

V.

Weyrlings

THE IMPRESSION - A SHORT STORY

To Felessan's speculative eye, the eggs hardening on the Hatching Ground looked different. Well, maybe not very different. Maybe not different at all. Perhaps it was just his knowledge that this time, this Hatching, was to be his first try at Impression, and that put the eggs in an entirely new light - The idea that he was considered worthy to Impress one of Pern's great dragons delighted and scared him.

The sunlight shone through the high openings to the Weyr Bowl outside, retracting gloriously off the mottled eggshells. Since F'lar had taken him and two other boys in the Lower Caverns aside two nights earlier to tell them that they were eligible to be Candidates if they so chose - as if anybody with sense would turn down such a chance - Felessan had made several detours from his chores to pass through the great echoing cavern. Which egg held a bronze dragon, and which a blue? To Felessan's knowledge, no one had ever been able to work out a system to tell the smaller eggs apart. Of course, the queen egg was easy to pick out. It was mostly gold, like its occupant, it was bigger than all the rest, and it rested, lovingly protected, between the claws of its broody golden mother.

Ramoth opened one great jeweled eye about halfway and regarded the boy passively. To his relief, it showed the blue of sleepy contentment rather than the red or yellow of annoyance. Felessan was afraid that she was sizing him up and passing judgment on him: "Might make a *blue* rider, but no more than that," as the elders and senior weyrlings had been doing for two days now. He did not see where the others got off making remarks about him. Faranth only knew how they had tricked the dragons they rode into choosing them in the first place! He clapped a hand over his mouth, for fear of letting the unkind thoughts become words. What if Ramoth heard him? Who knew what affected Impression?

The sleeping chambers were crowded this last sevenday, with the addition of the new boys found on Search from Hold and Hall. Most of them were strangers, but Felessan recognized Borand, who was from Lemos Hold. Borand had once accompanied a supply train making its trip to the Weyr, and the two of them, along with many other boys from the caverns, had spent a long, hot afternoon stacking cloth sacks of river grains in the storage caverns under Manora's watchful eye. He was glad Borand had come to Benden. Only two of the other boys his age in the Weyr were standing to the egg this time, and the others were eyeing the three chosen ones with an air of suspicion. He did not know why none of them had been picked as Candidates this time. He was hardly sure why he *had*.

How did one Impress a dragon? All they had heard from the senior riders were oblique warnings that meant nothing. "Don't do this... don't do that... mustn't ever do this..." And most enigmatic: "Don't let your dragon eat too much." "You must never be afraid of your dragon," F'nor had cautioned the boys before handing them over to Felena for the fitting of their robes. "He will never hurt you." That was all very well, but how did one attract a dragon in the first place?

There were nearly twice as many Candidates as there were eggs in the sand. F'lar liked to give the dragonets a wide choice, but it always meant that there were just that many disappointed boys left standing on the ground when the Hatching was finished. Felessan shrugged. Just so long as he was not one of them, he did not care. It was worse with the girls, of course. Anywhere from two to ten of them, and only one queen dragon to Impress.

The boys had all had a chance to touch the eggs. Felessan had shivered when he stroked one of the elongated ovals, and Ramoth had looked at him. He remembered the time he and Jaxom had sneaked in to have a look at the clutch from which Ruth had eventually Hatched. The boys' adventure had not hurt the dragonets, but Felessan had feared for sevendays that someone would know he had done it.

"Another day to go, they say," a boy from the Minecraft hall complained as Felessan returned to the sleeping chamber to get his hunting snares and knife. "I'm to break up firestone till the noon meal. I could

have done that at home."

"My duty is to hunt tunnel snakes in the storage tunnels below the kitchen cavern," Felessan offered. Hunting was his talent, and he was proud of it. "Want to come with me?"

"No, thanks," the boy said, patting his stomach. His name was Varon. He was a chunky lad with a head of black hair and dark freckles dusted across his cheeks. "I might get stuck where a wisp like you would fit through."

"I'll come," a red-haired boy said with a smile. Called Catrul, he came from a small hold in Bitra. He was built much like Felessan, with long legs and a skinny frame that spoke more of missed meals than hereditary slenderness. He took from his pack a two-tined hunting knife, which Felessan eyed with envy. It was just the right configuration to take the head off a tunnel snake with a single chop. "I'd rather do that than scrub pots. The scaled kind is good to eat."

"These are smooth-skinned," Felessan said apologetically. "May I try your knife?"

"If I can borrow one of your snares," Catrul countered, handing over the shining blade. "Let's go."

Catrul was as adept with snare as with knife, and Felessan was pleased that his new friend enjoyed hunting as much as he did. The trick of killing tunnel snakes was to avoid their sharp claws and teeth and strike at their unprotected backs and necks. The boys watched in silence as one of the beasts crept closer and closer to the place where Catrul had spread a snare. The snake, invisible in the darkness, passed cautiously over the single grains of glows dispersed along the corridor. The boys could measure its progress by how quickly the glows disappeared and reappeared. Another man-length, then another -

"Pull, Catrul!" Felessan cried suddenly. With a whoop, the redheaded boy sprang to his knees and fell onto his back, yanking the cord taut.

From the side, Felessan dove over the flailing pair of stabilizers that were the tunnel snake's middle limbs and yanked the tail and hindquarters back and down. There was a snapping sound as the snake's neck broke. It twitched in a frenzy for a few seconds, then fell still.

"Whee-ooooop!" Felessan picked up the carcass by the tail and shook it.

"Not so loud!" Catrul complained. "You'll scare all the rest off."

"I don't care," Felessan shouted, enjoying the way his voice echoed all the way into the depths of the Weyr. In the distance, it broke into two sounds, a shrill echo almost above the range of hearing, and a vibrato thrum that bounced off the solid stone walls around them.

"Ow!" Catrul said, pressing his hands over his ears and crouching against the dark floor. "That's loud!"

"Yow!" Felessan cried again. The echo sprang away, but the thrumming filled the cavern around them and continued long after the higher-pitched sound had died.

"How'd you do that?" Catrul asked, listening to the sound in wonder. He swept the glows together in a trembling palm and felt for the basket.

"I'm not doing it." Felessan looked around, big-eyed. "That humming sounds like it's coming from above. The Hatching! The eggs are hatching!"

"Now? It couldn't be now! We're not ready!"

Felessan was already running through the dark passage toward the kitchens, coiling the snares up as he ran. "We'd better *get* ready. It's happening!"

They dashed through the Living Cavern and into the Inner Cavern. The humming was louder out there, and people were rushing back and forth, hurrying to make all ready for the guests who would be arriving to witness the Hatching. Felessan looked around for Manora, but he guessed that his foster mother was at the hearths, overseeing the preparations for the Impression feast.

"Come on," Felessan said, pulling Catrul toward the bathing pool. "Can't face the egg dirty?"

"We'll be late!" Catrul cried, pulling off his clothing and climbing into the warm, swirling water. He and Felessan reached for the jar of sweetsand at the same time, and it fell between their hands into the pool. Both of them dove for it and came up sputtering. In their haste, they churned up the bathing pool until there was as much water out of it as in it.

"Better wet than dirty," Felessan assured his friend, leading him back to their sleeping chamber to change.

Felena was waiting with the pile of clean white Candidates' robes over her arm. As Felessan and Catrul appeared, clutching bathing sheets around them, she handed a robe to each of them and bade them hurry. "The bronzes are already on their ledge," she said.

"But it's too soon," one of the boys cried. "I don't know what to think yet."

"How will I know what to do?" another boy asked.

Felessan was worrying about the same things, but he said nothing. He just concentrated on pulling on the thin white cloth over his wet skin. With a nervous hand, he smoothed his shock of hair back on his head. Catrul and the Minecraft lad were white and solemn. The robes had been the final touch. The reality of the

situation had dawned on the boys. No matter what they thought or hoped, the event was upon them, and it would be all over very soon. They would Impress now, or not, as the dragons pleased. In awed silence, the barefoot boys followed Felena through the stone corridor to the Hatching Ground.

Around them in the passage, drudges were hastening to refill the glowbaskets with fresh glows, the light throwing weird shadows across their faces. At the end of the tunnel there was a real blaze of light – the oblique rays of the midday sun hitting the Hatching Grounds. The arena was filling up with people. Felcssan was suddenly terrified. Practically all of Pern would be watching him. Borand caught his eye and made a brave thumbs-up sign, even though his face showed that he was nervous, too. The closer they got to the chamber, the warmer the floor became under their feet.

As instructed, once the boys reached the sands, they spread out, forming a loose semicircle around the rocking eggs. Ramoth coiled on the egg mound, protecting the queen egg, hissing and snarling, her forked tongue licking out at the air, her eyes awhirl with a red light. The four female Candidates stood at a respectful distance, but their eyes were on the big golden egg.

Felessan promptly forgot about them. Before him now was the biggest moment of his life. There was the clutch of eggs, all rocking back and forth on the hot sand. Which one would crack first? His impatience nearly strangled him, and he had to force himself to breathe. The hush of the great chamber made him feel both very important and very small; he felt as if every single person in the Hatching Ground were watching him. He did his best to look patient, though his feet felt as if they were burning up. Discreetly, he lifted first one scorched sole and then the other.

Why do they make us come out barefoot? he wondered. Does it make a difference to the dragon? Without moving his head, he slewed a glance over to the left, to see if anyone else was as uncomfortable as he was. Besides him, Catrtil was shifting from foot to foot. How long would they have to stand here? The sand was growing hotter by the moment.

The hum went on and on, and the eggs " twitched and jerked, as if the dragonets were as impatient as the Candidates. Felcssan was hypnotized by their movement, and by the humming of the bronze dragons, which was building slowly in power, like the sound of an approaching storm.

With a loud pop, a mottled egg with a pattern that looked like a river and waterfall burst open, and a young bronze dragonet fell to the sand, bawling a protest. There was a sigh of pleasure from the audience in the stands behind him. It was a good sign that the first hatchling was a bronze. Felessan wanted more than anything to look at the young dragon, to see if it was his, but he did not dare. What if it was not? Oh, but what if it *was* his? He would be so disappointed if it was not. He risked a glance at the little creature, whose glistening wet wings were unfurling and drying in the hot air. He was so beautiful! Felessan's heart felt as if it was about to explode in misery as the whirling jeweled eyes changed from blue to green and the little dragon moved decisively toward Varon.

"He says his name is Horoth!" the tall Minecraft lad cried in triumph as he knelt and touched the young dragon's upturned face. The hum grew louder, as if the senior dragons approved the match. Then V'ron, as the new dragonrider would now be known, led the staggering dragonet toward the ground-level exit where brown and green riders waited to escort the new weyrings to their shared barracks.

Briefly Felessan watched V'ron and Horoth. The first Hatching was almost like a signal for things to begin happening. All of a sudden, several eggs broke open at once. Crooning piteously, the dragonets sought around them, searching the faces of the Candidates. A brown dragonet fell across Felessan's feet and lay bawling on the sand.

Is this the one I want? he asked himself as he helped the little creature to stand up.

The brown creeled and tottered away.

A tiny green dragon drew Felessan's attention, calling shrilly.

"Does she want me?" He started toward her. At the same time, two blue hatchlings made for one boy, then one of them turned away. The green went on by, still searching for the right Candidate. Felessan gave it a sidelong hopeful glance, but it ignored him.

Catrul was on his hands and knees on the sand, tears pouring down a face that smiled as wide as its narrow bones would allow. Staring lovingly up at him was a very small dragonet.

Felessan stared at the brown in astonishment. He did not know whether to rejoice for his friend or melt in frustration. Every dragon had to have a rider. He dared not risk a look at the Weyrleaders on the Tier. Then his eyes were drawn away by a blaze of greeny gold.

"Oh, a bronze," he breathed. Not an ordinary bronze, either, but a flawless combination of gold and green and tan that looked like the dappled sun through leaves, only more perfect. "Oh! Is he coming... to me?"

Felessan's heart pounded as he took a step forward to meet the dragonet, who was crooning in impatience to reach him. The boy's longer legs brought him close more quickly than the hatchlings wobbly short ones could. He completely forgot any recent twinge of disappointment.

This bronze was the handsomest, most perfectly formed, prettiest-colored, strongest hatchling in the clutch. Oops! He gasped as it tripped on its wing tip and its bulky hind legs kept on moving, plowing its sensitive nose farther into the hot sand. Felessan dropped to his knees to help the little beast right itself. Its glowing eyes focused on his.

Suddenly, some indefinable sensation surged through his body, followed by a consciousness that centered itself both in his head and a few feet in front of him, inside the body of the little bronze, making every breath echo, every movement repeat itself.

My name is Golanth, the bronze hatchling said.

Felessan reached out to stroke the dragonet's skin, knowing before he did how soft it would be, and how happy Golanth would be for the caress. He loved the little dragon with an astonishing sense of completion. He was overwhelmingly happy, happier than he had ever been in his life. All he wanted to do was to look at the little bronze dragon, just look at him. Felessan had the amazing feeling of being *together* with Golanth. No matter where he was, the rapport would remain between them. But he had no intention of ever being away from Golanth.

Golanth certainly had the softest skin Felessan had ever touched. Even though the little bronze was only a few minutes old, he was as steady on his feet as could be. And his wings! They were drying faster than any other hatchling on the Ground, even the ones who had broken shell before him. What transparent sails they were, and so perfect that they looked like they had been carved from glass. Felessan was so full of joy and pride that his chest hurt. His jaws ached, but he could not stop smiling.

I'm hungry, Golanth told him piteously, adding a croon to his plea.

"Hungry!" Felessan was abashed. He had stood there like a lump of coal while his dragon was hungry! *Terribly* hungry. His own guts were rumbling in sympathy, and he realized that the could feel the craving for food right through their precious link. His training flooded back to him, and he remembered there would be food out in the Weyr Bowl for them.

"Come on, we've got to get you some food! There's food right out here. Just come along with me now," he chattered on, reassuring Golanth, who tottered along beside him. The sand was hot, and the young dragon's claws were still soft and damp from being in the egg. "It's all right - here, I'll help you. Don't worry about it. It sure is hot here, isn't it? My feet hurt, too, but that's okay. We're just going outside. It's much cooler there. And the food!"

I'm very, very hungry, Golanth told him.

Other hatchlings were already being led by their proud new weyrmates, with some guidance from the senior riders. One of the brown riders came over to Felessan and handed him a big bowl of fresh red meat.

"Here you go, Felessan."

Felessan dragged his eyes away from Golanth's and recognized T'gran; at the same moment he realized that the smiling older rider was the first to address him by his new name.

"What's his name?"

"Golanth." Felessan grinned as he rolled the name around in his mouth for the first time. "This is my friend T'gran," he told Golanth. "And his dragon is Branth. He's a brown dragon."

The older rider smiled and clapped a hand to Felessan's shoulder. "The Weyr-leaders are mighty proud of you. F'lar just looked as pleased as can be, and the Weyrwoman - I think she was glowing as much as Ramoth was. You just see to Golanth now. He's a fine-looking little fellow, isn't he?" T'gran walked away, and Golanth opened his mouth for the meat.

The first pieces were swallowed promptly, and Golanth asked for more, rolling his jeweled eyes at Felessan in appeal. His stomach hurt so much. It was so empty.

"It's all right!" Felessan promised him. "It's all right. Your stomach will stop hurting, really. Here's more. And more. Boy, you are hungry, aren't you? No, wait, chew it!" the boy pleaded as a large lump of meat disappeared down his weyrmates throat. "You can have as much as you want, but you'll choke if you don't chew your food."

Chew? The mental tone was puzzled.

"Uh... mash the meat between your teeth." Felessan tried to demonstrate, pointing. "Those are teeth. You tear the meat with the front ones, and you chew with the back ones. Yes, you're all right now. Good."

As the edge of Golanth's hunger abated, F'lessan began to take in his surroundings more fully. Suddenly the Weyr Bowl seemed bigger than he remembered it, and the sky was more beautiful. Everything was *new*. "See? It's lovely out here. This is where we'll be living."

I like it. I like everything you like, Golanth told him, taking another chunk of meat. The bowl was nearly empty, and the dragonet's voracious eating was slowing down. The frantic spin of his eyes had abated to a placid whirl. Then the skin on Golanth's shoulder twitched and his eyes changed color.

"What's the matter?"

I itch came suddenly from the dragonet's mind.

F'lessan started at Golanth's emphatic tone. He set down the bowl and ran his hands over the shoulder joint. "You do? Here?"

No, further down. Yes, there.

"Yes. you feel very dry suddenly. I'll get some oil." He turned around and around, trying to recall where the oil was kept. A few of the senior riders looked up at him questioningly. "I need some oil!" he exclaimed. "He's itching. His skin is dry."

"Of course it is," one of the men said. With a smile, he handed F'lessan a pot of oil and a paddle.

"Oh. good!" F'lessan seized the oil and smeared some on Golanth's shoulder. Instantly he shared his dragon's relief. "I'd better do a good job. I'll oil you all over, to make sure you won't be uncomfortable." He spread paddlesful of oil all over the bronze dragonet, admiring the shimmer of his hide in the sun.

You are so considerate, Golanth said, his eyes glowing with love. The scent of the meat attracted him again, and he plunged his muzzle into the bowl while F'lessan worked. *You are so clever, and you make me very happy.*

F'lessan sighed with joy, caressing the soft, soft skin of his weyrmate and scratching above the dragon's sensitive eye ridges. "I'm happy, too."

Joyful creelings from a pair of Impressed fire lizards echoed overhead in the wide Weyr Bowl, as a very small green dragon joined the other hatchlings in the sun. F'lessan noted with one astonished glance that the weyrling with her was Mirrim. A *girl* impressing a green? Why she hadn't even been standing on the sands. Then Golanth nudged his arm again, and the boy turned back to spread more oil on his new friend.

When at last his dragon's skin was soothed, F'lessan helped Golanth make his way toward the Weyr Barracks at the opposite end of the Bowl from the Hatching Grounds. Through their new bond, the boy could tell that Golanth was growing very tired. After all, he had only been Hatched that day. He needed to get some rest from the exertion of breaking shell and walking so far from the Hatching sands.

Somehow F'lessan managed to get the staggering bronze up the ramp, into the barracks, and over to the side of the room he had been assigned by the Weyrleader. With a sigh of relief, Golanth collapsed onto the little stone couch. F'lessan discovered that he, too, was exhausted. He had been up practically all the night before, too nervous to sleep, not knowing what to expect and worrying what the other Candidates would say if the Weyrleader's son failed to Impress on his first try. But it had all turned out just fine! And he had Impressed a bronze, too – the most beautiful, intelligent, wonderful bronze on Pern! The reality of the Hatching was more wonderful, more terrifying, and more rewarding than any description he had ever heard. He would never be alone again – and he had never realized how alone he had been until Golanth's presence filled his soul.

He sat down next to the small bronze hatchling, who was trying vainly to keep his glowing jeweled eyes open. As F'lessan smiled down at Golanth, the translucent lids slid closed one by one, then all Golanth's muscles relaxed at once. Suddenly F'lessan's eyelids became too heavy to hold up, and he leaned against Golanth's shoulder. With a little sigh, the boy slumped down next to the bronze dragonet. In a moment, their placid breathing joined that of the other new weyrmates.

With a soft step, the Weyrleader made his way through the rows of stone couches, checking on each boy and dragonet. He lifted one of F'lessan's long, thin legs where it was dragging on the floor and settled it next to the other. Beaming paternally down at the young pair, he drew the woven coverlet up from the end of the couch and settled it over them. F'lessan was smiling in his sleep.

Anne McCaffrey's comments on Impression

"It's love at first sight across a crowded room – one of the most magical things that could possibly happen to anybody. To me, it's like getting up on a horse that's been schooled, and the minute you give him the aids, he knows exactly what you want, perfectly, only there's much more of a rapport. Impressing a dragon is the

amalgam of everything you wanted in your pet as a child and couldn't have, because your pet wasn't up to it. It's suddenly having the whole candy store window *yours*.

"At the instant of Impression, part of the miracle is that you realize now you will never be alone, you will always be supported for the rest of your life - the feeling of total surrender to another mind which understands you totally. It is completely in rapport with you, and suddenly a great weight has been lifted from your shoulders, because you know that there is that support system there. And with it comes a tremendous responsibility, because you know that something happens to you, that dragon will suicide.

"Now, the dragon will take care of you, so it's really up to you to take care of the dragon. You have the feeling of one mind suddenly encasing yours, and every ounce of your blood, every tissue in your body, is suddenly linked to another living creature. It cannot be but the most ecstatic moment. If the kids were old enough, they'd have orgasms.

"You feel pain through the link, and you would do anything to stop your dragon's pain. If you were happy or comfortable, the dragon would also share in the pleasure, but not necessarily the sensory feeling. Dragons would be peripherally aware of 'mechanical duties' (*such as eating, or sex, or sleeping*) and they'd know right away if you were sick. They would start to get worried, not knowing why. Unusual occurrences or sensations would come to the dragon's awareness."