

runner beasts. The facility had often been to his advantage since the other apprentices in his dormitory couldn't sneak up on him with vengeance in mind. And he was often awakened by discreet, dragon-borne visitors coming to see the Masterharper of Pern, or the arrivals and departures of Master Robinton himself, for he was surely one of the most important men on Pern; almost as influential as F'lar and Lessa, the Weyrleaders of Benden. Occasionally, too, on warm summer nights, when the shutters of the main hall were thrown back, the masters and journeymen assuming all the apprentices slept, he'd hear fascinating and uninhibited talk drifting on the night air. A small fellow like himself had to keep ahead of everyone else, and listening often showed him how.

As he tried to get back to sleep for just a little longer in the gray dawn, the drum sequence echoed in his mind. The message had originated from Ista Hold's harper: he had caught the identifying signature. He couldn't be sure of the rest of the message: something about a ship. Maybe he ought to learn message-drum beats. Not that they came in with such frequency now that more and more people owned little fire lizards to take messages round and about Pern.

He wondered when he'd get his hands on a fire lizard

Piemur folded his hands behind his head, musing on such a delightful prospect. From having helped Menolly feed her nine, he knew a fair bit about them now. More than some people who had fire lizards, the same people who'd been claiming for Turns that fire lizards were boy's-sun-dreams.

That is, until F'nor, brown Canth's rider, had

Impressed a little queen on a beach in the southern continent. Then Menolly, halfway across Pern, had saved a fire lizard queen's eggs from being drowned in the unusually high tides of that Turn. Now everyone wanted a fire lizard, and admitted that they must be tiny cousins to the great dragons of Pern.

Piemur shivered with delighted terror. Thread had fallen over Fort Hold yesterday. They'd been rehearsing Master Domick's new saga about the search for Lessa and how she'd become Weyrwoman at Benden just before the new Pass of the Red Star, but Piemur had been much more aware of the silvery Threads dropping through the skies above the tightly shuttered and sealed Harper Hall. He'd imagined, as he always did during Threadfall, the graceful passages of the great dragons as their fiery breath charred

wasn't immured in the Crafhall; if only he had a chance to search seashores and find his own clutch. . . . Of course, as a mere apprentice, he'd have to give the eggs to his Craft Master, but surely, if he found a whole clutch, Master Robinton would let him keep one.

The sudden raucous call of a fire lizard startled him, and he sat up in alarm. The sun was now streaming across the outer side of the Harper Hall rectangle. He had fallen asleep again. If Rocky was screaming, he was late to .help feed. With deft movements, he dressed, except for his boots, and thudded down the steps, emerging into the courtyard just as he heard the second, more urgent summons from a hungry Rocky.

When he saw that Camo was only just trudging up the steps outside the kitchen, clutching his bowl of scraps, Piemur drew a sigh of relief. He wasn't all that late! He thrust his feet into his boots, stuffed the laces inside to save time, and clomped across the court just as Menolly came down the steps from the Main Hall. Rocky, Mimic and Lazy whirled above Piemur's head, clattering hungrily at him to move faster.

they reached for handfuls of meat scraps. Rocky and Mimic took their accustomed perches on Piemur's shoulders, while Lazy clung with far from indolent strength to his left forearm.

Once the fire lizards settled to the business of eating, Piemur glanced at Menolly, wondering if she'd heard the drum message. She looked more awake than she usually did at this hour, and slightly detached from her immediate task. Of course, she might just be thinking up a new song, but writing tunes was not Menolly's only duty in the Harper Hall.

As they fed the fire lizards, the rest of the Hall began to stir: the drudges in the kitchen were roused to breakfast efforts by Silvina and Abuna; in the junior and senior dormitories, occasional shouts punctuated random noises; and shutters on the journeyman's quarters were being opened to let in the fresh morning air.

Once the fire lizards had wheeled up for their morning stretch of wings, Piemur, Menolly and Camo separated: Camo, with a push from Menolly, was sent back to the kitchen; then she and Piemur went up the main steps of

object to having to sing a female role. In fact, that morning he waited eagerly for the chorus to finish the passage before his first entrance. The moment came, he opened his mouth, and to his amazement no sound emerged.

"Wake up, Piemur," said Master Domick, irritably rapping his stick on the music stand. He alerted the chorus.

"We'll repeat the measure before the entrance . . . if you're now ready, Piemur?"

Usually Piemur could ignore Master Domick's sarcasm, but since he had been ready to sing, he flushed uncertainly. He took a breath and hummed against his closed

teeth as the chorus began again. He had tone, and his throat wasn't sore, so he wasn't coming down with a stuffed head.

The chorus gave him his entrance again, and he opened his mouth. The sound that emerged ranged from one octave to another, neither of which were in the score he held.

A complete and awed silence fell. Master Domick frowned at Piemur, who was now swallowing against a fear that froze his feet to one spot and crept up his bones to his heart.

irritation.

"Piemur, I think you had best see Master Shonagar. Tilgin, you've been understudying the role?"

"Me, sir? I haven't so much as glanced at it. Not with Piemur . . ." The startled apprentice's voice trailed off as Piemur, slowly and with feet he could barely force to move, left the chorus hall and walked across the court toward Master Shonagar's room.

He tried to close his ears to the sound of Tilgin's tentative voice. Scorn gave him momentary relief from his cold. Fear. His had been a much better voice than Tilgin's would ever be. Had been? Maybe he was just coming down with a cold. Piemur coughed experimentally, but knew even as he did so that no phlegm congested his lungs and throat. He trudged on to Master Shonagar, knowing the verdict and hoping against vain hope that somehow the flaw in his voice was transitory, that he'd manage to keep his soprano range long enough to sing Master Domick's music. Scuffing up the steps, he paused briefly in the threshold to accustom his eyes to the gloom within.

Master Shonagar would only just have arisen and break-

ter's rich, mellow bass voice. The propping hand came away from the head and brushed aside the tones now issuing from the chorus hall. "Tilgin will never come up to your measure."

"Oh, sir, what do I do now my voice is gone? It's all I had!"

Master Shonagar's surprised contempt startled Piemur.

"All you had? Perhaps, my dear Piemur, but by no means all you have! Not after five Turns as my apprentice. You probably know more about vocal production than any journeyman in the Craft."

"But who would want to learn from me?" Piemur gestured to his slight adolescent frame, his voice cracking dramatically. "And how could I teach when I've no voice to demonstrate?"

"Ah, but the distressing condition of your singing voice heralds other alterations that will remedy those minor considerations." Master Shonagar waved aside that argument, and then regarded Piemur through narrowed eyelids.

"This occasion has not caught me . . ." the thick fingers tapped against the bulging chest ". . . unprepared." Now

pletely in character, for you to decide on puberty before singing Domick's latest choral work. Undoubtedly one of his best, and written with your abilities in mind. Do not hang your head in my presence, young man!" The Master's bellow startled Piemur out of his self-pitiful reflections.

"Young man! Yes, that's the crux. You are becoming a young man. Young men must have young-manly tasks."

"What?" In the single word, Piemur expressed his disbelief and distress.

"That, my young man, is for the Harper to tell you!"

Master Shonagar's thick forefinger pointed first at Piemur and then swung toward the front of the building, indicating Master Robinton's window..Piemur did not dare permit the hope that

began to re-

vive in him to blossom. Yet, Master Shonagar wouldn't lie for any reason, certainly not to give him false hope.

Then they both winced as Tilgin erred in his sight reading. Instinctively glancing at his Master, Piemur saw the pained expression on Master Shonagar's face.

"Were I you, young Piemur, I'd stay out of Domick's sight as much as possible."

Piemur!" The thick forefinger pointed unwaveringly at Piemur, who affected innocent shock that such an admonition might be needed. "Away with you!"

Obediently, Piemur turned, but he'd gone no more than a few paces to the door when a second shock stopped him. He whirled toward the Voice Master.

"You mean, just now, sir, don't you?"

" 'Just now, sir?' Of course, I mean now, not this afternoon or tomorrow, but now."

"Now . . . and always?" asked Piemur uncertainly. If he could no longer sing, Master Shonagar would take on another special apprentice to perform those personal and private duties for him that Piemur had been undertaking in the past Turns. Not only was Piemur reluctant to lose the privilege of being Master Shonagar's special lad, he honestly didn't wish to end the very rewarding association with the Master. He liked Shonagar, and those services he had performed for his Master had stemmed from that liking rather than a sense of duty. He had enjoyed above all the droll humor and florid speech of his Master, of being teased for his bold behavior and called to task by a man he

Hall?". Though Piemur knew perfectly well that Master Shonagar rarely left his hall, he was obscurely reassured. He made a half turn and then came slowly back.

"This afternoon, you'll need some errands done?"

"You may not be available," said Master Shonagar, his face expressionless, his voice almost as neutral.

"But, sir, who will come to you?" and again, Piemur's voice broke. "You know you're always busy after the mid-day meal . . ."

"If you mean," and Shonagar spoke with real amusement crinkling his eye folds, "do I plan to appoint Tilgin to the vacancy? Sssssh! I shall, of course, have to devote a great deal of time to improving his voice and musicality, but to have him lurking about on tap . . ." The thick fingers •wiggled with distaste. "Away with you. The choice of your successor requires considerable thought. Not, mind you, that there are not hundreds of likely lads who would undoubtedly suit my small requirements to perfection . . ."

Piemur caught his breath in hurt and then saw the twitch of Master Shonagar's expressive brows and realized that this moment was no easier on the older man.

Quickly Piemur walked to the entrance, blinking at the bright sunlight after the darker hall. He paused on the bottom step, reluctant to take the final one that severed his association with Master Shonagar. There was a sudden hard lump in his throat that had nothing to do with his voice change. He swallowed, but the sensation of constriction remained. He rubbed at his eyes with knuckles that came away moist and stung, fists clenched at his thighs, trying not to blubber.

Master Robinton had something to tell him about new duties? So his voice change had been discussed by the Masters. To be sure, he wouldn't have been callously thrown out of the Harper Hall and sent in some obscure disgrace back to his herdsman father and the dreary life of a beast

farmer simply because he no longer had his soprano voice.

No, that wouldn't be his fate, despite the fact that singing was his one undeniable harper skill. As Talmor said of his gitar and harp playing, he could accompany so long as his playing was drowned out by loud singing or other instruments. The drums and pipes he made under Master's Jerint's guidance were only passable and never got stamped

about wasted ink and hide.

Piemur sighed deeply. The only thing he was really adept at was singing, and that was no longer possible. Forever? No, not forever! He spread his fingers in rejection of that prospect and then closed them into tighter fists. He'd be able to sing all right: he'd learned too much from Master Shonagar about voice production and phrasing and interpretation, but he might not have a voice as an adult. And he wasn't going to sing unless he did! He had his reputation. Better if he never opened his mouth to sing another note. . . .

Tilgin flubbed another phrase. Piemur grinned, listening to Tilgin repeating the phrase correctly. They'd miss Piemur all right! He could sight-read any score, even one of Domick's, without missing a beat or an awkward interval, or those florid embellishments Domick insisted on writing for the treble parts. Yes, they'd miss Piemur in the chorus! That knowledge fortified him, and he took the final step onto the flagstones of the court. Clipping his thumbs over his belt, he began to saunter toward the main entrance of the Harper Hall. Not, he reminded himself, that a lowly

the noise of a dragon landing and departing. These days the Harper spent more time away from the Hall than in it.

"Piemur?"

Startled, he glanced up and saw Menolly standing on the top step of the Main Hall. She'd spoken quietly, and when he peered at her, he knew that she knew what had happened to him.

"It was rather audible," she said, again in that gentle tone, which both irritated and appeased Piemur. Menolly, of all within the Harper Hall, would sympathize with him most acutely. She knew what it was to be without the ability to make music. "Is that Tilgin singing?"

"Yes, and it's all my fault," Piemur said.

"All your fault?" Menolly stared at him in surprised amusement.

"Why did I have to pick now to break my voice?"

"Why indeed? I'm sure you did it only to annoy Dom- ick!" Menolly grinned broadly at him, for they both had experience with Domick's whimsical temper.

Piemur had reached the top step and experienced another shock on this morning of surprises: he could almost look

to keep beside her.

"Menolly, that's not fair!"

"Ha!" She was pleased by his discomfiture. "You've not long to wait.-I will tell you this: Domick may not be pleased that your voice changed, but the Master was."

"Aw, Menolly, one little hint? Please? You know you owe me a favor or two!"

"I do?" Menolly savored her advantage.

"You do. And you know it. You could pay me back right now!" Piemur was irritated. Why did she have to pick now to be difficult?

"Why waste a favor when a little patience on your part will bring the answer?" They had reached the second level and were striding down the corridor toward the Harper's quarters. "You'd better learn patience, too, my friend!".Piemur halted in disgust.

"Oh, c'mon Piemur," she said, with a broad swing of her arm. "You're not a little 'un anymore to wheedle news out of me. And wasn't it you who warned me that you don't keep a Master waiting?"

"I've had enough surprises today," he said sourly, but he

not padding! I'm feeding you as fast as I can! Zair! Behave yourself! I'm perishing for a taste of my klah, but I'm feeding you first. Good morning, Piemur. You're adept at feeding fire lizards. Pop sustenance into Zair's mouth so I can get some in mine!" The Harper shot a look of desperate entreaty to Piemur.

He whipped around the long worktable and, grabbing up several chunks of meat, attracted Zair's gaze.

"Ah, that's more the thing!" exclaimed Master Robinton after he'd had a long gulp of his klah.

Absorbed in his task, Piemur wasn't at first aware of the Harper's scrutiny, for the man was applying himself to his own food with his free right hand. Then Piemur saw the keen eyes on him, lids narrowed as if weighty from sleep. He could tell nothing from the Harper's expression, for the long face was quiescent, slightly puffy about the eyes from sleep, the grooves from the corners of the mobile mouth pulled down with age and accumulated fatigue rather than displeasure.

"I shall miss your young voice," said the Harper with a gentle emphasis on "young." "But, while we're waiting for

glance.. "I'd be your apprentice?" Piemur asked the Harper, holding his breath for the answer.

"Indeed, you'd have to be my apprentice at that," said Master Robinton, his voice and face turning droll.

"Oh, sir!" Piemur was stunned at such good fortune.

Zair squawked petulantly in the little silence, for Piemur had paused in his feeding.

"Sorry, Zair," and Piemur hastily resumed the task.

"However," and the Harper cleared his throat while Piemur wondered what disadvantage to this envious status was about to be disclosed (there had to be one, he knew),

"you will have to improve your skill in scribing—"

"We must be able to read what you write," said Menolly, sternly.

"—learn to send and receive message drum accurately and rapidly . . ." He looked at Menolly. "I know that Master Fandarel is very keen to have his new message-sender installed in every hall and craft, but it's going to take far too long to be useful to me. Then, too, there are some messages that should remain privy to the Craft!" He paused, staring long at Piemur. "You were bred on a run-

equal solemnity, Piemur nodded assurance. "Menolly tells me that despite your incorrigibility on many other counts, you're not given to indiscriminate babbling. Rather," and the Harper held up his hand as Piemur opened his mouth to reassure him, "that you keep close about incidental information until you can use it to your benefit."

"Me, sir?"

Master Robinton smiled at his wide-eyed innocent expression. "You, sir, young Piemur. Although it does strike me that you've exactly the sort of guile—" He broke off, then continued more briskly, leaving unsaid words to tantalize Piemur.

"We'll see how you get on. I fear you may find your new role not as exciting as you think, but you will be serving your Craft, and me, very well indeed."

If he couldn't sing for a while, thought Piemur, being the Master's apprentice was the next best thing. Wait! he told Bonz and Timiny; -wouldn't they just choke!

"Ever sailed?" asked Menolly -with such a piercing look that Piemur wondered if she'd read his thoughts.

"Sailed? In a boat?"

"That's the general method," she said. "With my luck

Menolly burst out laughing.

"I told you. Master," she said, throwing up her hands.

"And what makes you mention the Southern Continent?" asked the Harper.

Piemur was rather sorry now that he had.

"Well, sir, nothing special," he said, wondering himself.

"Just things like Sebell being gone for a couple of seven-days midwinter and coming back with a tanned face. Only I'd known he'd not been in Nerat or Southern Boll or Ista. There's been talk, too, at the Gathers that even if dragonriders from the north aren't supposed to go south, some of the Oldtuners have been seen here in the north. Now, if I was F'lar, I'd sort of wonder what those Oldtimers were doing north. And I'd try to keep them south, where they're supposed to be. And there're all these holdless men, looking for someplace to live, and no one seems to know how-big the Southern Continent is and if ..." Piemur trailed off, daunted by the keen scrutiny of the Master Harper.

"And if . . . ?" Master Robinton urged him to continue.. "Well, I've had to copy that map P'nor made of the

"Well, sir, if it were me, I'd want to know, 'cause sure as eggs hatch, there's going to be trouble with those Old-timers south"—he jerked his thumb in that direction— "and trouble with the holdless men in the north," he turned his thumb back. "So when Menolly talks about sailing, I know how Sebell got south without being taken by a dragon. Which Benden Weyr wouldn't permit 'cause they promised that northern dragons wouldn't go south, and I don't think Sebell could swim that far. If he can swim."

Master Robinton began to laugh, a soft chuckle, and he slowly swung his head from side to side.

"I wonder how many more people have put the same pieces together, Menolly?" he asked, frowning. When his journeywoman shrugged, he added to Piemur. "You've kept such notions to yourself, young man?"

Piemur gave a snort, realized he must be more circumspect with the Master of his Craft and said quickly, "Who pays any attention to what apprentices think or say?"

"Have you mentioned these notions to anyone?" The Harper was insistent.

"Of course not, sir." Piemur tried to keep indignation

head slowly, his eyes still holding Piemur's. "I want to be certain of your discretion."

"Menolly'll tell you; I'm not a babblemouth." He

looked at Menolly for her support.. "Not normally, I'm sure. But you might be tempted to

speak when taunted by others."

"Me, sir?" Piemur's imagination was genuine. "Not me, sir! I may be small, but I'm not stupid."

"No, one could not accuse you of that, my young friend, but as you've already pointed out, we are living in an uncertain Turn. I think ..."

The Harper broke off, staring out the window, frowning absently. Abruptly he made a decision and regarded Piemur for a long moment. "Menolly told me you were quick-witted. Let's see if you comprehend the reason behind this: you will not be known as -my apprentice . . ." and Master Robinton smiled understandingly at Piemur's sharp intake of breath. Then he nodded with approval as Piemur promptly schooled his expression to polite acceptance. "You will be told off as apprentice to the Drummaster, Olodkey, who will know that you are under my orders

except possibly Domick, but here in the Harper Hall, some of us listen to other tunes and drum a different beat." He gave Piemur another shake, then cuffed him on the shoulder encouragingly. "I don't want you to stop listening, Piemur, not if you can take isolated facts and put them together as well as you just did. But I also want you to notice the way things are said, the tone and inflection, the emphasis."

Piemur mustered a grin. "What a harper hears is for the Harper's ears, sir?"

Master Robinton laughed. "Good lad! Now, take this tray back to Silvina and ask her to fit you out with wherhide. A drummer has to be at his post in all weathers!"

"You don't need wherhide on the drunaheight!" exclaimed Piemur. Then he grinned as he cocked his head at his master. "You do need it if you're riding a dragonback, though."

"I told you he was quick," said Menolly, grinning at the Harper's consternation.."Scamp! Rascal! Impertinent snip!" cried the

Harper,

dismissing him with a vigorous wave of his hand that set

Though the glint of amusement remained in his eyes, the Harper stared thoughtfully at the closed door, his fingers tapping idly on his chair arm.

"Quick yes, but a shade young . . ."

"Young? Piemur? He was never young, that one. Don't let that innocent, wide-eyed stare of his fool you. Besides, he'd got fourteen Turns, almost as old as I was when I left Half-Circle Sea Hold to live in the Dragon Stones' cave with my fire lizards. And what else can be done with all his energy and mischief? He's simply not suited for any other section of this Craft. Master Shonagar was the only person who had half a chance of keeping him out of trouble. Old Amor couldn't, nor Jerint. It's got to be Olodkey and the drums."

"I could almost see the merit of the Oldtimers' attitudes," said the Harper on the end of a heavy sigh.

"Sir?" Menolly stared at him, startled as much by the abrupt change of subject as the sense of what he said.

"I wish we hadn't changed so in this last long Interval."

"But, sir, you've been supporting all the changes F'lar and Lessa have advocated. And Benden's been right to

"Ah, now, there's the real accomplishment!"

"Indeed it is," she said, ignoring his facetiousness. "For he's very hard to impress, I assure you. Believe me, too, that he won't be in the least distressed to do for you

what he does naturally for himself. He's always heard the gossip at Gathers and told me, knowing I'd tell you. 'What 16

a harper hears is for the Harper's ears.'" She laughed to find Piemur's saucy quip so applicable.

"It was easier during the Interval. . . ." Robinton said, with another long sigh. Zair, who'd been cleaning himself, chirped in a querying way, tilting his head and peering with earnestly whirling eyes at his friend. The Harper smiled as he stroked the little creature. "Boring, too, to be completely candid. Still, it won't be that long an assignment for Piemur, will it? His voice ought to settle within the Turn, and he can resume his place as a soloist. If his adult voice is half as good as his treble, he'll be a better singer than Tagetarl."

Seeing that that prospect cheered her Master, Menolly smiled.

The tray Piemur was carrying was all that restrained him from jumping into the air and kicking his heels together in his jubilation. Working for Master Robinton, no matter how indirectly, and being apprenticed to Master Olodkey, was no loss of prestige and much more than he had dared contemplate. Not, Piemur admitted to himself, that he'd given much thought to his future.

Of course, one never saw much of Master Olodkey about the Hall. He kept to the drum height, a lean, slightly stooped figure of a man with a big head and coarse bristling brown hair that seemed to stand out from his skull to give him the appearance, the irreverent said, of one of his own bass drumsticks. Others insisted that he was deaf from years of pounding the great message-drums for the Harper Hall.

Except for drumbeats, they hastily amended,

which he didn't need to hear: he felt the vibrations in the air.

Piemur considered his new apprenticeship and found it good: there were only four other apprentices, seniors all, and five journeymen serving Master Olodkey. Granted that Piemur had been Master Shonagar's special, but Master

wrong to think that any could extract information from Piemur that Piemur didn't care to divulge. Nothing pleased Piemur more than "knowing." He didn't necessarily have to show off to other people how much he "knew."

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The fact that he, Piemur, an insignificant herdsman's son from Crom, knew, was sufficient.

He wished he hadn't been so brash, mentioning the Southern Continent, but the reactions had proved that his guess was accurate. They had been down to the south: at least Sebell had, and probably Menolly. If they'd gone, then the Harper needn't risk the trip with such eyes and ears to do the hard work.

Piemur hadn't had much to do with the Oldtimers before F'lar had ordered them exiled to the Southern Continent. For this he was fervently grateful as he'd heard enough about their arrogance and greed. But if he, Piemur, had been exiled, he wouldn't have just stayed put. He couldn't understand why the Oldtimers had quietly accepted their humiliating dismissal. Piemur calculated that some two hundred and forty-eight Oldtimers and their

gone between this Turn. Somehow that struck Piemur as being rather careless of dragons, even Oldtimer ones. He stopped abruptly, aware of a tantalizing aroma wafting from the kitchens. Bubbly berry pies? And just when he needed a real treat! His mouth began to water in anticipation. The pies must be just out of the bake oven or surely

he would have discerned that fragrance before.

He heard Silvina's voice rising above the working noises and grimaced. He could've gotten a few pies out of Abuna with no trouble. But Silvina wasn't often taken in by his starts and schemes. Still . . .

He let his shoulders sag, dropped his head and began to shuffle down the last few steps into the kitchen level.

"Piemur? What are you doing here at this hour? "Why do you have the Harper's tray? You should be rehearsing . . ."

Silvina took the tray from his hands and stared at him accusingly.

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"You didn't hear?" Piemur asked in a low, dejected

voice.

voice.

music. And he was sorrier that Tilgin was!

"Your voice? Your voice is changing?"

Piemur heard the regret and dismay in Silvina's hushed tone. It occurred to him that women's voices never did change, and that she couldn't possibly imagine his feelings of total loss and crushing disappointment. More tears followed the first.

"There, lad. The world's not lost. In a half-Turn or less your range'll settle again."

"Master Domick's music was just right for me . . ."

Piemur did not need to fake the ragged tones.

"To be sure, since he wrote it with you in mind, scamp.

Well, wouldn't you know? Though I can't for the life of me believe you could contrive to change your voice to spite Domick—". "Spite Master Domick?" Piemur widened his eyes with indignation. "I wouldn't do such a thing, Silvina."

"Only because you couldn't, rascal. I know how you hate singing female parts." Her voice was acerbic, but her hand under his chin was gentle. She took a clean corner of her apron and blotted the tears on his cheeks. "As luck would have it, I seem to be prepared with an easement for

bled through a mouthful so hot that he had to suck in cool

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air to ease the burning of his gums. "But . . . I'm to get wherhide clothes."

"You? In wherhide? Why would you need wherhide?"

She frowned suspiciously at him now.

"I'm to study drum with Master Olodkey, and Menolly asked me could I ride runners, and Master Robinton said I was to ask you for wherhide."

"All three of them in it? Hmmm. And you'd be apprenticed to Master Olodkey?" Silvina considered the matter and then eyed him shrewdly. He wondered should he tell Menolly that Silvina hadn't been taken in by their strategy of making him a drummer. "Well, I suppose you'll be kept out of mischief. Though I, for one, doubt it's possible. Come on then. I do have a wherhide jacket that might fit." She cast him a calculating look as they moved toward the storage section of the kitchen level. "Let's hope it'll fit for a while because sure as eggs hatch, I shan't be able to pass it on to anyone else the way you mangle your clothes." Piemur loved the storerooms, redolent with the smell of

shoulders settle. It was long in the body, but Silvina was pleased: he'd need the length. Fitting him with new boots

showed her how ragged his trousers were, so she found him two new pairs, one in harper blue and the other in a deep gray leather. Two shirts with sleeves too long, but which no doubt would fit him perfectly by midwinter, a hat to keep his ears warm and his eyes shaded, and heavy riding gloves with down-lined fingers.

He left the stores, his arms piled high with new clothes, boots dangling from their laces over his shoulder and bumping him front and back, his ears ringing with Silvina's promise of dire things happening to him if he snagged, tore, or scuffed his new finery before he'd had it on his back a sevenday.

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He happily employed the rest of the morning by dressing in his new gear, examining himself from all angles in the one mirrored surface of the apprentice dormitory.

He heard the burst of shouts as the chorus was released and peered cautiously over the sill. Most of the boys and young men swarmed across the Court to the Hall. But

formance . . . until this one. Piemur gave a sour note. He really had wanted to sing Lessa in Domick's ballad. He'd sort of counted on coming to the Benden Weyrwoman's notice that way. It was always wise to be known to the two Benden Weyrleaders, and this would have been the perfect opportunity.

Ah well, there were more ways of skinning a herdbeast than shaving him with a table-knife.

He folded his new clothing carefully in his bedpress, giving the fur a smoothing twitch. Then quickly glanced out the window again. Now, while Master Domick was busy with Master Shonagar, would be the time for him to slip into the dining hall. Keep out of sight, and soon enough he'd be out of Domick's mind. Not that Piemur was at fault. This time.

A shame really. Lessa's melody was the loveliest Domick had ever written. It had so suited his range. Once again a lump pushed up in his throat at the sadness of the lost opportunity. And probably a Turn before he could try to sing again. Nor was there a guarantee that he'd have any-

the court, they paused in their play and watched his slow progress with awed silence.

He trudged up the steps, past apprentices and journey-men, eyes down, hands flopping at his sides, the picture of dejection. Scorch it, would he have to pretend to have lost his appetite? He could smell roast wherry, succulent, and dripping with juices. And then, berry pies.

However, if he managed his tablemates adroitly ...

Hunger warred with greed, and there was nothing feigned about his expression of sad reflection when the dining room began to fill.

Piemur, deep in his plans, was aware of being flanked by silent boys. But the chubby fist visible on the left was Brolly's. The stained, dirty, calloused, nail-bitten hand on the right was Timiny's. His good friends were standing by him in this moment of loss. He let out a long, dragging sigh, heard Brolly shift his feet uncomfortably, saw Timiny extend his hand tentatively to draw it back slowly, uncertain how a gesture of sympathy would be received. Well, Timiny might just give him both pies, Piemur thought. Suddenly everyone moved, and a quick glance at the

at it on his plate instead of attacking it immediately. But then, generally, he'd have taken as many slices as he could knife onto his plate without raising uproars from his mates. He did like roast tubers, but restrainedly took only a small one. He ate slowly so that his stomach would think it was getting more. A rumbling belly would ruin his ploy for bubbly pies.

None of his friends spoke, either to him or to each other.

At their end of the table, gloomy silence prevailed. Until the bubbly pies were served. Piemur maintained his air of tragic indifference as the first ripple of delighted surprise.sighed down from the kitchen end of the table. He could

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hear the rise of happy voices, the quick interest of his friends as they saw the burden of the sweet tray.

"Piemur, it's bubbly pies," said Timiny, pulling at his sleeve.

"Bubbly pies?" Piemur kept a querulous note in his voice, as if even bubbly pies had no magic to revive him.

"Yes, bubbly pies," said Brolly, determined to rouse him.

"Your very first favorite, Piemur," said Bonz. "Here,

see. Get a bubbly or two inside you, and you'll feel more like yourself. Imagine! Piemur not wanting all the bubbles he can eat!" Ranly glanced at the others, urging them to second him.

Bravely Piemur ate slowly of the first bubbly pie, wishing they were still hot.

"That did taste good," he said with a trifle brighter tone and was promptly encouraged to eat another.

By the time he had consumed eight because three more were donated from the other end of the table, Piemur affected to lose the edge of his gloom. After all, ten bubbly pies when he might only have had two was a good day's scrounge.

The journeyman rose to deliver announcements and assignments. Piemur toyed with the notion of several different reactions to the news of his change in status. Shock, yes! Delight? Well, some because it was an honor, but not too much, otherwise they might doubt the performance that had won so many pies.

"Sherris, report to Master Shonagar . . ."

"Sherris?" Surprise, shock, and consternation, totally

and Brolly, determined that their friend should not suffer the extra humiliation of a public reprimand for interrupting the journeyman.

"Did you hear, Piemur?" Bonz was saying, leaning across the table. "Did you not hear?"

"I heard that Sherris is to be Master . . ." Piemur was sputtering with rage. There were a few truths Master Shonagar ought to know about Sherris,

"No, no, about you!"

"Me?" Piemur ceased his struggles, abruptly horrified by the sudden thought that maybe Master Robinton had changed his mind, that some further investigation had led him to believe Piemur was unsuitable, that all the morning's bright prospect would be wrenched from his grasp.

"You! You're to report to . . ." and Bonz paused to give additional weight to his final words, "Master Olodkey!"

"To Master Olodkey?" Relief gave Piemur's reaction genuine force. Then he looked wildly around for the Drummaster.

Bonz's elbow suddenly digging into his ribs alerted him,

him.

Chapter 3

The rest of that day was not quite as joyful for Piemur. At Dirzan's order, he moved his gear from the senior apprentice dormitory to the Drummers' quarters, four rooms adjacent to the height, separate from the rest of the Hall.

The apprentices' room was cramped and would be more so when the spare cot for Piemur was added. The journey-

men's quarters were hardly more spacious, nor Master Olodkey's, though he had his small room to himself. The largest room was both for the instruction and living. Beyond, separated by a small hallway, was the drum room, with the great metal message-drums shining in the afternoon sun. There were several stools for the watchdrummer, a small workable to write down the messages, and a press, which became the bane of Piemur's mornings. It contained the polish and cloths required to keep that eye-blinding shine on the drums. Dirzan took evident relish in telling Piemur that, by custom, the newest apprentice was required to maintain their brilliance.

The drumheights were always manned save for the

learned the identifying beats of each of the major holds and crafthalls, and the emergency signals, like "threadfall," "fire," "death," "answer," "question," "help," "affirmative," "negative," and a few useful phrases. When Dirzan first showed him the mass of drum messages that he would be expected to memorize and per-

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form, he began to wish fervently that his voice would settle before winter came. Dirzan ruthlessly loaded him down with a column of frequently used beat measures to learn by the next day, telling him to practice quietly, using sticks on the practice block, and left him.

In the morning, writing under Dirzan's full attention Piemur struggled through the lesson. He almost cried out with relief when Menolly appeared. She ignored him.

"I need a messenger. Can I steal Piemur?"

"Certainly," Dirzan said without surprise, since that task was also a function of drum apprentices. "He can practice his lesson on his way, I expect. I expect he'd better."

Piemur groaned to himself at this partial reprieve, but

her. She took the steps from the drumheights at a clip.

"You said you'd ridden runners?" she asked.

"Sure. I'm herder bred, you know." He was a bit miffed.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that you've ridden runners."

"Well, I have."

"You'll have a chance to prove it," she said, awarding him a curious smile.

Piemur stared hard at her profile as they made their way out of the arch entrance and across the broad Gather meadow in front of the Harper Hall. To their left towered the cliff that housed Port Hold, and the rows of cots that huddled in the bosom of the sturdy precipice. On the fire heights of the Hold, the brown dragon stood, looking more massive silhouetted against the bright sky, one wing extended, which his rider was grooming.

Piemur felt a surge of reverence for dragons and their riders, reinforced by the sight of Beauty, Menolly's queen fire lizard, alighting on her friend's padded shoulder,

bright blue with pleasure. Grimly, Piemur forebode to ask the questions that seethed in his mind as they walked in silence toward the great caverns carved into the Fort cliff to house the herdbeasts, wherry flocks and runners. Inside the cavern, the head stockman approached with a smile for Menolly. Her fire lizards whirled into the cavern and sought perches on the curious beams that supported the ceiling, beams that had been fashioned by long-lost skill of the ancients. No one even knew from what substance they had been contrived.

"Off again, Menolly?"

"Again," she said with a slight grimace. "Banak, have you gear for a beast for Piemur, too? As easy for me to have the second runner ridden as led."

"A course," and the man led the way to the enclosure where the backpads and headgear were hung on racks. After a close look at Piemur, he selected pad and gear, handed Menolly hers. They followed him down the aisle of open-ended stalls. "Your usual is third down, Menolly."
"See if Piemur remembers how to go on," she said to Banak.

and ranged in color from a dirty white to a dark brown.

They were more graceful than herdbeasts but by no stretch of the imagination as beautiful as dragons or fire lizards.

The creature Piemur was to ride was a dirty brown. He threw the mouth rope over its neck, and by pinching its

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nose holes, forced it to open its mouth to receive the metal mouthpiece. Quickly grabbing its ear, Piemur managed to get the headstall in place. It snorted as if mildly surprised.

Not half as surprised as Piemur that he'd remembered that little trick. He heard Banak grunt. He slapped the pad in place and tightened the midstrap, wondering if this thing would give him any trouble once he was astride it.

Untying its halter, he backed it out and found Menolly as the aisle, holding her larger beast. She examined the gear on his.

"Oh, he did it right," said Banak, nodding approval and waving them to go on as he turned to the rear of the cavern on his own affairs.

It had been a long time since Piemur had been bestride a runner. Fortunately, this creature was docile, and its pac-

noted.

All the way down to the sea hold, Piemur kept his mouth shut. He'd be scorched if he'd ask her why they were going there. He doubted that the sole purpose of this excursion was to see if he could ride runners or keep his mouth shut. And what had she meant by easier to have a second runner ridden than led? This reticent, assured Menolly on Harper business was quite different from the girl who let him feed her fire lizards, and a long stride from his recollections of the shy and self-effacing newcomer to the Harper Hall three Turns back.

Once they reached Fort Sea Hold, Menolly tossed him her beast's mouth rope, told him to take them to the hold's beastmaster, ease the backpads, water them and see if they could have some feed. As Piemur led the creatures away, he noticed that she went to the harbor wall, shading one hand as she peered at the eastern horizon. Why was she waiting

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for a ship? Or had that something to do with the drum message from Ista Hold the other morning?

The beastmaster greeted him cheerfully enough and

His hospitality included Menolly when she came in; after Piemur too had seen the speck far out on the sea. He knew that he'd have a chance to rest his weary bones as well as exercise his jaw.

Sebell had a runner stabled here, huh? Sebell borne by a westbound ship. 'Which suggested that Sebell had also sailed from this seahold. Piemur tried to remember how

long 'it had been since he'd seen Sebell about the Hall, and couldn't.

Fort Sea Hold possessed a natural deep harbor so that the incoming ship sailed right up to the stone-lined side. Seamen on shore as well as on the ship neatly tied her thick lines to the bollards on the wall. Sebell was not immediately visible, though as Menolly's fire lizards did a welcoming display above the ship's rigging, the westering sun glinted off two golden bodies, Sebell's queen, Kimi, as well as Menolly's Beauty. Piemur didn't spot Sebell in the bustle of people unloading the ship until suddenly he appeared right in front of them, heavy bags draped across his shoulders and arms. A seaman carefully laid two more filled sacks at his feet. Enough to load down a runner beast, all

Herbs?

"Piemur? What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be re-
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hearsing?" began Sebell. His smile was pleasant and the
whiteness of his teeth stood out against dark tanned skin.
Herbs and a tan? Piemur would bet every mark he had
that Sebell had just returned from the Southern Continent.

"Piemur's voice has broken."

"It has?" There was no doubting Sebell's pleasure at the
news. "And Master Robinton's agreeable?"

Menolly grinned. ""With a slight variation, according to
the wisdom of our good Master!"

"Oh?" Sebell glanced first at Piemur and then back to
Menolly for explanation.

"He's been told off as apprentice to Master Olodkey."

Sebell began to chuckle then. "Shrewd of Master Robin-
ton, very shrewd! Right, Piemur?"

"I guess so." At such a sour rejoinder, Sebell threw his head back and
laughed, startling his queen who'd been about to land on
his shoulder. She flew about his head, scolding, joined by
Beauty and the two bronzes. Sebell threw an arm across

Variations on that notion contented Piemur on the initial leg of their hallward trip. The last three hours were spent in increasing physical discomfort. For one thing, he had sacks strapped front and back of his pad and another slung over his shoulder. It was difficult to adjust his rear end and find a spot not already beaten to a pulp by the runner beast's action. Rather unfair of Menolly, Piemur thought with some rancor, to include him on an eight-hour ride his first time on a runner in Turns.

He was immensely relieved that he wasn't expected to tend the mounts, too, as they handed mouth ropes to Banak. Then, Piemur wished he'd been able to dismount in the Harper Hall courtyard, for his stiff and seemingly reshaped legs made the short walk from beasthold to Hall an unexpected torture. Sourly he listened to Menolly and Se-31

bell chatting as they preceded him. They talked of inconsequentialities so that Piemur couldn't even ignore his aches by concentrating on their comments.

"Well, Piemur," said Menolly as they climbed the steps to the Hall, "you haven't forgotten how to pace a beast.

when Menolly brought a tray of hot food for them all, she served Piemur as he floated in the soothing water. To Piemur's utter embarrassment, Silvina appeared as he was patting his sore spots dry. She proceeded to slather him with numbweed salve and, making him lie down, massaged his back and legs. Just when he thought he'd never move again, Silvina made him get to his feet. Strangely enough, he could walk more normally. At least the numbweed deadened the muscular aches enough for him to make his own way across the court and up to three flights to the drumheights.

He slept through three drum messages the next morning, the fire lizards' feeding and half the chorus rehearsal with instruments. When he woke, Dirzan gave him time for a cup of klah and a meatroll, then quizzed him on the drum measures assigned him the day before.

To Dirzan's amazement, Piemur beat them out time-perfect. He'd had plenty of hours in which to memorize them on that runner ride. As a reward, Dirzan gave him another column of measures to learn.

The numbweed salve had worn oS, and Piemur found

of such medicines. He did learn that galls hurt more when treated than when sat on. Then the numbweed took over. Master Oldive said he was to use a cushion for sitting for a few days, wear older, softened pants, and ask Silvina for a conditioner to soften his wherhide.

No sooner had he returned to the drumheights, than he was sent with a message for Lord Groghe to Fort Hold, and when he came back, set to stand a listening watch. He saw Menolly and Sebell the next morning when he fed his trio of fire lizards but, apart from solicitous inquiry about his stiffness, the two harpers were not talkative. The next day Sebell was gone, and Piemur didn't know when or how. He was able, however, to observe, from the drumheights, the comings and goings, in and out of Fort Hold, of riders on runners, of two dragons and an incredible number of fire lizards. It occurred to him that while he had been congratulating himself on knowing most of what went on in the Harper Hall, the drumheights let him observe the larger world which, up till that day, had been unremarked by himself. Several messages came in that afternoon, two from the

surprised Dirzan, it irritated his fellow apprentices. They presented him with several all too forceful arguments against too much application on his part. Piemur had always relied on being able to outrun any would-be adversaries, but he discovered that there was no place to run to in the drumheights. While nursing his bruises, he stubbornly learned off three more columns, though he kept this private, tempering his recitations to Dirzan. Discretion, he was learning, is required on many different levels.

He was not sorry six days later to be told to take a message to a minehold situated on an awkward ridge in the Fort Hold Range. With a signed, Harper-sealed tube of record hide, he mounted the same stolid runner beast Banak had given him for the previous trip.

Gingerly settling the seat of his now well-softened wher-hide pants onto the pad, Piemur was relieved to feel no discomfort from his tail bones as the creature moved off.

The journey should take him two to three hours, Banak said, as he'd pointed out to him the correct southwestern track. Three hours was probably correct, Piemur thought as his efforts to increase the pace of his runner failed. By the

taciturn mineholder.

"You're from the Harper Hall?" The man scowled at him dubiously.

"Apprentice to Master Olodkey, the Drummaster!" This could be some sort of test of his prudence.

"Wouldn't have thought they'd send a boy on this errand," he said with a skeptical grunt.. "I've fourteen Turns, sir," Piemur replied, trying to

deepen his tone without notable success.

"No offense meant, lad."

"None taken." Piemur was pleased that his voice remained steady.

The Miner paused, his gaze drawn upward. Not, Piemur noticed, in the direction of the sun. When the Miner began to scowl, Piemur also looked up. Though why the Miner should register displeasure at the sight of three dragons in the sky, Piemur couldn't guess. True, Thread had fallen only three days before, but you'd think dragons would be a reassuring sight at any time.

"There's feed and water in the shed," said the Miner, still watching the dragons. He gestured absently over his

"This is what you were sent for. Tend your beast while I tend these unexpected arrivals."

Piemur's trained ear did not miss the apprehension in the Miner's tone nor the implicit command that Piemur was to remain out of sight. He made no comment, stuffing the small sack in his belt pouch while the Miner watched. The man left as Piemur vigorously pumped water into the trough for his thirsty beast. As soon as the Miner reached his cot, Piemur changed his position so that he had a clear view of the one reasonably level area of the minehold where dragons could land.

Only the bronze did. The two blues settled on the ridge above the mine opening. Sight of the great beast that backwinged to the ground told Piemur all he needed to know to understand the Miner's grimness. Before their exile south, the Oldtimers from Port Weyr had made few appearances, but Piemur recognized Fidranth by the long sear scar on his rump and T'ron by the arrogant swagger as he strode up to the minecot. Piemur didn't need to hear the conversation to know that T'ron's manner had not altered in his Turns south. With a very stiff ,bow, the Miner

size of his thumbnail to small uneven crystals, were rough. The blue sapphires were much prized by the Harper Hall, and stones as large as the four cut ones were mounted as badges for Masters of the Craft. Four cut stones? Four new masters walking the tables? Would Sebell be one of them, Piemur wondered.

Piemur thought a moment and then slipped the cut stones carefully, two and two, into his boots. He wiggled his feet until the stones settled, sharp lumps against his an-

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kles but they'd not slip out. He hesitated as he was about to stow the sack in his pouch. He doubted T'ron would stoop to searching a lowly apprentice, but the stones made a suspicious bulge. Checking the leather to make sure it bore no miner's mark, he wrapped the thong on the backpad ring beside his drinking flask. Then he took off his jacket, folding the harper badge inside before he slung it over the pump handle. Trail dust had turned his blue pants to a nondescript gray.

A clink of boot nails on the ridge stone warned him and, whistling tunelessly, he picked up the beast's feet in turn,

Tsest hillhold mumble, "Sor, he was that sweated, I've had a time cleaning him up."

"You've other work to do," said the Miner in a cold voice, jerking his head toward the cothold.

"A day too late, am I, Miner? Well, there's been yesterday's work and this morning's." The Oldtimer superciliously gestured the Miner to precede him toward the open shaft.

Piemur watched, keeping a dull expression on his face as the two men disappeared from sight. Inwardly he was right pleased with his dissembling and was positive he'd seen an approving glint in the Miner's eyes.

By the time he had finished grooming the runner from nose to dock, T'ron and the Miner had not yet reappeared. What other work would he have to do if he were a genuine miner's apprentice? It would be logical for him to stay far away from the shaft at the moment, for he'd be scared of the dragonrider if not of his master. Ah, but the Miner had indicated the cothold.

Piemur pumped water into a spare pail and lugged it back to the cothold, ogling with what he hoped was appro-

every drawer was open and every door was ajar. A large cooking pot on the hearth was boiling so hard its contents frothed from under its cover. Not wishing what might be his meal in the ashes, Piemur quickly swung the pot away from the full heat of the fire. Then he began to tidy the kitchen area. No lowly apprentice would enter the Master's quarters, however humble, without direct permission. He heard voices again, the Miner's low comments and T'ron's angry reproaches. Then he heard the sounds of hammers against stone and ventured to look cautiously through the open window.

Six miners were squatting or kneeling, carefully chipping rough dark stone and dirt from the blue crystals possibly within. As Piemur watched, one of the miners rose, extending the palm of his hand toward the Miner. T'ron intercepted the gesture and held the small object up to the sun. Then he gave an oath, clenching his fist. For a moment, Piemur thought that the Oldtimer was going to throw the stone away.. "Is this all you're finding here now? This mine produced sapphires the size of a man's eye—" "Four hundred Turns ago it did indeed, Dragonrider,"

He held up his clenched fist. "I want good, sizable sapphires."

He continued to stand there, glaring at each of the miners in turn as they tapped cautiously away. Piemur, hoping that no larger sapphires would be discovered, made himself busy in the kitchen.

By the time the sun was westering behind the highest of
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the ridges, only six medium to small sapphires had rewarded T'ron's afternoon vigil. Piemur -was not the only one to watch, half-holding his breath, as the Oldtimer stalked to Fidrath and mounted. The old bronze showed no faltering as he neatly lifted in the air, joined by the two blues. Only when the three had winked out between did the miners break into angry talk, crowding up to the Miner, who brushed them aside in his urgency, to get to the minecot.

"I see why you're a messenger, young Piemur," said the Miner. "You've all your wits about you." Grinning, he extended his hand.

Piemur grinned back and pointed toward his backpad

cheer, for they'd had no chance to learn that the Miner had managed to save the product of several sevendays' labor..Piemur found himself much admired for his quick thinking as well as his timely arrival.

"Did you read my mind, lad," asked the Miner, "to know that I'd told the old grasper I'd sent the gems off yesterday?"

"It seemed only logical," Piemur replied. He'd taken his boots off just then, examining the scratches the sapphires had made. "It would've been a crying shame to let old T'ron get away with these beauties!"

"And what are we going to do, Master," asked the oldest journeyman, "when those Oldtimers come back again in a few sevendays' and take what we've mined? That placer's not played out yet."

"We're closing up here tomorrow," said the Miner.

"why? We've just found more—"

The Miner signaled silence abruptly.

"Each craft has its privacies," said Piemur, grinning broadly. If the Miner felt an apprentice required no apology for such curtness, he would not be admonished for

stones—you were all very clever with your hammers today, though I deplore cracking good sapphires." The Miner sighed heavily for that necessity. "Master Nicat will know which other miners to warn. Let the Oldtimers seek if it amuses them." When the older journeyman laughed derisively, the Miner went on, raising an admonishing finger at him. "Enough! They are dragonmen, and they did help Benden Weyr and Pern when aid was badly needed!" Then he turned to Piemur. "Did you save any of our stew, lad? I've the appetite of a queen dragon after clutching."

Chapter 4

That day held one more event! At sunset, as Piemur was helping the apprentice bring in the miners' runners from the pasture, he heard the shrill cry of a fire lizard. Glancing up, he saw a slender body, wings back, drop with unnerving speed in his direction. The apprentice dropped to the ground, covering his head with his arms. Piemur braced his legs, but the bronze fire lizard did not come to his shoulder. Instead, Rocky spun round his head, berating him, his jewel-faceted eyes spinning violently red and orange in anger.

mur had to laugh.

"Is that fire lizard yours?" asked the Miner curiously as he approached Piemur, eyeing Rocky all the time.

"No, sir," said Piemur with such chagrin the Miner smiled.

"This is one of Menolly's, Master Robinton's journey-woman. His name is Rocky. I help Menolly feed him mornings, because she's got the nine and they're a right handful, so he knows me pretty well."

"I didn't think the creatures had enough sense to find people!"

"Well, sir, I have to say it's the first time it's happened to me," and Piemur couldn't suppress the smug satisfaction he was feeling that Rocky had been able to find him.

"Now that he's found you, what good will that do?" asked the Miner with a revival of his skepticism.

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"Well, sir, he could go back to Menolly and make her understand that he's seen me. But it would be much more useful if you'd let m& have a bit of hide for a message. Tied on his leg, he'll take it back, and they'll know exactly. . . ."

him to add in drum measures, "Errand completed. Emergency. Old Dragon."

"You've a way with the little things, haven't you?" said the Miner with reluctant respect as he watched Piemur tying the message on Rocky's leg, an operation the fire lizard oversaw as carefully as the Miner.

"He knows he can trust me," said Piemur.

"I'd say there were not many," replied the Miner in such a dry tone that Piemur stared at him in surprise. "No offense meant!"

Piemur had to concentrate just then on imagining Menolly as strongly as he could in his mind. Then, lifting his hand high, he gave a practiced flick to send Rocky into flight.

"Go to Menolly, Rocky! Go to Menolly!"

He and the Miner watched until the little fire lizard seemed to disappear in the dimming light to the east. Then the apprentice called them to their meal.

As he ate, Piemur wondered what the Miner had meant by that remark. "Not many that fire lizards could trust?"

"Not many people that trusted Piemur?" Why would the

"Pienrur!" Someone shook him by the shoulder.

Abruptly the young harper realized that he'd been addressed several times.

"You're a harper! Can you not give us a song?"

The eagerness of the request from men isolated for long periods of time in a lonely hold gave Piemur a genuine pang of regret.

"Sirs, the reason I'm messenger is that my voice is changing and I'm not allowed to sing just now. But," he added seeing the intense disappointment on every face,

"that doesn't mean I can't talk them to you. If you've

something I can drum to give the rhythm." After several attempts, he found a saucepan that did not

sound too flat, and while the men stomped their heavy boots in time, he talked the newest songs from the Harper Hall, even giving them Domick's new song about Lessa.

The Shell knew when they'd hear it sung, though no one was supposed to hear it until Lord Groghe's feast. If the performance of the spoken song lacked much in Piemur's estimation. Master Shonagar couldn't hear, Domick would

hoped not to go sailing off the track into the deep gorges.

"When he returned the stolid runner to Banak, it was barely sweated under the midstrap while Piemur knew that his armpits and back were damp with perspiration.

"Safe back, I see," was Banak's only remark.

"He may be slow, but he's sure-footed," said Piemur with such exaggerated relief that Banak laughed.

As Piemur jogged into the Harper Hall court, he heard Tilgin | bravely singing his first solo as Lessa. Piemur grinned to himself, for Tilgin's voice sounded tired even if he was note-wise. None of Menolly's fair was sunning on the ridge, but Zair was sprawled on the ledge of the Harper's window so Piemur took the steps two at a time. While he

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sort of wished someone would encounter him on his triumphant return, he was also relieved that he'd have no temptation to blurt out his adventures.

Master Robinton's greeting, however, was warm enough to make Piemur puff his chest out in pride.

"You make the most of your opportunities, young Piemur—but kindly explain your cryptic measures before I

exiled. Besides, the Miner knew them all too well." The Harper gestured for him to continue, and the day's

events made good telling with the best of all audiences in the Masterharper, who listened intently without a single interruption. He then asked Piemur to repeat, this time questioning a detail here, a response there, and extracting from Piemur every nuance of the confrontation of Miner and Oldtimer. He laughed appreciatively at Piemur's strategy and lauded his caution of putting the four cut gems in his boots. It was only then that Piemur remembered to hand the precious stones to the Harper. The sun sparkled off the facets as the sapphires lay on the table.

"I'll have a word with Master Nicat myself. And I think I'll see him today," said Robinton, holding up one of the gems between thumb and forefinger and squinting at it in the sunlight. "Beautiful workmanship! Not a flaw!"

"That's what the Miner said," and then Piemur daringly added. "I gather it's not easy to find the right blues for masterharpers."

Master Robinton regarded Piemur, a startled expression on his face, which changed to amusement. "You will keep

imagine what had prompted him to say such a thing. He didn't even dare look away from the Harper's severe gaze, although he wanted more than anything else to creep away and hide from his Master's disapproval. He did stiffen, fully expecting a blow for such impertinence.

"When you can keep your wits about you as you did yesterday, Piemur," said Master Robinton after an interminable interval, "you prove Menolly's good opinion of your potential. You have also just proved the main criticism that Hall masters have expressed. I do not disapprove of ambition, nor the ability to think independently, but," and suddenly his voice lost the cold displeasure, "presumption is unforgiveable. Presuming to criticize a dragonrider is the most dangerous offense against discretion. Further," and the Harper's finger was raised in warning, "you are rushing toward a privilege you have by no means earned. Now, off with you to Master Olodkey and learn the proper drum measure for 'Oldtimer.' "

The kindly note in his tone was almost too much for Piemur, who could more easily have borne blows and a tirade for his transgressions. He made his way to the door

so that the Harper wouldn't see the tears of shame and relief in his eyes.

He stood for a moment in the quiet hall, intensely grateful that it was empty at this time of day as he conquered dismay at his untimely insolence. The Harper was so right: he had to learn to think before he spoke; he never should have blurted out that unfortunate criticism of dragonriders. He'd've rated a right sound beating from any other Master. Domick wouldn't have hesitated a moment, nor even languid Master Shonagar, whose hand he'd felt many a time for his brashness. But how had he dared criticize dragonriders, even Oldtimers, to Master Robinton? Certain-

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ly that took the prize for impudence, even from him.

Piemur shivered and vowed fervently to mind his thoughts and, even more carefully, his tongue. Particularly now, when he did know something of real significance. For he had been aware, previous to his imprudent comment, that the appearance of the Oldtimers at the mine, not to mention their errand, was unwelcome news to the Harper. Besides, what could have been done about the Oldtimers'

Then he wondered why Master Robinton had asked him to find out. Was it a code he'd need? Did that mean the Harper expected this wouldn't be the first such visit by the Oldtimers? Or what?

The speculations on this subject occupied Piemur's mind off and on for the next few days until he did have the chance to check the code..Somewhat to Piemur's disgust, Dirzan treated him as if

he had deliberately protracted his errand to avoid polishing the drums. This was his first task, and because Piemur couldn't polish when the drums were in use, it dragged on until the midday meal.

That afternoon Piemur began to participate in another activity of the drumheights, since he had unfortunately learned the drum measures so well. All apprentices were supposed to stop and listen when messages came in and write down what they heard, if they could. Then Dirzan checked their interpretations of the message. It seemed harmless enough, but Piemur soon learned that it was one more road to trouble for him. All drum messages were considered private information. A bit silly to Piemur's way of

When Dirzan first accused him of loose talk, a day or two after he started writing messages, he stared in utter astonishment at the journeyman. And got a hard clout across the head for it.

"Don't try your ways on me, Piemur. I'm well aware of your tricks."

"But, sir, I'm only in the Hall at mealtimes, and sometimes not even then."

"Don't answer back!"

"But, sir . . ."

Dirzan fetched him another clout, and Piemur nursed his grievance in silence, rapidly trying to figure out which of the other apprentices was making mischief for him.

Probably Clell! And how was he going to stop it? He certainly didn't want Master Robinton to hear such a wretched lie..Two days later a rather urgent message for Master Oldive was drummed through from Nabol. As Piemur was on duty, he was dispatched with it to the Healer. Mindful of a possible repeat accusation, Piemur noted that no one was about in court or hall as he delivered his message. Master Oldive bade him wait for a reply which he wrote on a then

other apprentices watching the scene with great interest.

The especially eager glint in Clell's eyes confirmed Piemur's suspicion.

"No, I'm trying to prove to you that I'm no babble-mouth, even if I did understand that message. Lord Meron of Nabol is ill and requires Master Oldive urgently. But who'd care if he died after what he's done to Pern?" Piemur knew he'd merited Dirzan's blow then and didn't duck.

"You'll learn to keep a civil tongue in your head, Piemur, or it's back to the runner hold for you."

"I've a right to defend my honor! And I can!" Piemur caught himself just in time before he blurted out that Master Robinton could attest to his discretion. As rife with rumor as the Harper Hall generally was, there hadn't been a whisper about the Oldtimers' raid on the mine.

"How?" Dirzan's single derisive word told Piemur forcibly how very difficult that would be without being rightfully accused of indiscretion.

"I'll figure a way. You'll see!" Piemur glared impotently at the delighted grins of the other apprentices.

problem, they might decide he wasn't the right lad for their needs. They might even consider his complaint a lack of discretion in itself.

How right Master Robinton had been when he said that Piemur might possibly be plagued into disclosing matters best left unmentioned! Only how could the Harper have known that Piemur was stuck in the one discipline, as a drum apprentice, where he was most likely to be accused of indiscretions?

One possibility presented itself to his questioning mind: the apprentices, even Clell as the oldest, were still plodding through the medium hard drum measures. Therefore some parts of every long message reaching the Harper Hall were incomprehensible to them. Now, if Piemur learned drum language beat perfect, he'd understand the messages in full. Not that he'd let Dirzan know that when he wrote the message down for him. But he'd keep a private record of everything he translated. Then, the next time there was a rumor of a half-understood message, Piemur would prove to Dirzan that he had known all the message, not just the parts the other apprentices had understood.

lizards. Messages came through, some of them urgent, some tempting enough, Piemur would have thought, for one of the apprentices to repeat, but no whisper of rumor repaid his immolation. In despair he gave up his plan and tore up the messages he had written. But he still held himself away from others.

He wasn't certain how much more of this he could endure when Menolly appeared in the drumheights just after breakfast one morning.

"I need a messenger today," she said to Dirzan.

"Clell would—". "No. I want Piemur."

"Now, Menolly, I wouldn't mind letting him go for a minor errand but—"

"Piemur is Master Robinton's choice," she said with a shrug, "and he's cleared this with Master Olodkey. Piemur, get your gear together."

Piemur blandly ignored the black looks Clell directed his way as he crossed the living room.

"Menolly, I think you ought to mention to Master Robinton that we haven't found Piemur too reliable—"

"Piemur? Unreliable?"

"In point of fact," and now Menolly sounded puzzled, "he's not been talkative at all, apart from commenting on the weather and the condition of my fire lizards. Should he have reason to bleat, Dirzan?"

Piemur half-ran back into the room, to forestall any explanation by the journeyman. This opportunity was playing beautifully into his hands.

"I'm ready to go, Menolly."

"Yes, and we have to move fast." It was obvious to Piemur that Menolly had wanted to hear Dirzan's reply. "I'll be back to you on this, Dirzan. C'mon, Piemur!"

She led the way down the steps at a clatter, and only when they had passed the first landing did she turn to him.

"What have you been up to, Piemur?"

"I haven't been up to anything," he replied with such vehemence that Menolly grinned at him. "That's the trouble." "Your reputation's caught up with you?"

"More than that. It's being used against me." As much as Piemur wanted to expand, the less he said, he decided, even to Menolly, the stronger his position.

when we come back. There's a Gather today at Igen Hold. Sebell and I are to be there as harpers, but Master Robinton wants you to play scruffy boy apprentice."

"Can I ask why?" Piemur delivered the question on the end of a long suffering sigh.

Menolly laughed and reached out to ruffle his hair.

"You can, but I've no answer. We weren't told either. He just wants you to wander about the Gather and listen."

"Has he got Oldtimers on his mind?" Piemur asked as casually as he could.

"I'd say he probably does," Menolly answered after a thoughtful moment. "He's been worried. I may be his journeywoman, but I don't always know what's on his mind. Neither does Sebell!"

They had reached the archway now and turned toward the Gather meadow.

"I'm to ride a dragon?" asked Piemur. He lurched to a stop, his eyes bulging out at the scene before him. Bronze Loith was shaking his wings out in the sun, his great jeweled eyes gleaming blue-green as he turned his head to watch the antics of the Ere lizards. Dwarfed by his bulk,

that they were watching, that they'd see him riding off on a dragon! That'd teach them to smear his reputation. He pushed from his mind the corollary that the privilege of flying a dragonback would make his lot with his fellow apprentices that much harder. What mattered was the now! Piemur was going to ride a dragon.

N'ton had always been Piemur's ideal of a dragonrider: tall, with a really broad set of shoulders, dark brown hair slightly curled from being confined under a riding helmet, an easy, confident air reflected by a direct gaze and a ready smile. The contrast between this present Fort Weyr-leader and his disgruntled predecessor, T'ron, was more vividly apparent as N'ton smilingly greeted the harpers' apprentice.

"Sorry your voice changed, Piemur. I'd been looking forward to Lord Groghe's Gather and that new Saga I've heard so much about from Menolly. Have you ridden dragonback before, Piemur? No? Well, up with you, Menolly. Show Piemur the knack."

As Piemur attentively watched Menolly grab the riding strap and half-walk up Lioth's shoulder, swing her leg ag-

Piemur grabbed the rope and just as he planted his
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booted foot on Lioth's shoulder, he wondered if he'd hurt
the dragon's smooth hide.

N'ton laughed. "No, you won't hurt Lioth with your
boots! But he thanks you for worrying."

Piemur was so startled that he almost lost his grip.

"Reach up, Piemur," Menolly ordered.

"I didn't know he'd hear me," he said in a gasp as he
settled astride Lioth's neck.. "Dragons hear what they choose to," she
said, grinning.

"Sit back against me. Sebell's got to fit in front of you!"

The words were barely out of her mouth before Sebell
had swung up with the ease of considerable practice and
settled himself before Piemur. N'ton followed, passing
back the riding straps. Piemur thought that a needless cau-
tion. His legs were wedged so tightly between Menolly's
and Sebell's, he couldn't have moved if he had to. Then
Sebell peered over his shoulder at him.

"You'll have heard a lot about between, I expect, but I'll
warn you now: it's scary even when you know what to

a few heartbeats. They'll sound very loud to you. Just count 'em. We'll be doing the same thing, I assure you!" Sebell's grin absolved Piemur from any expression of fear or doubt.

Piemur nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He didn't care what happened between. At least, he would have experienced it, which very few apprentice harpers could say. Suddenly there was a great heave, and he cracked his chin against Sebell's shoulderblade. Inadvertently looking down, he saw the ground moving away from him as Lioth sprang skyward. He could feel the great muscles along Lioth's neck as the fragile-seeming wings took their first all-important downsweep. Then the Gather meadow and the Harper Hall seemed to rush away, and they were on a level with the Hold fire-heights.

Sebell gave Piemur's hands, clutching his belt, a -warning squeeze. The next heartbeat and there was nothing but a cold so intense that it was painful. Except that Piemur couldn't feel pain with his body, only sense that his lack of tactile contact with reality included everything except the wild beating of his heart against his ribcage. Ruthlessly he

around, found himself watching them zip about the dragon.

"It is scary to look down," Menolly's voice said in his ear. "It's worse when they . . . ahhhhh. . . ."

Piemur felt his stomach drop and, to his horror, his seat seemed to leave the dragon's neck. He gasped and clutched more tightly at Sebell, feeling the man's diaphragm muscles move as he chuckled.

"That's what I mean!" said Menolly. "N'ton says it's only air currents, pushing the dragons up or letting them down."

"Oh, is that all?" Piemur managed to get the words out in a rush, but his voice betrayed him. "All" came out in a two-octave crack.

Menolly didn't laugh, and he felt more kindly toward her than at any other time in their association.

"It always scares me," she said in a comforting shout by his left ear.

He was just getting accustomed to this additional hazard of flying dragonback when Lioth seemed to be diving straight for the Igen River bed. He was pressed back against Menolly and didn't know whether to clutch more

face on a current that must be swifter than the turgid surface suggested. To the right was the broad, clean-swept rock shelf that led up to Igen Hold, a safe distance above the highest flood marks left by the river on the sandstone banks. Behind Igen Hold rose curious, wind-fashioned cliffs, some of which made additional holds for Igen's people, for there were no rows of cotholds adjoining the main Hold here. Igen Hold also had no fire-heights, not needing any since there was nothing but sand and stone around the Hold proper, to which Thread could do no harm. The lands that supplied Igen Hold were around the next bend of the river, where the waters had been led inland by canals to supply watergrain fields. Piemur wasn't sure that he would like living in such a

barren-looking Hold, even if no Thread could ever attack it. And it was hot!

Red dust puffed up as Lioth landed, and suddenly Piemur was unbearably warm. He began to unbelt his wherhide jacket before he released the riding strap and noticed that Menolly was as quick to strip helmet, gloves and jacket.

gle. There didn't seem to be any walkway. The only open space was the customary central square for dancing.

Though who'd have the energy to dance in this heat he didn't know.

Then Piemur ducked while Lioth showered them all with sand as he vaulted into the air and winged to join the other sunbathing dragons. The fire lizards—N'ton's Tris, Sebell's Kimi and Menolly's nine—swirled up and away and were met, midair, by other fire lizards, the augmented fair swirling higher and higher in the joy of meeting.

"That'll occupy them for a while," said Menolly, then she turned to Piemur. "Give me your flying gear and I'll leave it at the Hold till you need it again."

"We must pay our respects to Lord Laudey and the others," said Sebell, bringing out a handful of marks from his pocket. He presented Piemur with an eighth piece and two thirty-seconds. "I'm not being stingy, Piemur, but you'd be questioned if you had too many marks about you. And I don't think Igen Hold runs to bubbly pies."

"Too hot to eat 'em anyway." Piemur mopped his sweaty forehead with one hand as he gratefully slid the marks into

erately covered with tenting to deflect the worst of the sun's baking heat. It was simple now for Piemur to move away from the journeymen harpers and the Weyrleader in the steady flow of people sauntering past the Gather stalls. He saw Menolly turn about, trying to see where he had got to, then Sebell spoke to her, and she shrugged and moved on with him.

Almost immediately Piemur noticed one great difference between this and the Gathers he had attended in the west: people took their time. In order to separate himself from his craftmates, Piemur had deliberately lagged behind, but when he would have stepped out again at his customary pace, he hesitated. No one was moving briskly at all. Gestures and voices were languid, smiles slow, and even laughter had a lazy fall. A great many people carried long tubes from which they sipped. Stalls dispensing drinks, chilled water, as well as sliced fruits, were frequently placed and well-patronized. About every ten stalls or so, there were areas where people lounged, either on the sand or on benches placed about the edges. The tenting was raised in corners to catch breezes sweeping up from the

second piece on a long tube of fruit juice and some succulent slices of a rind-melon, found himself an inconspicuous spot in one lounge area, and settled to listen as he sipped his drink and ate.

At first he didn't quite catch the softer drawl of these south-easterners. The low-pitched conversation between two men on his left turned out to be the innocuous boasting of one about the breeding lines of the splay-footed runners he was hoping to barter profitably while the other man kept extolling the virtues of the currently favored strain. Disgusted at such a waste of his time, Piemur focused his ears on the group of five men on his right. They were blaming the weather on Thread, the bad crops on the weather and everything else except their lack of industry, which Piemur thought would be the real problem. A group of women were also murmuring against the weather, their mates, their children and the nuisance children of other holds, but all in a fairly comfortable, tolerantly amused fashion. Three men, with their heads so close together no sound passed their shoulders, finally parted, but not before Piemur saw a small sack pass from one to another and de-

drum message, and then oriented himself. Night had fallen and, with the set of the sun, the cooler winds of evening blew cheerfully through the raised flaps. There was no one else in the tent with him, but he could smell the aroma of roasting meats and scrambled to his feet. He'd be late at the Hold for his supper, and he was hungry.

Cool evening had enlivened everyone, for the walkway was now full of quickly stepping, chattering people, and Piemur had to duck and dart his way out of the Gather

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tents. The dragon lumps on the Hold cliff turned their brilliant lanterns of eyes on the doings below them, rivaling the blazing glow baskets set on high standards about the Gather grounds.

No one challenged Piemur at the Hold courtyard gates, and he found the main Hall by simply following the general drift of the well-dressed people.

Lord Laudey, according to Harper Hall gossip, was not a very outgoing man, but at a Gather, every Holder did make an effort. The principal men and craftmasters of his Hold were invited with their immediate families to dine in

walked the tables to become a journeywoman, and with Strud, who'd been posted to a sea hold on Igen River that same night.

Gray of hair but with bright and unusually blue

eyes, Bantur welcomed Piemur with such friendliness for a mere apprentice that Piemur was made more uncomfortable by kindness than he would have been by taciturnity. Bantur insisted on getting him fresh meats and tubers from one of the drudges and heaped his plate so high with choice cuts that Piemur's eyes boggled.

The other harpers talked while he ate, and when he had finally swallowed the last morsel, Bantur suggested they all leave to make room for more of Lord Laudey's guests.

Then Bantur asked if Piemur would take a harper's turn on drum or gitar and, when Piemur saw Sebell's discreet nod, he agreed with a show of enthusiasm to take a gitar part.

"Why Piemur, I thought sure you'd take a drum part," said Menolly, her expression so bland that he nearly rose to her bait.

Piemur restrained an urge to kick her in the shins and smiled sweetly at her instead. "You heard today what the drummers think of me," he replied so demurely that Men-

"You'll notice the change in them now, and you'll only need to do the dance turns. If I gauge the Gather right," said Sebell, glancing ahead at Menolly's slender figure in harper blue, "they'll keep her singing until she's hoarse. They always do."

Piemur glanced swiftly at Sebell, wondering if the journeyman was aware of showing his feelings for the harper girl so openly.

The first dance turn was the longest and most energetic. The crisp night air stimulated the dancers' gyrations until they were energetic beyond Piemur's credence. Quite a transformation from the languid manners of the afternoon. Then, as Bantur, Deece, Strud and Menolly remained on the platform to sing, Sebell nodded to Piemur to work his way from the square's attentive audience toward the smaller groups of men, drinking tubes in hand, conversing in quiet tones.

The subdued level, Piemur decided, was out of courtesy to the singers and their audience, but it made it hard for him. He was about to give up when the word "Oldtimers" caught his ear. He sidled closer to the group and, in the

that Piemur had to strain to catch the words. "He always has, and my Holder sees no harm in it. Toric's no dragon-man, and those that stayed south with him don't fall under Benden's order. So we trade. He may bargain close, but he pays well."

"In marks?" asked the Igen holder, surprised.

"No. Barter! Gemstones, hides, fruit, such like. And

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once"—here Piemur held his breath for fear of missing the confidential whisper—"nine fire lizard eggs!"

"No?" Envy as well as surprised interest were expressed in that startled reply. The seaholder quickly gestured the man to keep his tone down. "Of course," and there was no disguising the bitter jealousy, "they've all the sand beaches in the world to search in the south! Any chance . . ."

The fascinating conversation broke off as another seaholder joined them, an older man, and possibly superior to the gossiping seaman, for talk turned to other things, and Piemur moved on.

Then Menolly began to sing alone, the other harpers accompanying her. All conversations died as she sang, with

natural voices. As often as Piemur had heard the "Fire Lizard Song," he found himself listening as intently as ever.

"When the song ended, he applauded as vigorously as everyone else, only then aware that he had been equally captivated.

Putting words to music was not Menolly's only talent; she put her music in the hearts and minds of her listeners, too..while her enrapt audience started shouting for their fa-

vorite tunes, she beckoned Sebell to the platform, and they sang a duet of an eastern sea hold song, their voices so well blended that Piemur's respect and admiration for his fellow harpers reached unprecedented heights. Now, if only his voice turned tenor, he might have the chance to sing with . . .

He played three more dance turns, but Sebell had been correct: the Igen gatherers wanted Menolly whenever she would favor them with song. Piemur also noticed that for every solo she sang, there was at least one group song and a duet including the Igen harpers. Clever of her to forestall ill-feeling. Too bad such discretion did not translate into his particular problem with the drum apprentices!

advised him, with a grin, to find a corner and get some sleep, if he could.

It had been easy enough to sleep that afternoon, but now, with no heat to lull him, the things he had heard—music as well as malice—danced about in his mind. One positive fact emerged: the Oldtimer's descent on the miner in Fort Hold was not an isolated incident. He also knew that while G'narish, Igen's Oldtime Veyrleader, was respected, Igen Holders would have given much to be beholden to Benden instead.

A sharp peck on his ear woke him, and he had a momentary fright before he focused his eyes on Rocky's cocked head and heard the reassuring soft chirrup. Someone was snoring lustily beside him, and Piemur's back was warm. He cautiously eased away from this unknown sleeper. Rocky chirped again and, hopping off his shoulder, walked a few paces away with exaggerated steps before looking back at Piemur. He wanted Piemur to come with him, and while his eyes were not red with hunger, they were whirling fast enough to indicate some urgency. "I don't need a drum to get your message," Piemur said

Rocky called in a sweet light voice and then took off toward the group. Piemur followed, yawning and shivering in the chill pre-dawn breeze, wishing he had some klah. Especially if the presence of a dragon meant he had to go between; he was cold enough already.

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The dragon was not Lioth, as he'd half expected, but a brown nearly ,as big as the Fort Weyr dragon. It had to be Canth. And it was, for as he neared the group, he saw the scars on Fnor's face from the dreadful, near-fatal scoring he'd taken on his famous jump to the Red Star.

"Cmon, Piemur," called Sebell "Fnor's here to take us to Benden Weyr. Ramoth's latest clutch is Hatching."

Piemur started to whoop with joy, then bit his tongue, choking off his jubilation. Bad enough he'd been to a Gather, but when CleU and that lot heard he'd been to a Benden Hatching, his life wouldn't be worth a wax marki He saw in the same instant that the others were expecting him to react with appropriate anticipation and, loudly damning his changing voice, he affected as genuine a smile as he could manage. The groan that escaped him as he

are awake, aren't you?"

"Sort of," he said, yawning again, then added for her benefit, "I just can't take it in that me, Piemur, gets to go to a Benden Weyr Hatching!"

Should he ask Menolly not to tell the Drum Master and Dirzan? Could he ask her to say he'd been left at Igen Hold until they could collect him? No, he couldn't, because she'd want to know why. And he couldn't tell her because that would mark him a blubber-baby, bleater, babblemouth. There had to be some way he could settle Clell and Dirzan by himself

Despite his misgivings, Piemur succumbed to the fear-charged thrill of Canth's initial vault into the air, the sensation of being pressed down, the breathlessness as the huge wings beat powerfully, and he felt the effort of Canth's

neck muscles under his buttocks. It wasn't quite as scary flying in this predawn darkness because he didn't know how far he was above the ground, particularly since his face was turned away from Igen Hold's fading lights;

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but he caught his breath in a spurt of pure terror as F'nor

egg hatching. He'd thought that Fort was huge, but Benden seemed much bigger. Perhaps because he was seeing it from dragonback, perhaps because of the light, touching the far edges of the Bowl, gilding the lake. Perhaps it was because this was Benden, and Benden figured so hugely and importantly in his eyes, and the eyes of everyone else on Pern.

Without Benden and her courageous leaders, Pern might have been half-destroyed by Thread.

Another dragon appeared in the air just above them, and instinctively Piemur ducked, hearing Menolly laugh at his reflex. A third and then a fourth dragon arrived even as Canth began to glide down to the bowl floor. By the time Piemur could slide from Brown's shoulder to the ground, he marveled that the dragons hadn't collided midair, appearing as they had with such startling frequency.

Beauty, Kimi, Rocky and Diver popped in above Menolly's head, caroling with excitement, and suddenly they were joined by five other fire lizards Piemur had never seen before. When Menolly muttered worriedly about feeding fire lizards before they disrupted the Weyr, F'nor

folk at the larger fires.

"Mirrim?" she called, and the girl at the hearth turned, her face lighting as she recognized the new arrivals.. "Menolly! You came! Sebell! How are you? What have

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you been up to recently to get so tanned? Who's this?" Her smile disappeared as she noticed Piemur bringing up the rear, as if such a scruffy apprentice shouldn't be in such good company.

"Mirrim, this is Piemur. You've heard me speak of him often enough," said Menolly, putting her hand on Piemur to draw him forward and closer to her, the intimacy a guarantee of him to Mirrim. "He was my first friend at the Harper Hall, as you were mine here. We've all been at the Igen Gather. Baked yesterday, frozen this morning, and very hungry!" Menolly let her tone drift upward plaintively.

"Well, of course, you're hungry," said Mirrim, breaking off her stem appraisal of Piemur to turn to the hearth. She filled cups and bowls and set them out on one of the small tables with such alacrity that Piemur changed his first, un-

pats at the near plaits that hung down her back.

Piemur eyed her with a certain skeptical cynicism but, when he realized that Menolly and Sebell took no notice of her mannerisms and had sought out her company from everyone in the busy cavern, he came to the reluctant conclusion that there must be more to her than was obvious.

Beauty landed on Menolly's shoulder just then, chirruping with some petulance, her eyes whirling reddishly. Diver swooped _to Menolly's other shoulder just as Kimi landed on Sebell's. Rocky, to Piemur's intense delight, came to roost on his.

"I thought that was Rocky," Mirrim said, pointing accusingly at Piemur as if he oughtn't to have a fire lizard anyhow.

"It is," said Menolly with a laugh, "but Piemur helps me feed him every day so Rooky's just reminding us he's hungry, too."

"Why didn't you say they hadn't been fed?" Mirrim
62.bounced to her feet, scowling with disapproval. "Really, Menolly, I'd've thought you'd take care of your friends first. . . ."

Rocky poked his cheek imperiously, and Piemur concentrated on feeding him.

"Is she a good friend of yours?" Piemur asked when the first edge of fire lizard hunger had been eased.

Sebell laughed, and Menolly made a rueful grimace.

"She's very good-hearted. Don't let her ways put you off."

Piemur grunted. "They have."

Sebell laughed again, offering Kimi a large chunk of meat so he could get a swallow of his klah while she struggled to chew. "Mirrim does take a bit of getting used to but, as Menolly says, she'll give you the shirt from her back ..."

"Complaining all the time, I'll wager," Piemur said.

Menolly's expression was solemn. "She was fosterling to Brekke, and Manora's always said that it was Mirrim's devoted nursing that helped Brekke live after her queen was killed."

"Really?" That did impress Piemur, and he looked for Mirrim among the knot of women by the hearth as if this disclosure had caused her to change visibly.

ing—"

"When everyone knows," and Sebell rolled his eyes ceiling-ward, "that it takes time, endurance, tolerance and luck to appreciate Mirrim!" Sebell ducked as Menolly threatened him with her spoon.

They had finished feeding the fire lizards and sent them out to sun themselves when Mirrim popped up before them again, exhaling a mighty sigh.

"I don't know how we're going to get everything finished in time. Why those eggs have to be so awkward in their timing. Half the western guests will be dead of sleep and need breakfast. . . . See?" She waved toward the entrance where dragons were depositing more passengers.

"There's so much to be done. And I particularly want to get to this Hatching. Pelessan's a candidate today, you know."

"So F'nor told us. I could manage the breakfast hearth, Mirrim," said Menolly.

"Just set us a task," said Sebell, throwing his arm across Piemur's shoulders, "and we'll do our best to assist."

"Oh, would you?" Suddenly the affected manners

oddly? She was much nicer when she was just herself I
"So, Felessan stands on the Hatching Ground," said Sebell. "I missed that this morning."

"Sorry, thought I'd told you," said Menolly, rising to clear the table of their dishes. "I wonder if he'll Impress."

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Piemur, startled by her doubt.

"He may be the son of the Weyrleaders, but that doesn't necessarily mean he'll Impress. Dragon choice can't be forced."

"Oh, Pelessan'U Impress," said a dragonrider, approaching the small hearth, two others just behind him. "Are you tending the pot, Menolly?"

"And a good day to you, T'gellan," Menolly said with a pert smile for the bronze rider as she poured klah for him.

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"How's yourself, Sebell?" T'gellan went on, seating himself on the bench and gesturing to the other riders to join him.

"Hard put upon," said Sebell in a long-suffering tone that sounded suspiciously like an imitation of Mirrim. "We

other to laying the tables with utensils and platters. He decided that Mirrim had not been puffing up her responsibilities.

Menolly, too, was kept busy, feeding dragonriders and their sleepy-eyed passengers, dragged from their beds for the imminent Hatching.

Sebell and Piemur had just set up the last table when a faint hum reached their ears. Fire lizards reappeared in the cavern, the high notes of their chirruping a counter-cadence to the low bass throb of the humming dragons. Mirrim, divested of her apron and brushing water stains from her skirt, came dashing toward them.

"C'mon, Oharan promised to save us all seats by him," she cried and led the way across the Bowl at a run.

The Weyr Harper had kept them places in the tiers above the Hatching Ground, though, he informed them, his life had been threatened by Holders and Craftmasters.

Piemur could see why as he settled down, for this was a splendid position, in the second tier, close to the entrance so that the view of the entire Ground was clear. There was no queen egg for Ramoth to guard, so the Benden queen

65. less foot-shifting, wing-rustling, was a far picture from the gentle concern female herdbeast or runners showed their offspring.

A blur of white, seen from the corner of his eye, drew Piemur's attention to the Hatching Ground entrance. The candidates were approaching the eggs, their white tunics fluttering in the light morning breeze. Piemur suppressed his amusements as the boys, stepping further on the hot sands, began to pick up their feet smartly. When they had reached the clutch, they ranged themselves in a loose semi-circle about the gently rocking eggs. Ramoth made a noise like a disapproving growl, which the boys all ignored, but Piemur noticed that the ones nearest her edged surreptitiously away.

A startled murmur ran through the audience as one of the eggs rocked more violently. The sudden snapping of the shell seemed to resound through the high-ceilinged cavern, and the dragons on the upper ledges hummed more loudly than ever with encouragement. The actual Hatching had begun. Piemur didn't know where to look because the audience was as fascinating as the Hatching: dragonriders'

press a dragon, was reminded of that unfilled promise, that he would have a fire lizard one day. He wondered if Menolly remembered her promise to him. Or if he'd ever have the opportunity to remind her of it.

"There's Pelessan," said Menolly, nudging him sharply with her elbow. She pointed to a leggy figure with such a luxuriant growth of dark curling hair that his head seemed oversized.

"He doesn't even look nervous," said Piemur, as he noted the signs of apprehension in other candidates who shifted uneasily or twitched unnecessarily at their tunics. A concerted gasp directed their attention from Felessan, and they saw that several more eggs were rocking violently

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as the hatchlings struggled to be free. Abruptly an egg split open, and a moist little brown dragon was spilled to his feet on the hot sands. Dragging his fragile-looking damp wings on the ground, he began to lunge this way and that, calling piteously, while the adult dragons crooned encouragement, reinforced by Ramoth's half-hum, half-howl..The boys nearest the dragonet tried to anticipate his di-

with triumph, his jeweled eyes glowing the blue and purple of love and devotion. The day's first Impression had been made!

Piemur heard Menolly's deep and satisfied sigh and knew that she was reliving the moment she had Impressed her fire lizards in the Dragon Stones cave three Turns ago. He was again assailed by a deep stab of envy. When would he rate a fire lizard?

Excited cries brought his attention back to the Hatching Ground as more eggs cracked, exposing their occupants.

"Watch Felessan, Piemur! There's a bronze near him ..."

cried Mirrim, grabbing Piemur's arm in her excitement.

"And two browns and a blue," added Menolly, scarcely less excited as she canted her body in a mental effort to direct the little bronze toward Felessan. "He deserves a bronze! He deserves one!"

"Only if the dragon wants him," said Mirrim sententiously. "Just because he's the Weyrleader's son—"

"Shut up, Mirrim," said Piemur, exasperated, clenching his fists, urging the Impression to occur.

Felessan was aware of the bronze's proximity, but so

made.

Ramoth's bugle astonished everyone into a long moment of silence; but it was no wonder, Piemur thought, that F'lar and Lessa were embracing each other at the sight of their one child Impressing a bronzel

The excitement was over too soon, Piemur thought, just moments later. He wished that all the eggs hadn't hatched.at once, so this dizzy happiness could be extended. Not

that there wasn't some disappointment and sadness, too, because far more candidates were presented to the eggs than could Impress. Only one little green had not Impressed, and she was mewling unhappily, butting one boy out of her way, lurching to another and peering up into his face, obviously searching for just the right lad. She had worked her way toward the tiers, despite the efforts of the remaining candidates to attract her attention and keep her well out into the Ground.

"Whatever is the matter with those boys?" demanded Mirrim, frowning with anxiety over the little green's pathetic wandering. She stood up, gesturing peremptorily to the candidates to close around the little green.

mutter and pushed past the three people seated between her and the stairs. "She'll bruise her wings on the walls."

The little green did hurt herself, slipping on the first step and banging her muzzle so sharply on the stone that she let out a cry of pain, echoed by a fierce bugle from Ramoth who began to move across the sands.

"Now, listen here, you silly thing, the boys you want are out there on the Ground. Turn yourself around and go back to them," Mirrim was saying as she made her way down the steps to the little green. Her fire lizards, calling out in wildly ecstatic buglings, halted her. She stared for a long moment at the antics of her friends, and then, her
"?»

expression incredulous, she looked down at the green hatchling determinedly attacking the obstacle of steps. "I can't!" Mirrim cried, so panic-stricken that she slipped on the steps herself and slid down three before her flailing hands found support. "I can't!" Mirrim glanced about her for confirmation. "I'm not supposed to Impress. I'm not a candidate. She can't want me!" Awe washed over the consternation on her face and in her voice.

half-slid the remaining steps, cushioning the little green's chin from yet another harsh contact with the stone of the step.

"Oh, you silly darling! Whatever made you choose me?"

Mirrim said in a loving voice as she gathered the green into her arms and began to soothe the hatchling's distressed cries. "She says her name is Path!" The glory on Mirrim's face caused Piemur to look away in embarrassment and envy.

For one brief moment, Piemur had entertained the bizarre notion that maybe the little green dragon had been looking for him. A deep sigh fluttered through his lips, and a hand was laid gently on his shoulder. Schooling his expression, he turned to see Menolly watching him, a deep pity and understanding in her eyes.

"I promised you Turns ago that you'd have a fire lizard, Piemur. I haven't forgotten. I will keep that promise!"

As one they turned their heads back to watch Mirrim fussing over her Path, her fire lizards hopping on the sands, chattering away as if welcoming the little green in their own fashion.

"Greens are fighting dragons," began Sebell.

"In that case, Mirrim's well paired, isn't she?" asked Piemur with droll amusement.

"Piemur!"

At Menolly's shocked remonstrance, Piemur turned to Sebell and saw an answering gleam, though the journeyman turned quickly and started down the steps. "Sebell's right, though," Menolly said thoughtfully as

they started across the hot sands, quickening their pace as the heat penetrated the soles of their flying boots.

"Why?" asked Piemur again. "Just because she's a girl?"

"There won't be as much shock as there might be," Sebell went on. "Jaxom's Impression of Ruth set a precedent."

"It's not quite the same thing, Sebell," Menolly replied.

"Jaxom is a Lord Holder and has to remain so. And then the weyrmen did think the little white dragon mightn't live. And now he has, it's obvious he's never going to be a full-sized dragon. Not that he's needed in the Weyrs, but Mirrimis!"

"Exactly! And not in the capacity of green rider."

with F'lessan Impressing a bronze, Lessa and F'lar are in great spirits." Now he shrugged, his grin broadening. "It was simply a case of the dragon finding her own partnership where she wanted it!"

"As Ruth did with Jaxomi"

"Precisely."

"And that is the Harper message?" asked Sebell, glancing about the Bowl where knots of people surrounded weyrings and dragonets.

"There doesn't seem to be any other explanation. So let
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us drink and be merry. It's a good day for Pem! And I'm terribly dry," said the Masterharper as the Weyr Harper solemnly proffered a cup of wine. "Oh thanks, Oharan. Must be the heat of the Hatching Ground or the excitement. I'm parched. Ahhhh." The Harper's sigh was of relief and pleasure. "A good Benden vintage ... ah, an old one, the wine has a mellowness, a smoothness . . ." He glanced about him as his audience waited expectantly.

Oharan's hand casually covered the seal of the wineskin..The Harper took another judicious sip. "Yes, indeed. I

and they all laughed as Master Robinton started to protest. They had time for a quiet glass before the admiring guests had exhausted all the possible things one could say to a newly impressed pair. Then the 'weyringmaster took his charges off to the lake where the newly hatched would be fed, bathed and oiled, and the guests began to drift toward the tables, seating themselves for the feasting that would follow.

Master Robinton led his craftsmen in a rousing ballad of praise to dragons and their riders before he joined the Weyrleaders and their visiting Lord Holders. Oharan, Sebell, Menolly and Piemur did the courtesy round to the tables where the parents of new dragonriders were seated, singing requests. Menolly's fire lizards sang several songs with her before she excused them, explaining that they were far more interested in the new dragons than singing for mere people. Then she got involved with a group from the crafthall at Bitra, and the other three harpers left her explaining how to teach fire lizards to sing as they continued the rounds.

The tradition was that a harper's song deserved a cup of

lizards to be found at Southern, so her unexpected rise to dragonrider was at least consistent. Now Jaxom, who had to remain Lord of Ruatha, was a different case entirely.

Piemur noticed that everyone was a good deal interested in the health of the little white dragon and, while they wished him the best, were just as pleased that he'd never make a full-sized beast. Evidently that made it easier for people to accept the fact that Ruth was being raised in a Hold instead of 9. "weyr..Holdlessness was a topic to which conversations returned

time and again that evening. Many lads, growing up in land crafts, would not find holdings of their own when they were old enough. There simply weren't any old places left. Could not more of the mountainous regions of the far north be made habitable? Or the remote slopes of High Reaches or Crom? Piemur noted that Nabol, which actually had tenable land uncultivated, was never cited. V What about the marshlands of lower Benden? Surely with "• such a competent 'Weyr, more holds could be protected. ^ Occasionally Piemur, standing or sitting at the edges of f1 groups, would overhear fascinating snatches and try to :.}

from one table and move to another. Not that he was drinking any wine; he had sense enough not to do that. He just seemed to be more tired than he ought to be; if he could just put his head down for a few moments. He was scarcely conscious of the cold of between, only annoyed because he was being forced to walk when he wanted to sit down. He did recall some sort of argument going on over his head. He could have sworn it was Silvina giving someone the very rough edge of her tongue. He was

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mercifully grateful that finally he was permitted to stretch out on a bed, feel furs pulled over his shoulders, and he could give in to the sleep he craved.

The bell woke him, and his surroundings confused him. He looked about, trying to figure out where he was, since he certainly wasn't in the drum apprentices' quarters. Further he was on a rush bag on a floor—the floor in Sebell's room, for the clothes Sebell had been wearing for the past two days were draped on a nearby chair, his flying boots sagging against each other by the bed. Piemur's empty clothes had been neatly piled on his boots at the foot of the

the others and then strode up to Piemur, grabbing him by the arm roughly.

"Where've you been for two days?"

"Why? Did you have to polish the drums?"

"You're going to get it from Dirzant" A pleased smirk crossed Clell's face.

"why should he get it from Dirzan, Clell?" asked Men-oily, quietly coming up behind the drum apprentices. "He's been on Harper business."

"He's always getting off on Harper business," replied Clell with unexpected anger, "and always with you!"

Piemur raised his fist at such insolence and leaned back to make the swing count in Clell's sneering face. But Men-oily was quicker; she swung the apprentice about and shoved him forcefully toward the main door.

"Insolence to a journeyman means water rations for you, Clell!" she said and, without bothering to see that he'd continued out of the hall, she turned to the other three who gawked at her. "And, for you, too, if I should learn of any mischief against Piemur because of this. Have I made myself perfectly clear? Or do I need to mention the

he could get back at Clell for that insult to Menolly.

"Water rations for you, too, Piemur, if I see so much as a scratch on Clell's face."

"But he . . ."

Bonz, Timiny and Brolly came flying into the hall at that point and hailed Piemur with such evident relief that, after giving Piemur a long, forbidding glance, Menolly went off toward the journeyman's tables. The boys de-

manded to know where he'd been and he was to tell them everything.

He didn't. He told them what he felt they should know as far as the Igen Hold Gather was concerned, an innocuous enough tale. And he could, and did, describe in great detail the Impression of Path to Mirrim. The bare bones of that unexpected event was already the talk of the Hall, and Piemur had heard the public version so often that he knew he wasn't committing any indiscretion. He was careful to play down, even to his good friends, the circumstances that had brought him to Benden Weyr at such an auspicious occasion.

"No dragonrider was going to take me, an apprentice

"Say, Piemur, you getting on all right with Clell and those others?" asked Ranly.

"Sure. Why?" Piemur kept his voice as casual as he could.

"Oh, nothing, except they're not mixers, and lately, they've been sort of asking about you in a funny sort of way." Ranly was worried, and from the solemn expressions on the other faces, he had conceded their concern.

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"You just haven't been the same since your voice changed, Piemur," said Timiny, blushing with embarrassment.

Piemur snorted, then grinned because Timiny looked so uncomfortable. "Of course, Piemur, Tim. How could I be? My voice is changing, and the rest of me, too."

"I didn't mean that . . ." and Timiny faltered in a muddle of confusion, looking at Bonz and Brolly for help to express what puzzled them all.

Just then the journeyman rose to give out the day's assignments, and the apprentices were forced to be quiet.

Piemur held his breath, hoping that Menolly had not made

him. He was not surprised to find that the drums had been left for him to polish, or that Dirzan grumbled about his absence because how could he learn enough to be a proper drummer. And it was only to be expected that there was no word of praise from Dirzan when he came out measure perfect on all the sequences Dirzan asked him. What Piemur wasn't prepared for was the state of his belongings when Dirzan dismissed him. He got the first whiff when he opened the door to the apprentices' room. Despite the fact that both windows were propped wide open, the small room smelled like the necessary. He opened the press for clean clothes and realized where the worst of the offending stench lay. He turned, half-hoping this was all, but as he ran his hand over his sleeping furs they were disgustingly damp.

"Who's been . . ." Dirzan came striding into the room, finger and thumb pinching his nose against the odor. Piemur said nothing, he merely let the soiled clothing unroll and held the furs up so that the light fell on the long, damp stain. Dirzan's eyes narrowed, and his grimace deepened. Piemur wondered what annoyed Dirzan more:

things from the room, and then he slammed the door with such force that the journeyman on watch came to see what was the matter.

With everyone scattered for work sections, Piemur managed to get to the washing room without being stopped.

He was so furious he wouldn't have trusted himself to answer properly if anyone had asked him the most civil of questions. He slapped the furs, hair side out into the warm tub, sprinkling half the jar of sweetsand on the slowly sinking bedding. He shook the half-hardened stuff out of his clothing into the drain, and then, with washing paddle, shoved and

prodded the garments to loosen the encrusta-

tions. If there were stains on his new clothes, he'd face a month's water rations but he'd pay them all back, so he would.

"What are you doing in here at this time of day, Piemur?" asked Silvina, attracted by the splashing and pounding.

"Me?" The force of his tone brought Silvina right into the room. "My roommates play dirty jokes!"

Silvina gave him a long searching look as her nose told

his discovery. He'd been so proud of the fine garments, and to have them crudely soiled before he'd worn some of them enough to acquire honest dirt hit him harder than the slanders at his supposed indiscretions.

"I get to Gathers and Impressions," Piemur drew a whistling breath through his teeth, "and I've made the mistake of learning drum measures too fast and too well."

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Silvina continued to stare at him, her eyes slightly narrowed and her head tilted to one side. Abruptly she moved beside him and took the washpaddle from his hand, slipping it deftly under the soaking furs.

"They probably expected you back right after the Igen Gather!" She chuckled as she plunged the fur back under the water, grinning broadly at him. "So they had to sleep in the stink they caused for two nights!" Her laughter was infectious, and Piemur found his spirits lifting as he grinned back at her. "That Clell. He's the one who planned it. Vatch him, Piemur. He's got a mean streak." Then she sighed. "Still, you won't be there long, and it won't do you any harm to learn the drum measures. Could be very useful

have her expert help in cleaning his clothes.

Then, because she said nothing would be dry before evening, she got him another sleeping fur, and a spare shirt and pants, commenting they they were well-enough worn not to cause envy.

"You'll mention, of course, that I tore strips out of you for ruining good cloth and staining fur," she said with a parting wink.

He was halfway out of the Hall when he remembered the need for a sweet candle and went back for it, bearing her loud grumbles to the rest of the kitchen with fortitude. Afterward, Piemur thought that if Dirzan had ignored the mischief the way Piemur intended to, the whole incident might have been forgotten. But Dirzan reprimanded the others in front of the journeymen and put them on water rations for three days. The sweet candle cleared the quarters of the stench, but nothing would ever sweeten the apprentices toward Piemur after that. It was almost as if, Piemur thought, Dirzan was determined to ruin any chance Piemur had of making friends with Clell or the others.

he alone could open. Apprentices were not supposed to have any private containers, but Dirzan made no mention of the addition to Piemur's box.

In a way, Piemur found a certain satisfaction in being able to ignore the nuisances, rising above all the pettiness perpetrated on him with massive and complete disdain. He spent as much time as he could studying the drum records, tapping his fingers on his fur even as he was falling asleep to memorize the times and rhythms of the most complicated measures. He knew the others knew exactly what he was doing, and there was nothing they could do to thwart him.

Unfortunately, the coolness he developed to fend off their little tricks began insidiously to come between him and his old friends. Bonz and Brolly complained loudly that he was different, while Timiny watched him with mournful eyes, as if he somehow considered himself responsible for Piemur's alterations.

Piemur tried to laugh it off, saying he was drum happy. "They're putting on you up in the drumheights, Piemur," said Bonz glowering loyally. "I just know they are.

cracked in days!"

Piemur blinked, mildly surprised at the phenomenon of which he'd been unaware.

"It's too bad. Anyhow, Tilgin's got the part down . . . finally, and it wouldn't sound the same with you as baritone," Brolly went on.

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"Baritone?" Piemur's voice broke in surprise and, when he saw the disappointment on his friends' faces, he started to laugh. "Well, maybe, and then, maybe not."

"Now you sound like Piemur," said Bonz, shouting with emphasis.

Isolated as he'd been in the drumheights, Piemur had easily managed to forget the fast approaching feast at Lord Groghe's and the performance of Domick's new music.

Two sevendays had passed since the Benden Hatching, and he'd been too engrossed with his own problems to give much attention to extraneous matters. His friends now underlined the nearness of the Feast, and he was sure that he couldn't escape attending it and wondered how he could. He'd prefer to be out of Fort Hold altogether on the night

chance, Dirzan's tittle-tattle had affected Menolly's opinion of him. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen Sebell at all of late.

The next morning, when he was feeding the fire lizards with her, he asked her where the journeyman was.

"Between you and me," she said in a low voice, having seen Camo occupied with the greedy Auntie One, "he's up in the Ranges. He should be back tonight. Don't worry, Piemur," she said, smiling. "We haven't forgotten you." Then she gave him a very searching look. "You haven't been worried, have you?"

"Me? No, why should I worry?" He gave a derisive snort. "I put my time to good use. I know more drum measures than any of those dimwits, for all they've been mucking about up there for Turns!"

Menolly laughed. "Now you sound more like yourself. You're all right with Master Olodkey then?"

"Me? Sure!" Which, Piemur felt, was not stretching the truth. He was fine with Master Olodkey because he rarely came in contact with the man.

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"And that rough lad, Clell, he's not come back at you

wished heartily that he could tell Menolly the real state of affairs in the drumheights. But what good would it do? She could only speak to Dirzan, who would never accept Piemur for any reason. Asking Dirzan to discipline the other apprentices for what was only stupid petty narking wouldn't help. Piemur could see clearly now that his well-founded reputation for mischief and game playing were coming back at him when he least expected, or even less, deserved it. He'd no one but himself to fault, so he'd just have to chew it raw and swallow! After all, once his voice settled, he'd be out of the drumheights. He could put up with it because he'd have the odd Gather out with Sebell and Menolly.

SO

Chapter 5. That afternoon a drum message came in from the north, Piemur was in the main room diligently copying drum measures that Dirzan had set him to learn by evening, although he already knew them off rhythm perfect. He translated the message as it throbbed in.

"Urgent. Reply required please. Nabol." To himself Piemur smiled as the rest of the message pounded on, because

he understood little beyond the Erst three measures, which was about all they'd know.

Rokayas, the journeyman on duty, came into the room a moment later.

"Who's running messages today?" he asked, the thin, folded sheaf of the transcribed message in his hand.

The others all pointed to Piemur, who immediately put his pen down and rose to his feet. The journeyman frowned.

"You were on yesterday."

"I'm on today again, Rokayas," said Piemur cheerfully and reached for the sheaf.

"Seems to me you're always on," Rokayas said, holding the message away from Piemur as he glared suspiciously at the others.

"Dirzan said I was messenger until he said otherwise," said Piemur, shrugging as if it were a matter of indifference to him.

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"All right, then," and the journeyman surrendered the message, still eyeing the other four boys, "but it seems

yard, automatically glancing about. The raking team was at work. He waved cheerfully to the section leader and then took the main steps to the Hall three at a time. His legs must be getting longer, he thought, or he was improving his stride because he used to be able to leap only two. Slightly puffed, he tapped politely at Master Oldive's door and handed over the message, wheeling instantly so that no one could say he'd seen the message.

"Hold a moment, young Piemur," said Master Oldive, unfolding the sheaf and frowning as he read its contents. "Urgent, is it? Well, it could be, at that. Though why they wouldn't in courtesy send their watch dragon. . . . Ah well. Nabol hasn't one, has it? Reply that I'll come, and please ask Master Olodkey to pass the word to T'ledon that I must prevail on his good nature for passage to Nabol! I shall go straight to the meadow to wait for him."

Piemur repeated the message, using Master Oldive's exact phrasing and intonation. Released by the healer, he sped back across the court with another wave to the section leader. He was halfway up the second flight when he felt his right foot slide on the stone. He tried to catch himself,

greased the rail and steps.

His shoulder was roughly shaken, and he heard Dirzan's irritated command to wake-up.

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"What are you doing here? Why didn't you return immediately with Master Oldive's request? He's been waiting in the meadow. You can't even be trusted to run messages!"

Piemur tried to form an excuse, but only a groan issued from his Ups as he groggily tried to right himself. He was dimly conscious of aches and pains all over his left side and sore stiffness across his cheek and under his skin.

"Fell on the steps, did you? Knocked yourself out, huh?" Dirzan was unsympathetic, but he was less rough-handed as he helped Piemur turn and sit on the bottom step.. "Greased," Piemur mumbled, waving with one hand at the steps while with the other he cushioned his aching head to reduce the pounding in his skull. But every place he touched his head seemed to ache, too, and the agony was making him ill to his stomach.

"Greased! Greased?" Dirzan exclaimed in acid disbelief.

above his head. The agitated tone hurt Piemur's skull.

"Step there and handrail . . ." Piemur gestured with one hand.

"There's not a sign of grease! On your feet!" Dirzan sounded angrier than ever.

"Did you find him, Dirzan?" Rokayas called. The voice of the duty journeyman made Piemur's head throb like a message drum. "What happened to him?"

"He fell down the steps and knocked himself between."

Dirzan was thoroughly disgusted. "Get up, Piemur!"

"No, Piemur, stay where you are," said Rokayas, and his voice was unexpectedly concerned.

Piemur wished he wouldn't shout, but he was very willing to stay where he was. The nausea in his belly seemed to be echoed by his head, and he didn't dare so much as open his eyes. Things whirled even with them shut.

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"He said it was greased! Feel it yourself, Royakas, Clean as a drum!"

"Too clean! And if Piemur fell on his way back, he was between a long time. Too long for a mere slip. We'd better

you stand, Piemur?"

Piemur groaned, which was all he dared to do or his dinner would come up.

"He's faking to get out of duty," Dirzan said.

"He's not faking, Dirzan. And another thing, he's done too much of the running. Clell and the others haven't moved their butts out of the drumheights the last two sevendays I've been on duty."

"Piemur's the newest. You know the rule—"

"Oh, leave off, Dirzan. And take him from the other side. I want to carry him as flat as possible."

With Dirzan's grudging assistance, they carried him down the stairs, Piemur fighting against his nausea. He was only dazedly aware that Rokayas shouted for someone to fetch Silvina and be quick.

They were maneuvering him up the steps to the Main Hall, toward the infirmary, when Silvina intercepted them, asking quick questions, to which she got simultaneous answers from Dirzan and Rokayas.

"He fell down the stairs," said Rokayas.

"Nothing but a tumble," said Dirzan, overriding the

S4

"There was grease," said Silvina. "Look at his right shoe, Dirzan. Piemur, do you feel nauseated?"

Piemur made an affirmative sound, hoping that he could suppress the urge to spew until he was in the infirmary, even as a small spark of irreverence suggested that here was a superb opportunity to get back at Dirzan with no possible repercussions.

"He's jarred his skull, all right. Smart of you to carry him prone, Rokayas. Here, now, set him down on this bed. No, you fool, don't sit him. . . ."

The tipping of his body upward triggered the nausea, and Piemur spewed violently onto the floor. Miserable at such a lack of control, Piemur was also powerless to prevent the heaving that shook him. Then he felt Silvina's hand supporting his head, was aware that a basin was appropriately in position. Silvina spoke in a soothing tone, half-supporting his trembling body as he continued to vomit. He was thoroughly exhausted and trembling when the spasms ended and he was eased back against a pile of pillows and could rest his aching head.

"I take it that Master Oldive has already gone off to

have done no more than rattle his brains. Rest, quiet and time will cure that thumping. Yes, Master Robinton?"

Silvina's hands paused as she tucked the sleeping fur about Piemur's chin.

"Piemur's been hurt?" The Harper's voice was anxious.

As Piemur turned to one elbow, to acknowledge the Harper's entrance, Silvina's hands forced him back against the piled pillows.

"Not seriously, I'm relieved to say, but let's all leave the room. I'd like a word with these journeymen in your presence, Master Robin—"

The door closed, and Piemur fought between the overwhelming

desire to sleep and curiosity about what she had to say to Dirzan and Rokayas in front of the Masterharper. Sleep conquered.

Once she'd closed the door, Silvina gave vent to the anger she'd held in since she'd first glimpsed the gray pallor of Piemur's face and heard Dirzan's nasal complaints.. "How could you let matters get so out of hand, Dirzan?" she demanded, whirling on the astonished journey-

rowed with anxiety, and to Rokayas' delighted and amused observation.

"Enough, Silvina!" The Masterharper's voice was loud enough to quell her momentarily, but she turned to him with an injunction to keep his voice down. Please!

"I will," said the Harper in a moderate tone, keeping Silvina turned toward him, and away from the subject of her ire, "if you will tell me what happened to Piemur." Silvina let out an exasperated breath, glared once more at Dirzan and then answered Master Robinton.

"His skull isn't cracked, though how it wasn't I'll never know," and she exhibited the glistening sole of Piemur's boot, "with stair treads coated with grease. He's bruised, scraped and shaken, and he's definitely suffering from shock and concussion. . . ."

"When will he recover?" There was an urgency behind the Harper's voice that Silvina heard. Now she gave him a long keen look.

"A few days' rest will see him right, I'm sure. But I mean rest!" She crossed her hands in a whipping motion to emphasize her verdict, then pointed to the closed infirmary

steps or the railing. I tested them all myself!"

"Too clean," said Rokayas, and earned a reprimanding glare from Dirzan. "Too clean!" Rokayas repeated and then said to Silvina. "Piemur's decidedly odd man. He learns too quickly." "And spouts off what he hears!" Dirzan spoke sharply,

determined that Piemur should share the responsibility for this untoward incident.

"Not Piemur," Silvina and Menolly said in one breath.

Dirzan sputtered a moment. "But there've been several very private messages that were all over the Hall, and everyone knows how much Piemur talks, what a conniver he is!"

"Conniver, yes," said Silvina just as Menolly drew breath to defend her friend. "Blabberer, no. He's not been saying more than please and thank you lately either. I've noticed. And I've noticed some other things happening to him that ought not to have! No mere pranks for the new lad in the craft, either!"

Dirzan moved uneasily under her intense stare and looked appealingly toward the Masterharper.

"I'd say Piemur knows more than he admits," said Rokayas in a droll tone, grinning when Dirzan began to mouth a denial.

"It'd be like Piemur," said Menolly with a grin and then, touching Silvina's arm, "does he need someone with him right now?"

"Rest and quiet is what he needs, and I'll look in on him every little while."

"Rocky could stay," Menolly said. The little bronze fire S7

lizard pat in an immediate appearance, cluttering worriedly to find himself in such an unexpected place.

"I won't deny that would be sensible," said Silvina, glancing at the closed door. "Yes, that would be very wise, I think." Everyone watched as Menolly, stroking Rocky gently, told him that he should stay with Piemur and let her know when he spoke. Then she opened the door just enough to admit the little fire lizard, watched as Rocky settled himself quietly by Piemur's feet, his glistening eyes on the boy's pale face.

"Rokayas, would you help Menolly collect Piemur's

the controlled anger in his eyes suggested that he was going to deal sternly with the apprentices who had put him in such an invidious position. When he was unexpectedly placed on duty for the entire Feastday, he knew why the roster had been changed. He also knew better than to blame Piemur.

Once Menolly and the journeymen had left them, Robinton turned again to Silvina, showing all the anxiety and concern he had kept hidden.

"Now, don't you worry, Robinton!" Silvina said, patting him on the arm. "He's had a frightful knock on his skull, but I could feel no crack. Those scrapes on chin and cheek'll mend. He'll be stiff and sore from the bruising, that's certain. If you'd only asked me," and Silvina's manner indicated that she'd have her say any road, "I'd have said there were much better uses for Piemur than message drumming. He's been a changed lad since he went to the heights. Not a peep of complaint out of him, but it's as if he wouldn't speak for fear of saying something that was the least bit out of line. And then'Dirzan has the nerve to say that Piemur babbled drum messages!"

with a sigh of regret as she seated herself.

Robinton laughed then, rubbing his fingers gently on her cheek before he came around the table and poured wine, looking at her as he suspended the wine skin above a second glass. She nodded agreement. She needed the wine after the excitement and worry over Piemur, and with the little bronze watching the boy, she didn't need to hurry back.

"The whole accident is my fault," said the Harper after a long sip of wine. He seated himself heavily. "Piemur is clever, and he can keep his tongue still. Too still for his own good health, I see now. He hasn't hinted of any trouble in the drumheights to either Menolly or Sebell. . . ."

"They'd be the last he'd tell, except for yourself, of course." Silvina gave a snort. "I only knew about it after the Impression at Benden. The others . . ." and Silvina wrinkled her nose in remembered distaste, ". . . treated his new clothes. I came upon him washing them, or I'd never have known either." She chuckled with such malice the Harper had no trouble following her thought.

"They did it while he was at Igen Hold, not knowing

in the Hall aggravated her intensely.

"Yes, Meron!" The Master Harper sighed again, one corner of his expressive mouth twitching with irritation and an inner perplexity.

"The man's dying. Not all of Master Oldive's skill can save him. And why bother with Meron? He's better dead after all the harm he's done. When I think that Brekke's queen might still be alive today . . ."

"It's his dying that will cause even more trouble, Silvina."

"How?"

"We can no more have Nabol Hold in contention than we can Ruatha Hold—"

"But Nabol has a dozen heirs of full blood—"

"Meron won't name his successor!"

"Oh." Silvina's exclamation of startled comprehension was followed quickly by a second of utter disgust. "What more could you expect of that man? But surely steps can be taken. I doubt that Master Oldive would scruple against ..."

Master Robinton held up his hand. "Nabol has been

ten full-blooded close male heirs. Those daughters of Meron's are too young to be married, and none of them will ever be pretty, taking after their sire as they all seem to have had the misfortune to do. Which of those nine—"

"Ten . . ."

"Which would get the most support from the small holders and craft-halls? And how, pray tell, does Piemur fit into . . . ah, but, of course." A smile smoothed Silvina's frown, and she raised her glass to toast the Harper's ingenuity. "He did well then at Igen Hold?"

"Indeed he did, though Igen's a loyal group under any circumstances."

Silvina caught his slight emphasis on the word "loyal," and scrutinized his thoughtful face. "Why 'loyal'? And to whom? Surely there's no more disloyalty to Benden?" Robmton gave a quick negative shake of his head. "Several disquieting rumors have come to my notice. The

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most worrying, the fact that Nabol abounds with fire lizards . . ."

"Nabol has no shoreline and scarcely any friends in

"The Oldtimers!" Silvina emphasized that guess with a snap of her fingers. "T'kul and Meron were always two.cuts from the same rib."

"What I cannot figure out is what besides fire lizards the association gains Meron . . ."

"You can't?" Silvina was frankly skeptical. "Spite! Malice! Scoring off Benden!"

Robinton reflected on that opinion, turning his wine glass idly by the stem. "I'd like to know . . ."

"Yes, you would!" Silvina grinned at him, tolerance for his foibles as well as affection in her glance. "You and Piemur are paired in that respect. He has the same insatiable urge to know, and he's a dab hand at finding out, too. Is that why you want his head mended? You're sending him up to Candler at Nabol Hold?"

"No . . ." and the Harper drawled the word, pulling at his lower lip. "No, not directly to Nabol Hold. Meron might recognize him: the man's never been a fool, just perverted in principle."

"Just?" Silvina was disgusted.

"I'd like to know what's going on there."

in attendance," and Robinton ended his sentence on an up-swing of tone, eyeing Silvina hopefully.

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"The boy'll be fit enough for a Gather, and undoubtedly it's kinder to send him away from the Hall on that particular day. Tilgin's come along amazingly."

"Could he do aught else?" asked Robinton with real humor in his voice, "with both Shonagar and Domick spending every waking moment with him?"

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Chapter 6

Piemur drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of that day, and most of the next, immeasurably reassured and com-

forted by the presence of Rocky or Lazy and Mimic who spelled the bronze fire lizard.

If Menolly's fire lizards were with him, he reasoned, during the moments he drifted into consciousness, then Master Robinton couldn't be annoyed that he'd been stupid enough to fall and hurt himself just when the Harper needed him. For that was how Piemur construed the Harper's urgent query about his injury. He fretted, too, about

your mouth. Too bad we can't numbweed the inside of your head, but we can't. Never thought to see the day you weren't ready to eat. Now, there's the lad. You'll feel right as ever in a day or two more. Don't mind if you seem to want to sleep. That's only natural. And here's Rocky to keep you company again."

"Who's been feeding him?"

"Don't sit up!" Silvina's hand pressed him back into the half-reclining position. "You'll spill the broth. I suspect Sebell gave Menolly a hand. Not to worry. You'll be back at that chore soon enough!"

Piemur caught at her skirt as she made a move. "There was grease on those steps, wasn't there, Silvina?" Piemur had to ask the question, because he couldn't really trust what he thought he'd heard.

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"Indeed and there was!" Silvina frowned, pursing her lips in an angry line. Then she patted his hand. "Those little sneaks saw you fall, scampered down and washed the grease off the steps and handrail . . . but," she added in a sharper tone, "they forgot there'd be grease on your boot

sleep, and slipping out of the room without giving him any hint to the plans for his future. If his things were here, he didn't think he'd be going back to the drumheights. Where else could he be placed at the Hall? He tried to examine this problem, but his mind wouldn't work. Probably Silvina had laced that broth with something. Wouldn't surprise him if she had.

Complacent fire lizard chirpings roused him. Beauty was conferring with Lazy and Mimic, who were perched on the end of the bed. No one else was in the room, and then Beauty disappeared. Shortly, while he was fretting that no one seemed to be bothering about him, Menolly quietly pushed the door open, carrying a tray in her free hand. He could hear the normal sounds of shouting and calling, and he could smell baked fish.

"If that's more sloppy stuff . . ." he began petulantly.

" 'Tisn't. Baked fish, some tubers, and a special bubbly pie that Abuna insisted would improve your appetite."

"Improve it? I'm starving."

Menolly grinned at his vehemence and positioned the tray on his lap, then seated herself at the end of the bed.

pranks. I checked. And I checked with Silvina to be sure all your things are accounted for." She grinned, then, her eyes twinkling. "Clell and the other dimglows are on water rations, and they won't get to the Gather!"

Piemur groaned.

"And why not? They deserve restriction. Pranks are one thing, but deliberately conspiring to injure—and you could have been killed by their mischief—is an entirely different matter. Only . . ." and Menolly shook her head in perplexity, "... I can't think what you did to rile them so."

"I didn't do anything," Piemur said so emphatically that he slopped the water glass on his tray.

Rocky chirped anxiously, and Beauty took up the note in her trill.

"I believe you, Piemur." She squeezed his toes where they poked up the sleeping furs. "I do! And, would you also believe, that that's why you had trouble? They kept expecting you to do some typical Piemur tricks, and you were so busy behaving for the first time since you apprenticed here, no one could credit it. Least of all Dirzan, who knew all too much about you and your ways!" She gave his

"You know I only like 'em hot!"

"Eat all your dinner first. You'll need your strength, and wits. You're to go with Sebell to Nabol Hold for Meron's Gather. That'll get you away from here during Tilgin's singing, though he has improved tremendously—and no one at Nabol will be expecting any extra harpers. Not that they've all that much to sing about in Nabol Hold anyhow."

"Lord Meron's still alive?"

"Yes." Menolly sighed with distaste, then cocked her head slightly. "You know, your bruises might just come in ^ very handy. They're just purpling beautifully now, so they won't have faded. . . ."

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"You mean," and Piemur affected a tremulous whine in his voice, "I'm the poor apprentice lad whose master beats up on him?"

Menolly chuckled. "You're on the mend."

Late that evening, a dust-grayed, raggedly dressed man peered around the door and shuffled slowly into the room, never taking his eyes from Piemur's face. At first, Piemur

floor, laughing.

"Now I'm sure I can gain a discreet arrival at the Nabol Hold Gather! I fooled Silvina, too. She says you still have some rags that will be appropriate to the status of a rather stupid border's boy!"

"Herder's boy?"

"Why not? Kum in handy, like, tha' knowin' the way from tha' bluid, like." As Sebell affected the speech mannerisms of the up-range herders, he became completely the nondescript person who had first entered the infirmary. Despite his chagrin at being told to resume a role he'd hoped never to play again, Piemur was enchanted by the journeyman's dissembling. If Sebell would do it, so would he.

"Master Robinton's not angry with me, is he?"

"Not a mite." Sebell shook his head violently for emphasis. Kimi swooped in, scolding because Sebell had made her wait outside. Then his expression became serious, and he wagged a finger at Piemur. "However, you will have to watch your step with Master Oldive. We've sworn blue to him that this isn't going to be an energetic adventure for

Nabol Gather."

"Why?" asked Piemur bluntly. Discretion had got him nothing but misery, confusion and unwarranted accusations. This time he would know what he was about.

"Two things," Sebell said without so much as a pause for consideration. "If it's true that there are more fire lizards in Nabol Hold than—"

"Is that what they meant?"

"Is that what who meant?"

"Lord Oterel. At the Hatching. I overheard him talking to someone . . . didn't know the man . . . and he said, 'Meron gets more than he ought and we have to do with-
out.' Didn't make sense then, but it would if Lord Oterel was talking about fire lizards. Was he?"

"He very likely was, and I wish you'd mentioned that snip of talk before."

"I didn't know you'd want to know, and it made no sense to me then." Piemur ended on a plaintive note, seeing Sebell's frown of irritation.

The journeyman smiled a quick reassurance. "No, you couldn't've known. Now you do. We know that Lord

"Lord Meron, lad you don't forget the title even in your thoughts . . . and yes, that's the possibility."

"And he's getting whole clutches of fire lizard eggs for trading for 'em? As well as the eggs of his original pairs?"

Piemur was assailed by a variety of emotions: anger that Lord Meron of Nabol Hold was getting more than a fair share of the fire lizard eggs when other, more worthy persons, Piemur included himself, ought to have a chance to impress the precious creatures; a righteous indignation that Lord Meron (and he slurred the title into an insult in his thoughts) was deliberately flouting Ben den Weyr by trafficking in any way with the Oldtimers; and an intense excitement at the possibility that he, Piemur, might help discredit further this infamous Lord Holder.

"Those are two of the main things to listen for. The third, which is the most important in some ways, is which of Lord Meron's male heirs would be most acceptable to craft and cot."

"He is dying then?" He'd been sure that the message to Master Oldive was spurious.

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"Bored? Well, I'll ask Rokayas to give you drum measures to learn. That ought to ease your boredom without taxing your strength." Sebell laughed at Piemur's snort of dismay.

"As long as it's Rokayas."

"It will be. He's of the mind that you learned a great deal more than Dirzan believes."

Piemur grinned at the subtle question in Sebell's words, but before he could retort, the door was closing behind the journeyman and Kimi, who fluttered above him. Piemur hugged his knees to his chest, rocking slowly on his tail bones as he thought over all that Sebell had confided to him. And tried to figure out what it was Sebell hadn't told him.

One thing Sebell hadn't mentioned was how cold and how dark it would be when N'ton collected him before dawn. Menolly with Beauty and Rocky had roused him from a fitful sleep, for he'd been afraid he'd oversleep and consequently spent a restless night. He could sense Menolly's amusement as the two of them, guided by the encouraging chirrups of the fire lizards, stumbled across the dark

position discernible only by four points of light that were fire lizard eyes.

"D'you want the fighting strap about you, Piemur?"

Night flying unnerves a lot of people."

Piemur wanted to say yes, but instead took a good hold on the leathers that encircled Lioth's neck. He replied that since this was only a short trip, he wouldn't need them.

Then clutched convulsively as Lioth sprang upward. They were above the rim of Fort Hold's fireheights before Piemur caught his breath. N'ton gave the bronze dragon the audible command to Nabol, and Piemur knew he screamed

into the nothingness of between. He choked off the noise.as he felt the change from intense cold and blackness to

frosty chill and the faint lightening in what must be the eastern sky.

Two whirling points of light danced above N'ton's left shoulder, and a fire lizard's complacent chirp informed Piemur that N'ton's bronze, Tris, had turned to look at him. Then Lioth swerved and Piemur's fingers became numb as he increased the pressure on the straps, unconsciously leaning backward against the angle of descent into

"Isn't it Sebell?" asked Piemur, shedding helmet and jacket and thrusting them blindly toward N'ton.

"Lioth says no, but Sebell is not far behind. He hears Kimi."

"Kimi?" Piemur's surprise made him speak louder than he intended, and he winced at N'ton's warning.

"You forget," whispered N'ton, "Sebell can bring Kimi because fire lizards are so common here in Nabol. Or so we're led to understand." Displeasure colored the Fort

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Weyrleader's amendment. Then Piemur felt the strong gloved hand curl about his wrist, and he obediently threw his right leg back over Lioth's neckridge, sliding down the massive shoulder, aware as he slipped beyond N'ton's guiding hand, that the dragon had cocked his leg to allow an easier slope of descent. He let his knees take the shock of his landing and patted Lioth's shoulder, wondering as he did so if that were bold of him.

"Good luck, Piemur!" N'ton's muted voice just reached his ears.

He stepped back, turning his head against the shower of

the erratic wavering of light from the glowbaskets of the leading file. A creaking of wheeled carts and the familiar sluff-sluff of plate-footed burden beasts reached his ears. He looked about him for a place to hide. He had a choice of boulders and ledges, and found a shielded spot that faced the track but gave him a clear view of the dimly seen exit. He curled up small, hugging knees to chest, secure in the belief that he couldn't be seen.

A chirrup disabused him of that notion and, startled, he glanced up and saw three pairs of fire lizard eyes gleaming at him.

"Go away, you silly creatures. I'm not even here!" To prove this, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the awful nothingness of between.

The fire lizards responded with an agitated chorus.

"What's the matter with them?" a gruff male voice called over the creaking of cartwheels and the shuffling sound of the burden beasts.

"Who knows? Who cares? We'm most to Nabol now!"

Piemur redoubled his efforts to think of nothing, and heard the faint flutter of fire lizards taking flight. To

mur long after the caravan and the comfort of their glow-baskets passed from his angle of vision.

The cold dawn wind rose, and Piemur wished that Sebell would put in his promised appearance. He ought to have asked N'ton if Lioth had seen Sebell as he glided to his landing. Then Piemur chided himself that this was scarcely the first time he'd waited on his lonesome in the dark of dawn. He'd done his watches with his father's herds. Of course, there'd usually been someone sleeping in the cot within voice range during those long, slow hours. What if something had happened to Sebell? Or he was delayed? Should Piemur go on to Nabol by himself? And how was he to return to the Harper Hall? He'd forgotten to ask N'ton that, presuming it was the Port Weyrleader who'd collect him. Or was he to be collected? Did Sebell plan to sell those suitable beasts of his during the Gather?.Or would they have to herd them back whence they'd come? There was a great deal that Sebell hadn't told him in spite of the journeyman's candid explanation about their surreptitious appearance at Nabol Hold.

Piemur relieved his anxieties by remembering that he

day.

Here he was, cold, miserable, and uncomfortably aware that he hadn't had so much as a cold cup of klah before he was bundled onto a dragon's back and dumped here to await a man who might not arrive for hours if he was walking a herd of beasts in from Ruatha Hold all by himself!

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And when they found out what they'd come to discover and returned to the Harper Hall, what would Piemur do tomorrow?

He grinned, hugging his knees in smug satisfaction, remembering Rokayas' surprise the day before when he had perfectly dead-sticked the complicated message Rokayas had thought up to test his knowledge of the drum language.

Piemur was almost sorry he wouldn't be—

He groped on the ground beside him and found a rock, gave it an experimental whack against the boulder that sheltered him. The resultant sound echoed about the small valley. Piemur found another rock and, rising, went to the now visible track. He beat the rocks together in the mono-

heard a "stay" as the message was repeated. He was a bit daunted by the "stay" and restlessly scuffed at the loose gravel on the track. Surely Sebell wasn't far away. What did it matter if Piemur did go to meet him? But the message had been clear—"stay"—and Piemur decided that Sebell must have a reason, other than obedience to Master Oldive's instruction about Piemur's dented head..Sullenly, Piemur resumed his position behind the boul-

der. And none too soon. He heard then the sharp clatter of hooves against stone, the jangle of metal against metal, and a rumble of encouraging shouts. A pair of fire lizards ar-
rowed out of the graying southern skies, heading straight up the track. Piemur thought of cold between's nothingness, as the fire lizards, intent on keeping ahead of the swiftly pacing riders, swept on. The ground beneath Piemur's rump trembled with the runners' passage.

There was so much dust raised that Piemur couldn't be sure how many rode by, but he estimated a dozen or more.

A dozen riders with a full fair of fire lizards escorting them?

ers obviously hadn't appreciated the capabilities of the little creatures, that at first he didn't hear the shiwff-shlwff of the approaching herd.

Kimi's quizzical cheep nearly frightened him out of his wits. She cheeped again, apologetically, and her eyes whirled a little faster as she peered at him from the top of the boulder.

"Well?" asked Sebell, appearing around one side. "You took me too literally."

"They all have fire lizards," cried Piemur, too indignant to make polite greeting.

"Yes, I had noticed."

"I don't mean that lot," and Piemur jerked his thumb in the direction of the riders. "There was a caravan that had two or three full fairs—"

"Did they see you?" asked Sebell, suddenly wary.

"The fire lizards did, but no human paid any attention to their alert!" Then Piemur caught sight of the beasts that Sebell had herded and whistled.. "So? They meet with your approval?"

The leader had ambled past, eyes half-closed against the dust, and the rest, nose to the tail in front, with eyes fully

told me Lioth had flashed by."

Piemur mumbled his gratitude for the klah, which was hot enough to warm his belly. Then Sebell handed Piemur

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a dried meat roll of the sort that was standard journey rations, and Piemur began to view the imminent day in a much improved frame of mind.

As soon as he'd finished eating, he voluntarily dropped back to the apprentice's uncomfortable position at the end of the single file. He'd be properly coated with dust by the time they arrived at Nabol Hold.

The first thing Piemur did when they got to the Gather meadow was head toward the nearest watering trough, fighting against his thirsty charges for a space at the edge. He also remembered exactly where to pinch their noses to make them turn from him.

"Ar, lad, let th'beasts drink deep farst!" Sebell unceremoniously hauled him away, his voice angry, though his eyes twinkled as he warned Piemur to play the proper part.

"Ar, sor, tongue that dry can't move."

Two young boys were approaching the trough with pails,

dered his token, but he didn't protest when the Steward waved them contemptuously toward the smallest enclosure at the end of the rank. Piemur was about to object when Sebell's hand closed warningly on his shoulder. Looking at the journeyman in surprise, Piemur saw the imperceptible

jerk of his head over his shoulder. Piemur waited a few discreet seconds and then casually glanced about him. Three men had started to follow them toward their allotted space. A thrill of fear made Piemur catch his breath until he recognized the unmistakable herder gait and knew these were prospective buyers.

"Tol'ya Ah'd suitable beasts, di' Ah no?" drawled Sebell under his breath.

"Ar, an yull drink th' profit again, like as not," replied Piemur in a sullen tone, but his shoulders shook with the effort to control his amusement. He hadn't a single doubt in his mind that Sebell would also play the happy drunken

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herdsman to perfection. And manage to say without offense what would be impossible for a sober man anyplace. They got the beasts enclosed, and Piemur was sent with

for the good flesh on them after this long winter than the prospective buyers, so he hunkered down and listened to Sebell's explanation.

Trust a harper to weave words well, and Piemur's respect for the journeyman increased proportionately to the elaborations of the tale he told. Sebell would have his audience believe that he merely used an old trick handed down from grandsire to grandson: a combination of herbs and grasses sweetened with just the right amount of berries and well-moistened dried fruits. He also said that he and his did without sometimes to improve their beasts, and Piemur promptly sucked in his cheeks to look suitably haggard. He saw the eyes of the men linger on his bruises, showing yellow on his chin and cheek, while Sebell rambled on about his holders scrambling up and down the southern face of his hold hill to find the sweet new grasses that produced such spectacular results.

The earnest knot of listeners attracted more who stood respectfully back but close enough to hear. What Piemur couldn't figure out was that, while the beasts had very old marks of Ruathan breeding, the secondary marks were also

apiece, at what Piemur knew was a bloody good price. He wondered if that had covered their original purchases and
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their keep. Appropriately sober-faced during the bargaining, Sebell permitted pleasure to glow on his dirt-smeared face as he carefully stowed the mark pieces in his belt pouch while the beasts were prodded away by their new owners.

"Didn't think I'd make that much, but the trick always works!" said Sebell in a low mutter to Piemur.

"Trick?"

"Sure," said Sebell softly as he patted dust from his clothing. "Arrive dusty, early, with the well-fleshed beasts, and they're on to you fast, hoping you're tired enough to be stupid."

"Where did you get 'em?"

Sebell flashed Piemur a grin. "Craft secret. Get along with you now," and he gave Piemur a wink and a rough shove. "See t'Gather!" he added in a louder tone. "Ah find thee when Ah wish to go."

This wasn't much of a Gather, Piemur decided when

mur returned that way. He squatted at the corner of the stand, munching slowly away at another meatroll, listening to comments and noticing with deep chagrin and a growing wrath how many fire lizards flitted about, resting for a moment on the stall tops, wheeling up in fairs to dance in the air a bit before settling on their friends' shoulders or on a new position where they could overlook. At first Piemur tried to convince himself that he was only seeing the same group again and again. He did notice that most were greens with a sprinkling of brown and blues—the lesser fire lizards. When he saw bronzes, they were always on the shoulder or arm of the more prosperously dressed. Yet no matter how Piemur argued the matter in his mind, it was

clear that Nabol Hold boasted more fire lizards than he had seen even at Benden Weyr during the Impression.

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Suddenly a phrase stood out from the murmurous conversation about the winestand.

"There'll be a few more happy holidays today, I hear!"

Piemur turned to scratch his shoulder fiercely and located the man who had spoken from his knowing smirk, a

given. Up to us to care for 'em proper enough to make 'em hatch. That one," and his head jerked toward the Hold cliff to indicate Lord Meron, "enjoys putting a snake among the wherries!" He snorted derisively. "Happen it's his only pleasure now."

Both men guffawed with malicious delight.

"Happen we'll not need to worry about him much longer, I hear tell." The smith winked broadly at the miner.

"Couldn't be soon enough for me. Well, see you at the dancing?"

"Going so soon?"

"Had my glass. Must get back."

The disappointment in the miner's face made Piemur think that the smith's departure was precipitous. Going to tell his master about the eggs that were up at the Hold, was he? Piemur decided to tag along.

Eggs handed out in quantities, eggs that had been badly handled and wouldn't hatch. Unless . . . and Piemur reflected over something that Menolly had said about fire lizard eggs. Green fire lizards laid eggs as well, having

Piemur wondered if anyone in Nabol realized that a deception was being practiced on them, and green fire lizard eggs were what were dispersed so lavishly. Then he realized that he'd lost sight of the smith and, cursing his inattentiveness, began to retrace his steps, turning with assumed idleness to peer between the stalls. He spotted the smith, urgently speaking to a man with a smithmaster's badge and, as the man reacted to his journeyman's excited words, his master's chain sparkled. Piemur managed to duck away as both men suddenly turned toward him.

When they had passed him on their way to the Hold, Piemur followed, restlessly scanning faces in the hopes that he might see Sebell and tell him what he'd overheard. Sebell might wish to investigate.

As the two smiths turned from the Gather area toward the Hold, Piemur had to pause or be noticeable. The smiths strode purposefully up the ramp toward the main Hold gates. They were challenged by the guard and, after some moments of arguing, the guard summoned another from the gatehouse and sent him to the Hold with the smith-

turned toward the Gather meadow. As they approached him he caught sight of their figures in profile and realized that each man carried something hidden in his cloak, held tight against his side. It couldn't have been a large object. But, thought Piemur, putting expression, manner and profile together, an egg pot wouldn't be large. He wanted to follow the men to see if his suspicion was correct, but he also didn't want to leave the Hold until the message from the smithmaster had been answered.

A new party, holders by the look of them, now made themselves known to the guards and were admitted, to the angry chagrin of the smithmaster. Then three carts, heavily laden to judge by the straining of the burden beasts struggling up the ramp, forced the smithmaster to one side. The

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guard waved the carts toward the kitchen courtyard. The last cart jammed a wheel against the ramp parapet, the driver thudding his stick against the burden beast's rump.

"Wheel be jammed," yelled Piemur, not liking to see any animal beaten for what was not its fault.

He jumped forward to help guide the carter. The man

ing no more attention to the procession of carts. Ducking quickly to the side of the cart away from the carter, Piemur gained access to the Hold proper.

As the carts rumbled on into the kitchen court, Piemur rapidly wondered how he could turn this opportunity to advantage and remain in the Hold after the carters had unloaded and left. Certainly if he was actually in the Hold, he might find out more than he could possibly learn wandering about the Gather. If nothing else he could discover what the carter had delivered.

Then he spied a line of coveralls bleaching in the spring sun. He darted over and removed one, ignoring the slight dampness as he slipped it over his head. Kitchen drudges were never noted for cleanliness, and once the beast dirt and stains on his tunic were covered, the dust on his boots and trousers would be unremarkable.

"Hey, you!" Piemur tried to ignore the call, but it was repeated and could only be directed to him. He turned toward the speaker, affecting a stupid expression. "I mean you, with the empty arms!"

Obediently he trudged back to the carter, who slung a

hurrying to this bloody Gather. Meron ought to be pleased he'd got here within the day allotted, much less at an earlier hour.

The steward hushed him and began shouting orders, ordering Piemur on to the back storerooms. Piemur got inside the kitchen, not knowing where the stores rooms were, so,

making a business of wiping his face and easing his shoulders, he waited until someone brushed past him and turned down the proper corridor.

"Don't know where Ah'm t' put more as is plenty here a'ready," muttered the drudge as Piemur followed him.

"A-top them others?" suggested Piemur helpfully.

In the dim light of waning glows, the Nabolese peered at Piemur. "Never saw you afore."

"Nor you haven't," Piemur agreed amiably. "Sent from t'Hold to help in kitchen for t'Gather."

"Oh!" And the sly gleam in the man's eyes suggested to Piemur that he had just let himself in for the worst and dirtiest of the chores about a Hold on a Gather day when the Lord was feasting guests.

Haste appeared the vital factor in unloading the carts, so

close to him during the unloading. Piemur had no sooner lowered himself to a sack to rest than the man snatched him to his feet.

"C'mon, we've no time to rest t'day."

Nor did Piemur, who was set first to scrape out ashes from the secondary hearths and then to gutting beasts and wild fowl, thankful that he'd watched Camo often enough at that task to know the tricks. He scoured extra plates, encrusted with the dirt and grime of Turns, until his fingers shriveled. When he'd done that, and peeled a dragon-load of tubers, he was allowed a breather so long as he kept one of the five spits turning.

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Chaos broke loose when the Hold Steward arrived to inform the kitchen that Lord Meron chose to eat in his own quarters and these were to be prepared while he walked the Gather.

The kitchen steward obsequiously took the change of order, having only that hour completed the feast arrangements in the Great Hall. The moment the heavy door had swung shut on the Hold Steward's back, however, he burst

tried to cheer himself by imagining Master Oldive's reaction to his "quiet day" at Nabol Gather.

"Who'd a thought he'd walk t'Gather?" the woman was saying as they trudged up the steep steps from the main hall to Meron's apartment, i

"Had to. Didncha hear what they be saying at Gather? Meron dead a'ready and none know his heir. Some as want to turn Gather Day into Duel Day."

That remark set both Nabolese into cackles of laughter, and Piemur wondered if he could be ignorant enough of Hold problems to ask why they were so amused.

"Ah saw 'em comin' in. Ah did," said Besel, again with that sly, knowing expression on his face. "Ev'ry one of 'em was with 'im some time t'day, they was. Outsides with him now, shouldn't wonder."

"He'll have his li'l game wi'em, he will, each thinking he's been named," said the woman and dug her elbow into Besel's ribs which sent them both off into malicious laughter again.

"Hope it's not just us as has to do all the cleaning here," Besel said, putting his hand on the door handle. "Hasn't

"Here, you get in and open shutters. You're used to stinking messes, guttingman." Besel grabbed Piemur roughly by the arm and propelled him violently into the room.

How Piemur managed not to vomit from the odor of the room before he reached the shutters and flung them

open, he didn't know. He half-threw his body up the deep sill, gasping in fresh, cool air.

"Other windows, too, boy," ordered Besel from the doorway,

Piemur filled his lungs and opened the other windows, staying by the last until the chill air dissipated the odors of decay and illness. And Lord Meron's heirs had had to attend him in this funky atmosphere? Piemur spared them a moment of sympathy.

Then Besel shouted for him to go into the other rooms and open them up to air properly. "Else no one'd eat his food, like as not, and we'm to clean up their messes."

The foul odor hung heaviest in the last of the four large rooms that comprised the Lord Holder's private apartments in Nabol. It was then that Piemur blessed the hap-

first pot in the other group. Yes, the egg was smaller and of a different hue. He'd wager every mark he owned that the separate pot contained a fire lizard queen egg.

Quickly he switched pots. Shielding his actions with his body in case Besel ventured this far to check on him, he dumped the sand with deft speed into the cinder shovel, removed the egg and shoved it up under his coverall and into his shirt above his belt. Poking among the cinders, he selected one that had a slightly rounded end and neatly inserted it into the egg pot, replaced sand and lid and

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stood the rifled pot back in line, straightening up just as the woman crossed the threshold.

"That's the lad, tend the fire first. And you'll need to bring up more blackrock from the yard. He likes his warmth, he does." She cackled again as she roughly pushed carved chairs out of her way to sweep under the worktable.

"To be sure, he'll feel the cold soon enough, he will!"

Besel joined in her laughter.

The fire was hot as Piemur shook the grate free of ashes, and his face burned by the time he had cleared the debris.

safe. Certainly not on his person. And he'd have to keep it warm, too. As well as in someplace to which, in his guise as a lowly guttingman, he'd have easy access.

The solution came to him just as he was about to dump the ashes. He checked the swing of the bucket and glanced about the ashpit. Then very carefully, he emptied the ashes in a pile just to the left of the ashpit opening. Anyone emptying ashbuckets tended to fling the contents to the back wall where the cinders spread downward from the top of the accumulated pile. The molding on either side of the opening kept ashes from tumbling back into the courtyard until the pit was full. Its capacity was by no means reached at this moment. With his booted toe, Piemur made a small depression in the warm ashes, quickly inserted the egg, covering it first with warm ashes, then with a coating of cold cinders to insulate it. Glancing at the sun as he filled his bucket with fresh blackstone from the dump next to the ashpit, Piemur saw that the sun was lowering. Which was a mercy he thought, lugging the blackstone back into the Hold, because he wondered if he'd manage to last through the most arduous day of his life.

get what remained on the serving platters and that would mean everyone could relax for a while. He could, perhaps, sneak away then, before Sebell got anxious. And did he have a lot to tell Sebell!

Half the workers in the Hold were now running up and down the steps, pursued by the strident voice of the Hold Steward who had arrived to direct the freshening. Piemur was promptly given another ashbucket to empty and fill with blackrock. On his way back through the kitchen this time, he sneaked a breadroll, which heartened him considerably.

By some miracle, they were just about finished when a messenger arrived from the guard to say that Lord Meron

and his guests were returning. The Steward shoved and pushed everyone out, even to the point of collecting abandoned cleaning tools. As the last of the drudges scurried back into the kitchen, the laughter of the returning Gatherers was heard at the Hold doors.

Piemur had to assist the cook turn the roast for carving, and nearly had his fingers sliced thinner when the cook caught him taking bits that dropped to the table. Then he

lesser stewards stripped food off as it passed them by. The kitchen began to quiet as mouths were stuffed too full to permit speech. Piemur managed to secure a meat-rimmed bone and, grabbing a handful of the sliced breads, he retired to the darkest corner of the huge room to eat.

He applied himself ravenously to his food, having decided to leave as quickly as possible now. The sun had set during the furor of serving the feast, so he had the cover of darkness to retrieve his egg. And he'd have the excuse

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for the guards, if they stopped him, that he was finished with his duties. Lord Groghe always gave his drudges time to attend the Gather dancing. Piemur was looking forward to encountering Sebell again. He might not have heard much to the point of which heir the Hold staff preferred, but he had proof that Lord Meron was getting far more fire lizard eggs than a small Hold like Nabol ought to receive; that his stores rooms were full of more supplies than he and his could ever use in a full pass much less a Turn. Hungry though he was, Piemur couldn't finish all the meat on the bone. He was too tired to eat, he thought, and

ping it carefully in a wad of rags, thrust

the bundle once again under his tunic. He jauntily approached the main gates, whistling deliberately off key.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"T'Gather," Piemur replied as if this was all too obvious.

He was as surprised by the man's guffaw as he was by being swung around and roughly propelled back the way he had come.

"Don't try that one on me again, guttingman!" called the guard as the force of his push sent Piemur stumbling across the cobbles, trying not to fall and damage the egg. He stopped in the darkest shadow of the wall and stood fuming over this unexpected check to his escape. It was ridiculous! He couldn't think of any other Hold in all Pern where the drudges were denied the privilege of going to the Hold's own Gather.

"G'wan back to the ashes, guttingman!"

It was then that Piemur realized his coverall, none too clean in the light, was still visible in the shadows, so he slunk past the opening into the kitchen court. Out of sight, he stripped off the betraying coverall and flung it into a

again. His roving eye caught the blackness that was the ash and blackstone pits, and that solved his problem. Keeping to the shadows, he made his way to this least likely of all hiding spots and settled on the spongy surface at the right hand side of the opening to the ashpit. Not the most comfortable place to wait, he thought, removing a large cinder shell from under his tail bone before he achieved some measure of comfort. The night wind had picked up a bit, and he felt the chill when he poked his nose over the coping. Ah well, he shouldn't have long to wait. He doubted anyone would tolerate Lord Meron's smell longer than absolutely necessary.

He was awakened from a fitful doze by the sound of shouting and much running about in the main courtyard, and then a nearer, more frightening clamor in the kitchen itself. Above the shouts and slammings, he heard a pathetic wail.. "Ah dunno 'im. Ah tell yuz. First time today Ah saw *im. Said he was here to help ('Gather, and we needed help."

Trust Besel to clear himself of any blame, thought Pie-mur.

out of this Hold in the shadow of departing guests. With the way men were dashing about lighting up every crook and corner of the courtyards, he'd be lucky to remain undiscovered. Some eager soul would certainly think to prod a spear through the ashpit just on the off-chance ...

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especially if Besel remembered that he'd emptied ash buckets and might have hidden the egg there.

Frantic now, Piemur glanced up at the walls about him.

Carved from the cliff itself, they were, and he could never climb straight up unseen. He caught sight of a rectangular darkness just above his head to the left of the ashpit. A window? To what? This side of the kitchen was devoted to stores rooms, but what window. . . . The stores rooms were backed from the corridor side. No searcher would believe him able to open locked doors without a key. Which the kitchen steward kept on a chain about his waist at all times. He couldn't ask for a safer hiding place. And if he closed the window behind him . . .

He had to wait until the kitchen courtyard had been thoroughly searched . . . except for the garbage and ash-

worked his body up until his elbows had purchase on the sill. With another mighty wriggle and kick, he managed to propel himself up and over, falling on his head on the top-most sack. Groaning at the pain of that contact, he twisted about, and reaching up, drew the shutter tightly but quietly across, barring the window. Then he felt the egg to

be sure his fall had done it no harm.

He tried to imagine this room from the perspective of the door side, but all the stores rooms had seemed the-same.

He crouched in terror as he heard shouting in the corridor.

Someone rattled the bolts of the door.

"Locked right, and the steward has the keys. He can't be here."

They might just take a look, thought Piemur, when they didn't find him anywhere else. He crawled cautiously over the stacked bundles until he found one with enough slack at the top to admit him. He opened the thong, and just as he was crawling in, wondered how under the sun he was

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going to tie it up again, the switching at the side began to give in his hands. Smiling happily at such a solution, he

confines, he was able to wiggle down between bolts so that he was standing on the bottom of the sack and both he and the egg were cushioned on all sides by the material.

Between fatigue and the scant supply of air in the sack, he found his eyes drooping, and surrendering to the combination of exhaustion and safety, he fell fast asleep.

He was roused briefly when the door was unlocked and thrown open. But the inspection was cursory, since the Hold Steward kept insisting that the doors had been locked since the morning and he wouldn't let them poke any spears lest they harm the contents of the bales.

"He could have hid in the glow room. He was sent there several times."

The door was duly shut and locked.

Piemur was conscious of more activity, but his sleep was so deep that he wasn't certain later whether he dreamed the noise or not. He wasn't even conscious of being moved or of the cold of between. What woke him was a strange difficulty with breathing, a sense of heat and the terror of suffocating in his own sweat..Gasping, he tore at the thread he had reworked, hard to

unbearable, but caution returned and he listened for any sounds. Instead of noise, his senses reported sun-heated ma-

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terial and hides, sun-warmed metal, and the sour sweat of hot wine.

He tried to shove the nearest sack away from him and couldn't shift it. Peeling the contents, he realized that it was metal. Twisting around, he tested the sack above him and gave an experimental heave. It moved, and a whoosh of slightly cooler air rewarded his efforts. Dragging breath into his lungs, he waited until his heart stopped its frantic pounding. And then, belatedly remembering the egg, he felt the rags about the precious burden. It seemed to be whole, but he didn't have sufficient space to get it out and look. He gave another shove at the upper bale with no success. Angling so that his shoulders were against the unyielding metal, he levered his feet and pushed as hard as he could. It moved farther, and he saw a crack of sky so brilliantly blue that he gasped at the color.

It was then that he realized he wasn't in Nabol Hold any longer. That the heat was not due to the unventilated

exertion as sweat trickled down inside his clothes. He had made enough space to take a look at the egg, and he fumbled under his tunic for it with trembling hands. It was warm to his touch, almost hot, and he worried that an egg could be overheated. What had Menolly said about the temperature required by hatching eggs? Surely beach sands under the sun were hotter than his body. He could see no fracture marks on the shell and fancied he felt a faint throbbing. Probably his own blood. He squinted at the blue sky, which meant freedom, and decided not to put the egg back in his tunic. If he held it in front of him, then it didn't matter how he twisted and squeezed his body past

the sacks and bales, the egg would take no harm and there was no way it could fall far.

When he was breathing more easily, he gathered his
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body, egg-holding hand above his head, and began to squirm upward. Just as he thought he was free, the sack behind him settled agonizingly on his left foot, and he had to put the egg down to free himself.

Bruised—torn in muscle, skin and nerve—Piemur

His tired mind could not recall much of what he'd heard of the Southern Veyr. Vague flashes of people saying you could pick fresh fruit right off the trees reassured him. A breeze fanned his face, bringing with it the smell of baking meats. Hunger asserted itself. He licked his dried, cracking lips and winced as the salt of his sweat settled painfully in the cuts.

Cautiously he raised his head and realized that he was at the top of a considerable mound that was braced against the stone walls of a structure of some height. To one side there was open space, to the other the crushed green of leaves and fronds, half-trapped by the bales. He inched himself cautiously toward the foliage, the egg considered at each movement. But even with caution his heart all but stopped when his motion caused one of the bundles to settle abruptly with what seemed to him a lot of unnecessary noise.

He listened intently for a long moment before continuing his crawl toward the foliage. Now, if he could climb up that tree . . . One look at the horny bark decided him against that. His hands were sore, scratched and bleeding

orange-yellow meat as he tore juicy segments out of the rind and crammed them into his moisture-starved mouth. The juice stung his cracked lips, but it seemed to revive the rest of him.

It was while he was licking his fingers clean of the last of the fruit that he noticed the change in the laughing and talking. The noise was coming nearer, and he could hear individual phrases.

"If we don't get some of that stuff under cover, it'll be rained," said a tenor voice.

"I can smell the wine, in fact, and that better be taken out of the sun or it will be undrinkable," said a second male voice with some urgency.

"And if Meron's ignored my order for fabric this time . . ." The woman's sharp alto left the threat unspoken.

"I made it a condition of that last shipment of fire lizard eggs, Mardra, so don't worry."

"Oh, I won't worry, but Meron will."

"Here, this one bears a weaver's seal."

"At the very bottom, too. Who piled this so carelessly?"

Piemur, scurrying down the other side as fast as he

uncertainly, but as he lurched down a faintly outlined path leading away from the voices and the goods, he thought so fiercely of the black nothingness of between that the fire lizards gave a shriek and disappeared.

"Who's not here? What are you talking about?" The strident tones of the woman's voice followed Piemur as he careered away.

When he could run no more for the stitch in his side and the lack of breath, he dared no more than pause until he'd gotten his wind. He did stop longer when he came to a stream, rinsed his mouth out with the tepid water and then splashed it about his heated face and head.

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A noise, to his apprehensive mind like the querying note of a fire lizard, set him off again, after nearly falling into the stream. He plunged on, tripped twice, curling his body each time as he fell to protect the egg; but the third time he fell, he had reached the end of his resources. He crawled out of the line of the faint path to a place well under the broad leaves of a flowering bush and probably slept even before his labored breathing quietened.

Lord Meron and his curious generosity with fire lizard eggs that only hatched greens.

If Lord Meron's appearance gave the lie to rumors that the man was dead or dying, it was apparent to Sebell's sharp eyes that the Lord Holder needed the support of the two men who walked beside him, arms linked in his. Some of his heirs, Sebell heard whispered in glum and disgusted tones.

When the roasted beasts were being sliced for distribution to the Gather crowd, Sebell did begin to search for Piemur. Surely the boy wouldn't miss free meat at Lord Meron's expense. Not that the beasts were juicy, probably the oldest creatures in the Hold herds, Sebell thought, endlessly chewing on his portion. He had placed himself at an end table about the Gather square where Piemur ought to be able to see him.

By the time the dancing started, Sebell began to worry. N'ton would be returning for them at full dark, and he didn't want to impose on the bronze dragonrider by requiring him to wait about or return at a later time.

It was then that Sebell wondered if Piemur had some-

sent her then to the allotment, in case Piemur had gone there to wait. When that errand too was fruitless, Sebell appropriated a handy, fast-looking runner beast from the picket lines and made his way to their original meeting place, on the off-chance that Piemur had returned there, to wait for him and N'ton.

Though Sebell searched the valley carefully, he found no trace of his young friend. He was forced to admit that something had indeed happened to Piemur. He couldn't imagine what, nor why Piemur, or whoever the lad might have crossed, had not sent for him as Piemur's master. He sped back to the Hold, retied his borrowed mount, and reached the Gather just as news of the theft of the queen egg rippled through the crowds. Feelings were mixed as that news spread; anger from those who had received lesser eggs, and amusement that someone had outsmarted Lord Meron. By the time Sebell got to the Hold gates, no one was being allowed in or out. Glowbaskets shone on empty courtyards, and every window of the Hold was brilliant with light. Sebell watched with the rest of the curious gatherers while even the ash and refuse pits were

from the Hold's glows. Surely if the boy had only fallen asleep, the noise would rouse him.

It was only when word filtered through the crowd that some unknown drudge had made off with the precious egg that Sebell came to the startling conclusion that that drudge could have been Piemur. How the boy had managed to enter the guarded Hold, Sebell couldn't figure out, but trust Piemur to find a way. Certainly it was like the boy to steal a fire lizard egg, given the opportunity. A queen egg at that! Piemur never did anything by halves. Sebell chuckled to himself and then sent Kimi flying with

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the other agitated fire lizards to see if she could discover where Piemur was hiding.

She returned and conveyed to Sebell that she couldn't get close to Piemur. It was too dark and too full. When Sebell questioned her for details, she grew distressed and repeated the image of darkness and her inability to reach the boy.

The frenzy of the search mounted. Guards were now dispatched on fast runners up every road leading from the

the glows, but despite the fact that the guards endlessly searched and researched the Hold and yards, their efforts proved vain. Delighted with Piemur's elusiveness, Sebell settled himself to wait out the night in the shadowy corner of the first cot below the ramp. He had a good view of the guards and, by carefully looking over the ramp wall, could see most of the courtyard.

He was roused from a half-doze by the shouts and angry muttering as the guards prodded those who had lingered about the gates back down toward the Gather area.

"Go on now," the guards kept saying. "Go to your cots or your allotments. You'll be allowed to leave in the morning. No need to linger here. Go on with you, now!"

The moons had set, and gone, too, were all the glowbaskets that had illuminated the courtyards. Even the Hold was in darkness, though some light seeped through the shutters of the Lord Holder's apartments on the first level. Curling himself into a tight ball in the shadows, Sebell hid his face and hands and ordered Kimi to tell Tris to be quiet and for both to keep their eyes closed.

When the guards disappeared, he wondered what was

dragons; furthermore, dragons that neither fire lizard.knewl Just as that image faded in his mind, Sebell heard

the sound of dragon wings. Gliding from the northern shadows of the Hold cliff, he saw the black bulks of four dragons, wing on wing. Two settled neatly into the kitchen courtyard while the other pair landed in the main yard. Sebell heard hushed commands and then an unusual, muted hubbub. Grunts and muffled oaths punctuated the activity. Sebell was considering moving out of his protective shadows for a better view when he heard a heavy groan, the unmistakable scrabble of talons on stone, and the equally identifiable swoosh of mighty wings making a powerful downstroke.

In the one band of light in the kitchen courtyard he saw the belly of a heavily laden bronze dragon struggling to rise, his sides bulging. No sooner had the first one cleared, than the second dragon launched himself skyward. The two in the main courtyard moved to the kitchen yard. More activity ensued, conducted with hoarse whispers and low voiced commands.

All during this, Kimi and Tris shivered, clinging to Se-

dark comer, warning the two fire lizards to close their eyes as he hid his face and hands again.

After moments of boot scuffing and muttered phrases, there was silence. Cautiously raising his head, he saw that the guards were back in position and that the glowbaskets again glowed on ramp and Hold walls, illuminating the roads leading up to the Hold. He was trapped in his shadowy comer. Nor did he dare to send Kimi or Tris from him, for their flight would surely be noticed when there

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wasn't another fire lizard to be seen. With a sigh, he settled himself as comfortably as he could, Kimi draped warmly about his shoulders, and Tris curled at his side. He couldn't have slept very long before he was rudely awakened by the boom of the message drums. "Urgent to the Healer! Lord Meron very ill. Masterharper required. Urgent! Urgent 1 Urgent!"

Had they then caught Piemur and, recognizing him, summoned Master Robinton to account for the misbehavior of one of his apprentices? Lord Meron would like nothing better than to be able to humiliate Master Robinton, for

of the big message drums and now wheeled about in the glowlight. Sebell unwrapped Kinai's tail from his neck, and holding her slender body in his hands, compelled her to look at him while he gave her directions to Menolly. He thought hard about clean clothes and imaged himself dressed in harper blue. Kimi chirruped understandingly and, after stroking his chin with her head, launched herself up. Tris chirped questioningly, tugging at Sebell's sleeve. N'ton would be a good ally, but strictly speaking the Fort 'Weyrleader had no genuine business here since Nabol was beholden to T'bor of the High Reaches Weyr. So Sebell looked deeply into Tris's lightly whirling eyes, thought hard that N'ton need not come to the valley, and sent the little brown back to his friend at Fort Weyr.

The message drum boomed a repeat, emphasizing again the urgency. Sebell strained his ears for the relay drums at the next point, but a handful of guards quick-stepped down the road toward the Gather and their passing masked the distant sounds.

Dawn was just breaking when Sebell, scanning the lightening skies, saw a dragon emerge. As the creature circled

enough to please her, she hovered at his shoulder and tugged at his dirty tunic, darting off again toward the meadow.

"I understand, of course. I'm tired, that's why I'm slow, Kimi," he said. Sticking to the shadows, he skirted the cot and started down the deserted road until he was far enough away from the guards. Then he picked up his feet and ran down the deserted road toward the new arrivals. He reached them just as the blue dragon left.

"Ah, Sebell," said the Masterharper, for all the world as if he were welcoming his journeyman into his rooms at the Harper Hall instead of surreptitiously meeting on a dark meadow in early dawn. "Menolly, hand him his clothes. He can tell us what has been happening while he changes. Is Lord Meron so desperately ill?"

"Probably. Of temper if nothing else," replied Sebell, stripping off his tunic and getting a shower of dust and grit in his hair and face. "He walked the Gather last evening . . ."

"He what!" exclaimed Master Oldive, cocking his head up at Sebell in surprise.

no longer amused.

"I don't know. Master. Kimi located Piemur in the Hold, but she couldn't explain where, said she couldn't get to him because it was too dark. I know the guards spent hours searching the Hold. Presumably they know it better than Piemur could. But—" Sebell paused. "I'm bloody certain they would have made some sort of commotion if they had found him and recovered that egg."

"Nothing would give Lord Meron more satisfaction than to force me to punish an apprentice thieving in his Hold."

"The message clearly states that Lord Meron is ill," said Master Oldive. "If he was foolhardy enough to walk his Gather and then agitate himself over the loss of a queen egg, he could indeed be very ill in his condition."

"It's accepted fact among the Naboese," said Sebell, gratefully throwing aside his herdsman's cracked boots, which had rubbed his heels raw, "that the man's dying." He glanced up at Oldive and saw the Healer's head move affirmatively.

"Did you find out whom the Naboese prefer as heir?"

them . . ." and he paused to give his words more weight, ". . . are green."

"Green?" Menolly swung on him in surprise.

"Yes, green."

"You mean," Menolly went on, "he's been distributing eggs from green fire lizard clutches? Why, the bloody beast!"

"On top of that insult, a lot of the eggs don't hatch at all, so you can imagine how little his generosity endears Lord Meron to the recipients," Sebell added grimly. "Of more importance," and Sebell held up his hand to forestall her angry words, "just after moonset, four dragons landed right in the courtyards and lifted off again so heavily laden you could hear their wings creaking!" Sebell grinned at the expressions of shock from his companions. "Further, Kimi didn't know those dragons and their presence frightened her."

"Now that is the most interesting piece of news you've given me," remarked the Master Harper.

He said no more because they had reached the foot of the ramp to the Hold and the group of men waiting there

all possible dispatch. As I'm sure Master Oldive will tell you, there is no time to be lost. . . ." The others exclaimed in support of his words. "I fear that after the alarms and excitements of this night, the poor man cannot long survive. But come, we must hurry." Then he took the Harper by the arm and urged him toward the Hold.

"Alarms and excitements? Ah, yes, you had a Gather yesterday. . . ." Master Robinton was saying.

"I can't thank you enough for responding. Master Oldive," said Berdine falling in step with the Healer as the others followed Hittet and Master Robinton across the Court. "I know you said that there was nothing more you could do for Lord Meron, but the truth of the matter is that he has sadly taxed what strength was left him. I

warned him, oh I did most explicitly, that he ought not walk the Gather, but he was adamant. Had to reassure his holders. I think that would have been safe enough, but then he insisted on having guests in his apartments ... so much excitement. And then, to discover the queen egg had been stolen!" Berdine fluttered his hands in distress. "Oh my, oh my. I was beside myself trying to calm him. He

"A drudge stealing an egg?" asked the Harper, as if he didn't believe his ears.

"Yes, if you must know," began Hittet, still glaring at the indiscreet healer. "Lord Meron was recently given a clutch of fire lizard eggs, one of which was thought to be
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a queen egg. He naturally took the best care of such prizes, kept them on his own hearth. He has had a lot of experience with fire lizards, you see. He was to distribute the eggs to deserving people as the high point of the Gather Feast. When his rooms were being freshened, one of the kitchen drudges had the audacity to steal the queen egg. How, we can't yet understand. But it's gone, and that wicked lad is somewhere in the Hold." Hittet's tone augured ill for Piemur when he was found.

None of the Nabolese noticed Beauty, Zair and Kind peeling off from airy escort and darting out an open window as the group traversed the Main Hall. Sebell gave Menolly's hand a reassuring squeeze. She didn't look at him, but her lips curved slightly in a smile of relief.

"You can appreciate how upset Lord Meron was when

his physical handicap or dignity.

Master Robinton also quickened his pace until the fat Hittet was forced to run to keep up. Sebell and Menolly deliberately slowed, to give their fire lizards a chance to range through the Hold and locate Piemur.

"If you could know how good it is to see a friendly face," said Candler, quite willing to match their laggard advance to the Lord's apartments. "If anyone can make that dreadful man see reason, it's Master Robinton. Lord Meron won't name an heir. That's why he collapsed, to avoid it. He was furious about the egg theft, to be sure, but while they were searching, he was more like himself—totally disagreeable and planning all kinds of fiendish punishments when they caught the drudge. Frankly, Sebell, he wants the Hold in contention. You know how he hates Benden. And now," and Candler laughed sourly, "none of the relatives who've been badgering him to name one of them wants to be the heir. I don't know why. They

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changed their tune abruptly this morning. Just as well." Candler snorted with disgust. "Any one of the lot would

"Oh, the carter." He gave a mirthless laugh. "I suppose he could be considered an heir, couldn't he? Grand-nephew, isn't he? Forgot about him. "Which is probably Deckter's doing. Said he could make more money carting than he could holding. He's probably right. How'd you know about him?"

"Looked up the Nabol bloodline."

Beauty flitted back, skimming so close to Candler that he ducked. Rocky, Zair and Kimi followed her, all chattering in some distress. All had the same message: Piemur was not in the Hold. Sebell and Menolly exchanged glances.

"Would he have hidden somewhere outside?" Menolly asked..Sebell gave a quick shake of his head. "Kimi couldn't find him."

"Rocky and Beauty have been much closer to Piemur than Kimi."

"Can't hurt to try!"

"Piemur?" asked Candler, mystified by this cryptic exchange.

"I've reason to believe that-the theft was accomplished

And Piemur here, too? On harper business? I thought it odd for one of Meron's drudges to have so much initiative.

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Well, I'll tell you one thing, Piemur is not in this Hold.**

"How could he have gotten out?" asked Sebell. "I was just beyond the ramp all night. Even if I didn't see him, Kimi would have."

They had reached the Lord's apartments now, and Candler opened the door, gesturing them to precede him.

"What's that smell?" asked Menolly softly, grimacing in distaste.

"Smell? Oh, you get used to it. Disgusting, I know, but it has something to do with Lord Meron's illness. We try to mask it," and Candler gestured to the sweet candles alight in containers about the room. "I often think that it's only justice," he added in a careful whisper, "for the suffering he's given others, but it's a terrible way to die."

"I thought Master Oldive had given him . . ." Sebell began.

"Oh, he has. The strongest there is, according to Berdine. But the medicine only dulls the pain."

Lords Oterel, Nessel and Borgen, and to Weyrleader T'bor.

Would they please attend us here at Nabol immediately.

Double urgency on the beat, please."

"Yes, sir," said Sebell with such unexpected vigor that Master Robinton gave him a mild second look. But Sebell turned on his heel and walked swiftly out of the apartments, motioning as he passed them for Candler and Menolly to come with him. "I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier, Menolly. If Piemur got out of the Hold and is hiding somewhere in the hills, he'll surface to a drum message aimed at him. Lead us to your drumheights, Candler."

The big message drums needed only to be uncovered, Sebell stood for a moment, beaters poised over the taut hide as he composed his message. The opening roll boomed across the valley, the urgent measure following as the last echoes died. Then Sebell, eyes half-closed in concentration,

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beat out the recipients' names, the Harper's request, and the urgent measures once again to insure immediate reply and attention. Menolly positioned herself at the window then, ears straining to catch the pass-along roll from the

odor in Lord Meron's rooms.

"Of course, of course. I apologize for not offering sooner." Candler was away down the stairs.

Sebell picked up the sticks again and beat a quick measure. "Apprentice. Report. Urgent." He waited a few breaths and then repeated the measure.

"If he's anywhere between here and Ruatha or Crom, he'll hear that," Sebell said, carefully replacing the drumsticks on their hooks before he joined Menolly at the window.

Her face was sad and her brows constricted in a tiny frown as she gazed across the huddle of cots below the

Hold ramp and over the disorganized Gather square, still tenanted by those unwillingly held over by the emergency. Few sounds wafted to their ears at this height, and the scene was unrealistically calm.

"Don't fret over Piemur, Menolly," Sebell said, trying to sound more lighthearted than he felt. "He has a knack of landing on his feet." He smiled down at her, allowing himself the luxury of putting his arm lightly about her shoulders.

know he's as devious as Meroni"

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"I wish I could believe you, Sebell," Menolly said sighing heavily, but she leaned trustingly against him for his comfort. "If he was anywhere in the vicinity. Beauty and Rocky ought to have found him."

"He's somewhere," replied Sebell firmly, and daring more than ever, he gave her a quick hug, turning abruptly from her as he caught her startled look. "The wretch!" he added, more of a growl than a comment. At that moment, they both heard the message drum roll across the mountains, and Sebell hastily strode back to the drums.

Candler arrived, just as Sebell beat "receive" for the last of the messages. The Nabol Harper was panting with the exertion of his climb, for he carried not only a well-laden tray, but a full wine skin slung over his shoulder. The three harpers had time to make a leisurely meal before the first of the visitors arrived. The harpers then escorted the Lord Holders and T'bor to the Master Harper.

Sebell almost gagged and lost his breakfast when he brought Lords Holder Nessel and Barga into Lord Mer-

fur rug that covered him, were claws with

hanging bags of flesh between the knuckles. It was as if, Sebell thought, all life was centered in those hands, feebly holding onto life through the hair of the fur.

"So, I'm granted my own private gather, is that it?

Well, I've no welcome for any of you. Go away. I'm dying.

That's what you all wished me to do these past Turns.

Leave me to it."

"You've not named your successor," said Lord Oterel bluntly.

"I'll die before I do."

"I think we must persuade you to change your mind on that count," said the Masterharper in a quiet, amiable tone.

"How?" Lord Meron's snarl was smug in his self-assurance.

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"There is friendly persuasion. ..."

"If you think I'll name a successor just to make things easy for you and those dregs at Benden, think again!" The force of that remark left the man gasping against his props, one hand feebly beckoning to Master Oldive, whose atten-

an implacable voice, "we can do ... nothing ... to a dying man."

Sebell heard Menolly's catch of breath as she understood what Master Robinton had in mind to force this issue with Lord Meron. Berdine started to protest, but was silenced by a growl from Lord Oterel. The healer turned appeal-

ingly to Master Oldive, whose eyes had never left the face of the Harper. Although Sebell had known how desperately Master Robinton wished for a peaceful succession in this Hold, he had not appreciated the steel in his pacific Master's will. Nabol Hold must not come into contention, not with every Holder's younger sons eager and willing to fight to the death to secure even as ill-managed a Hold as this. Such fighting could go on and on, until no more challengers presented themselves. What little prosperity Nabol enjoyed would have been wasted in the meantime with no one holding the lands properly.

"What do you mean?" Meron's voice rose to a shriek.

"Master Oldive, attend me. Now!"

Master Oldive turned to the Lords Holder and bowed.

"I understand, my Lords, that there are many seeking my

ony! Something inside is burning through my vitals. It won't stop until it's eaten me to a shell. I must have medicine. I must have it!"

"We must have the name of your successor." Lord Oterel's voice was pitiless.

Master Robinton began to name the male relatives, his voice expressionless as he intoned the list. When he had completed it, he recited it again.

"You've forgotten one. Master," Sebell said in a respectful tone. "Deckter."

"Deckter?" The Harper turned slightly toward Sebell, his brows raised in surprise at being corrected.

"Yes, sir. A grand-nephew."

"Oh." The Harper sounded surprised, at the same time dismissing the man with a flick of his fingers. He repeated the list to Lord Meron, now mouthing obscenities as he writhed on his bed. Deckter was added as an afterthought.

Then the Harper paused, looking inquiringly at Lord Meron, who responded with another flow of invective, demanding Oldive's presence at the top of his voice. Again, the effort rendered him momentarily exhausted. He lay

Sebell watched Meron's eyes widen with growing horror as he finally realized that he would have no surcease from the pain of his body until he did name a successor, confronted as he was by men who had excellent reason for hating him. i

Sebell also noted that T'bor forgot to mention Deckter. So did Lord Oterel when he took his turn. Lord Bargaen recited the name first, with a glance at Oterel for his omission.

Sebell knew he would always remember this bizarre and macabre scene with horror as well as with a certain awful respect. He had long known that Master Robinton would use unexpected methods to maintain order throughout

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Pem and to uphold the leadership of Benden Weyr, but he had never expected such ruthlessness in the other-wise gentle and compassionate Robinton. He schooled his mind away from the stink and closeness of the room, from Meron's pain, by trying to appreciate the tactics that were being used as Lord Meron was deftly maneuvered into choosing the one man the others preferred among his heirs

mented him.

The instant he spoke Deckter's name. Master Oldive, who had gone no further than the next room, came to give the man relief.

"Perhaps it was a terrible cruelty to inflict on anyone,".Master Oldive told the Lords when they left Meron in a

drugged stupor, "but the ordeal has also hastened his end.

Which can only be a mercy. I don't think he can last another day."

The other heirs, Hittet the most vocal, now barged in from the entry room, demanding to know why they had been excluded from their kinsman's presence, berating the Lord Holders and Master Robinton for this unconscionable delay and finally remembering to ask if Lord Meron had indeed named an heir. When they were told of Deckter, their reactions were compounds of relief, consternation, disappointment and then incredulity. Sebell extricated Menolly from the knot of chattering relatives and guided her to the steps down to the Main Hall and out of the Hold where they could breathe the fresh, untainted air. A considerable and silent crowd lined the ramp, held

had named his successor. A curious rippling groan came from the crowd as if they expected the worst and were steeling themselves. So Sebell grinned as he called out Deckter's name. The multiple gasp of astonishment turned into a spate of relieved cheers. Sebell then told the head guard to send for the honored man, and half the crowd followed the messengers of this mixed fortune.

"I don't see Piemur," said Menolly in a low anxious voice, her eyes continually scanning. "Surely with us here, he'd come forward."

"Yes, he would. And since he hasn't . . ." Sebell looked about the courtyard. "I wonder . . ." As he twisted slowly in a circle, he realized that there would have been no way for Piemur to climb out of the Hold yards. Not even a fire lizard could claw its way up the cliff above the Hold's windows. Especially not in the dark and encumbered by a fragile fire lizard egg. His eyes were drawn by the ash and refuse pits, but he distinctly remembered their being vigorously spear-searched. His glance traveled upward and paused on the small window. "Menolly!" He grabbed her by the hand and started pulling her toward

His reaction told Sebell exactly what he needed to know.

"The supplies for the Southern Weyr were stored in that room, weren't they?"

The guard stared straight ahead of him, lips pressed firmly together, but the flush in his face was a giveaway.

Laughing with relief, Sebell half-ran toward the kitchen yard, Menolly eagerly following him.

"You think Piemur hid himself among the stuff for the Oldtimers?" Menolly asked.

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"It's the only answer that suits the circumstances. Menolly," said Sebell. He halted right in front of the ashpit and pointed to the wall that separated the two pits. "That wouldn't be too high a jump for an agile lad, would it?"

"No, I wouldn't think so. And just like Piemur! But, Sebell, that would mean he's in the Southern Veyr!"

"Yes it would, wouldn't it," said Sebell, unutterably relieved that the mystery of Piemur's disappearance could be explained. "C'mon. We'll send a message to Toric to be on the lookout for that rascal. I think Kimi knows Southern

where he was or why he ached and his guts rumbled.

He sat bolt upright as he remembered and felt inside his tunic for the beragged egg. He tore the covering in his frenzy to check the precious shell and was trembling with relief when he' touched its warm shape. The quick tropical dusk was nearly on him, the vivid glimmer of the sun

coating the foliage about him with gold. He heard the lap of water and, peering toward the sound, realized that he was close to a beach. The call of a nest-homing wherry startled him as he crept stiffly from under his bush. He knew he'd have little time and light to settle the egg in warm sand for the night. He staggered to the beach, praying it would be a sandy one, crying out in relief when he saw that it was, dropping to his knees to burrow into the warm sand and bury the egg safely.

Wearily he built a pile of rocks to mark the spot and then pulled himself back to the jungle, using the light to locate a tree with orange fruit. The Erst few he batted down from the branches with a long stick were too hard to be edible, another fell with a liquid splot. He scooped up the overripe fruit and swallowed it down, grimacing at the

fire lizards and then dragons flew overhead. He was too close to the Weyr, he realized, and he would have to move

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on. But first, something to eat: more orange fruit and redfruit, which seemed to grow in profusion. He also picked up several dried hulls, one for carrying water and another for carrying his fire lizard egg buried in warm beach sand.

When he saw fire lizards and dragons returning to the Weyr, he waited for a spell before he retrieved his egg, packing it well in the hot sands, and headed westward, away from the Veyr.

Afterward, he never could figure out why he felt the Weyr and the Southern Hold were dangerous to him. He just felt he ought to avoid any contact with them, certainly until his egg had hatched and he had Impressed his own fire lizard. It wasn't logical, really, but he'd endured a harrowing experience, had already been in the role of the hunted, and so he continued to run.

The first moon rose early and full, lighting his way along the shore, up the rocky banks and steep sand dunes.

persevered until both moons had set and the darkness forced him to seek refuge under the trees, where he'd be safely hid if he slept and dawn came before he knew. He woke when a snake crawled over his legs, scraping against his bare skin where the trousers had been torn. He clutched feverishly at the egg, for snakes liked fire lizard eggs. The sand about his precious possession was cool and that brought him to his feet. He emerged onto a small cove, baking in a midmorning sun. He scooped out a hole and buried his egg, marking the spot with the upturned fruit shell ringed by beach stones. Then he returned to the jungle to seek his breakfast and water.

The diet of fresh raw fruit was affecting his digestion, and he spent some uncomfortable moments before he realized he would have to have something else to eat. He remembered what Menolly had said about fishing from her

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cave in the Dragon Stones, but he hadn't so much as a line. Then he noticed the thick vines clinging to tree trunks and viewed the thorns on the orange fruit trees with new sight. Using his belt knife and a little ingenuity, he shortly had

fish, though he had pulls on several occasions that lost him his bait. When he finally hauled in a medium-sized yellow-tail he had every right to be jubilant and think longingly of roast fish. But as he rose from his cramped position and turned, he realized he'd been very stupid. His rock was now isolated from the cove's arm by active surf, With a shock, he realized his second mistake: he had buried the egg in sands that would shortly be underwater. His yellow-tail was considerably mangled by the time he had paddled, jumped and splashed ashore. His immersion in salt water had disclosed another shortsightedness on his part: his face, particularly his nose and the tips of his ears, had been badly sunburned, as well as the parts of his body showing through rents in his tunic.

He rescued his egg first, burying it in the shell with the hottest sands he could scoop about it. Then he hurried on to the next cove and a spot well above an obvious high-tide mark.

It took him time, too, to find rocks that would spark and light his fire of dried grasses and twigs. Eventually, he got enough of a blaze and he stretched the gutted yellow-

had such a wait, fishing at midday.

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His face and hands burned now from too much sun, so he hiked deep into the woods that lined the beach, looking for fresh water, for ripe fruit, and seeing in the luxurious undergrowth, familiar, but oddly outsized, leaves of tuber plants. Experimentally he yanked on a handful of stems and up came a huge tuber root, which he dropped when he saw the small gray grubs that swarmed over it. But they disappeared quickly back into the rich loam, leaving clean the enormous white tuber. Suspiciously Piemur picked it up and examined it from all sides. It looked all right, even if it was much bigger than any tuber he'd ever seen. He was certainly hungry enough to eat all of it.

Taking it back to his dying fire, he fed the flame to a good height, washed the tuber in some of his precious fresh water, and sliced it thinly. He toasted the first slice on the end of his knife and broke off a tiny piece for judicious tasting. Maybe it was his hunger, but he decided he'd never tasted such a delicious tuber, crisp on the outside and just soft enough on the inside. He made quick work of

warm sand.

He walked that night again until both moons had set.

When he found a place to sleep on dried tree fronds, he arranged himself so that the rising sun would shine in his face and wake him. That way, he would be up in time to catch fish.

He followed this routine for two more days and nights, until the last night he realized that for some time he had seen no fire lizards nor dragons, nor any other living creature, except windborne wild wherries soaring high above the ground. He told himself that the next day, as soon as he found fresh water and a good cove with a wide sandy beach well above high-water markings with convenient fishing points, he would settle. The egg was perceptibly hardening and surely must be close to hatching time.

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That evening he began to wonder why he had continued moving away from hold and Weyr. Of course, it was kind of fun, discovering each new cove and the vast stretches of sandy beach and rocky strand. To be accountable to no one except himself was also a new experience.

mindful of Menolly's experience with the tough, oily flesh as he gutted it. He smeared oil on face and body to ease the rough skin the sun had burned, reasoning that if Menolly had used fish oil for her fire lizards' flaking hides, it would do for his as well.

Retrieving and inspecting his precious egg, he was now certain it must be close to hatching, the shell was so rock hard. He packed it in the fruit shell with warm sand and proceeded westward, striking off through the shadier forest for a while.

At midmorning he stumbled out of the shade onto a wide expanse of gleaming white sand that forced him to squint against its glare. Shading his eyes, he saw a lagoon, partially sealed off from the sea by a jagged barrier of massive rocks, which must once have been the original coastline. Carefully climbing along that rocky arm, he could see all kinds of fish and crawlers in the clear water, trapped there after the higher tides had retreated. Just what he needed, his own private fishing pond. He retraced his steps and continued along the beach. Parallel to the

preparations for that event now. It wouldn't do to miss

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Impressing simply because he had no food for the hatchling.

He had seen neither fire lizards nor dragons in the sky for the past two days, so afterward he thought that might be why he had given no thought to Thread. In hindsight he realized that he had known perfectly well that Thread fell on the southern half of Pern just as it did in the North. His preoccupation with the fire lizard egg and his efforts to supply himself with food had simply divorced him from the concerns and memories of life in craft and hall.

He was fishing that dawn, lying prone on the grass pad he had made to protect his bare chest from the harsh rock surfaces when he experienced a sudden sense of alarm so intense that he glanced over his right shoulder and saw in horror the gray rain hissing into the sea not a dragon's length beyond.

He remembered later that he glanced for the reassuring sight of flaming dragons just before he realized that he

gulped air into his lungs.

His shoulders were stung while he fell back under the water. He pushed himself down, down again. But before long, he had to repeat the cycle of emerging, gulping air into his laboring lungs, then retreating to a depth that was free of viable Thread. He'd done this six or seven times before he realized that he couldn't sustain such activity for the length of Threadfall. He was dizzy with lack of oxygen, pinpointed by Threadscore that burned and stung in the salty water. Menolly had at least had a cave in which to shelter and.

. . .

If he could find it, if it were sufficiently above the surface of the lagoon at this time of the tide, there was an overhanging rock. . . . He desperately tried to place its location on the lagoon arm the next time he surfaced, but he could barely see with eyes red and stinging. He was never sure in the mist of panic and anoxia how he found that meager shelter. But he did. He scraped his cheek, right hand and shoulder in the process, but when the redness cleared from his eyes, his nose and mouth were above water and his head and shoulders protected by a narrow roof of

more shone in unoccluded splendor on a peaceful scene.

The terrified core of his soul, however, was slower to acknowledge that danger was over, and he remained in the shelter of the ledge until the tide had receded, leaving him stranded like a white fish on his portion of the reef.

Anxiety for his egg finally drove him from his sanctuary to check it in its beachy nest. The first scoop of sand he threw violently from him for it contained hundreds of the gray, squirming grubs. They reminded him so forcefully of Thread that he scrubbed his hands against his sides. Could Thread have penetrated the egg? He dug frantically until he reached it. He caressed the warm shell in relief. Surely it would hatch any time now!

Abruptly he hoped it wouldn't happen just now. He had no fish handy, and with their bellies full, he doubted if he'd catch any before sundown. If then. And how would he know precisely when the egg was going to hatch? Dragons always knew when a clutch was ready and warned their riders. Menolly said her fire lizards began to hum and their eyes whirled purple-red. He had no such forecasters to aid him.

His fingers trembled so that he had to pause. He, Piemur of ... well, he wasn't a herdsman's boy anymore, and he wasn't a harper's apprentice either . . . Piemur . . . Piemur of Pern. He, Piemur of Pern, he went on more confidently, had survived Threadfall holdless. He straightened his shoulders and smiled broadly as he glanced proudly across his lagoon. Piemur of Pern had survived Threadfall! He had overcome considerable obstacles to secure a queen fire lizard egg. It would hatch, and he would, at long last, have a fire lizard all his own! He glanced fondly at the mound in the sand that was his little queen.

Was he certain, though, that it was a queen? Doubt assailed him briefly. If it wasn't, it might be a bronze and that was every bit as good. But it had to be a queen egg, separated as it had been from the others warming by Lord Meron's fire.

Piemur chuckled at his own stupidity. He ought to have realized that Lord Meron would present the eggs as the climax to his feasting. Of course, the recipients would check, out of joy. Or maybe, out of distrust for Lord Meron's generosity. He really ought to have gotten out of the

Nabol Hold? He was a bit surprised that Sebell hadn't sent Kimi or Menolly's Rocky to look. But then, how was anyone to know where he was? North or south? And fire lizards had to have directions, just like dragons. Sebell might not have learned that Lord Meron was dealing with the Southerners, or that there had been a collection that night. A splash in the lagoon attracted his attention. The fish were back with the tide. He rose and made his way across the exposed rocks, affectionately patting the ledge that had sheltered him.

It took him longer than usual to catch a fish that eve-

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ning. And he only landed a small yellowtail, too small to satisfy his hunger, much less provide for a voracious hatchling. Soon the rising tide would isolate him on this section of the lagoon so if he didn't hook shortly, he'd have to retreat to where the fishing was always poorer..Controlling his impa-

tience as best he could, for Piemur

was certain that the fish heard sound, else why were they avoiding his hook, he also held his breath as he jerked his line in an imitation of live bait. That's when the curious

hand jerked. In a panic of comprehension, he nearly let go but a reflex prompted him to haul the line in rapidly, rising to his feet as he did so, his eyes on the beach.

Something moved on the sand. Near his egg! A sand-snake? He picked up the first yellowtail, poked a finger in the gills of the hooked one, and made for the beach. Nothing was going to. ...

Surprise and consternation halted him for one panic-filled instant as he saw the cause of the motion; a tiny glistening golden creature flapping awkwardly across the sands, piteously screaming. "Wild wherries materialized in the sky, drawn by some uncanny magnet to this birth moment.

"All you have to do is feed a hatchling!" Menolly's calm advice rang in his ears as he stumbled across the sand and nearly fell on the tiny queen. He fumbled at his belt for his knife to cut up the fish. "Use pieces about the size of your thumb or else the hatchlings will choke."

Even as he tried to cut through tough fish scale, the little fire lizard darted forward, screaming with hunger.

"No. No. You'll choke to death," cried Piemur, pulling

queen and Piemur's knife. He managed to keep just a slice ahead of her voracity. When his knife opened the softer fish gut, she pounced, mumbling in her haste to consume it. Piemur wasn't certain if fish entrails, full of Thread no.doubt, were a suitable diet for a newly hatched fire lizard,

but it gave him time to cut more flesh.

He started on the second yellowtail, putting it first to occupy her while he hacked rapidly at the flesh. He knew one was supposed to hold the fire lizard while one fed it, to form the Impression, but he didn't see how he could contrive that until he had food enough to coax her into his hand.

Finished with the offal, she turned back to him, her rainbow eyes glaring at him as they whirled redly with hunger. She gave a scream, opened her still wet wings and dove on the small mound of fish pieces. He caught her first, holding her body firmly just under the wings and then proceeded to feed her piece by piece until she stopped struggling in his grasp. The edge of her hunger assuaged, she paused long enough to chew, and her voice took on a new, softer note. He loosened his hold and began to stroke

sun, frightening the wherries into wider, higher circles.

Wild wherries were dangerous, and he and the hatchling were unprotected on the open beach. He gathered her carefully into the crook of his arm, grabbed the line from which the fishhead still depended and started to run toward the jungle.

She shrieked in protest as he broke into a full run just as the wherry leader made its first pass. He sliced upward with his knife, but the wherry was clever and, adding its piercing scream to the fire lizard's, veered away from him.

Holding the struggling queen against his chest, Piemur hunched his shoulders and concentrated on reaching the forest as fast as he could. He'd always prided himself on his speed: right now that ability had to save two lives.

He saw the shadow of another wherry dive at them and swerved to the left, grinning with satisfaction at its shrill call of anger when it was balked of its prey.

The queen's talons might not be dry but they scabbled painfully against his bare chest as she struggled to grab the fishhead that dangled enticingly from the line in his hand.

Piemur ducked right as he avoided a third wherry's dive,

had fallen and was at their mercy.

The little queen was now aware of their peril and slipping from his grasp, jumped to his shoulder, spreading her wings and screaming defiance at the attackers. She was so valiant, the little darling, so small in comparison to the wherries that her courage gave Piemur the impetus he needed. He scrambled to his feet, felt her cling to his hair, her tail tightly wound about his neck, continuing her stream of defiant cries as if by her fury she could repel their attackers.

Piemur ran then, pumping his legs as fast as he could, his lungs straining for breath to sustain the speed. He ran, expecting momentarily to feel the wherry talons rending his flesh. But abruptly their cries turned from triumph to fear. Piemur launched himself into the thick bushes, grabbing at his queen to keep her secure. Safe under the wide leaves and among the thick stalks, he turned to see what had frightened their pursuers. The wherries were flying away as fast as they could flap their wings, and he had to crane his neck eastward until he saw a flight of fire lizards arrowing in pursuit of the wherries. Just as he drew back

enshelled. Without waiting to see if the dragons landed, Piemur pushed his way deeper into the jungle, trying to remember if Menolly had ever said anything about fire lizards tracing newly batched ones.

But fire lizards only knew what they'd seen, and he'd been undercover by the time the winged rescuers had reached the lagoon area. The wherries' shrieks would have masked any sound she'd made, and as Piemur plunged past thorn trees and undergrowth, her cries became softer. Weariness overcame the last vestiges of her shelling hunger.

Piemur was more aware of her contentedness than his rasping breath as he continued to put as much distance between him and the lagoon, and possible discovery, while light remained to guide him in the murky jungle.

In the same hour Kimi returned with a message from Tone, answering the Harper's query about young newcomers in the southern settlement, the drum beat the news of Lord Meron's death.

"Eight days it's taken him to die," said the Harper on the end of a long sigh, "when Master Oldive thought one."

"Determined to disoblige us, I imagine," said Sebell, dis-

strange shapes by the Weyrhold, so he suspects that a shipment has arrived from the north. They don't let the mere holders in the Weyr grounds to celebrate. So if Piemur smuggled himself out of Nabol Hold in one of the Oldtimers' sacks, he also got out of it and made himself scarce."

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"Which is sensible of Piemur," said the Harper, idly twirling his wine glass with one hand. His face was expressionless, but his eyes moved restlessly with his thoughts.

"Piemur would undoubtedly deem it discreet not to come to the Oldtimers' notice."

"At least not until that egg of his had hatched," added Menolly. She had so hoped that Piemur would have gone to Toric. She was Certain he would know that Toric was friendly with the harpers. She turned to Sebell. "Candler will let us know the instant the Other eggs from the clutch have hatched, won't he?"

"Yes, he said he would," the journeyman replied, but then he made a face, scratching his head. "But we don't know if that queen egg came from the same clutch as the Others."

sponsible for—". "But I feel responsible for Piemur," she said, and then shot her Master an apologetic look for interrupting him so rudely. "If I hadn't encouraged his interest in the fire lizards, if I hadn't filled his ears with the pleasures they bring, he might not have been tempted to steal that egg and get himself into such a predicament." She looked up because both men started to laugh, and she exclaimed with exasperation at their callousness.

"Menolly Piemur has been getting in and out of trouble since long before you arrived here," said Sebell. "You and your fire lizards calmed him down considerably. But I think you're right about Piemur not showing himself until Impression's been made. And Toric is on the alert for him. He'll show up."

"Meanwhile," said the Harper, rising from his chair and reaching for his flying gear, "I'd best go and assist the new Lord Deckter to secure his Hold."

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Chapter 9

Afterward, Piemur wasn't certain why he had run from the dragonriders. He seemed to have been running from or

Just as the sun was rising the next morning, she awoke him, snappy with hunger. He eased the worst of her pangs and his own with fresh redfruit, cool from the night air and succulently sweet. Then he turned north, to make his way back to the beaches and fish for Farii, for that was the name he gave his little queen. Pushing his way through the underbrush, he tripped over a half-eaten runner beast carcass. Farii chattered with delight and ate flesh from bone, humming at him in pleasure.

"You'll choke like that," he said, and proceeded to hack smaller pieces, keeping about one knife slice ahead of her voracious appetite.

When Farii had curled herself about Piemur's neck, thoroughly sated, her belly bulging, he sliced more meat from the dead runner. He figured the creature must have been killed during Threadfall so the meat wouldn't as yet be tainted. Not only would it be a welcome change for him from fish, but red meat was better for Farii as well. Comforted by her sleeping weight about his neck, Piemur found thick grasses and wove a rough envelope in which to carry the meat. He estimated he had enough for

this close now. . . .

He pushed his way through the thinning screen of trees and bush and came out on a small rise. Below him were wide tidelands, which swept from the forest in an undulating grassy plain, broken by thick clumps of a gray-green bush. The plain continued on the other side of a broad river, which gradually widened until, in a distant point now hazy with heat, it must open its mouth into the sea. A breeze, scented with an oddly familiar, pungent odor, dried the sweat on his face. Squinting against the sunlight, Piemur could see herdbeasts grazing on the lush grass on both sides of the river. And yet there'd been Thread here the day before, and no dragonriders flaming to prevent the deadly stuff burrowing into the ground and eating the land barren.

As if to reassure himself, he poked at the soil with one of the sticks he'd collected, lifting up a clod of grass. Grubs fell from the roots, and Piemur was suitably awed by the abilities of those little gray wriggles, which could, all by themselves, keep such an enormous plain free from the ravages of Thread. And those bloody Oldtimers hadn't so

moving current that rippled toward the sea. He'd have fresh water for drinking here as well as a retreat from Thread. The jungle behind him would provide fruit and tubers; the meadow's inhabitants red meat for Farii. There was no need to trek to the sea again. He could stay here until Farii had lost the worst of her hatchling appetite.

Then he'd better start back to the Southern Hold. If he was careful, he could avoid being noticed by the Oldtimers

until he'd made contact with the holder . . . what was his name? He was certain he'd heard Sebell mention the man by name. Toric! Yes, that was it. Toric.

He set about making a rough circle of stones to protect his fire from the breeze, whistling softly.' A fresh breeze brought him another whiff of that odor, sun-warmed and so puzzlingly familiar. Whatever it was must be down on the plain for the wind came from that direction. Leaving his meat to roast at his fire, Piemur made his way down the slope, looking about at the tiny blooms in among the grasses with Thread-pricked blades. He almost passed the first clump of bushes before he realized that their leaves were definitely familiar. Familiar, he thought as he reached

A petulant squeak in his ear warned him that Farii had roused, probably smelling the roasted meat. He carefully broke off some large numbweed leaves, and wrapping their cut stems in a thick blade of grass, returned to the fire.

"When he had given Farii a few half-done pieces of meat, she was quite content to curl up for the rest of her nap.

Then Piemur bruised a numbweed leaf between two flat, clean stones. He nibbed the wet side of the stones against his cuts, shivering at the slight sting of the raw numbweed before its anesthetic properties took effect. He was careful not to rub the stone too deep, for raw numbweed must be used sparingly or you could get horrible blisters and end up with scars.

As he settled by the fire to wait for his meat to cook, he knew he'd be sorry to leave here.

He said that to himself the next morning when he rose, and that evening when he curled up in the shelter he'd made for Parii and himself. He really ought to try to get word back to the Harper Hall.

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Each day, however, found him too busy catering to the

east, suddenly flicked out. When Piemur called her, she popped back in, scolded him furiously, and then disappeared. She had gone between before, inadvertently scared by some odd noise or other, so that it wasn't until she remained away for much longer than before that Piemur began to wonder what had frightened her. He looked northeast, noticing as his eyes swept across the plains, that the animals were all moving toward the river with considerable haste. The quick blossom of flame against the sky caught his eyes, and he saw, not only Thread's gray rain, but the distant motes of dragons.

He had made preparations against the next Pall of Thread, determined never to spend another eternity under a rock ledge. He had found a sunken tree trunk where the river flowed out of the forest. Diving into the water, he kicked down to the depth at which drowning Thread could no longer sting. There he hooked his arm around the tree trunk and poked back to the surface a thick reed, through which he then was able to breathe. It was not the most comfortable of hideaways, and fish constantly mistook his arms and legs for oversized Thread so he had to

shake themselves, and then rapidly take off down the plain. Some were bawling with pain, and he saw a number with bloody face scores where Thread had stung them. He
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also noticed some of the injured making to the numbweed brushes and rubbing against the leaves.

Piemur waded to the bank, calling for Farii -as he sank to the solid ground. His arms and legs felt leaden from his efforts to discourage fish from eating him.

Farii burst into view just above him, cluttering with relief and anxiety. She landed on his shoulder, wrapping her tail about his neck and stroking his cheek with her head, one paw wrapped around his ear, the other anchored to his nose. They comforted each other for a long moment. Then Piemur felt Farli's body go taut. She peered around his face and began to chatter angrily. Twisting about, at first Piemur saw nothing to alarm him. Farii loosed her hold on his nose, and he realized that she was pointing skyward. He saw the wherries then, circling high, and knew that something had not survived the Fall. If wherries were after it, it was something that would also feed him and his fire lizard.

under a large numbweed bush. To his surprise, it heaved upward, its bloodied flank crawling with grubs. The poor thing couldn't still be alive? He raised his stick to put an end to the creature's pain when he realized that the movement came from under the animal, spasmodic and desperate. Farii hopped from his shoulder and cluttered, touching a tiny protruding hoof that Piemur hadn't noticed.

It had been a female runner beast 1 With an exclamation, Piemur grabbed the hind legs and pulled the corpse from the youngster the female had given her life to protect from Thread. Bleating, it staggered to its feet, shedding a carpet of grubs, and hobbled the few steps to Piemur, its head and shoulders scored here and there by Thread.

Almost absently, Piemur stroked the furry head and scratched behind the ear cup, feeling its rough tongue licking his skin. Then he saw the long shallow scrape on the little beast's right leg.

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"So that's why you didn't make it to the river, huh, you poor stupid thing?" said Piemur, gathering it closer to him. "And your dam sheltered you with her body. Brave thing

wherries were closing in.

Farii was sated enough not to resist leaving the carcass.

Nor did she object when Piemur carried little Stupid back

to their forest shelter..As Piemur settled down to sleep that night, he had

Stu-

pid curled tightly against him along his back and Parii

draped across his shoulders. He had fully intended to use

the interval between this Fall and the next to make his way

to the Southern Hold, but he really couldn't leave Stupid,

crippled as well as motherless. The leg would heal with care

and rest. Once Stupid was walking easily, after the next

Threadfall, he would definitely make tracks to Southern.

Despite the lateness of the hour, the Masterharper could see

light coming from his study window as he wearily made

his way from the meadow where Uoth and N'ton had just

left him. He was very tired, but well satisfied with the

results of his efforts over the last four days. Zair, balanc-

ing on his shoulder, cheeped an affirmative. Robinton

smiled to himself and rubbed the little bronze's neck.

"And Sebell and Menolly are going to be satisfied, too,

Unless, of course, there has been word from that scamp

to lock the bolts tightly in floor and ceiling.

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"Ah, but I've accomplished much. Any news from Piemur?"

"No," and her shoulders drooped noticeably. "We would've sent you word instantly."

He put his arm around her slender shoulders comfortably. "Is Sebell awake as well?"

"Yes, indeed!" She gave a chuckle. "N'ton sent Tris to warn us. Or you'd've been locked out of your own Hall."

"Not for long, my dear girl, not for long!"

They were climbing the steps now, and he noticed that she slowed her pace to match his. He was tired, true, but, worse, he no longer commanded the resilience that made no bother of late hours.. "Lord Groghe was back two days ago. Master. Why

did

you have to stay so long at Nabol?" He felt her shoulders give a convulsive shudder under his arm. "I wouldn't have stayed at that place a moment longer than I had to."

"Not the most of congenial of Holds, to be sure. I can't think what can have happened to all the wine Lord Fax

voice. But they had reached his rooms now, and he opened the door, grateful for the sight of the familiar disorder of his workroom and the welcoming smile on Sebell's face. The journeyman was on his feet, helping his master out of his flying gear and guiding him to a chair, while Menolly poured a goblet of a decent Benden wine.

"Now, sir, have you a tale to tell?" asked Sebell, lightly taunting with his Master's usual greeting. "Could we not have come to Nabol and helped speed matters?"

"I would have thought you'd seen enough of Nabol Hold to last a Turn or two," said Master Robinton, sipping at his wine.

"He's got news, Sebell," said Menolly, narrowing her eyes to glare at her master. "I can tell that look on his face.

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Smug, that's what he is. Did you learn what happened to Piemur at Nabol?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't find out about Piemur, but among other, equally important, things, I have arranged matters so that we don't have to worry about Nabol Hold supplying the Oldtimers with northern goods or receiving a

sides, I never bothered to disabuse them of the notion that Benden and the other Lord Holders would call the heir to account for the sins of his predecessor." Master Robinton beamed at the reactions of his journeyman to his strategy. "It afforded me considerable pleasure to help the new Lord Deckter send the worthless lot back to improve their beggared holds."

"And Lord Deckter?" asked Sebell.

"A good choice, however unwilling. I pointed out to him, adroitly, that if he merely regarded his Hold as a flagging business and applied the same ingenuity and industry with which he had built a flourishing carting trade, he would find that the Hold would respond and repair. I also pointed out that in his four sons he has able assistants and ministers, a fortune few Lords can enjoy. However, he did have one matter he was particularly anxious to resolve." The Harper paused. He looked at the expectant faces. "A matter that just happens to march kindly with a problem we face." He turned to Menolly. "You'd best ready that boat of yours. . . ." he had started referring to her skiff in that manner after he and Menolly had been storm-lost

believe that Master Oldive wants you to bring back some of those herbs and powders. He used up a large portion of his supplies on Meron.

"But don't you dare return until you've found Piemur."

Chapter 10

Stupid bleated, his rump, as he struggled to his feet, pushing sharply into Piemur's belly. Curled on Piemur's shoulder, Farii gave a sleepy complaint, which rapidly changed to a squeak of alarm. Piemur rolled over, away from both his friends for fear of injuring either and got stiffly to his feet. There wasn't anything alarming in the clearing about his small shelter but, as his eyes swung about, he caught the unexpected distant blur of bright red on the river. Startled, he brushed aside an obscuring bough and saw, just where the river began to narrow between the plains, three single-masted ships, carrying brilliant red sails. Even as he watched in surprise, the ships altered course, their red sails flapping as they were first turned into the wind and then were carried by momentum up onto the muddy beach..Fascinated at the sight of ships on his river, Piemur moved further from his shelter, stroking to reassure Farii,

beach to the higher, dry banks. Holdless men from the north? wondered Piemur. But surely he'd heard that they were passed through Toric first, so that their inclusion in the Southern Hold was unobstrusive and the Oldtimers had no cause to complain. Whoever these people were, they looked as if they intended to stay awhile.

As Piemur continued to watch the disembarkation, he became aware of a growing sense of indignation that anyone would dare invade his privacy, would have the audac-

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ity to make a camp and set up cooking fires -with great kettles balanced on spits across the flames, just as if they belonged here. This was his river, and Stupid's grazing grounds. His! Not theirs to litter with tent, kettle and fire!

"What if the Oldtimers just happened to fly this way? There'd be trouble. Didn't those folk know any better? Setting up in the sight of everything?

Farii distracted li'm by protesting her hunger. Stupid had fallen to his customary sampling of every type of greenery in his immediate area. Absently, Piemur reached in the

river. This group moved purposefully toward the far end of the field and then the individuals spread out. Long chopping blades flashed in the sun, and suddenly Piemur knew who they were and what they were doing.

Southerners had come to harvest the numbweed bushes, now full of sap and strong with the juice that eased pain.

He wrinkled his nose in disgust: it'd take them days to harvest that field; and each kettleful would require three days of stewing to reduce the tough plant to pulp. Another day would be

required to strain the pulp, and the juice had

to be simmered down to the right consistency to make the numbweed salve. Piemur knew that Master Oldive took the purest of the resultant salve and did something else with it to make it a powder for internal use.

He sighed deeply, because the intruders would be here for days and days. The camp may have been set up a good hour's walk from him and undoubtedly he could keep from being noticed. He wouldn't escape however, even at this distance, from the stench of boiling numbweed, for that smell was pervasive, and the prevailing breeze right now was from the sea. It was infuriating to be forced out

was why Sebell had made that trip not long ago to bring back sacks and sacks of medicinal things. Surely he'd brought enough or maybe this was a new arrangement with the Oldtimers, who surely couldn't object to the Healer. But northern ships had many-colored sails; Menolly had told him that seaholders prided themselves on the intricacy of their sail patterns. Plain red sail did suggest Southerners, whom everyone knew broke northern tradition whenever possible. Also those work groups were moving with the familiarity of much practice.

Piemur grinned to himself. One thing sure, he wasn't going to announce his presence right now. Sure as eggs hatched, he'd get himself included in harvesting numbweed. He'd just take what he needed and work around them, through the forest, until he got to the seashore, well east of them. And well away from the stink of boiling numbweed.

So he made a neat bundle of his woven mat and tied it with a vine thong, ignoring the clattering of Farli, who disapproved of his activity and of the fact that he was ignoring her gradually more insistent requests for food. He

complaints by heading for the river. His fish trap, tied to his sunken Thread-tree, held more than enough to feed her amply. He gutted what remained after she was sated, and wrapping them in broad leaves, added that to his bundle. He hesitated a few moments before tossing the fish trap back into the water. Surely no one would notice it unless someone tripped over the silly thing, which seemed highly unlikely, and the fish it captured wouldn't suffer. He'd

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leave it, and then he'd have ample eating when he returned here.

He made his way through the forest, skirting the wide plain, pausing to drink when he crossed a small contributory stream and to let Stupid rest awhile. The little fellow's short legs tired quickly, and while the creature was no great weight, he did seem to get heavier on those occasions when Piemur took pity and carried him awhile, parii flitted ahead of them and behind, venturing up through the trees into the sky occasionally, twittering a scold that Piemur didn't understand but assumed was directed at the invaders.

they were Southerners. Imagine their surprise when he wandered in, as easy as you please. They'd be startled, they would! And amazed when he told them his adventures here in the south. Yes, but then they'd want to know how he'd got here, and he wasn't at all certain he ought to tell the exact truth. Surely it wasn't unusual for a bold holdless man to try to sneak south, particularly if he had merited his Holder's displeasure! Piemur didn't have to mention that he'd acquired Farii in the North and certainly not that he'd removed her from Meron's hearth in Nabol Hold. Southerners would naturally assume that he'd found the little queen fire lizard here in some beach clutch. Stupid's acquisition posed no problem at all. He could tell the truth there. Piemur could always pretend that he didn't know where the Southern Hold was, and had been endlessly searching. Yes, that was it, he could say he'd stolen a small boat and had had an absolutely ghastly trip south, which was only the truth. Yes, but where had he sailed from? Ista? That was too small a hold to steal a boat from.

Igen? Maybe even Keroon? The Southerners were not likely to check with anyone . . .

A quick chirp from the little bronze caused Farii to relax her tail. Piemur turned his head toward her, annoyed that she hadn't warned him.

"It's not her fault," said the girl with a wide smile, easing her weight to one leg as she enjoyed Piemur's discomfort. She had a pack strapped to her shoulders; a belt with a variety of pouches, some empty; dark hair wrapped with a band tightly about her head so strands wouldn't tangle in branches; and thick-soled sandals on her feet as well as shin guards tied about her lower legs. "Meer," and she indicated the bronze, "and Talla know how to be silent when they wish. And when they realized that she was already Impressed, we all wanted to see who had got a gold. I'm Sharra from the Southern Hold." She held out her hand, palm up. "How'd you get down here? We didn't see any wreckage as we came along the coast."

"I've been here three Threadfalls already," said Piemur, crossing her palm quickly in case she was the sort of person who sensed when someone lied. "Landed up near the big lagoon." Which was also partially true.

"Near the big lagoon?" Sharra's face expressed concern.

belong in the south."

"I belong here?" Suddenly the prospect heartened Piemur. Sharra was as perceptive as the Harper. The thought of being permitted to stay on in this beautiful land, walking where no one else, maybe not even Sharra, had ever trod before, made Piemur's heart tip over..167

"Yes, I'd say you belonged," said Sharra, wide mouth curled in a smile. "So, what name shall I call you by?" If she hadn't given him the option to state a name, any name, not necessarily his own, Piemur might have prevaricated. Instead, he answered her with a grin. "I'm Piemur of Pern."

Sharra threw back her head and laughed at his audacity, but she also laid her arm about his shoulders and gave him a companionable squeeze.

"I like you, Piemur of Pern. What have you named your little queen? Farii? That's a pretty name, and is that little runner beast a friend of yours, too?"

"Stupid? Yes, but he's just joined us. His mother was threadscored last Fall, but he keeps up with us—"

"Keeps up with you? You mean, you saw the ships

Other leaves and herbs that grow in this area. Generally takes me the entire time they're rendering the numbweed."

"I wouldn't mind helping you with that, you know," suggested Piemur, slyly giving her a look. He was only just aware of how much he had missed the interchange with someone of like mind.

"I'd be glad of the right sort of help. And you'll have to keep up with me. I've got a lot to do while they muck about with the numbweed. There's a northern Healer who's sent me a special request."

"I thought you Southerners kept away from the north?"

Piemur decided it was time to be ignorantly discreet.

"Well, there are some things that need to be traded back and forth."

"But I thought Benden Veyr doesn't permit—"

"Dragonriders, yes," and there was curious tone in her voice when she said "dragonriders" that caught Piemur's quick ear. It was a mocking derision that surprised him, accustomed as he was to the respect with which all dragonriders—except the Southern Oldtimers—were treated. But Sharra meant the Southern Oldtimers when she said "dragon-

knew exactly where she was going in the tangled depths, had traveled this way many times before.

At some stages of the next few days, Piemur had occasion to regret not harvesting numbweed, a comparatively simple task compared to Sharra's search, which included digging, scrambling under thorny bushes that scratched his back raw, and climbing trees for parasitic growths. He felt he had found a taskmaster in her equal to old Besel at Nabol Hold. However, a taskmaster far more interesting, for Sharra talked about the properties and virtues of the roots for which they dug, the leaves for which they climbed only the healthiest of trees, well-sheltered from the worst ravages of Threadfall, or equally elusive herbs that lived obscurely where other bushes had thorns to scratch. Sharra had a wherhide jacket with her, but he had nothing to shield him from lacerations. She was quite ready and prepared to daub him with numbweed whenever necessary, but she did have to point out that his size made him the logical person to pursue the shyest herbs in their protective environment. Nothing would permit Piemur to lose honor in Sharra's eyes.

panions. When she commented on his knowledgeable han-

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dling of little Stupid, he did admit to having been a herdsman's boy in mountain holds. Otherwise Sharra seemed

determined to introduce him to the south and gave him endless lectures on its beauties and advantages. She told him of explorations up the river—his river—which had ended in an unnavigable and dangerous marshland of tremendous breadth. The explorers had reluctantly decided that rather than get lost one by one up blind waterways they had better abandon the search until they could make an aerial survey of the area; a survey unlikely to be accomplished until one of the Oldtimers boredly agreed to the outing.

Piemur hadn't been in Sharra's company for more than several hours before he learned how poor her opinion was of dragonriders. While he had to agree to her estimate of the Oldtimers, he found it very difficult not to call N'ton to her as comparison. He felt he was being disloyal to the Fort Veyrleader when he forced himself to keep silent. But a favorable mention of N'ton might bring a query as to how

Sharra knew a great deal, Piemur realized, for she also had him feeding Stupid on a particular plant that would make up for the lack of nourishment from his dead mother. Piemur would never have known that that was why Stupid had browsed so continuously; a dietary instinct rather than an insatiable appetite.

The second day, after a light meal of fruit and tubers, which Sharra had baked in the ashes of the fire, the two continued on a steady course south. The thick forest gave occasionally onto grassy meadows, dotted with herdbeasts and runners who would gallop wildly away when the first scent of the humans reached them. By the middle of the next day, they had reached higher ground, more frequently broken by meadows, until suddenly, they came to a low

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bluff, as if the land had suddenly fallen away from the level on which they stood. Below, stretching to the far hazy horizon, was a marshland, fingered with black strips of water, which wove and disappeared about the clumps of drier land on which grew giant bushes of stiff, tuft-topped grasses.

appropriate directions. The third large channel to their right was actually the river that led to the sea. That much the earlier exploration had determined. There was plenty of the valuable tuft grasses between the bluff and that safe, third channel. They would be able to half-swim, half-wade across, the intervening channels, using the fire lizards to scare away the water snakes, which could wring the blood out of a person's arm or leg. Piemur didn't believe that water snakes could grow that big, but he had to credit her warning when she showed him the fine band of puncture marks on her left arm where a water snake had wound its coils and left the myriad points of its toe-teeth. Not a denizen of these parts, Sharra assured him blithely, and brushed aside his pity by saying that the marks would fade gradually. Then she suggested that, being taller, she'd better carry Stupid across the waters on her shoulders. As they reached each grassy island, they cut the tufts from the grass for the therapeutic seeds that grew along each stem. The larger branches were laid aside and tied in bundles to be bound together for the raft. Sharra said that the branches absorbed water gradually, but the raft would

the spring season, now well past. Something, they thought, rolled up on the spring tides so that beaches were avoided during that month by everyone.

Piemur might have avoided both numbweed stench and water snake puncture, but he certainly worked as hard beside Sharra, as he had that one day in Nabol Hold, a day that seemed to belong to another boy entirely, not this one that was alternately soaked and dried to parchment as they harvested the precious fruits of the swamp grass.

The fourth day they made the raft, binding layer after layer of the grass stalks and then forcing them into a vaguely boatlike shape by tying the ends into stubby prows, leaving a central hollow for their precious cargo and Stupid..Sharra had taught her fire lizards to hunt when they were in the wild, but she had also managed to train them to bring their catch to her. They returned that fourth evening with the strangest-looking creature Piemur had ever seen. Sharra identified it as a whersport. It was far too small to be like the watchwhers that Piemur knew as nocturnal hold guardians in the north, but it was bigger than fire lizards, which it also somewhat resembled. Fortunately

tuber and some grass shoots, and we'll have a meal fit for a Lord Holder."

When she saw Piemur's dubious expression as she completed her arrangements, she laughed.

"There're a lot of strange beasties in this part of the south. As if all the animals you have up north got mixed up somehow. A whersport isn't a fire lizard, and it isn't a wher. For one thing it's a daytime beast, and whers are nocturnal; sun blinds them. Then there's far more varieties of snake here than in the north. Or so I'm told. Sometimes I'd like to go north, just to see all the differences,

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but then again," and Sharra shrugged, her eyes wandering over the lush, deserted and strangely beautiful marshlands, "this is where I hold. I haven't seen half enough of it yet to begin to appreciate all its complexity." She pointed due south with her bloody knife blade. "There're mountains down there that never lose their snow. Not that I've seen snow, on them or on the ground, though my brother has told me about it. I wouldn't like to be as cold as he says it gets in the north when there is snow on the ground."

"We don't always work this hard in Southern, either, Piemur; but now it's time to harvest numbweed and get the .tuft seeds and bush hearts. If we didn't have them. . . ."and she shrugged to indicate a very unpleasant alternative. Then she made a trench in the red ashes of their fire, lined it with thick water plant leaves, which began to hiss and exude a steamy fragrance, deftly inserted the stuffed whersport, folded over the leaves, then carefully knifed the hot ashes in place, and sat back. "There. Dinner won't be long, and there's enough for all."

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Chapter 11

Once out of the grip of the Great Current, Sebell wrestled •with the gaudy striped mainsail, untying it from the runners on the boom and folding it away neatly in its bag. Then he and Menolly bent the bright red southern sail to the boom and mast. Practice had made it a smooth operation, though the Erst time Menolly and.Jhe had changed the sail halfway to the Southern Continent, it had taken them hours, with him cursing at his ineptness and she patiently explaining the trick.

"Possibly, usually does come up again, then," she replied, squinting up to see what made Sebell so irritable.

"Sorry, Menolly," he said, running his hand through wind-disheveled hair. He dropped to the deck beside her.

"You're not worried about Piemur, are you? Something you've kept from me?"

"No, girl, I've kept nothing from you." Her anxious query seemed at this moment more of an accusation to him than a plea for reassurance, and he had answered with more asperity than was customary for him. She was quiet, though he could sense her confusion at his manner; he was unable to explain it to himself. "I didn't mean to snap, Menolly," he said, realizing that she wouldn't speak until he had. "I just don't know what's gotten into me. I honestly believe we'll find Piemur in the south." 174

"Maybe we ought to have taken someone else to help with the sailing—"

"No, no, it's not that!" Again his tone was churlish. He bit his lips together, took a deep breath and carefully added, "You know I like sailing. Better, I like sailing with you alone!" That came out sounding more like himself, and

gently as she brought the neatly captured yellowtail back to the prow of the ship. Oddly, the others stayed aloft while Kimi tore savagely into the flesh of her still-struggling prey.

Sebell wondered why the other three fire lizards didn't come to share the feast, but the thought didn't absorb him long. The ferocity with which Kimi ate fascinated him; he felt as if he were somehow involved in tearing the strips, as if he could savor the warm salty flesh in his mouth, as if—

"I'm sending Beauty to Toric at Southern Hold. She can't stay here now, Sebell."

Sebell heard Menolly's voice but made no sense of the words, his entire attention was concentrated on the unusual actions of his fire lizard queen. He wanted, to go to her, but he couldn't move. He found that he was alternately clenching his hands and then rubbing his sweating palms against his legs. He was unbearably hot and tore at his shirt to open the throat.

"Oh!" he heard Menolly exclaim. "Oh, what else can I do? I can't send Rocky and Diver away. That's not fair to Kimi. "We're too far from land to raise more fire lizards,

Glowing? Unwilling to share food? What had Menolly mumbled about sending Beauty away? And to Toric? Why would she send Toric another message? What was the matter with Kimi?

He wanted to reprimand her but could frame no message in his mind. And why were those bronzes waiting? Why didn't they go away and leave Kimi? Why . . . ?

The "why" suddenly penetrated Sebell's fire-lizard-linked confusion. Kimi eating alone, savagely; Menolly sending Beauty, another queen, away; Kimi, glowing golden and taunting the bronzes, her good friends, with her staring, whirling orange-red eyes! Kimi was about to By. And it was Menolly's bronzes who would fly her. A surge of elation swept Sebell, who could scarcely believe his good fortune. And yet . . .

"Menolly?" He turned to her, hands outstretched, palms up, pleading with her and apologizing for what he knew was about to happen since there were only the two of them on this becalmed boat in the middle of the windstill sea. He hadn't wanted Menolly coerced, as she now must be; he'd wanted to be in full command of himself, not over-

with Kimi, exulting in her strength, in her flight, determined to outsmart those who pursued her. Just let them try to catch her!

Never had her wings responded so fully to her demands. Never had she flown so high, soaring, veering, gliding. The sun flowed across her body, its rays burning into her eyes as she flew on and ever upward. The heat was unendurable. She glided obliquely to the right, caught movement below her and, sweeping her wings back, dropped down, screaming with delight as she fell between the two startled bronzes.

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One of them tried to entangle her with his lashing tail and fell, his flight rhythm disrupted. She beat upward again, calling defiance and deliberately cutting across the path of the second bronze. But, in her desire to flaunt her flight superiority, she brushed just too close to him, and he veered, jamming his wing tip against hers. Her forward speed was momentarily checked. Before she could get away from him, he had caught her, neck twining hers in that instant. Locked together, they fell toward the shimmering

his head, trying to orient himself. Menolly stirred against him, awakened by the same sea sounds. Startled, she opened her eyes and saw him, propped on his elbow above her. Surprise, and then memory, changed the color of her sea green eyes. Holding his breath, Sebell watched, fearful of her reaction. Her smile was tender as she lifted her hand and brushed his hair back from his eyes.

"What chance did you have, dear Sebell, with Rocky and Diver so determined?"

"It wasn't just Kurd's need," he said in a hurried voice, "you know that, don't you?"

"Of course, I know, dear Sebell." Her fingers lingered on his cheek, his lips. "But you always stand back and defer to our Master." She did not hide from Sebell then how much she loved Master Robinton, nor would that ever come between them since they each loved the man in their separate ways. ". . . but I have so wished—"

The ominous creak of the boom swinging across the cockpit warned her just in time to pull him back against her, out of its way.

"I wish," said Sebell in a growl, "that the bloody wind

the boom, then pulled herself onto the seat to unlash the tiller. As Sebell rose to join her, he caught sight of a curled ball of bronze and gold on the forward deck, but Kimi and Diver were too soundly asleep to be roused by considerations of sea and wind. He envied them.

"Where did Rocky go?" he asked Menolly, who frowned slightly in thought.

"He either joined Beauty ... or found himself a wild green. I suspect the latter."

"Wouldn't you know?" asked Sebell, surprised.

Menolly shook her head from side to side, with a half-smile, and Sebell realized that she'd been unaware of anything except their rapport with their two fire lizards. He relaxed, thoroughly content with their new understanding.

"If this breeze continues to follow, we'll make Southern by tomorrow high sun," she said and deftly played out the line, making the most of the wind that filled the red sail. Then she indicated that Sebell should bridge the distance between them in the cockpit.

Neither left each other for very long all through that brilliant, lovely night.

high sun.

Suddenly Beauty appeared, cluttering a wild welcome.

Rocky arrived more sedately, settling on the tied boom.

Menolly scooped him from his perch and caressed him, murmuring loving reassurances until Sebell heard her laugh.

"What's so amusing?"

"He must have found a green. He looks far too smug, but he's trying to make me feel guilty!"

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"Not your fault Diver lived up to his name!"

"Hello down there!" The loud hail attracted their attention up to the small precipice that bulged out above the harbor. The tall, tanned figure of the Southern Holder, Toric, waved an imperious arm at them. "No use swelter-.ing! Come where it's cool!"

With Beauty and Rocky as escort, they waded ashore, leaving Kimi and Diver still asleep. Sebell firmly captured Menolly's hand as they raced across the hot sand to the steps that would lead to the top of the white stone cliff, which rose above the sea to make a safehold for its inhabi-

break of shell also served to warn the hold of visitors. Toric awaited them just inside the hold's entrance, gripping each by the arm with fingers that threatened to leave bruise marks.

"You were mighty short on words with that message Beauty bore me," he said as he escorted them to his private quarters.

The Southern Hold differed from northern ones in many respects, and, at this time of day, was uninhabited. The large low cavern was used for mealtimes, bad storms or Threadfall. The Southerners preferred to live apart, in shelters set in the shade of the thick forest of the bluff. When the wind was from the wrong quarter, this cavern could be breathlessly- hot. Today, however, as Toric handed them each long tubes of cooled fruit juices, the temperature was a distinct drop from the heat without.

"To expand on Beauty's terse message," said Sebell, without the usual harper preambles, for Toric was a blunt-spoken man and appreciated the same in return. "Meron is dead and his successor, Lord Deckter, wishes it clearly understood that he is in no way to be bound by previous

was going to give Meron every dead fire

lizard egg she could find for sending her a half-empty sack."

"Half-empty?" Sebell caught Menolly's eye.

"Yes, the sack arrived with the top loosened and she's certain some of the shipment, some materials she's been plaguing the Masterweaver for, dropped out between.

Why?" Toric caught the significant glances between the harpers. "Oh, that missing lad you queried me about several sevendays back? You tl-nnfe he came south in it?"

"It's a possibility."

"Never occurred to me to connect the two before now."

Toric stroked his cheek thoughtfully. "A small lad? Yes, he'd doubtless have fit in that sack. Anything else about him I should know perhaps?"

Sebell thought how like Toric to want answers before he gave his own.

"A queen fire lizard egg was involved. . . ."

"Oh ho," and Toric's eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

"Then it's not a possibility anymore, but a probability that your lad got here." He stressed the word "got," strangely,

only a queen's shell on the beach. They spent a good deal of time going up and down that strand, but there wasn't any trace of a full clutch."

"Piemur does have his friend after all," cried Menolly, grabbing Sebell and dancing about with him in her relief.

"Piemur? That's your missing boy? Hey, stop that, you'll set every fire lizard in the place a-wing."

ISO

Kimi and Diver swooped into the cavern at that point, and with Beauty and Rocky bugling their delight, some of the southern fire lizards were also reacting. Sebell and Menolly called their four to order, and Toric sent his away.

"Yes, it's Piemur who's been missing, our apprentice," said Menolly, so jubilant that for a moment Sebell thought she'd swing Toric into their joyful antics.. "He and I were at Meron's

Gather," said Sebell. "Some-

how he got into the Hold itself and purloined the queen fire lizard egg. Meron was livid. . . ."

"I can well imagine," said Toric with a snort.

"Only none of his men could find Piemur or the egg.

Kimi said she couldn't reach him," Sebell went on.

Oldtimers. The heirs apparent now wanted no part of the succession, nor did they want the Hold in contention, so they pressured Meron to name a successor, who would then try to placate the Benden 'weyrleaders. But Meron had collapsed, and both the Master Healer and the Masterharper were summoned, for the Harper could act as mediator. He convoked other Lord Holders and the High Reaches Veyrleader to force Lord Meron to name his successor. About the methods, Sebell remained discreet. Nor did Toric inquire, since Sebell's recitation was limited to facts rather than story-telling embellishments.

"So we think," Sebell finished, "that since Kimi specifically said it was too dark, as in a sack, and she couldn't 'find' Piemur, or room enough to get to him, he did secrete himself in a sack, which the Oldtimers collected that night—I saw the dragons—and brought here. That would also explain why none of our fire lizards could find a trace of him anywhere in Nabol."

Toric had listened with keen attention to Sebell's summary, but now he cocked his head to one side and made a rueful noise with his tongue against his teeth.

the little queen at hatching—"

"Not if Piemur was alive! And I know he was," said Menolly more stoutly now and utterly convinced. "Is that place far from here? Could your queen take our fire lizards? If Piemur's anywhere about, they'll find him."

Toric was dubious, but he called up his queen. To the surprise of both harpers, the queen didn't, as Kimi or Beauty would have done, land on Tone's shoulder, but hovered awaiting his pleasure. Toric issued the sort of order one would give a stupid drudge. She chirped at Kimi and Beauty, disdaining the two bronzes, and flitted out of the cavern, the other four fire lizards right behind her.

"Lord Meron's death won't bother them," and Toric jerked his head in the direction of the Southern Weyr, "for a while. They just brought in all they'll need for some time. I would prefer that we somehow keep them supplied. I ..." and he jerked his thumb at his chest in emphasis, ". . . do not wish to jeopardize my arrangements with Lessa and F'lar. They" and again he meant the Oldtimers, "don't care how they get what they think they need. Meron was just convenient." He took the harpers' solemn

mur and I were there: to make certain Meron was the source of so many green fire lizards."

Toric half-rose, his usually controlled expression showing anger. "No one suspected me of cheating traders?"

"No," Sebell said, though that had been one of his prob-
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lems. "Don't forget that I collected the clutches you've sent north in barter, but it was necessary for the Harper to find the real culprit. Green clutches could have been brought in by sailors who have been so conveniently losing themselves in southern waters."

"Oh, all right then." Toric subsided, his honor unchal-
lenged.

"The Oldtimers have not questioned those lost sailors?". "No," said Toric, shrugging negligently. "So long as the sails are red. They never have bothered to count the number of ships we really own."

Toric then noticed that they had drained their juices so he replenished the cool drinks.

"Have you some ships out now?" asked Sebell, because he had thought it odd to see so few at anchor when the sun

"Good news, Toric, but we'd best sail home laden with Piemur as well."

The southerner clicked his tongue pessimistically. "As I said, there've been three, maybe four Threadfalls since that queen egg shell was found."

"You don't know our Piemur," said Menolly, so insistent that Toric raised his eyebrows in surprise at her fervor.

"Maybe, but I know how other Northerners act in Threadfall!" Toric was plainly contemptuous.

"You're having trouble with their adaptation here?" asked Sebell, worrying that the Harper's masterful solution of sending holdless men south to Toric in unobtrusive numbers was in jeopardy.

"No trouble," said Toric, dismissing that consideration with a wave of his hand. "They learn to cope holdless, or stay holdbound without the additional privileges of being ranked as holders here. Some have adapted rather well," he admitted grudgingly. Then he noticed Menolly's anxious glances toward the entrance. "Oh, I told her to give the

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forests a good raking, too. The fire lizards'll take a while if

thirst. It's mainly water."

Sebell and Menolly were licking their fingers for the last of the succulent juices when a twittering pair of fire lizards swooped in. Beauty and Kimi made immediately for their friends' shoulders. Rocky and Diver settled near Menolly on the table, but Toric's queen hovered, chirping out a message, her eyes whirling with the orange-red of distress.

"I told you he might not survive," said Toric. "My queen really looked for any trace of a human, too." •

Menolly hid her face on the pretext of reassuring her fire lizards, who were imaging to her endless distances of forest and deserted stretches of beach and sandy wastes.

"You sent them west," said Sebell, grasping at any theory that would give them hope, "to the place where the egg shells were discovered. If I know Piemur, he wouldn't have stayed anywhere that he had left clues. Could he have worked his way east? And be further down this side of the Southern Weyr?"

Toric gave a snort of laughter. "He could be any bloody •where in the whole great southlands, but I doubt it. You

knowing they were our friends. But there's one call he won't ignore or hide from."

"And what would that be?" asked the skeptical holder.

1S4

Sebell caught Menolly's suddenly hopeful expression.

"Drums! Piemur will answer a call on drums!"

"Drums?" Toric threw back his head in an honest guffaw of surprise.

"Yes, drums," said Sebell, beginning to find Toric's attitude offensive. "Where's your drumheights?"

"Why would we need drumheights in Southern?". It took the astounded harpers a little while to under-

stand that drumheights, traditional in every hold in the north, had never been installed in the Southern's single hold. Granted, there were now small holdings established as far to the east as the Island River, but messages came back and forth either by fire lizard or by ship.

To Sebell's impatient query for any sort of drums in the hold, Toric said that they had a few to aid rhythm in dances. These were found in the quarters of Saneter, the hold's harper, who roused from his midday rest to show

myself." Saneter regarded the journeymen harpers with an abashed surprise. "Haven't had to use drum talk since I came here with F'nor."

"It wouldn't be hard to refresh your memory, Saneter, but we must have proper drums. And that would take time with all the Master Smith has on his plate right now," said Sebell, shaking his head with the disappointment he felt. He'd been so sure. ...

"Must drums be made of metal?" asked Toric. "These have wooden frames." He tapped the stretched hide across the larger drum, and it rattled in response.

"The metal message drums are large, to resound—" Sebell began.

"But not necessarily metal; just something big enough, hollow enough over which to stretch your hide, and resonate?" asked Toric, ignoring the interruption. "What about a tree trunk . . . say . . ." and he began to hold out his

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arms, widening the circle while Sebell started in disbelief at the area he encompassed. "... about this big? That ought to make a bloody loud drum. Tree I'm thinking of came

his hands out to indicate that Toric was indeed telling the truth.

"Further, it's not all that far from the hold. We could make it there and back before dinner," said Toric, well pleased with himself, and strode out of the harper's quarters ahead of the other three to rouse assistants.

While Sebell didn't doubt that the fallen tree was "not far" from the Southern Hold, it was also not an easy trek through steamy hot forests where the trail had to be hacked out afresh. But, when they finally reached the tree, it was every bit as large in girth as Toric had promised. Sebell felt much like Menolly, awed, as they reached out to caress the smooth wood of the fallen giant. The insects that had burrowed out the monster's core had also made meals of its bark until only a thin shell remained, the last skin of the once-living tree. Even that shell had begun to rot away in the steam and rain of its environment.

"Will this make you enough drums, harperman?" asked Toric, delighted to confound them.

"Enough for every holding you've got, with more left over," said Sebell, running his eyes down the fallen trunk.

pointing to the limit with his right forefinger by his ribs,

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". . . to here. That would make a good, deep, long-carrying sound when the hide is stretched."

Saneter, who had come with them, stooped to pick up a thick, knobby-ended branch and pounded the tree trunk experimentally. Everyone was surprised at the hollow boom that resulted. The fire lizards, who'd been perched on the surface, lifted with shrieks of protest..Grinning, Sebell held out his hand

to Saneter for the

stick. He beat out the phrase "apprentice, report!" He grinned more broadly as the majestic tones echoed through the forest and started a veritable shower of tree-dwelling insects and snakes, shaken from their perches by the unexpected loud reverberations.

"Why move it?" asked Toric. "You could hear this at the back of the mountains."

"Ah, but site this on that landing over your harbor, and a message would carry to that Island River of yours," said Sebell.

"Then we'll cut your drum. Harper," said Toric, gestur-

to secure the section to the carrier, and the party was soon making its way back to the Southern Hold.

By the time they had arrived, Sebell and Menolly were dripping with sweat, tortured by scratches and insect bites, which did not seem to bother the tougher, tanned hides of the Southerners. Sebell wondered if he could find the energy to cover the drum that day. Toric had firmly assured him that there were hides large enough—since herdbeasts also grew larger here in the south—to fit this mammoth drum. But the journeyman was determined to work as long and hard as the Southern Holder if he had to. And he had to, to find Piemur.

They had positioned the drum in front of the cavern "for the sun to dry up the insects," so Toric announced, when the big holder frowned at his guests.

1S7

"Man, you will die an early death if you work this hard all the time." Toric waved toward the westering sun. "The day is nearly over. This drummaking can wait till morning. Now we all need a wash," and his gesture went seaward. "That is, if you harpers swim . . ."

zipped in and out of the gentle evening waves, cluttering with delight to frolic with their friends, though if Menolly disappeared for long beneath the waves, her three fire lizards dove after her, pulling her surfacewards by her hair. Suddenly Tone's queen, who had held herself aloof from the antics of the visitors, hovered above Toric's head, twittering urgently. Toric glanced around. Following his gaze, Menolly and Sebell saw three red-sailed sloops, their sides lined with people, rounding the arm of land that protected the southern harbor.

"The harvesters have returned," said Toric to the harpers. "I'll just see if all is well. Stay on and enjoy yourselves."

With strong strokes of his powerful arms, he made a diagonal line to the shore that would intercept the landing of the lead ship.

"Sometimes that man is too much," she said, shaking her head at this latest exhibition of the southerner's strength.

"Which is as well for me," said Sebell, laughing, and pulled her under just to let the fire lizards rescue her. They played that game bit, reveling in the freedom of

haired girl, only a head shorter than the big Holder, approach him and hold him in a long conversation.

"That must be Sharra," Menolly said, noticing several fire lizards converge over the girl's head. One of them landed on her shoulder, and Menolly gave a snort. "Toric certainly has his queen well'-trained, hasn't he?"

Suddenly a sound paralyzed them: the sharp thudding of a practiced hand against what could only be the newly acquired drum round. A practiced hand that beat a mea-.sure, "Harper here, anyone else?" and the staccato that was a question.

"It has to be Piemur!" Menolly's cry was half-gasp half-scream, but the words weren't quite out of her mouth before both harpers were on their feet and running toward the ramp up from the harbor.

"What's the matter?" they heard Toric yelling after them.

"That was Piemur!" Sebell managed to gasp out as he charged a bare stride ahead of Menolly. But when they skidded to a halt on the shell-strewn area before the cavern, there was no one about.

them.

Menolly, Sebell and Piemur were entangled in mutual cries and thumpings of rediscovery when a tiny fire lizard queen began attacking Sebell, and a small runner beast tried to butt Menolly's knees from under her. Beauty, Rocky and Diver immediately drove off the little queen, but it wasn't until Piemur, dashing tears of relief and joy from his eyes, called Farii to order and reassured Stupid, that any sort of coherent conversation was possible. By that time, Sharra, Toric, and half the Southern Hold were aware that the lost had been found.

A celebration for the successful return of the harvesters would have been held in any case, but the evening was ?8°

certainly crowned by Piemur's appearance, especially after he was reassured that his absence would be forgiven by the Masterharper in view of the extraordinary outcome of the initial folly of stealing the queen egg from Meron's hearth. Sebell and Menolly listened intently when Piemur accounted for his continued absence once Farii had been Impressed.. "He was wiser not to come back right then, anyhow,"

"In the water, under a ledge in the lagoon," said Piemur as if that ought to have been obvious. "Farii didn't hatch until after Threadfall."

Toric nodded approval. "And the other Threadfalls?"

"Under water. Only by that time I'd sort of found a camp by the river, above the numbweed meadows. . . ."

He glanced at Sharra, whose eyes twinkled at the truth he now chose to speak, "where I found a submerged log to hold onto and a long reed to breath through."

"Why didn't you come back after the second Pall?"

"I found Stupid, and I couldn't travel far or fast until he was grown up."

Sharra bubbled with laughter then, for the ingenuous expression of Piemur's face was just short of impudence.

"You were certainly making tracks eastward to the sea when our paths crossed," she said.

"You expected me to stay anywhere near people making numbweed?" asked Piemur with such disgust that everyone laughed.

"I'll bet there were times in the marsh when you wished you were back just harvesting numbweed," said Sharra,

a. warning to Piemur that brought a sudden silence to the
-main table.

"He's wasted as just a harper," said Sharra after a moment. "Why, I—"

"And I'm not really a harper right now, either, am I,
Sebell?" asked Piemur, suddenly collecting his wits. "I was
only good as a singer, and I have no voice. Is there really a
place for me at the Harper Hall? I mean," and he rattled on,
his eyes going from Sebell to Menolly, "I know you and
Menolly thought you could get me to help you two, but a
fine help I turned out to be, getting sacked up and sent
south without even knowing it. It's not as if I was good at
anything except getting into trouble—"

"Useful trouble, as it turned out," said Sebell, "but I
just had an idea ... to keep you out of trouble for a
while." The journeyman turned to the Southerner. "You
rather like the idea of message drums, Toric? And, Saneter,
you say you've forgotten most of the measures you learned.
Well now, Piemur hasn't."

"I could be drum messenger here?" Piemur was suddenly
Open-mouthed with shock.

Sebell held his hand up to get a word in, and the radi-

measures into. If you wouldn't mind him refreshing your memory. . . ."

Saneter laughed and beamed encouragingly at Piemur, whose face once again shone. "If he can put up with a fumble-fingered old harper . . ."

"Toric, as Southern Holder?" Sebell paused delicately, for he had caught the narrowing of the big man's eyes and wondered if he had presumed too much.

"Troublemaker in the Hall?" Toric frowned, giving each one a long, expressionless look, pausing to stare hard at Piemur. The boy held his breath so long his face began to turn bright red under his tan.

"Actually, not a troublemaker, Toric," said Menolly.

"He just has a lot of energy."

"We could certainly use drums for messages to the coastal holds," said Toric in a slow drawl, his face closed on his thoughts. "Can Piemur make the drums?" he asked Sebell.

"I'd prefer to stay and supervise," Sebell murmured.

"Well, in the ordinary way I wouldn't accept another Northerner, but as Piemur has already proved he can sur-

thing you told me about fire lizards and your life in the Dragonstone cave and all—"

"You'll find this lad has ears in every pore of him," said Sebell, giving Piemur's right one an affectionate twist.

"And tell Master Robinton I've got a queen and a tame runner beast," Piemur told Menolly who was busily writing. "I wouldn't have to leave Stupid behind if I have to go back to the Harper Hall, would I, Sebell?"

Sebell said something soothing and watched as Menolly made the message tube fast to Beauty's leg, told her to go back to Master Robinton and return as soon as possible.

"D'you think he'll let me stay?" Piemur asked Menolly then, his eyes round with hope and anxiety.

"You did put your time in the drumheights to good advantage," Menolly said, hoping that this solution to the problem of Piemur's immediate future did indeed meet with Master Robinton's favor. The boy so clearly had thrived in his few sevendays' here. She could swear he was taller and had broadened through chest and neck. And there was no question but what his unexpected trip to Southern had altered him in many subtle ways. She caught

"Bet you didn't, either." Most of the Southerners then prevailed on the two visit-

ing harpers for the latest northern songs, always a happy importation. So the time passed quickly for most while Beauty delivered her message

The moment the little golden queen swooped into the cavern, every sound died, for by now the prospect of Piemur as drum messenger had filtered to every Southerner present and the suspense was universal.

But Beauty was so attuned to the message she carried that her carolling answered Piemur's question before the confirming words were read aloud

. "Well done Piemur. Safely stay. Drum-journeyman!"

Congratulations were loud and cheerful, with Piemur's back being thumped and hand shaken until he was nearly dizzy with such sudden acclaim after so much solitude.

"When Sebell saw him take an opportunity to leave the cavern and the continuing festivity, he started to follow, but Menolly shook her head, already halfway to the door.

So it was only Menolly who heard Piemur say to the tired little golden queen that clung to his neck: "I wish I

