand as a table luxury and grown successfully only in some

upland areas of Telgar and the High Reaches Hold.

“Brekke may have something, F’nor,” N’ton admitted. “The watchriders have mentioned that Nabol

will stare for a long time into the distance-viewer and then suddenly stare into his fire lizard’s eyes until the

F'nor remembered that feature well. A mass of grayness formed like a thick dragon tail, pointing in the opposite direction from the planet's rotation.

"Sometimes," N'ton chuckled, "the clouds above the star are clearer than anything we can see

below. The other night, for instance, there was a cloud drift that looked like a girl," N'ton made passes with

his hands to describe a head, and a few to one side of the air-drawn circle, "braiding her hair. I could see

her head, tilted to the left, the half-finished braid and then the stream of free hair. Fascinating."

F'nor did not dismiss that conversation entirely for he'd noticed the variety of recognizable patterns

in the clouds around the Red Star and often had been more absorbed in that show than in what he was

supposed to be watching for.

N'ton's report of the fire lizard's behavior was very interesting. The little creatures were not as

dependent on their handlers as dragons. They were quite apt to disappear between when bored or asked to

Nevertheless, Meron would be watched closely. It was just possible that he could dominate his fire lizard. His mind, as Brekke said, was warped.

As F'nor entered the passageway to his weyr that evening, he heard a spirited conversation going on although he couldn't distinguish the words.

Lessa is worried, Canth told him, shaking his wings flat against his back as he followed his rider.

"When you've lived with a man for seven Turns, you know what's on his mind," Lessa was saying

urgently as F'nor entered. She turned, an almost guilty expression on her face replaced by relief when she recognized F'nor.

He looked past her to Brekke whose expression was suspiciously blank. She didn't summon even a welcoming smile for him.

"Know what's on whose mind, Lessa? F'nor asked, unbelting his riding tunic. He tossed his gloves to the table and accepted the wine which Brekke poured him.

Lessa sank awkwardly into the chair beside her, her eyes darting everywhere but toward him.

gether. He's the only one who

can consolidate the Lord Holders, the Craftmasters and the Dragonriders. Even the Oldtimers trust him

now. Him. No one else!"

Lessa was unusually upset, F'nor realized. Grall and Berd came gliding in to perch on the posts of

Brekke's chair, chirping softly and preening their wings.

Lessa ignored their antics, leaning across the table, one hand on F'nor's to hold his attention. "I

heard what the Harper said about miracles. Salvation in three days!" Her eyes were bitter.

"Going to the Red Star is salvation for no one, Lessa!"

"Yes, but we don't know that for certain. We've only assumed that we can't because the ancients

didn't. And until we prove to the Lords what the actual conditions there are, they will not accept the alternative!"

"More trouble from Larad?" F'nor asked sympathetically, rubbing the back of his neck. His muscles felt unaccountably tight.

she underscored her contempt for the old Lord Holders, “are of the opinion that Meron of Nabol has found

coordinates after nights of watching and is maliciously withholding them from the rest of Pern.”

F’nor grinned and shook his head. “N’ton is watching Meron of Nabol. The man has found nothing.

He couldn’t do anything without our knowledge. And he certainly isn’t having any luck with his fire lizard.”

Lessa blinked, looking at him without comprehension.

“With his fire lizard?”

“Brekke thinks Meron might attempt to send his fire lizard to the Red Star.”

As if a string in her back had been pulled, Lessa jerked up in her chair, her eyes huge and black as

she stared first at him, then at Brekke.

“Yes, that would be like him. He wouldn’t mind sacrificing his fire lizard for that, would he? And it’s

as old as yours.” Her hand flew to her mouth. “If he . . .”

F’nor laughed with an assurance he suddenly didn’t honestly feel. Lessa had reacted far too

“There’s got to be something we can do. I tell you, F’nor, I know what F’lar has on his mind. I know

he’s trying to find some way to get to the Red Star if only to prove to the Lord Holders that there is no other alternative but the grubs!”

“He may be willing to risk his neck, my dear Lessa, but is Mnementh willing?”

Lessa flashed F’nor a look of pure dislike. “And put the notion in the poor beast’s head that this is

what F’lar wants? I could throttle Robinton. Him and his three-day salvation! F’lar can’t stop thinking about

that. But F’lar is not the one to go” and she broke off, biting her lip, her eyes sliding toward Brekke.

“I understand, Lessa,” Brekke said very slowly, her eyes unwinking as she held Lessa’s. “Yes, I understand you.

F’nor began to massage his right shoulder. He must have been between too much lately.

“Never mind,” Lessa said suddenly, with unusual force. “I’m just overwrought with all this

once more. Certainly he's been open with the other Weyrleaders, the Craftmasters, being sure that

everyone knows exactly what the over-all plan is. Nothing will go wrong this time. This is one Craft secret

that won't get lost because someone can't read a Record skin!".Lessa rose, her body taut. She licked her lips. "I think," she said in a low voice, "that's what scares

me most. He's taking such precautions to be sure everyone knows. Just in case . . ."

She broke off and rushed out of the Weyr.

F'nor stared after her. That interpretation of F'lar's overtness began to assume frightening

significance. Disturbed, he turned to Brekke, surprised to see tears in the girl's eyes. He took her in his arms.

"Look, I'll get some rest, we'll eat, and then I'll go to Fort Weyr. See Meron myself. Better still," and

he hugged her reassuringly, "I'll bring Grall along. She's the oldest we've got. I'll see if she'd take the trip.

If any of the fire lizards would go, she'd be the one. There now! How's that for a good idea?" She clung to

enough about F'lar to confide in

Brekke and F'nor, she was more deeply concerned than she'd admit.

Brekke and F'nor must assume such

responsibility as they could.

Brekke was a great one for assuming responsibility, F'nor thought with affectionate tolerance as he

roused Canth. Well, it wouldn't take long to check on Meron. Or to see if Grall would consider going to the

Red Star. That certainly was a better alternative than F'lar making the trip. If the little queen lizard would consider it.

Canth was in high good humor as they wheeled first above Benden Weyr, then burst out of between

above Fort Weyr's Star Stones. There were glows along the crown of the Weyr rim and, beyond the Star

Stones, the silhouettes of several dragons.

Canth and F'nor of Benden Weyr, the brown dragon announced in answer to the watchrider's query.

Lioth is here and the green dragon who must stay at Nabol, Canth added as he backwinged to a light

Canth.”

The bronze Nabol lizard began to screech with a distress which Grall echoed nervously. Her wings

extended. F'nor stroked them down to her back, emitting the human version of a lizard croon which usually

calmed her. She tightened her wings but started to hop from one foot to the other, her eyes whirling

restlessly.

“Who’s that?” demanded Meron of Nabol peremptorily. Meron’s shadow detached itself from the

larger one of the rock on which the distance-viewer was mounted.

“F’nor, Wing-second of Benden Weyr,” the brown rider answered coldly.

“You’ve no business in Fort Weyr,” Meron said, his tone rasping. “Get out of here!”

“Lord Meron,” N’ton said, stepping in front of F’nor. “F’nor of Benden has as much right in Fort Weyr

as you.”

“How dare you speak to a Lord Holder in that fashion?”

“Can he have found something?” F’nor asked N’ton in a low voice.

N’ton shrugged and moved toward the Nabolese. The little lizard began to shriek. Grall extended

eyes were used to the darkness by now and he could see the Lord Holder bend to place his eye to the viewer. He also saw that the man held tight to his fire lizard though the creature was twisting and writhing to escape. Its agitated screeching rose to a nerve-twitting pitch.

The little one is terrified, Canth told his rider.

“Grall terrified?” F’nor asked the brown dragon, startled. He could see that Grall was upset but he didn’t read terror in her thoughts.

Not Grall. The little brother. He is terrified. The man is cruel..F’nor had never heard such condemnation from his dragon.

Suddenly Canth let out an incredible bellow. It startled the riders, the other two dragons, and put Grall into flight. Before half the dragons of Fort Weyr roused to bugle a query, Canth’s tactic had achieved the effect he’d wanted. Meron had lost his hold on the fire lizard and it had sprung free and gone between.

With a cry of rage for such interference, Meron sprang toward the Dragonriders, to find his way blocked by the menacing obstacle of Canth’s head.

cowards, the pack of you! Always

knew it. Anyone can get to the Red Star. Anyone! I'll call your bluff, you neutered perverts!"

The green dragon, her eyes redly malevolent, dipped her shoulder to Meron. Without a break in his

ranting denunciation, the Lord of Nabol climbed the riding straps and took his place on her neck. She had

not cleared the Star Stones before F'nor was at the distance-viewer, peering at the Red Star.

What could Meron have seen? Or was he merely bellowing baseless accusations to unsettle them?

As often as he had seen the Red Star with its boiling cover of reddish-gray clouds, F'nor still

experienced a primitive stab of fear. Tonight the fear was like an extra-cold spine from his balls to his throat.

The distance-viewer revealed the westward-pointing tail of the gray mass which resembled a featureless,

backward Nerat. The jutting edge of the swirling clouds obscured it. Clouds that swirled to form a pattern —

no lady braiding her hair tonight. Rather, a massive fist, thumb of darker gray curling slowly, menacingly

Clouds, that's all he could have seen, over backward Nerat!"

N'ton looked up from the eyepiece, sighing with relief.

"Cloud formations won't get us anywhere!"

F'nor held his hand up for Grall. She came down obediently and when she started to hop to his

shoulder, he forestalled her, gently stroking her head, smoothing her wings flat. He held her level with his

eyes and, without stopping the gentle caresses, began to project the image of that fist, lazily forming over

Nerat. He outlined color, grayish-red, and whitish where the top of the imagined fingers might be sun-struck.

He visualized the fingers closing above the Neratian peninsula. Then he projected the image of Grall taking

the long step between, to the Red Star, into that cloud fist.

Terror, horror, a whirling many-faceted impression of heat, violent wind, burning breathlessness,

sent him staggering against N'ton as Grall, with a fearful shriek, launched herself from his hand and

disappeared.

"What happened to her?" N'ton demanded, steadying the brown rider.

“I gave vivid coordinates?”

Yes.

“What terrified Grall? You aren’t reacting the way she did and you heard the coordinates.”

She is young and silly. Canth paused, considering something. She remembered something that

scared her. The brown dragon sounded puzzled by that memory.

“What does Canth say?” N’ton asked, unable to pick up the quick exchange.

“He doesn’t know what frightened her. Something she remembers, he says.”

“Remembers? She’s only been hatched a few weeks.”

“A moment, N’ton.” F’nor put his hand on the bronze rider’s shoulder to silence him for a thought

had suddenly struck him. “Canth,” he said taking a deep breath, “You said the coordinates I gave her were

vivid. Vivid enough — for you to take me to that fist I saw in the clouds?”. Yes, I can see where you want me to go, Canth replied so confidently that F’nor was taken aback.

But this wasn’t a time to think things out.

“Have a care then,” N’ton advised. “At least we’ve solved one problem tonight. Meron can’t make that fire lizard of his go to the Red Star ahead of us.”

F’nor had mounted Canth. He tightened the fighting straps until they threatened to cut off

circulation. He waved to N’ton and the watchrider, suppressing his rising level of excitement until Canth had taken him high above the Weyr.

Then he stretched flat along Canth’s neck and looped the hand straps double around his wrists.

Wouldn’t do to fall off during this jump between.

Canth beat steadily upward, directly toward the baleful Red Star, high in the dark heavens, almost as if the dragon proposed to fly there straight.

Clouds were formed by water vapors, F’nor knew. At least they were on Pern. But it took air to

support clouds. Air of some kind. Air could contain various gases. Over the plains of Igen where the

noxious vapors rose from the yellow mountains you could suffocate with the odor and the stuff in your lungs.

see to the surface, under the

cloud cover. One look to settle the matter forever. One look that F'nor — not F'lar — would make.

He began to reconstruct that ethereal fist, its alien fingers closing over the westering tip of grayness

on the Red Star's enigmatic surface. "Tell Ramoth. She'll broadcast what we see to everyone, dragon,

rider, fire lizard. We'll have to go slightly between time, too, to the moment on the Red Star when I saw that

fist. Tell Brekke." And he suddenly realized that Brekke already knew, had known when she'd seduced him

so unexpectedly. For that was why Lessa had confided in them, in Brekke. He couldn't be angry with

Lessa. She'd had the courage to take just such a risk seven Turns ago, when she'd seen a way back

through time to bring up the five missing Weyrs.

Fill your lungs, Canth advised him and F'nor felt the dragon sucking air down his throat.

He didn't have time to consider Lessa's tactics because the cold of between enveloped them. He

Canth started to open his wings and screamed in agony as they were wrenched back. The snapping of his strong forelimbs went unheard in the incredible roar of the furnace-hot tornadic winds that seized them from the relative calm of the downdraft. There was air enveloping the Red Star — a burning hot air, whipped to flame-heat by brutal turbulences. The helpless dragon and rider were like a feather, dropped hundreds of lengths only to be slammed upward end over end, with hideous force. As they tumbled, their minds paralyzed by the holocaust they had entered, F'nor had a nightmare glimpse of the gray surfaces toward and away from which they were alternately thrown and removed: the Neratian tip was a wet, slick gray that writhed and bubbled and oozed. Then they were thrown into the reddish clouds that were shot with nauseating grays and whites, here and there torn by massive orange rivers of lightning. A thousand hot points burned the unprotected skin of F'nor's face, pitted Canth's hide, penetrating each lid over the

warned!.Grall returned to Brekke, crying piteously, burrowing into Brekke's arm. She was trembling with fear

but her thoughts made such chaotic nonsense that Brekke was unable to isolate the cause of her terror.

She stroked and soothed the little queen, tempting her with morsels of meat to no effect. The little

lizard refused to be quieted. Then Berd caught Grall's anxiety and when Brekke scolded him, Grall's

excitement and anguish intensified.

Suddenly Mirrim's two greens came swooping into the weyr, twittering and fluttering, also affected

by the irrational behavior of the little queen. Mirrim came running in then, escorted by her bronze, bugling

and fanning his gossamer wings into a blur.

"Whatever is the matter? Are you all right, Brekke?"

"I'm perfectly all right," Brekke assured her, pushing away the hand Mirrim extended to her

forehead. "They're just excited that's all. It's the middle of the night. Go back to bed."

"Just excited?" Mirrim pursed her lips the way Lessa did when she knew someone was evading her.

to keen now, flitting

around the room, swooping in wild dives as if they wanted to escape some unseen danger.

“Get me some klah,” she repeated, because Mirrim stood watching her like a numbwit.

Her trio of fire lizards had followed her out before Brekke realized her error. They’d probably rouse

the lower Caverns with their distress. She called but Mirrim didn’t hear her. Cold chills made her fingers

awkward.

Canth wouldn’t go if he felt it would endanger F’nor. Canth has sense, Brekke told herself trying to

convince herself. He knows what he can and can’t do. Canth is the biggest, fastest, strongest brown

dragon on Pern. He’s almost as large as Mnementh and nearly as smart.

Brekke heard Ramoth’s brassy bugle of alarm just as she received the incredible message from

Canth.

Going to the Red Star? On the coordinates of a cloud? She staggered against the table, her legs

feet, to walk to the ledge.

The fire lizards kept darting and diving around her, keening wildly; a steady, nerve-jangling double trill of pure terror.

She halted at the top of the stairs, stunned by the confusion in the crepuscular gloom of the Weyr

Bowl. There were dragons on ledges, fanning their wings with agitation. Other beasts were circling around

at dangerous speeds. Some had riders, most were flying free. Ramoth and Mnementh were on the Stones,

their wings outstretched, their tongues flicking angrily, their eyes bright orange as they bugled to their

Weyrmates. Riders and weyrfolk were running back and forth yelling, calling to their beasts, questioning

each other for the source of this inexplicable demonstration.

Brekke futilely clapped her hands to her ears, searching the confusion for a sight of Lessa or F'lar.

Suddenly they both appeared at the steps and came running up to her. F'lar reached Brekke first, for Lessa

hung back, one hand steadying herself against the wall.

F'lar stiffened and his eyes turned as orange as Mnementh's. He stared at her with a compound of

fear and loathing that sent Brekke reeling back. As if her movement released him, F'lar looked toward the bronze dragon roaring stentoriously on the heights.

His shoulders jerked back and his hands clenched into fists so tight the bones showed yellow through the skin.

At that instant, every noise ceased in the Weyr as every mind felt the impact of the warning the fire

lizards had been trying inchoately to project..Turbulence, savage, ruthless, destructive; a pressure inexorable and deadly. Churning masses of slick, sickly gray surfaces that heaved and dipped. Heat as massive as a tidal wave. Fear! Terror! An inarticulate longing!

A scream was torn from a single throat, a scream like a knife upon raw nerves!

"Don't leave me alone!" The cry came from cords lacerated by the extreme of anguish; a command,

an entreaty that seemed echoed by the black mouths of the weyrs, by dragon minds and human hearts.

plunge as fatal as the one which Canth had tried to stop over the stony heights of the High Reaches range.

And there was no consciousness in that plummeting speck, no echo, however faint, to her

despairing inquiry. The arrow of dragons ascended, great wings pumping. The arrow thickened, once,

twice, three times as other dragons arrived, making a broad path in the sky, steadily striving for that falling mote.

It was as if the dragons became a ramp that received the unconscious body of their Weyrmate,

received and braked its fatal momentum with their own bodies, until the last segment of overlapping wings

eased the broken-winged ball of the bloody brown dragon to the floor of the Weyr.

Half-blinded as she was, Brekke was the first person to reach Canth's bleeding body, F'nor still

strapped to his burned neck. Her hands found F'nor's throat, her fingers the tendon where his pulse should

beat. His flesh was cold and sticky to the touch and ice would be less hard.

and sucked it out.

“That’s right, Brekke,” someone cried. That may work. Slow and steady!

Breathe for yourself or

you’ll pass out.”

Someone grabbed her painfully around the waist. She clung to F’nor’s limp body until she realized

that they were both being lifted from the dragon’s neck.

She heard someone talking urgently, encouragingly to Canth.

“Canth! Stay!”

The dragon’s pain was like a cruel knot in Brekke’s skull. She breathed in and out. Out and in. For

F’nor, for herself, for Canth. She was conscious as never before of the simple mechanics of breathing;

conscious of the muscles of her abdomen expanding and contracting around a column of air which she

forced up and out, in and out.

“Brekke! Brekke!”

Hard hands pulled at her. She clutched the wher-hide tunic beneath her.

“Brekke! He’s breathing for himself now. Brekke!”

They forced her away from him. She tried to resist but everything was a bloody blur. She

atmosphere of the thawing

planet toward Pern, pushed and pulled by the gravitic forces of a triple conjunction of the system's other planets.

The spores dropped through the atmospheric envelope of Pern. Attenuated by the friction of entry,

they fell in a rain of hot filaments on the surface of the planet.

Dragons rose, destroying them with flaming breath. What Thread eluded the airborne beasts was

efficiently seared into harmless motes by ground crews, or burrowed after by sand-worm and fire lizard.

Except on the eastern slope of a northern mountain plantation of hardwood trees. There men had

carefully drawn back from the leading edge of the Fall. They watched, one with intent horror, as the silver rain scorched leaf and fell hissing into the soil. When the leading Edge had passed over the crest of the

mountain, the men approached the points of impact cautiously, the nozzles of the flames throwers they

carried a half-turn away from spouting flame.

The still smoldering hole of the nearest Thread entry was prodded with a metal rod. A brown fire

The Benden Weyrleader returned Asgenar's smile, hooking his thumbs in his broad riding belt.

"And this is the fourth Fall with no burrows and no protection, Lord Asgenar?"

The Lord of Lemos Hold nodded, his eyes sparkling. "No burrows on the entire slope." He turned in

triumph to the one man who seemed dubious and said, "Can you doubt the evidence of your eyes, Lord

Groghe?"

The ruddy-faced Lord of Fort Hold shook his head slowly.

"C'mon, man," said the white-haired man with the prominent, hooked nose. "What more proof do

you need? You've seen the same thing on lower Keroon, you've seen it in Telgar Valley. Even that idiot

Vincent of Nerat Hold has capitulated."

Groghe of Fort Hold shrugged, indicating a low opinion of Vincent, Lord Holder of Nerat.

"I just can't put any trust in a handful of squirming insects. Relying on dragons makes sense."

"But you've seen grubs devour Thread!" F'lar persisted. His patience with the man was wearing

lizard on his shoulder crooned softly and rubbed her down-soft head against his cheek. The man's

expression softened slightly. Then he recalled himself and glared at F'lar. "Spent my whole life trusting

Dragonkind. I'm too old to change. But you're running the planet now. Do as you will. You will anyhow!"

He stalked away, toward the waiting brown dragon who was Fort Hold's resident messenger.

Groghe's fire lizard extended her golden wings, crooning as she balanced herself against his jolting strides.

Lord Corman of Keroon fingered his large nose and blew it out briskly. He had a disconcerting habit

of unblocking his ears that way. "Old fool. He'll use grubs. He'll use them. Just can't get used to the idea

that it's no good wanting to go to the Red star and blasting Thread on its home ground. Groghe's a fighter.

Doesn't sit well with him to barricade his Hold, as it were, and wait out the siege. He likes to charge into

things, straighten them out his way."

"The Weyrs appreciate your help, Lord Corman," F'lar began.

reassuringly. “He’s on his

feet. Not much the worse for wear,” although F’nor would never lose the scars on the cheek where particles

had been forced into the bone. “Canth’s wings are healing, though new membrane grows slowly. He looked

like raw meat when they got back, you know. There wasn’t a hand-span on his body, except where F’nor

had lain, that hadn’t been scoured bare. He has the entire Weyr hopping to when he itches and wants to be

oiled. That’s a lot of dragon to oil.” F’lar chuckled as much to reassure Corman who looked uncomfortable

hearing a list of Canth’s injuries as in recollection of the sight of Canth dominating a Weyr’s personnel.

“Then the beast will fly again.”

“We believe so. And he’ll fight Thread, too. With more reason than any of us.”

Corman regarded F’lar levelly. “I can see it’s going to take Turns and Turns to grub the continent

thoroughly. This forest,” and he gestured to the plantation of hardwood saplings, “my corner on Keroon

ment. "Cheer up, man," he

advised, giving the Lord of Lemos an affectionate clout on the shoulder.

"Think about it. You ought to know

by now what dragons do best."

Mnemoth was settling carefully in the small clearing in response to his summons. F'lar closed his

tunic, preparatory to flying.

"Dragons go places better than anything else on Pern, good Lord Holders. Faster, farther. We've

all the southern continent to explore when this Pass is over and men have time to relax again. And there're

other planets in our skies to visit."

Shock and horror were mirrored in the faces of the two Lord Holders. Both had had lizards when

F'nor and Canth had taken their jump between the planets; they'd known intimately what had happened.

"They can't all be as inhospitable as the Red Star," F'lar said.

"Dragons belong on Pern!" Corman said and honked his big nose for emphasis.

"Indeed they do, Lord Corman. Be assured that there'll always be dragons in the Weyrs of Pern. It

High Reaches Weyr Southern Weyr

Igen Weyr

THE MAJOR HOLDS AS BOUND TO

THE WEYRS

Fort Weyr

Fort Hold (oldest hold), Lord Holder Groghe

Ruatha Hold (next oldest), Lord Holder Jaxom,

Lord Warder Lytol

Southern Boll Hold, Lord Holder Sangel

Benden Weyr

Benden Hold, Lords Holder Raid and Toronas

Bitra Hold, Lords Holder Sifer and Sigomal

Lemas Hold, Lord Holder Asgenar

High Reaches Weyr

High Reaches Hold, Lord Holder Bargen

Nabol Hold, Lords Holder Fax, Meron, Deckter

Tillek Hold, Lord Holder Oterel

Igen Weyr

Keroon Hold, Lord Holder Corman

Parts of Upper Igen

Southern Telgar Hold

Southern Hold, Holder Toric

THE PRINCIPAL LORDS

(AND THEIR HOLDS)

Asgenar (Lemos)

Banger (Igen Plains)

Bargen (High Reaches)

Begamon (Nerat, 2)

Corman (Keroon)

Deckter (Nabol, 3)

Fax (Nabol, 1)

Groghe (Fort)

Jaxom (Ruatha)

Larad (Telgar)

Laudey (Igen)

Lytol (Ruatha Warder)

Meron (Nabol, 2)

Nessel (Crom)

Oterel (Tillek)

Raid (Benden)

Sangel (Boll)

Sifer (Bitra, 1)

Andemon Masterfarmer Nerat Hold

Arnor Craftmaster, scrivener Harpercraft Hall

Fort Hold

Baldor Weyrharper Ista Weyr

Belesdan Mastertanner Igen Hold

Bendarek Craftmaster, woodsmith Lemos Hold

Benelek Journeyman, machinesmith Smith Hall

Briaret Masterherder Keroon Hold

Brudegan Journeyman Harper Harpercraft Hall,

Fort Hold

Chad Harper Telgar Weyr

Domick Craftmaster, composer Harpercraft Hall,

Fort Hold

Elgin Harper Half-Circle Sea Hold

Facenden Craftmaster, smith Smithcraft Hall,.Fandarel Mastersmith

Smithcraft Hall,

Telgar Hold

Idarolan Masterfisher Tillek Hold

Jerint Craftmaster, instruments Harpercraft Hall,

Fort Hold

Ligand Journeyman tanner Fort Hold

Pailm Journeyman baker Smithhall

Petiron Harper Half-Circle Sea Hold

Piemur Apprentice/journeyman Harpercrafft Hall,
Fort Hold

Robinton Masterharper Fort Hold

Sebell Journeyman/Masterharper Harpercrafft Hall,
Fort Hold

Sharra Journeyman healer Southern Hold

Shonegar Craftmaster, voice Harpercrafft Hall,
Fort Hold

Sograny Masterherder Keroon Hold

Tagetarl Journeyman Harper Harpercrafft Hall,
Fort Hold

Talmor Journeyman Harper Harpercrafft Hall,
Fort Hold

Terry Craftmaster, smith Smithcraft Hall,
Telgar Hold

Timareen Craftmaster, weaver Telgar Hold

Wansor Craftmaster, glassmith Smithcraft Hall,
Telgar Hold

Yanis Craftmaster Half-Circle Sea Hold

Corman —

Deelan green

Famira green

F'nor gold Grall

Groghe queen Merga

G'sel bronze

Kylara gold

Larad green

Menolly queen Beauty;

bronzes Rocky, Diver, Poll;

browns Lazybones, Mimic, Brownie;.greens Auntie One, Auntie Two;

blue Uncle;

Meron bronze

Mirrim greens Reppa, Lok;

brown Tolly;

Nessel —

Nicat —

N'ton brown Tris;

Oterel —

Piemur queen Farlir;

Robinton bronze Zair;

SOME TERMS OF INTEREST

Agenothree: a common chemical on Pern, HNO_3 .

Between: an area of nothingness and sensory deprivation between here and there.

Black rock: analogous to coal.

Day Sisters: a trio of stars visible from Pern.

Dawn Sisters: an alternate name for Day Sisters.

Deadglow: a numbskull, stupid. Derived from glow.

Fellis: a flowering tree.

Fellis juice: a juice made from the fruit of the fellis tree; a soporific.

Fire-stone: phosphine-bearing mineral which dragons chew to produce flame.

Glow: a light-source which can be carried in a hand-basket.

High Reaches: mountains on the northern continent of Pern.

Hold: a place where the common people live; originally they were cut into the mountains and hillsides.

Impression: the joining of minds of a dragon and his rider-to-be at the moment of the dragon's hatching.

Interval: the period of time between passes, generally

Month: four sevendays

Numbweed: a medicinal cream which, when smeared on wounds, kills all feeling; used as an anesthetic.

Oldtimer: a member of one of the five Weyrs which Lessa brought forward four hundred

Turns in time. Used as a derogative term to refer to one who has moved to Southern Weyr.

Pass: a period of time during which the Red Star is close enough to drop Thread on Pern.

Pern: third of the star Rukbat's five planets. It has two natural satellites.

Red Star (sic): Pern's stepsister planet. It has an erratic orbit.

Rukbat: a yellow star in the Sagittarian Sector, Rukbat has five planets and two asteroid belts.

Sevenday: the equivalent of a week on Pern.

Thread: (mycorrhizoid) spores from the Red Star, which descend on Pern and burrow into it, devouring all organic material they encounter.

Turn: a Pernese year..Watch-when: a nocturnal reptile distantly related to Dragonkind.

Weyr: a home of dragons and their riders.

By the Egg

By the shards of my dragon's egg

By the first Egg

By the Egg of Faranth

Shells

Through Fall, Fog, and Fire

Scorch it

Shards

THE PEOPLE OF PERN

Abuna: Kitchen head at Harpercrafft Hall, Fort Hold

Alemi: Third of Seaholder's six sons, at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Andemon: Masterfarmer, Nerat Hold

Arnor: Craftmaster scrivener, at Harpercrafft Hold

Balder: Harper, at Ista Weyr

B'dor: at Ista Weyr

Bedella: Oldtimer Weyrwoman, at Telgar Weyr, dragon queen Solth

Belesdan: Mastertanner, Igen Hold

Bendarek: Craftmaster Woodsmith, at Lemos Hold

Benek: Journeyman machinestmith, Smithhall

Benis: one of Lord Holder Groghe's 17 sons, at Fort Hold

B'fol: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon green Gereth

Briaret: Masterherder (replaces Sograny), Keroon Hold

Brudegen: Journeyman of chorus, at Harpercraft Hall, Fort Hold

Camo: a half-wit at Harpercraft Hall, Fort Hold

Celina: queenrider, at Benden Weyr; dragon queen Lamanth

C'gan: Weyrsinger at Benden Weyr, dragon blue Tegath

Corana: sister of Fidello (holder at Plateau), Ruatha Hold

Cosira: rider, at Ista Weyr; dragon queen Caylith

Deelan: milkmother to Jaxom, at Ruatha Hold. Dorse: milkbrother to Jaxom, at Ruatha Hold

D'nek: rider, at Fort Weyr; dragon bronze Zagenth

D'nol: rider of dragon bronze Valenth, at Benden Weyr

Domick: Craftmaster composer, at Harpercraft Hall, Fort Hold

D'ram: Oldtimer Weyrleader, at Ista Weyr; dragon bronze Tiroth

Dunca: cot-holder, girl's cottage, at Harpercraft Hall, Fort Hold

D'wer: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon blue Trebeth

Elgion: the new Harper at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Fandarel: Mastersmith, Smithcraft Hall, Telgar Hold

Fanna: Oldtimer Weyrwoman, at Ista Weyr; dragon queen Miranth

Fax: Lord of Seven Holds, father of Jaxom

Felena: second to the Headwoman Manora, at Benden Weyr

Fidello: holder, at Plateau in Ruatha Hold

Gandidan: a child at Benden Weyr

Gemma, Lady: First Lady of Fax (Lord of the Seven Holds)

and mother of Jaxom

G'dened: Weyrleader-to-be, at Ista Weyr, son of Old-timer Weyrleader

D'ram,

dragon bronze Baranth

G'nag: at Southern Weyr, dragon blue Nelanth

G'narish: Oldtimer Weyrleader at Igen Weyr; dragon bronze Gyamath

G'sel: rider, at Southern Weyr; bronze fire-lizard, dragon green Roth

Groghe: Lord Holder at Fort Hold; fire-lizard queen Merga

H'ages: Wingsecond at Telgar Weyr; dragon bronze Kerth

Horon: son of Lord Groghe; Fort Hold

Idarolan: Masterfisher, Tillek Hold

Jaxom: Lord Holder (underage) at Ruatha Hold dragon white Ruth

Jerint: Craftmaster for instruments, at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

Jora: Weyrwoman preceding Lessa, at Benden Weyr; dragon queen

Nemorth

J'ralt: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon queen Palanth

Kayla: drudge, at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

K'der: rider, at Ista Weyr; dragon blue Warth

Kenelas: a woman of the lower caverns, at Benden Weyr

Prideth

Lessa: Weyrwoman at Benden Weyr; dragon queen Ramoth

Lidith: Queen dragon before Nemorth, rider unknown

Ligand: Journeyman tanner at Fort Hold

L'tol: rider, at Benden Weyr and, as Lytol, Warder of Ruatha Hold;
dragon brown Larth (dies)

L'trel: father of Mirrim, at Southern Weyr; dragon blue Falgrent

Lytol: Lord Warder for the underage Lord Holder Jaxom at Ruatha Hold;
dragon brown Larth (dies)

Manora: headwoman at Benden Weyr. Mardra: Oldtimer Weyrwoman at
Fort Weyr, banished to Southern Weyr;

dragon queen Loranth

Margatta: senior Weyrwoman at Fort Weyr; dragon queen Ludeth

Mavi: Seaholder's (Yanis) Lady at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Menolly: Journeyman at Harpercrafter Hold, Fort Hold, fire-lizards (10):

gold: Beauty; bronzes: Rocky, Diver, Poll;

browns: Lazybones, Mimic, Brownie,

greens: Auntie One and Auntie Two; blue: Uncle

Menolly: youngest child (daughter) of Seaholder (Yanis) of
Half Circle Sea Hold

Merelan: mother of Robinton (Masterharper of Harpercrafter Hold)

M'tok: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon bronze Litorth

Nadira: Weyrwoman, at Igen Weyr

Nanira: see Varena

Nicat: Masterminer, Crom Hold

N'ton: wingleader at Benden Weyr on dragon bronze Lioth;
then Weyrleader at Fort Weyr (after T'ron), fire-lizard brown Tris

Oharan: Journeyman Harper at Benden Weyr

Oldive: Masterhealer, at Harpocraft Hall, Fort Hold

Old Uncle: great grandfather of Menolly, at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Palim: Journeyman baker at Fort Hold

Petiron: the old Harper at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Piemur: Apprentice/Journeyman, at Harpocraft Hall, Fort Hold;
fire-lizard queen Farli; runner-beast Stupid

Pilgra: Weyrwoman, at High Reaches Weyr; dragon queen Selgrith

P'llomar: rider at Benden Weyr: dragon green Ladrarth

Pona: granddaughter to Lord Holder Sangel, Southern Boll Hold

P'ratan: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon green Poranth

Prilla: youngest Weyrwoman, at Fort Weyr; dragon queen Selianth

Rannelly: nurse and servant of Kylara

R'gul: Weyrleader before F'lar, at Benden Weyr; dragon bronze Hath

R'mart: Oldtimer Weyrleader, at Telgar Weyr; dragon bronze Branth

S'goral: rider, at Southern Weyr; dragon green Betunth

Sharra: Journeyman healer, at Southern Hold; fire-lizards: bronze: Meer
and brown: Talla

Shonagar: Craftmaster for voice, at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

Silon: a child at Benden Weyr

Silvina: headwoman at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

S'lan: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon bronze Bintah

S'lel: rider, at Benden Weyr; dragon bronze Tuenth

Sograny: Masterherder, Keroon Hold

Soreel: wife of the First Holder at Half-Circle Sea Hold. Tagetarl: Journeyman at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

Talina: Weyrwoman at Benden Weyr; queenrider

Talmor: Journeyman teacher, at Harpecraft Hall, Fort Hold

T'bor: Weyrleader at Southern Weyr, later moves to High Reaches
when the Oldtimers are exiled; dragon bronze Orth

Tegger: holder at Ruatha

Tela, Lady: one of Fax's ladies

Terry: Craftmaster smith, Smithcraft Hall, Telgar Hold

T'gran: dragonrider at Benden Weyr; dragon brown Branth

T'gellan: wingleader at Benden Weyr; dragon bronze Monarth

T'gor: rider at Benden Weyr; dragon blue Relth

T'ron: Oldtimer Weyrleader at Fort Weyr; banished to Southern Weyr; dragon bronze Fidranth; also called T'ton

T'sel: dragonrider at Benden Weyr; dragon green Trenth, fire-lizard bronze Rill

Vanira: see Varena

Varena (also called Vanira): rider, at Southern Weyr; dragon queen Ralenth

Viderian: fosterling (Seaholder's son) at Fort Hold

Wansor: Craftmaster glassmith, Smithcraft Hall, Telgar Hold; also called Starsmith

Yanis: Craftmaster and Seaholder at Half-Circle Sea Hold

Zurg: Masterweaver, Southern Boll Hold

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on April 1, Anne McCaffrey has tried to live up to such an auspicious natal day. Her first novel

was created in Latin class and might have brought her instant fame, as well as an A, had she attempted to

write in the language. Much chastened, she turned to the stage and became a character actress, appearing

in the first successful summer music circus at Lambertsville, New Jersey. She studied voice for nine years

to writing.

Between her frequent appearances in the United States and in England as a lecturer and guest of

honor at SF conventions, Ms. McCaffrey lives at Dragonhold, in the hills of Wicklow County, Ireland, with two

of her children, her gray horse Mr. Ed, four cats and a dog. Of herself, Ms. McCaffrey says, "I have green

eyes, silver hair, and freckles; the rest changes without notice."