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destroy the silvery invaders. But, incredibly, one Lord Holder refuses to believe the Thread will fall again, and he may endanger the entire planet.

When such aspects were harmonious, and not distorted by conjunctions with other planets in the system, the wanderer brought in a life form which sought to bridge the space gap to the more temperate and hospitable planet.

The initial losses the colonists suffered from the voracious mycorrhizoid organism that fell on them were staggering.

They had divorced themselves from their home planet, Earth, and had cannibalized the colony ships, the Yokohama, the Bahrain and the Buenos Aires, so they would have to improvise with what they had.

Their first need was an aerial defence against the Thread, as they named this menace. Using highly sophisticated bio-engineering techniques, they developed a specialized variant of a Pernese life form which had two unusual, and useful, characteristics: the so-called fire-lizards could digest a phosphine bearing rock in one of their two stomachs and, belching forth the resultant gas, create a fiery breath which reduced Thread to harmless char. The second of their unusual qualities were the ability to teleport and an empathy which allowed limited understanding with humans. The bio-engineered "dragons" - so called because they resembled the Earth's mythical creatures - were paired at hatching with an empathic human, forming a symbiotic relationship of unusual depth and mutual respect.

During this interval, the dragons multiplied and each successive generation became a little larger than the last, although optimum level would take many, many more generations to reach. And the humans spread out across the northern continent, creating holds to live in, and halls in which to train young people in skills and professions. Sometimes folks even forgot that they lived on a threatened planet.

However, in both Holds and Weyrs, there were masses of reports, journals, maps and charts to remind the Lords and Weyrleaders of the problem: and much advice to assist their descendants when next the rogue planet approached Pern and how to prepare for the incursion.

This is what happened two hundred and fifty-seven years later.

Early Autumn at Fort's Gather

Dragons in squadrons wove, and interwove sky trails, diving and climbing in wings, each precisely separated by the minimum safety distance so that occasionally the watchers thought they saw an uninterrupted line of dragons as the close order drill continued.

The skies above Fort Hold, the oldest of the human settlements on the northern continent, were brilliantly clear on this early autumn day: that special sort of clarity and depth of colour that their ancestors in the New England sector of the North American continent would have instantly identified.

broidered border of his best tunic had scratched the skin. Actually, he had had a few heart-stopping moments during some of the manoeuvres, but he would never mention that aloud. The dragon riders were far too full of themselves as it was, without pandering to their egos and an inflated sense of importance: constantly appearing at his Hold and handing him lists of what hadn't been done and must be done before Threadfall. Chalkin snorted. Just how many people were taken in with all this twaddle? The storms last year had been unusually hard, but then that wasn't in itself unexpected, so why were hard storms supposed to be a prelude to a Pass?

Winter meant storms.

And this preoccupation with the volcanoes going off. They did periodically anyway, sort of a natural phenomenon, if he remembered his science orientation correctly. So what if three or four were active right now? That did not necessarily have to do with the proximity of a spatial neighbour! And he was not going to require guards to freeze themselves keeping an east-erly watch for the damned planet. Especially as every other Hold was also on the alert. So what if it orbited near Pern? That didn't necessarily mean it was close enough to be dangerous, no matter how the ancients had gone on about cyclical incursions.

The dragons were just one more of the settlers' weird experiments, altering an avian species to take the place of the aircraft they had once had.

didn't the brainy ones develop a new type of air-worthy vessel? A vessel that didn't expect to be thanked for doing its duty!

He glanced down at the wide roadway where the gather tables and stalls were set up. His were empty; even his gamesters were watching the sight. He'd have a word with them later. They should have been able to keep some customers at the various games of chance even with the dragon rider display. Surely everyone had seen that by now.

Still, the races had gone well and, with every one of the wager-takers his operators, he'd have made a tidy profit from his percentage of the bets.

As he made his way back to his seat, he saw that wine chillers had been placed at every table. He rubbed his be ringed fingers together in anticipation, the black Istan diamonds flashing as they caught sunlight. The wine was the only reason he had been willing to come to this Gathering; and he'd half suspected Hegmon of some prevarication in the matter. An effervescent wine, like the champagne one heard about from old Earth, was to have its debut. And, of course, the food would be marvellous too, even if the wine should not live up to its advance notice. Paulin, Fort Hold's Lord, had lured one of the best chefs on the continent to his kitchens and the evening meal was sure to be good: if it didn't turn sour in his stomach while he sat through the obligatory meeting afterwards. Chalkin had bid for the

clear intention of buying cases of the vintage. But Hegmon had refused to see him. Oh, his eldest son had been apologetic - something about a critical time in the process requiring Hegmon's presence in the caverns - but the upshot was that Chalkin couldn't even get his name put down on the purchase list for the sparkling wine. Since Benden Weyr was likely to get the lion's share of it, Chalkin had to keep in good with the Benden Weyrleaders so that, at the Hatching which was due to occur in another few weeks, he'd be invited and could drink as much of their allotment of wines as he could.

More than one way to skin a wherry!

He paused to twirl one of the bottles in its ice nest. Almost perfectly chilled. Riders must have brought the ice in from the High Reaches for Paulin. Whenever he needed some, he couldn't find a rider willing to do him, Bitra's Lord Holder, such a simple service. Humph!

But of course, certain Bloodlines always got preferential treatment.

Rank didn't mean as much as it should, that was certain!

He was surreptitiously inspecting the label of a bottle when there was a sudden, startled intake of fearful breaths from the watchers, instantly followed by a wild cheer. Looking up, he saw he had just missed some sort of dangerous manoeuvre. Ah, yes, they'd done another mid-air rescue. He saw a bronze dragon veering from under a blue who was miming a

was purportedly supposed to start falling again. They really ought to be consistent! Of course, tunnelling into the cliff would take more time than building outside. But too many folks preached one thing and practised another.

Chalkin grunted to himself, wondering acidly if the architects had got Weyrleader approval for the design. Thread! He snorted again and wished that Paulin, chatting so cosily with the two Benden Holders as he and his wife escorted them back to the head table, would hurry up.

He was dying to sample the bubbly white.

Rattling his fingers on the table, he awaited the return of his host and the opening of the tempting bottles in the cooler.

K'vin, bronze Charanth's rider, put his lips close to the ear of the young blue rider sitting in front of him.

"Next time wait for my signal!" he said.

P'tero only grinned, giving him a backward glance, his bright blue eyes merry.

"Knew you'd catch me", he bellowed back. "Too many people watching to let me swing and give Weyr secrets away!" Then P'tero waved encouragingly at Ormonth, who was now flying anxiously at Charanth's wingtip.

"I was in no danger," P'tero repeated. "I used brand-new straps and he watched me braid'em".

"Hah!" As every rider knew, dragons had gaps in their ability to correlate cause and effect. So Ormonth would scarcely have connected the new straps with his rider's perfect safety.

"Oh, thanks," the rider added as K'vin snapped one of his own straps to P'tero's belt. Not that they would be doing more than landing, but K'vin wished to make a point of safety to P'tero.

While K'vin approved of courage, he did not appreciate recklessness, especially if it endangered a dragon this close to the beginning of Threadfall. Careful supervision had kept his Weyr from losing any dragon partners and he intended to maintain that record.

Spilling off his blue before K'vin had passed the word was taking a totally unnecessary risk. Fortunately, K'vin had seen P'tero dive.

His heart had lurched in his chest, even if he knew P'tero was equipped with the especially heavy and long harness as a fail-safe. Even if he and Charanth had not accurately judged the mid-air rescue, those long straps would have saved the blue rider from falling to his death.

Today's manoeuvre had been precipitous instead of well-executed.

And, if Charanth had not been as adept on the wing, P'tero might be nursing broken ankles or severe bruising as a result of his folly.

keenly interested in applying for more land by setting up cot holds for married children, fewer and fewer girls were encouraged to stand on the Hatching Grounds. While being a dragon rider didn't prevent a girl from having children, if that's what she wanted, it did prevent them from owning land. Still, grandchildren, even the Weyrborn, could claim land. Though, in actual fact, more Weyrborn preferred to stay in the Weyr even if they didn't Impress.

The dragons who had taken part in the mass fly-by were now landing their riders in the wide road beyond the court.

Then they leaped up again to find a spot in which to enjoy the last of the warm autumnal sun. Many made for the adjoining cliffs as space on Fort's heights filled up on either side of the solar panels.

Dragons could be trusted not to tread on what remained of the priceless installations. Fort's were the oldest, of course, and two banks had been lost last winter to the unseasonably fierce storms. Fort, being the largest as well as the oldest northern installation, needed all its arrays in full working order to supply heat for its warren of corridors, power for air circulation units and what equipment still worked. Fortunately a huge stockpile of panels had been made during the first big wave of constructing new Weyrs and Holds. There would be enough for generations.

exchanged. There'd been brisk business all day, especially for items needed during the winter months when there would be fewer big Gatherings.

The various Craftsmen would be pleased, and there'd be less for the dragons to haul back.

Charanth was now circling over the annexes which had been started to increase living space for both Pern's main infirmary research facility and teacher training. The dormitories were also going to house volunteers who were assiduously trying to save the records, damaged during last spring when water had leaked down the walls of the vast storage caverns under Fort. Riders had offered to spend as much time as possible from their training schedules to help in the project.

Everyone who had a legible script was acceptable, and Lord Paulin had done a bang-up job in making the copyists comfortable. The other Holds had contributed material and work forces.

The exterior buildings of the College were designed to be Threadproof, with high peaked roofs of Telgar slate and gutters which led into underground cisterns where errant Thread would be drowned.

All the Craftsmen involved, including those destined to inhabit the facility, would have preferred to enlarge the cave system, but there had been two serious collapses of caverns and the mining engineers had vetoed interior expansion for fear of undermining the whole cliff-side.

Even today there had been a work force, though they had taken a break to watch the aerial display and would finish in time for the evening meal and entertainment.

Charanth landed gracefully, with Ormonth right beside him so that P'tero could remove the tethering safety straps before they could be noticed. As he was doing so, M'leng, green Sith's rider, came up to him, scolding him for "putting my heart in my mouth like that!" And he proceeded to berate P'tero far more viciously than his Weyrleader would.

K'vin grinned to himself, especially as he saw how penitent P'tero became under such a harangue. K'vin rolled up his riding straps and tied them to the harness ring.

"Enjoy the sun, my friend," he said, slapping Charanth on the wide shoulder.

I will. Meranath is already there, the bronze dragon said, his tone slightly smug as he executed a powerful upward leap, showering his rider with grit.

Charanth's attitude towards his mate, Meranath, amused, and pleased, his rider. No-one had expected K'vin to accede to Telgar's Weyrleadership when it fell open after B'ner's death nine months before. Who would have expected that the sturdy rider, just into his sixth decade, had had any heart problems? But that is what the medics said killed him. So, when Meranath was ready to mate again, Telgar's senior Weyrwoman, Zulaya, had called

from B'ner that the normal duties of an Interval were bad enough, but to know that a high percentage of your fellow-riders would be injured, or killed, that the lives of so many people rested on your expertise and endurance was too much to contemplate. Some nights, now, he was racked by terrifying dreams, and Threadfall hadn't even started.

On the occasions when he was in Zulaya's bed, she had been understanding and calmly reassuring.

"B'ner worried, too, if that's any consolation, Kev," she said, using his old nickname and soothing back sweat-curled hair as he trembled with reaction. "He had nightmares, too. Comes with the title. As a rule, the morning after a nightmare, B'ner'd go over Sean's notes. I figure he had to have memorized them."

"I've seen you do the same thing. You'll do well, Kev, when push comes to shove. I know it." Zulaya could sound so sure of something, but then she was nearly a decade his senior and had had more experience as a Weyrleader. Sometimes her intuition was downright uncanny: she could accurately predict the size of clutches, the distribution of the colours, the sex of babies born in the Weyr and, occasionally, even the type of weather in the future. But then, she was Fort Weyrbred, a linear descendant of one of the First Riders, Aliana Zuleita, and knew things. It was odd how the golden queens always seemed to prefer women from outside the Weyrs,

The fact that he was a several times great-nephew of Sorka Connell, the First Weyrwoman - and Zulaya pointed this out more than once - constituted a secondary and subtle reassurance to the entire Weyr.

"Maybe that's why Meranath let Charanth catch her," Zulaya said, her face dead serious but her eyes dancing.

"Had you, I mean... did you think of me... I mean...", K'vin tried to summon appropriate words two weeks after that momentous flight. He had been overwhelmed by her response to him that night. But afterwards she had seemed very casual in her dealings with him, and she did not always invite him into her quarters, despite the fact that their dragons were inseparable.

"Who thinks at all during a mating flight? But I do believe I'm glad that Charanth was so clever. If there is anything in heredity, having a distant great-nephew of Fort Weyr's First Weyrwoman - AND from a family that has put many acceptable candidates on the Hatching Grounds - as Telgar's Weyrleader gives us all a boost."

"I'm not my many times great-aunt, Zulaya", She chuckled.

"Fortunately, or you wouldn't be Weyrleader, but blood will tell!" Zulaya had a disconcerting directness but gave him no real hint how she - the woman, not the Weyrwoman - personally felt towards him. She was kind, helpful, made constructive suggesnons when they discussed training pro-

Pass.

Now, at probably the last large Gather Pern would enjoy wider Thread-free skies for the next fifty years, he watched his Weyrwoman leave the group of Telgar holders she had been talking to and stride towards him across the open courtyard.

Zulaya was tall for a woman, long-legged - all the better for bestriding a dragon's neck. He was a full head taller than she was, which she said she liked in him: B'ner had been just her height. It was her colouring that fascinated K'vin: the inky-black curly hair that, once freed of the flying helmet, tumbled down below her waist.

The hair framed a wide, highcheekboned face, set off the beige of her smooth skin and large, lustrous eyes that were nearly black; a wide and sensual mouth above a strong chin gave her face strength and purpose which reinforced her authority with anyone. She strode, unlike some of the hold women who minced along, her steel-rimmed boot heels noisy on the flagstones, her arms swinging at her sides. She'd had time to put a long, slitted skirt over her riding gear and it opened as she walked, showing a well-formed leg in the leather pants and high boots.

She'd turned the high riding-boot cuffs down over her calves and the red fur made a nice accent to her costume, echoed in the fur trim of her cuffs

"For that piece of stupidity, I'll make them more afraid," she said briskly, hopping a step to match his stride. "You really should learn how to scowl menacingly." She glanced up at K'vin and then shook her head, sighing sadly. She had once teased him that he was far too handsome to ever look genuinely threatening, with the Hanrahan red hair, blue eyes and freckles. "No, you just don't have the face for it. Be that as it may, Meranath's going to give out to Sith for allowing a blue to put himself in danger."

"Get'em where it hurts," K'vin said, nodding, because Meranath was even more effective as a deterrent with the dragons than any human could be, even the dragon's own rider. Damned fool stunt!

"However," and now Zulaya cleared her throat, "the Telgarians thought it was Just marvellous!" she added in a gushing tone. "Especially since they won't get much chance to see the dive in real action." Now she grimaced.

"Well, at least Telgarians believe," K'vin said.

"Who doesn't?" Zulaya demanded, looking up at him.

"Chalkin, for one."

"Him!" She had absolutely no use for the Bitran Lord Holder and never bothered to hide it.

"If there's one, there may be others for all the lip service they give us."

"What? With Second Fall only months away from us?" Zulaya demanded. "And why, pray tell, do we have dragons at all, if not to provide an

laya said irritably.

"Why else do you think he came?" asked K'vin as he deftly guided her away from the Bitran, who was smacking his lips and regarding his wine glass with greedy speculation.

"Though today's also a chance for his gamesters to profit. One thing sure, I hear tell he's not on Hegmon's list," she said as they reached their table which the Telgarians shared, by choice, with the High Reaches Weyr and Hold leaders and those from Tillek. The senior Captain of the Tillek fishing fleet and his new wife completed the complement at their table.

"That was quite a show you put on," said the jovial ship's master, Kizan, "wasn't it, Cherry, m'dear?"

"Oh, it was, indeed it was," the girl replied, clapping her hands together. While the gesture was close to an affectation, the young wife was clearly awed by the company she kept at this Gather and everyone was trying to help her cope. Kizan had let it be known that she came from a small fishing hold and, while a capable ship's master, she had little experience with a wider world.

"I've often seen the dragons in the sky, but never so close up. They are so beautiful."

"Have you ridden one yet?" Zulaya asked kindly.

"Oh, heavens, no," Cherry replied, modestly lowering her eyes.

Cherry tried to respond, but she couldn't find words.

"Don't tease," Mari said. "Riding a dragon is considerably different to standing on your own deck, but I don't know many people who refuse a ride."

"Oh, I'm not refusing," Cherry said hastily, startled.

Just like a child frarffil of being denied a promised treat, K'vin thought and struggled to keep from grinning at her.

"All of you, leave her alone," said the Telgar Lady Holder, scowling at them. "I remember my first ride adragonback."

"Back that far, huh," said her husband, Lord Tashvi, eyeing her blandly. "And yet you can't remember where you put that bale of extra blankets."

"Don't start on that again!" Salda began, scowling, but it was apparent to the others at the table, even young Cherry, that the Telgar Holders often indulged in such sparring.

"Have you not opened your wine?" asked an eager voice and they looked round at Vintner Hegmon, a stout, grey haired man of medium height with a flushed face and a reddened nose which he jokingly called an occupational hazard.

"Do us the honour." said Tashvi, gesturing to the chilled bottles.

ting a hand to her nose just in time to catch a sneeze.

"The bubbles tickle." Try the wine," Hegmon urged.

"Hmmm," Tashvi said and Kizan echoed the sentiment.

"Dry, too," the Captain said. "Go on, Cherry," he urged his wife.

"It's quite unlike Tillek brews. They tend to be foxy and harsh. This'll go down easily."

"Ohhh," and Cherry's response was one of sheer delight.

"Oh, I like this!" Hegmon grinned at her ingenuousness and accepted the approving nods from the others at the table.

"I quite like it, too," Zulaya said after letting a sip slide down her throat.

"Rather nice."

"I say, Hegmon, wouldn't mind a refill," and Chalkin appeared at the table, extending his glass under the mouth of the bottle the Vintner held.

Hegmon kept the bottle upright and regarded the Lord Holder coolly.

"There's more at your own table, Chalkin."

"True, but I'd rather sample different bottles."

Hegmon stiffened and Salda intervened.

"Leave off, Chalkin. As if Hegmon would offer an inferior bottle to anyone," she said and waved him off.

Chalkin hesitated between a scowl and a smile but then, keeping his expression bland, he bowed and backed away from the table with his

"M'shall and Irene do. He's such a toad."

"Unfortunately," said Tashvi with a grimace, "he's managed to find like minds."

"We'll settle him at the meeting", said K'vin.

"I hope so," Tashvi said, "though a man like that is not easily convinced against his will. And he does have a following."

"Not where it matters," Zulaya put in.

"I hope so. Ah, and here's food to soak up all this lovely stuff before we're too muddled to keep our wits about us this evening."

Zulaya waved at the wine cooler. "I doubt there's more than two glasses apiece, scarcely enough to muddle us, though it's lovely stuff." And she sipped judiciously. "Hegmon is generous, but not overly so. And here's our dinner..." She sat back as a swarm of men and women in Fort colours began to distribute platters of steaming foods among the tables. And bottles of red wine.

"You spoke too soon about muddling, Zuli," K'vin said, grinning as he served her roast slices from the platter before passing it around the table.

They had finished their meal and all the wine before Paulin rose from his table and signalled those in the upper Court to follow him into the Hold for the meeting. Dancing was well under way in the square and the music made a cheerful processional.

"Hmmm," K'vin agreed, craning his neck around and impeding Chalkin's entrance into the Hall. "Sorry."

"Humph," was Chalkin's response and he glared sourly at Zulaya as he passed, shrugging his garments away from touching them.

"Consider the source," K'vin said when he thought Zulaya might fire a tart comment after the Lord Holder.

"I want to be at Bitra when the first Fall hits his Hold," she said.

"Isn't he lucky, then, not to be beholden to us, but to Benden?" K'vin asked wryly.

"Indeed," agreed Zulaya and allowed herself to be guided to Telgar Weyr's usual seat at the big conference table. "I wonder did anyone get any sleep in this Hold the past week," she said, stroking the banner of Telgar's colours that clothed their portion of the table.

"Makes such a nice display," she murmured as she pulled out the chair which also sported Telgar's white field and black grain design.

The table itself was made up of many smaller units hooked together, forming a multi-faceted circle: Telgar's Weyr and Hold leaders were between High Reaches and Tillek since they were the northernmost settlements. Across from them were Ista Weyr and Hold, and Keroon Hold, with their brilliant colours. Benden Weyr was seated with Bitra on one side and Nerat and Benden on the other. The Chief Engineer, the Senior Medic and

flushed red.

"I'm sure we're all aware of the imminence of Threadfall."

Chalkin made a rude noise.

"Look, Lord Chalkin," said Paulin, scowling at the dissident, "if you managed to get too much of the champagne inside your skin, you can be excused."

"No, that's exactly what he wants," said M'shall, Benden's Weyrleader, quickly. "Then he can claim anything decided today was done behind his back."

"If he can't shut up, we can always hold his head under the tap until he sobers enough to remember common courtesy, put in Irene, Benden's Weyrwoman. He doesn't like getting his Gather clothes wet." Her expression suggested she'd had experience enough to know.

"Chalkin!" Paulin said, his voice steely.

"Oh, all right," the Bitran said in a surly tone and he settled himself more squarely in his chair, leaning forward on his elbows at the table. "If you're going to be that way..."

"Only because you are," snapped Irene. Paulin gave her a stern look and she subsided, though she kept narrowed eyes on Chalkin for a while longer.

two planets. Or that they considered the... improbability for any reason.

"Yes, but does it say anywhere that there can't be?" Chalkin was obviously delighted with this possibility.

"Absolutely not," Paulin said simultaneously with Clisser who was not only the College Head but the senior of the trained astronomers.

Paulin gestured for Clisser to continue.

"Captains Keroon and Tillek," and he paused in reverence, "both annotated the AIVAS report which included data from the Yokohama's records. I have repeatedly reworked the relevant equations and the rogue planet will Pass Pern on an elliptical orbit that canNOT alter to a collision course with us. A matter of celestial mechanics and Rukbat's gravitational pull."

"I'd've brought the diagram of the orbits involved if I'd had forewarning." Clisser gave Chalkin a disgusted glare.

"Bad enough it brings in the Thread. Do you want to be blown to smithereens, Chalkin?" asked Kalvi, chief of the mechanical engineers.

"And I checked the maths, too, so I concur with Clisser and everyone else who's done the equations. Why don't you, if you're so worried?" Chalkin ignored the jibe since he had never been noted for scholarship in any field. He was also well pleased with the reaction to his remark. No matter what they said, there was no proof that they were really that safe.

These are due to occur in the first two weeks, about three days apart. The second Fall in Fort territory and the first one in High Reaches happen on the same day - different flows of the same Fall. Also, we know from the records that there will be live Falls over the Southern Continent for about a week before the Falls commence here in the North."

"S'nan," and Paulin turned to the Fort Weyrleader, "may we have your progress report?"

S'nan stood, holding up his ubiquitous clipboard. (Rumour had it that that item had been passed down from the Connell himself.) He peered down at it a moment. The old Leader of the premier Weyr on Pern resembled his several times great-grandfather, though his silvery hair was more sandy than red.

Privately, K'vin didn't think Sean Connell had been such a martinet, even if he had promulgated the rules by which the Weyrs governed themselves. Most of these were common sense even if S'nan managed to pursue them into the ridiculous.

"The first Fall," S'nan began, and there was a touch of pride in his voice, "would start over the sea east of Fort Hold and come ashore at the mouth of the river, passing diagonally across the peninsula and out into the sea in the west. The second two Falls, which will occur three days later, will be

"Thread giving us all a chance to get accustomed to fighting it?" asked B'nurrin of Igen.

"Your levity is ill-placed," S'nan said, but there were too many grins around the table for his reprimand to affect the irrepressible young Weyrleader. He cleared his throat and launched once more into his discourse. "The next two Falls will be the most dangerous for unseasoned wings," and he shot a stern glance at B'nurrin as he found the proper Thread path.

"The first will start over the sea in the east and proceed over Benden Weyr and Bitra Hold, ending almost at Igen Weyr. This would normally be flown jointly by Benden and Igen Weys.

"The second will start at the northern end of the Nerat peninsula and proceed across it, over the east coast of Keroon and the east tip of Igen, and end just offshore from Igen. This also would normally be a joint Fall, flown by Benden over Nerat, Igen over the northern part of Keroon, and Ista over the southern part of Keroon.

"We really do know what Falls we fly, S'nan," M'shall said.

"Yes, yes, of course," and S'nan cleared his throat again.

"However," and his glance went to the Lord Holders seated around the table, "it was decided at the last meeting of the Weyrleaders that, since any of these would be the first Fall in our experience, every Weyr would supply

but they had been overruled by the older Weyrleaders. K'vin suspected that if he were to take some wings down South for that first Fall there, he'd be likely to find B'nurrin practising there, too.

"I still think it's a good idea," the Igen leader said, shrugging.

Pretending such an interruption hadn't even occurred, S'nan went on. "As was customary in the First Pass, Lord Holders will supply adequate ground crews and have them assembled as directed by the Weyrleaders. In this case, Weyrleader M'shall." He inclined slightly towards the Benden bronze rider.

"Master Kalvi," and he bowed courteously to the Head Engineer, "has assured me that his foundry has turned out sufficient HNO₃ cylinders to equip the ground crews, but the HNO₃ must be made up on site. As in the First Pass, the labour and material are supplied by the engineer corps as part of their public duty. You all should have received your full allotment of tanks by Year's End." S'nan paused and peered at Kalvi who rose to his feet.

The Fort Weyrleader was precise in his language, scorning to use the term Turn for a year which was coming into use among the younger generation.

"I've scheduled every major Hold with three days of training in the maintenance and repair of the flame-throwers and a practice session

"Lords Holder must assign suitable medics with every ground control unit, or have one member of each trained in first aid and supplied with kits containing numbweed fellis juice and other first-aid medications," S'nan continued.

"Now," and he flipped over the top sheet, "I have done pre-Pass inspections of all Weyrs and find them well up to strength, with sufficient cadet riders to supply the wings with phosphine rock during the Pass. I have discussed all aspects of flight tactics and Weyr maintenance with the respective Weyrleaders."

K'vin writhed a bit on his chair, remembering the exhaustive inspection carried out by S'nan and Sarai: they'd even inspected the recycling plant! Then he noticed that G'don, the oldest Weyrleader, was also squirming. So, the Fort pair had spared no-one in their officious search for perfection.

Well, they were heading into a Pass and the Fort Weyrleaders were correct to want every aspect of dragon riding at the highest possible standard and readiness. In the propagation of dragons, the pair had found no fault with Telgar Weyr: it had had the largest clutches of all the Weyrs in the last three years as the dragons themselves answered the tide of preparations for the coming struggle.

K'vin was hoping that Charanth's first clutch would be larger than any that B'ner's Miginth had sired; maybe then Zulaya would warm to him.

K'vin contented himself with a smile. Unbidden, a little wiggle of fear shot up from his belly to chill him and he gave himself a shake. He came from a Blood that had produced First Riders and contributed many sons and daughters to the Weyrs.

And you ride me, Charanth said firmly. I shall be formidable in the air. Thread will fly in the other direction when it sees my flame.

And that was not all draconic boast, for Charanth had fracked up the Weyr Record for the length he achieved in flaming practice. Together we meet Thread, not just you on your own. I shall be with you and we shall overcome.

Thanks, Charrie.

You re welcome, Kev.

"You've got that look in your eye, K'vin," Zulaya murmured for his ear alone. "What's Charanth's opinion of all this?"

"He's raring to go," K'vin whispered back, and grinned.

Charanth was right to remind him that he did not fly alone: they were together as they had been from the moment the bronze had broken his shell in half and stepped directly towards a fourteen year old Kevin of the Hanrahans waiting on the hot sands of Hatching Ground. And Kevin had realized that that was the moment all his life had been aimed at Impression. He'd seen his older brother Impress, and his second oldest sister, and three of

With that, he sat down to an approving applause. "I hope that the Holds are too" Not his voice end on an up-note but he raised". Only did his thick brows questioningly at the Fort Holder.

Paulin stood up again, shuffling until he found the right clipboard and cleared his throat. "I have readiness reports in from all but two major Holds," and he glanced first at Franco, Lord Holder of Nerat, and then tilted his head towards Chalkin. "I know you received the forms to fill in."

The tall, thin bronze-skinned Neratian raised his hand. "I told you the problem we have with vegetation, Paulin, and we're still trying to keep it under control" he grimace.

"Not easy with the excellent weather we've been having and the restriction against chemical deterrents. But I can assure you that we'll keep at it. Otherwise, we have emergency roofing for the seedling nurseries and sufficient stores of viable seeds to replant when that's feasible. We're also continuing our research into dwarfing plants for indoor propagation. All minor holders are fully aware of the problems and are complying. Everyone's signed up for the ground-crew course. "

Paulin made a notation, nodding. "Agriculture's still working on the problem of an inhibitor for your tropical weed types, Fran."

"I hope so. Stuff grows out of pure sand without any cultivation at all. "

people with unnecessary tasks..." He wasn't able to finish his sentence for the acrimonious reactions from everyone at the table.

"Now see here, Chalkin - -."

"Hey, wait a bleeding minute"

"Just where do you get off. "

Bastom was on his feet with indignation.

Chalkin pointed one thick be ringed finger at the Tillek Holder.

"The Holds are autonomous, are they not? Is that not guaranteed in the Charter?" Chalkin demanded, rounding on Paulin.

"In ordinary times, yes," Paulin answered, waving a hand to the others to be quiet. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the angry remarks and protests. However, with..."

"This Thread of yours coming. So you say, but there's no proof" Chalkin said, grinning smugly.

"Proof? What more proof do you need?" Paulin demanded. "This planet is already feeling the perturbation of the rogue planet. "

Chalkin dismissed that with a shrug. "Winter brings bad storms, volcanoes do erupt."

"You can't so easily dismiss the fact that the planet is becoming more visible... "

"Pooh. That doesn't mean anything. "

Chair, I'll remind you," and he glared at Tashvi until the Telgar Lord resumed his seat and the others had quietened down.

"What kind of proof do you require, Lord Chalkin?" he asked in a very reasonable tone of voice.

"Thread falling..." someone muttered, and subsided before he could be identified.

"Well, Chalkin?" said Paulin.

"Some proof that Thread will fall. A report from this AIVAS we've all heard about Landing is under tons of volcanic ash," Paulin said, and then recognized S'nan's urgent signal to speak.

"Nine expeditions have been mounted to investigate the installation at Landing and retrieve information from the AIVAS" S'nan said in his usual measured tones. As he spoke he searched for and found a sheaf of plastic and held it up.

"These are the reports. And?" Chalkin demanded, obviously enjoying the agitation he had aroused.

"We have been unable to locate the administration building in which the AIVAS was located. "

Why not?" Chalkin insisted. I remember seeing tapes of Landing prior to the first Threadfall. "

"So you have done nothing at all to prepare your Hold for the onslaught?" Paulin asked calmly, reasonably.

Chalkin shrugged. "I don't perceive a need to waste time and effort.. "

"And money" murmured the original heckler.

"Precisely. Marks are hard enough to come by to waste them on the off-chance... "

"OFF-CHANCE?" Tashvi erupted out of his chair. "You'll have a revolt on your hands. "

"I doubt that," Chalkin said with a sly smile.

"Because you haven't bloody seen fit to warn your holders?" Tashvi demanded.

"Lord Telgar," Paulin said repressively, I'm Chair." He turned back to Chalkin. "If the rest of us, however misguidedly, do believe in the forewarnings - backed by irrefutable astronomical evidence of an imminent Pass - how can you deny them?" Chalkin's grin was patronizing.

"A space-borne organism? That drops on a large planet and eats everything it touches? Why wasn't Pern totally destroyed during previous visitations? Why is it every two hundred years? How come the Exploration Team which did a survey of the planet before it was released to our ancestors to colonize... how come they didn't see any evidence? Ah, no,"

been caused by one of the many fungus growths. "

"Well then, when this inconclusive evidence comes dropping out of the skies onto your Hold, don't bother us," Bastom said.

"Or come crying to my Hold for help," added Bridgely, completely disgusted by Chalkin's attitude.

"You may be sure of that," Chalkin said and, with a mocking bow to Paulin, he left the Hall with no further word.

"What are we going to do about him?" Bridgely asked, "because sure as night follows day, he will come running for aid to Franco and me. "

"There is provision in the Charter," Paulin began.

Jamson of the High Reaches stared with wide and disbelieving eyes at Paulin.

"Only if he believes in the Charter" Bastom said.

"Oh, Chalkin believes in the Charter all right," Paulin said sardonically. "The patent conferring the title of 'Lord Holder' on the original major northern Stakeholders is what gives his line the right to Hold. And he's already used the Charter to substantiate his autonomous position. I wonder if he also knows the penalty for failing to prepare his Hold. That constitutes a major breach of the trust."

"Who trusts Chalkin?" Jamson put in.

receive decent supplies from him. "

"Really?" Paulin asked, jotting down notes. "I hadn't realized he shorted you on tithes."

M'shall shrugged. "Why should you know? It's our problem. We keep at him. We'll have to keep at him over this, too, you know. Can't let him away with a total disregard for the upcoming emergency. Not every holder in Bitra's useless, Bridgely."

Bridgely shrugged. " Good apples in every basket as well as bad. But I'd really hate to have to cope with the problem come springtime and Threadfalls. Benden's too near Bitra for my peace of mind."

"So what is the penalty for what Chalkin's doing? Or, rather not doing?" Franco asked.

"Impeachment," Paulin said flatly.

"Impeachment!" Jamson was aghast.

"I didn't know Article Fourteen, Jamson," said Paulin, "Dereliction of Duty by Lord Holder".

"Can you give me a print-out on that, Clisser? Perhaps we all should have our memory refreshed on that point."

"Certainly," and the Head of the College made a note in his folder. "In your hands tomorrow."

"So your system's still working?" Tashvi asked.

trovertible proof of his inefficiency as a Lord Holder as well as his failure to respond to this emergency. I mean, impeachment's an extreme step."

"Yes, and Chalkin'll do everything he can to slide out of it," Bastom said cynically.

"Surely there's a trial procedure for such a contingency?" asked Jamson, looking anxiously about. "You certainly can't act without allowing him the chance to respond to any charges."

"In the matter of impeachment I believe that a unanimous agreement of all major Holders and Leaders is sufficient to deprive him of his position," Paulin declared.

"Are you sure?" Jamson asked.

If he isn't, I am," Bridgely said, bringing one fist down firmly on the table. His spouse, Lady Jane, nodded her head emphatically.

"I haven't wanted to bring it up in a Council before," Bridgely began.

"He's very difficult to confront at the best of times," said Irene, setting her lips in a thin line of frustrations long borne.

Bridgely nodded sharply in her direction and continued.

"He's come as near to bending, or breaking for that matter. What few laws we do have on Pern. Shady dealings, punitive contracts, unusual harsh conditions for his holders."

I don't know about going so far as to impeach him. I mean, such an extreme remedy could have a demoralizing effect on all the Holds," said Jamson, his reluctance deepening.

"Possibly..." Paulin began.

"Not being prepared for Thread will certainly demoralize Bitra!" Tashvi said.

Paulin held up his hand as he turned to M'shall. "Please give me specific instances in which Bitra Hold has failed to supply the Weyr."

"Jane, I'd like to look at the records you've kept."

"I've some, too," Irene added.

Paulin nodded and looked round the table. "Since his dereliction of primary duty in regard to preparation against Threadfall could jeopardize not only his own Hold but that of his neighbours, I feel we must examine the problem as quickly as possible and indict him..."

Jamson jammed up an arm in protest, but Paulin held up a placatory hand. "If, that is, we do find just cause to do so. Just now, he was acting as if he'd had too much of Hegmon's new wine. "

"Ha!" was Irene of Benden's immediate response, a cynical reaction echoed by others around the table.

"We cannot allow personal feelings to colour this matter," Paulin said firmly.

"He has relatives?" Bridgely asked, mimicking surprise and consternation.

I believe so," Franco said, "beyond his children. An uncle If they're of the same Blood as Chalkin, would that be an improvement?" Tashvi wanted to know.

"They do say a new broom sweeps clean," Irene remarked.

"I heard that Chalkin did his uncle out of succession by giving him an isolated hold."

"He got him out of the way fast enough, that's sure," said Bridgely. "Some mountain hold, back of beyond."

"All of Bitra is back of beyond," Azury of Boll remarked, grinning.

A replacement is not the most immediate concern," Paulin said, taking charge again, if we can persuade Chalkin that all of us can't be wrong about Threadfall."

Zulaya this time snorted at that unlikelihood. "He'll admit he's wrong only when Thread is eating him... which might solve the problem in the most effective way. Bitra's in the path of the first Fall."

"Remiss as Chalkin appears to be," Jamson said, "Bitra Hold may be better off with than without him. You don't learn the management of a Hold overnight, you know. "

and irregularities in his conduct of Bitra Hold. "

"We'll do this properly, gathering evidence and making a full report on the problem. Now, let's finish up today's agenda. "

Kalvi, you wish to broach the subject of new mines?"

The lean hawk-nosed engineer sprang to his feet. "I sure do. We've got fifty years of Fall and we're going to need more ore: ore that's closer to the surface than the Telgar deposits. "

"Thought they would last us a millennium," Bridgely of Benden said.

"Oh, there's certainly more ore down the main shafts, but it's not as accessible as these mountain deposits which could be worked more efficiently." He unrolled an opaque plastic map of the Great Western range where he had circled an area beyond Ruatha's borders. "Here! High-grade ore, and almost waiting to leap into carts. We'll need that quality if we're to replace flame-thrower equipment. And we'll have to. He said that with a degree of resignation. I've the personnel trained and ready to move up there - which I'd like to do to get the mines going before Threadfall starts. All I need is your OK."

"You're asking to start a hold up there? Or just a mine?" asked Paulin.

Kalvi scratched the side of his nose and grinned. Well, it'd be a long way to travel after the shift is over, especially if the dragons are all busy fighting Thread." He unrolled another diagram. One reason I've backed this site is

ment. The ore's second rate, too. There isn't time to restore the mine, much less argue with Chalkin over a contract. You know how he can be, haggling over minor details for weeks before he'll make a decision." He contorted his long face into a grimace.

"If you," and he turned to the others at the table, grant this permission, I'll have a chance to noise it about the Gather this evening and see who'd be interested in going along in support capacity and necessary crafts."

"I'll second it," said Tashvi magnanimously, raising his hand.

"Good. Moved and seconded. Now, all in favour of the formation of a mining hold?" Hands shot up and were dutifully counted by Paulin.

"Chalkin's going to say this was rigged," Bastom remarked caustically, and that we drove him out of the meeting before the subject came up.

"So?" Paulin said. "No-one asked him to leave and he has a copy of the agenda same as everyone else." He brought his fist down on the table. "Motion carried. Tell your engineer he may start his project. "

"High Reaches Weyr," and he turned to G'don. "Telgar," and he included K'vin now, "can you supply transport?" Both Weyrleaders agreed. If a new hold was to be established, as many riders as possible from their Weyrs should become familiar with its landmarks.

and now, are not too distanced from the events of the First Pass. We have actual visual records from that time with which to check on the approach of the rogue planet. We know it is a rogue because we know, from the excellent and exhaustive reports done by Captains Keroon and Tillek, that the planet was unlikely to have emerged from our sun. Its orbit alone substantiates that theory since it is not on the same ecliptical plane as the rest of Rukbat's satellites.

"I am assiduous in training at least six students in every class in the rudiments of astronomy and the use of the sextant, as well as being certain that they have the requisite mathematics to compute declination and right ascension and figure accurately the hour circle of any star. We still have three usable telescopes with which to observe the skies, but we once had more." He paused.

"We are, as I'm sure we all must honestly admit, losing more and more of the technology bequeathed us by our ancestors. Not through mishandling," and he raised a hand against objections, "but from the attritions of age and an inability, however much we may strive to compensate, to reach back to the same technical level our ancestors enjoyed." Kalvi grimaced in reluctant agreement to that fact.

"Therefore, I suggest that we somehow, in some fashion, with what technology we have left at our disposal, leave as permanent and indestruc-

wishing to destroy a flourishing economy and happy existence - that Thread will return, all that we have striven to achieve, all we have built with our bare hands," and dramatically he lifted his, "all we have around us today," and he gestured towards the music faintly heard outside the Hall, would perish.

The denials were loud.

"Ah," and he held one hand over his head, "but it could happen.

"Lord Chalkin is proof of that. We've already lost so much of our technology. Valuable and skilled men and women we could ill-afford to lose because of their knowledge and skills have succumbed to disease or old age. We must have a fail-safe against Thread! Something that will last and remind our descendants to prepare, be ready, and to survive."

"Is there any chance we could find that administration building then?" Paulin asked S'nan.

"Too close to Threadfall now," M'shall answered. "And it's going into the hot season down there which makes digging anything enervating.

"However, I most emphatically agree with Clisser. We need some sort of a safeguard. Something that would prove to doubters like Chalkin that Thread isn't just a myth our ancestors thought up."

"But we keep records... " said Laura of Ista Weyr.

as much lumber and pulp as it can."

"You know we'll do our best to protect the forests," K'vin said, though privately he wondered how good their best could be since even one Thread burrow could devastate a wide swath of timbered land in minutes.

"Of course you will," Salda said warmly, "and we will stockpile as much paper as we can beforehand. Old rags are always welcome." Then her expression sobered. "But I don't think any of us can know what will or will not survive. Tarvi Andiyar's survey when he took Hold indicated that most of the slopes were denuded. Ten years before Threadfall ceased, he had seedlings in every corner of the Hold, ready to plant out. We were just lucky that natural succession also occurred in the three decades after the end of First Pass."

"That is yet another item we must record for future generations," Clisser said.

"The ultimate how-to," put in Mari of High Reaches.

"I beg pardon?"

"What to do when Threadfall has Passed is even more important than what to do while it's happening," she said, as if that should be obvious.

"We've got to first survive fifty years..." Salda began.

"Let's get back to the subject," said Paulin, rising to his feet.

ken?"

"They're not that complicated to make," Kalvi replied.

"What if there's no-one trained in its use," Salda put in.

"My fleet captains use sextants daily," Bastom said. "The instruments are invaluable on the sea."

"Mathematics is a base course for all students," Clisser added, "not just fishermen."

"You have to know the method to get the answers you need," said Corey, the Head Medic, speaking for the first time.

And know when to use it., Her profession was struggling to maintain a high standard as more and more equipment became unusable, and unusual procedures became erudite.

"There has to be some way to pass on that vital information to future generations," said Paulin, looking first at Clisser and then scanning the faces at the table. "Let's have a hard think. "

"Etching on metal's one way... and prominently placing tablets in every Weyr and Hold so they can't be stored away and forgotten."

"A sort of Rosetta Stone?" Clisser's tone was more statement than query.

"What's that?" Bridgely asked. Clisser had a habit, which annoyed some folk, of dropping odd references into conversations: references with which

"All right then, Clisser, but don't put the project aside," Paulin said. "I'd rather we had a hundred sirens, bells and whistles going off than no warning at all." Clisser grinned slowly. "The bells and whistles are easy enough. It's the siren that will take time. "

"All right then," and Paulin looked around the table.

Toe-tapping dance music was all too audible and the younger holders and weyrfolk were plainly restless. "No more new business?" He didn't wait for an answer but used the gavel to end the meeting.

"That's all for now. Enjoy yourselves, folks." The speed with which the Hall emptied suggested that that was what all intended to do.

Gather at Fort

"Cliss, what on earth possessed you?" Sheledon demanded, glowering. He was head of the Arts faculty at the College and constantly jealous of what free time he had in which to compose.

"Well," and Clisser looked away from Sheledon's direct and accusing glare, "we do have more records and are more familiar with the techniques of accessing them than anyone else. Information and training are what this College was established to provide."

"Our main function," and Danja took up the complaint she wanted spare time in which to work with her string quartet, "is to teach youngsters who would rather ride dragons or acquire many clicks of Pernese real estate to

turn," he said in an attempt to appease the wrath of Sheledon and Danja.

"It isn't the 'hard' that bothers me," Danja said acidly, " but when will we have the time?" She stabbed her finger at the as-yet-unfinished extension to the teaching facility.

"Particularly since there is a time limit," and she shot another dirty look at Clisser. "Winter Solstice."

"Oh," and Lozell grimaced. "Good point."

"We're all working every hour we can spare from classes on what's urgent right now," Danja went on, gesturing dramatically and pacing up and down the length of their table.

While Sheledon closed in on himself when threatened, Danja exploded into action. Now her nervous movements knocked the chair on which she had placed her violin and she reacted, as quickly, to keep the valuable instrument from falling to the cobbles. She gave Lozell a second nasty look, as if he had been responsible.

Sheledon reached across and took violin and bow from her, putting them very carefully on the table which had been cleared of all but wine glasses. Absently he mopped a wine spill near the precious violin, one of the few usable relics from Landing days. He gave it a loving pat while Danja continued.

the above, except maybe get a little work done on next term. Which starts in a week, and then we'll have no time at all since we now have to prepare the teachers who'll be graduated to carry The Word to the outer extremities of the continent." She gestured eastward in a histrionic fashion, then flounced down on the chair the violin had occupied. "So how are we going to find time to do yet more research, Clisser?"

"We always do find the time," Clisser said, his quiet rejoinder a subtle criticism of her rant.

"Use it as a history class project?" suggested Lozell brightly.

"There you have the answer," said Bethany who had merely, as was her habit, watched the fireworks Danja was so good at sending up. "My juniors could use an independent project."

"So long as we have power to run the library," Danja added sourly.

"We will, we will," Clisser said, with bright encouragement.

"Kalvi had his engineers up on the heights during the fly-past working on the sun panels. They'll hook them up to the main banks tomorrow. "

"Other people worked today, you know. "

"Well, that's a big consolation," said Danja acidly.

Clisser refilled her glass. "And we'll need some catchy tunes and good lyrics, too, I should think. Something to teach students from a very early

into a musical format. Jemmy's good at little popular airs." Most of his songs were geared to show off the talent of his soprano spouse, Sydra, who taught history and, in her spare time, was chronicling the early years of the colony.

Bethany's face lit up with a great smile. Jemmy was a favourite pupil of hers, and she was his staunchest champion.

Even Danja looked mollified.

"So," Clisser went on, having solved one of his immediate problems, what shall we do in the next set?"

"Just like that?" Danja demanded. "What'll we do in this set? Clisser, will you get real!"

Clisser looked hurt. Bethany leaned over and patted his hand, smiling encouragingly.

"What did you mean by that, Danja?" Clisser asked.

"Don't you realize what a huge responsibility you just so casually... and Danja lifted wide her arms, flinging her hands skyward in exasperation, laid on us all?"

"Nothing we can't solve, dear," Bethany said in her gentle manner. "With a little thought and time."

"Back to time again. Do we have time?" Lozell was back in the discussion. "Especially if the winter's even half as bad as it was last year... and it's

lyrics, I can certainly churn out some tunes. Or maybe Jemmy can do both in his spare time."

Sheledon's face softened into a wry grin. He had had a tussle with himself, not to be jealous of Jemmy whose brilliance was multi-faceted. Though he wasn't officially graduated from the Hall, he already ran several smaller study groups and seemed able to do a bit of everything - on a high level. The consummate Jack of all Trades, Clisser called him.

"And what if, by leaving it to the student body - who are, as most students, indifferent researchers - the best notion is missed?" Danja asked.

"That's why we're teachers, dear," said Bethany. "To be sure they don't miss an obvious solution. They can at least save us having to sort through pounds of material and present us with the most viable options. We can put Jemmy in charge; he reads the fastest and his eyes are younger."

Just then, the instrumentalists on the stage wound up their last number and received an enthusiastic ovation from both the sweating dancers and the onlookers drinking at the tables.

They filed off the stage.

"All right, what set do we do, Clisser?" Sheledon asked, tossing off the last of his wine as he got to his feet.

"Those seniors did a lot of fast dance music," Clisser said.

Smiling in her gentle way at the courtesy, she picked up the flute in its worn hard-case, her recorders in their leather sleeves and the little reed whistle that had won its maker a prize that year. It had a particularly sweet, clear tone that young Jemmy had been trying to reproduce with other reeds. Then she limped forward, seemingly oblivious to her clubbed foot and awkward gait, her head high, her gaze directed ahead of her.

Jemmy joined them from his table, automatically taking Bethany's flute case from her. He was drummer for their group, though he had been playing guitar with others. Unprepossessing in physical appearance, with pale hair and skin and oversized features, he was self-effacing, indifferent to his academic achievements. While not in the least athletic, he had won the long-distance races in the Summer Games for the last three years. He did not relate well, however, to his peer group.

"They don't think the same way I do," was his diffident self-appraisal.

That was, of course, accurate since he had tested off the scale of the standard aptitude tests given prospective scholars.

His family, fishers at Tillek Hold, didn't understand him at all and at one point thought him retarded. At fourteen he had followed his siblings into training in the family occupation. He lasted three voyages. Though he had proven himself an able navigator, he had had such constant motion sickness - "never acquiring sea legs" - that he had been useless as a deck-

play, given a few hours of basic training.

Although his family, and indeed the Lord Holder Bastom, too, had expected him to return to Tillek to teach, Clisser had argued hard that anyone could teach the basics to hold children: he would supply a suitably trained candidate. But Jemmy must be allowed to continue at the College Hall, benefiting the entire continent.

What no-one at the Hall mentioned beyond their most private sessions was that Jemmy seemed intuitively to know how to fill in the gaps left by improper copying or damaged records. His notations, short and concise, were models of lucidity. The College could not afford to do without his skills and intelligence. He wasn't a good teacher, being frustrated by mental processes slower than his own, but he could, and did, produce manuals and guides that enhanced the basic texts the settlers had brought with them. Jemmy translated 'Earth' into 'Pern' If his peer group did not enjoy his company, he enjoyed that of his mentors and was fast outstripping all of them in knowledge and practical applications. It was also well known if tacitly ignored, that he idolized Bethany. She was consistently kind and encouraging to everyone, but refused to accept any partner. She had long since decided never to inflict her deformity on offspring and refused any intimacy, even a childless one.

perience would give him.

Clisser and Jemmy provided support for Bethany to ascend the un-railed steps to the stage and then, with a swirl of the long skirts that covered the built-up shoe she wore, she settled herself in her chair. She placed her flute case and the recorders where she wanted them, and the little reed flute in the music stand. Not that this group of musicians required printed sheets to read from, but the other groups did.

Danja lifted her fiddle to her chin, bow poised, and looked at Jemmy who hummed an A with his perfect pitch for her to tune her strings. Sheldon softly strummed his guitar to check its tuning and Lozell ran an arpeggio on his standing harp. The continent's one remaining piano - his preferred instrument - was undergoing repairs to the hammers: they had not yet managed to reproduce quite the same sort of felt that had been used originally.

Clisser nodded at Jemmy, who did a roll on his hand drum to attract attention and then, on Clisser's downbeat, they began their set.

It was several days before Clisser had a chance to discuss the project with Jemmy.

"I've wondered why we didn't use the balladic medium to teach history," Jemmy replied.

He slashed five lines across it, added a clef and immediately began to set notes down. Clisser was fascinated.

"Oh," Jemmy said offhandedly as his fingers flew up and down the lines, "I've had this tune bugging me for months now. It's almost a relief to put it down on paper now that I've a use for it."

He marked off another measure, the pen hovering above the paper only briefly before he was off again. "It can be a show piece anyhow. Start off with a soprano - boy, of course, setting the scene. Then the tenors come in - they'll be the dragon riders of course, and the baritones Lord Holders, with a few basses to be the Professionals... each describing his duty to the... then a final chorus, s.a.t.b., a reprise of the first verse, all Pern confirming what they owe the dragons. Yes, that'll do nicely for one."

Clisser knew when he wasn't needed and left the room, smiling to himself. Now, if Bethany was right and this term's students could perform the research satisfactorily, he could make good on his blithe promise to the Council. He did hope that the computers would last long enough for a comprehensive search. They had got so erratic lately that their performance was suspect at most times. Some material was definitely scrambled and lost among files. And no-one knew how to solve the problem of replacement parts. Of course, the pcs were so old and decrepit, it was truly a won-

work with mechanical objects; they just thought it was what they wanted. There were always a few cases like that in an academic year.

"And one set of Holder parents who did not like their daughter associating with lesser breeds without the law" as Sheledon put it.

"As if there was room, or facilities, for more than one teachers' school. Or the private tutors some Holders felt should be supplied them because of their positions. Ha! As it was, the peripatetic teachers were going all year long, trying to cover the basics with children in the far-flung settlements.

Well, maybe one day they could site a second campus - was that the word? - on the eastern coast. Of course, with Threadfall coming, he'd have to revise all the schedules as well as instruct his travellers on how to avoid getting killed by the stuff. He had seen footage - when the projector still worked - of actual Threadfall. He shuddered.

Accustomed as he had been all his life to the prospect of the menace, he still didn't like the inevitability. The reality was nearly on them.

The Weyrleaders could waffle on about how well prepared Hold and Weyr were, with dragon strength at max, and ground crews and equipment organized, but did anyone really know what it would be like? He swore under his breath as he made his way to the rooms that still needed to be completed to receive occupants in five days. He'd work on the syllabus on his lunch break.

was a complete revision of learning priorities, suitable to those who were firmly and irrevocably based on this planet. Why did anyone NOW need to know the underlying causes of the Nathi Space War?

No-one here was going to get in space - even the dragons were limited to distance which they could travel before they were in oxygen debt.

Why not study the spatial maps of Pern and forget those of Earth and its colonies? Study the Charter and its provisions as applicable to the Pernese citizenry, rather than prehistoric governments and societies? Well, some of the more relevant facts could be covered in the course to show how the current governmental system, such as it was, had been developed. But there was so much trivia - no wonder his teachers couldn't get through the lessons. Small wonder the students got bored.

So little of what they were presently required to learn had any relevance to the life they lived and the planet they inhabited.

History should really begin with Landing on Pern well, some nodding acquaintance with the emergence of homo sapiens, but why deal with the aliens which Earth's exploratory branch had discovered when there was little chance of them arriving in the Rukbat system?

And further, Clisser decided, taken up with the notion, we should encourage specialized training - raising agriculture and veterinary care to the prestige of computer sciences. Breeding to Pernese conditions and coping

various disciplines so that each student would learn what he needed to know, not a lot of basically useless facts, figures and theories?

For instance, get Kalvi to take in... what was the old term, ah, apprentices... take in apprentices to learn fabrication and metal-work?

And there'd have to be a discipline for mining, as well as metal-working. One for weaving; farming; fishing. And one for teaching, too. Of course, education in itself was designed to teach you how to solve the problems that cropped up in daily living, but for specialities you could really slim down to the essential skills required by each. As it was, that sort of apprentice system was almost in place anyhow with parents either instructing their kids in the family's profession or getting a knowledgeable neighbour to do it.

Kalvi had both sons now in supervisory capacities in his Telgar Works.

And there should be provisions to save other kids, like Jemmy, and see that they were able to develop a potential not in keeping with their native hold's main business.

Administer a basic aptitude test to every child at six, and the more specific one at eleven or twelve, and be able to identify special abilities and place him or her where she could learn best from the people qualified to maximize the innate potential.

"Ours not to wonder what were fair in life, but finding what may he, make it fair up to our means?" Well, he couldn't remember who had said it or to what it had applied. But the meaning definitely applied!

Pern had great riches which were being ignored in the regret of the what had been. Even Corey had to admit that the indigenous pharmacopoeia was proving to be sufficient for most common ailments, and even better in some cases now that the last of the carefully hoarded Earth chemicals were depleted.

Basic concepts of maths, history, responsibility, duty, could indeed be translated into music, easier to transmit and memorize. Why, anyone who could strum an instrument could give initial instruction in holds, teach kids to read, write and do some figuring, and then let them apply themselves to the nitty-gritty of their life's occupation.

And music had always been important here.

He put his foot down on the step, pleased with this moment's revelation. A whole new way of looking at the education and training of the young, and entirely suitable to the planet and its needs. He must really sit down and think it all through... when he found the time.

His laugh mocked his grandiose ideas and yet, they'd had to revise and reform so many old concepts here on Pern: why not the method in which education was administered? Was that the word he wanted: administered?

She turned to regard her queen fondly as the golden dragon hovered proprietorially over the fifty-one eggs which would, by all the signs, hatch some time this day.

All morning dragons had conveyed in guests and candidates.

"Aren't the Weyrs over-producing a trifle?" Paulin asked.

Benden and Ista Weyrs had also had Hatchings in the past month.

He had lost two very promising holder lads to the Weyrs; a felt loss, as the boys could no longer journey easily between Hold and Weyr as riders were freer to travel, and to learn and practise other professions during an Interval.

"Frequent clutches are one of the sure-fire signs that there will be a Pass," Zulaya said, "obviously looking forward to the days when the dragons of Pern started the work for which they were engineered. Have you heard that song the College sent out?"

"Hmmm, yes, I have," and Paulin grinned. In fact, I can't get it out of my mind.

"Clisser says they have several more to play for us tonight."

"Just music?" Paulin asked, scowling.

"It's a device we asked them for something permanent so that no-one can deny the imminence of a Pass." Zulaya patted his hand encouragingly.

skirt whirl. Which reminds me..." and she held out a fold of the rich crimson patterned brocade which she had had made for this Hatching. "Fredig suggested tapestries, hanging in every Weyr and Hold, depicting the return of the Red Star - with the formulae in the borders. Make an interesting design, certainly."

"Colours fade and fabrics certainly deteriorate."

"We've some that graced houses in Landing. That Earth Moon scene which was made, as I've been told, out of synthetic yarns which are more durable than what we have now cotton, linen and wool. And even they are looking worn and losing colour."

"I'll have them washed You'll have them thread-worn. - oops," and K'vin grinned at the pun.

"Which is not what is wanted but there's no reason, Kev, not to have a hundred different reminders. Something set in stone." the Weyrleader said in a more sober tone.

"Even stones move - - Only prior to a Pass.

"Only how to perpetuate the critical information?"

"I think everyone's worrying too much. I mean, here we are," and Zulaya gestured broadly to include the Hatching Ground and the Weyr around them.

the news, scarcely needed, for the Telgar dragons were already reacting to the queen's maternal croon with their deep masculine humming.

The Weyr Bowl became active with dragons a-wing in excitement, flipping here and there on seemingly unavoidable collision courses: with the Weyrlingmaster herding the candidates forward: with parents and friends of the lucky boys and girls rushing across the hot sands to take their places in the amphitheatre: hustling to get the best seating for the Impression about to happen.

K'vin sent Zulaya back to keep Meranath company as he urged people inside, checked the nervous white-clad candidates who had been halted in a clump near the entrance until the spectators were all seated.

"You've long enough to wait on the hot sands as it is," T'dam, the Weyrlingmaster, told them. "Singe your feet, you could, out there."

All this time the humming was rising in volume: Meranath joined by all the other dragons in a chorus of tones that Sheledon - and others had tried to imitate but never quite succeeded. Meranath's throat was swollen with her sound, which continued unabated and seemingly without her needing to draw breath. Soon, as the volume increased, her chest and belly would begin to vibrate too, with the intensity of her humming. K'vin was aware of the usual response in himself, a jumble of emotions; a joy that threatened to burst his heart through his chest, pride, hope, fear, yearning - oddly

that no other union could be compared with it: almost overwhelming in the initial moment of recognition, and certainly the most intense emotion the young candidates had ever experienced.

Some youngsters had no trouble at all adapting to the intense and intrusive link: some suffered feelings of inadequacy and doubt. Every Weyr had its own compendium of information about what to do in such-and-such a situation. And every weyrling was assiduously trained and supported through the early months of the relationship until the Weyrleaders and Weyrlingmaster deemed he/she was stable enough to take responsibility for her/himself and her/his dragon.

But then, a rider was the dragon, and the dragon the rider, in a partnership that was so unwavering, its cessation resulted in suicide for the dragon who lost his mate. The unfortunate rider was as apt to take his life as not. If he lived, he was only half a man, totally bereft by his loss. Female riders were less apt to suicide; they at least had the option of sublimating their loss by having children.

When the little fire-lizards, who had supplied the genetic material to bio-engineer the larger dragons, had still been available, a former male rider found some solace in such a companionship. Only three fire-lizard clutches had been found in Ista in the last five decades, though it was thought more might be found in the Southern Continent, but that quest had so far been

They had five junior queens, which was quite enough for Telgar's low flight wing. In fact, there was no dearth of queens in any of the Weyrs, but there was safety in having enough breeders.

Only five girls stood on the Hatching Ground vying to attract the attention of the greens. There should have been six, but one girl's family had refused to give her up on Search since they claimed a union had been arranged and they could not go back on that pledge. As K'vin thought that a good third or even half of this clutch might be greens, he hoped there'd be enough suitable lads' to impress the green hatchlings. His study of Thread fighting tactics also indicated that greens with male riders tended to be more volatile, apt to ignore their Weyrleaders' orders in the excitement of a Fall: in short, they tended to unnecessarily show off their bravery to the rest of the Weyr. On the other hand, the green dragons were valuable to a Weyr for their speed and agility even if they didn't have the stamina of the larger dragons. A careful wing leader alternated his green riders, resting each at least an hour during a Fall.

There had been a monograph on the advantages of female over male green riders in Threadfall. Although the text allowed the reader to make his own decision, K'vin had fallen on the side of preferring females when Search provided them.

"Taking a short dragon-ride" was now a euphemism for ending an unwanted pregnancy. Another good reason to have a few female green riders in the Weyr: less embarrassment.

According to Zulaya, though, there had been few such terminations since she had become Weyrwoman. Probably due to the fact that too many holds had lost relatives to the last bad winter fever. Or possibly because everyone wanted to have enough children to extend their legitimate holdings or establish new ones.

The draconic humming - what Clisser called a pre-birth lullaby was reaching an almost unendurable level, climaxing when the first egg cracked open. The spectators were exhibiting the usual excitability, jumping about, weeping, singing along with the dragons. They'd calm down, too, once the Hatching had begun.

And it did. Three shells burst outwards simultaneously, fragments raining down on nearby eggs and causing them to crack as well. K'vin counted nine dragons, six of them wetly green, and revised his third of greens closer to half.

The hatchlings were so dangerous at this stage, ravenous from their encapsulation, and some of the nearer candidates hastily avoided the bumbling progress of the new-born. Two greens seemed headed for Weyrbred

K'vin swallowed against the emotional lump in his throat: that instant of recognition always brought back the moment when he had experienced the shock of Impression with Charanth. And the glory of that incredibly loving mind linking with his: the knowledge that they were indissolubly one, heart, mind and soul.

We are, are we not? Charanth said, his tone rough with the memory of that rapture. Despite the fact that Charanth, like the rest of the Weyr's dragons, was perched up along the ceiling, K'vin could hear the dragon's sigh.

Zulaya grinned up at K'vin, aware of what was taking place within him, tears flowing down her face as the high emotional level of the Hatching affected her.

Absently K'vin thought that the glowing bulk of Meranath behind Zulaya made a great background for her beautiful new gown, red against gold.

Then another dozen or so eggs split wide open and the raucous screeching of starving little dragonets reverberated back and forth on the Ground. There was a piercing quality to these screams like lost souls. As each hatchling met its rider, the scream broke off and a mellow croon began. That quickly segued into a piteous hungry appeal which was almost more devastating than the earliest screech the weyrings made. K'vin's stomach invariably went into empathetic hunger cramps.

the pairing of the last few hatchlings, two browns and the last green. Two lads were homing on the green, desperate expressions on their faces. Abruptly the green turned from them and resolutely charged across the sands to the girl who had just entered.

K'vin gave a double-take. There were only five girls, weren't they? Not that he wasn't glad to see another. And she was the one the green wanted, for the hatchling pushed aside the boy who tried to divert her.

Then three men strode into the Ground, furious expressions on their faces, with T'dam trying to intercept their angry progress towards the lately Impressed green pair.

"DEBERA!" yelled the first man, reaching out and snatching her away from the green dragonet.

That was his first mistake, K'vin thought, running across the sands to avert catastrophe. Damn it all. Why did this marvellous moment have to be interrupted so abruptly?

Hatchings should be sacrosanct.

Before K'vin could get there, the green reacted to the man's attempt to separate her from her chosen one. She reared, despite being not altogether sure of her balance on wobbly hindquarters. Extending her short forearms with claws unsheathed, she lunged at the man.

that Morath might have already injured the man, he was close to laughing at this Debera's tone of authority. The girl had instinctively adopted the right attitude with her newly hatched charge.

No wonder she'd been Searched and at some hold evidently not too far away.

K'vin assisted Debera while T'dam pulled the fallen man out of the dragon's reach. Then his companions hauled him even further away while Morath continued to squeal and writhed to resume her attack.

He would hurt you. He would own you. You are mine and I am yours and no-one comes between us, Morath was saying so ferociously that every rider heard her.

Zulaya joined the group and, bending to check the father's injuries, called for the medics who were dealing with the minor lacerations that generally occurred at this time. Fortunately, Morath had no fangs yet and, although there were raw weals on the man's face and his chest had been badly scratched by unsheathed claws - despite their newness - he had been somewhat protected by the leather jerkin he wore.

By now, most of the newly-hatched were out of the Grounds, being fed their first meal by their new life companions. The spectators, beginning to dismount from the amphitheatre's levels, managed to get a peek at the injured man. Undoubtedly they would recount the incident at every opportu-

they didn't even show me the letter telling me to come. He wants me for a union because he had a deal with Boris for a mining site and with Ganmar for taking me on. I don't want Ganmar, and I don't know anything about mining. I was Searched and I have the right to decide." The indignant words rushed out, accompanied by expressions of distaste, resentment and anger!

"Yes, I remember seeing your name on the Search list, Debera," said Zulaya ranging herself beside the girl in a subtle position of support. The alignment was not lost on the older of the two men attending their fallen friend.

"You are Boris?" she asked him. "So you must be Ganmar," she went on, addressing the younger one. "Did you not realize that Debera had been Searched?"

Ganmar looked very uncomfortable and dropped his eyes, while the scowl on Boris's face deepened and he jutted out his jaw obstinately. "Lavel told me she'd refused."

At that point, Maranis, the Weyr's medic, arrived to have a look at the wounded man. When he had examined him, he sent a helper for litter-bearers. Then he began to deal with the injuries, pulling back the tattered jerkin, provoking a groan from the dazed man.

"Ah, but the daughter seems not to have been so willing," Lady Salda remarked.

"She was willing all right, wasn't you, Deb?" Boris said, staring with angry accusation at the girl who returned his look by lifting her chin proudly.

"Til they came from the Weyr on Search."

"Search has the priority," said Tashvi. "You know that, Boris."

"We had it all arranged," the father spoke up, now his pain had been alleviated by the numb weed Maranis had slathered on his wounds.

"We had it arranged!" And the look he gave his daughter was trenchant with angry, bitter reproach.

"You had it all arranged," Debera said, equally bitter, between yourselves, but not with me, even before the Search.

A wistful moan from Morath interrupted her angry rebuttal.

"She's hungry. I have to feed her. Come along now," she added in a far more loving tone. Without a backward glance, she led her green dragonet out of the Hatching Ground.

"I'd say that the matter was certainly not well arranged, then," Tashvi said.

"But it was," said Lavel, jabbing one fist at the dragon riders until they came round, "putting ideas in her head when she was a good, hard-working girl who always did as she was told."

your holders, not these weyfolk and all their queer customs and doings, and I dunno what'll happen to my daughter." At that point, he began to weep, more in frustrated anger than from the pain of the now well-anaesthetized injuries. "She was a good girl until they come. A good bid-dable girl!"

Tashvi gestured peremptorily to the two litter-men to take the man out. Then he turned back to the Weyrleaders.

"I did approve the new mine, and Boris and Ganmar as owners, but I'd no idea that Lavel was in any way involved."

"He's a troublemaker from way back," Tashvi said, absently shifting his feet on the hot sands.

Zulaya gestured for them all to leave the Hatching Ground.

Despite the extra lining she'd put in her boots this morning, she was uncomfortable standing there, and Tashvi was wearing light pull-ons.

"And it's not that he doesn't have other daughters," said Salda, taking her husband's arm to speed up his progress.

"He's got upwards of a dozen children and had two wives already. At the rate he's been making these arrangements of his, he'll have himself sufficient land among his relatives to start his own Hold. Not that anyone in their right mind would want him as a Lord Holder."

Listening to the vitriol in Lavel's criticism of Weyr life upset both Weyrleaders and Lord Holders. It was true that certain customs and habits had been developed in the Weyrs to suit dragon needs, but promiscuity was certainly not encouraged.

In fact, there was a very strictly observed code of conduct within the Weyr. There might not be formal union contracts but no rider reneged on his word to a woman, nor failed to make provision for any children of the pairing. And few Weyrbred children, reaching puberty, left the Weyr for the grand parental holds even if they failed to Impress.

Right now, the festivities had already started in the Main Cavern, with the instrumentalists playing a happy tune, one that reflected the triumph of a successful Hatching. Although the new riders were still feeding their dragons or settling them into the weyrling barracks, once the sated dragonets fell asleep the new dragon men and women would join their relatives.

Zulaya wondered if she should remind Lavel that the female riders were housed separately from the males. He obviously had no idea at all how much care a new dragonet required from its human. Most days the weyrlings fell into bed too exhausted to do anything BUT sleep. And had to be roused out of their bunks by the Weyrlingmaster when they failed to respond to their hungry dragons' summons.

one Zulaya knew well, "that we - Lord Tashvi and I - would not be at all pleased to find that Debera has been denied her holder rights."

"Holder?" Lavel snorted and then moaned as the injudicious movement caused him pain. "She'll not be a holder now, will she? She'll be lost to us for ever, she will."

"And any chance of bagging her legal land allotment," Salda said with mock remorse. Lavel growled and tried to turn away from the Lady Holder.

"You've claimed more than most as it is. I trust Gisa is in good health? Or have you got yet another child on her? You'll wear her out the same as you did Milla, you know. But I suppose there are women stupid enough to fall for your ever-increasing land masses. Ssshish," and Salda turned from him in disgust. "Get him out of my sight. He offends me. And sullies the spirit of this occasion."

"He's not so wounded he can't travel," the medic said helpfully.

"Travel?" Boris exclaimed, pretending dismay as he had glanced in the direction of the Lower Cavern where the roasts were being served.

"I could find him a place overnight," Maranis began hesitantly.

Just then four young weyrfolk led up the visitors' horses which they had recaptured.

the three dismissed holders. Nineteen greens, fifteen blues, ten browns and seven bronzes. Good distribution, too. Good size to the bronzes as well. I do believe every clutch produces dragons just slightly larger than the last."

"Dragons haven't yet reached their design size," K'vin said, answering her lead. "I doubt we'll see that in our lifetime."

"Surely they're big enough already?" asked Salda, her eyes wide.

Zulaya laughed. "Larger by several hands than the first ones who fought Thread, which will make it all that much easier for us this time round."

"You know what to expect, too," Tashvi said, nodding approval.

Zulaya and K'vin exchanged brief glances. Hopefully, what they could expect did not include unwelcome surprises.

"Indeed we have the advantage of our ancestors in that," K'vin said stoutly.

Zulaya gave his arm a little squeeze before she released him and strode to the first table where the families of two new brown riders were sitting. K'vin continued in with Salda and saw her and Tashvi settled at the head table, where he and Zulaya would join them after they'd done their obligatory rounds of the tables. Then, making a private bet with himself, he started at the opposite end of the wide Cavern.

sion avid. "Would the dragon have..."

She stopped abruptly - as if she'd been kicked under the table, K'vin thought, suppressing a grin.

"Ah," he said, bridging the brief pause, "but I'm sure you saw that other lads crowded round, ready and willing. The dragonet would have chosen one of them."

That was not exactly true. Which was why every Weyr had more than sufficient candidates on the Ground during a Hatching. Early on, the records mentioned five occasions when a dragonet had not found a compatible personality. Its subsequent death had upset the Weyr to the point where every effort was then made to eliminate a second occurrence, including accepting the dragonet's choice from among spectators.

There were also cases where an egg did not hatch. In the early days, when the technology had still been available, necropsies had been performed to establish cause. In most of the recorded instances, there had been obvious yolk problems, or the creature had been mis formed and would not have survived Hatching. Three times, however, the cause of death could not be established as the foetus had been perfect, with no apparent deficiency or disability. The message was handed down to dispose of such unhatched eggs between immediately: a duty performed on such rare occasions by the Weyrleader and his bronze.

bench and glared at him.

"Yes, it was her father," K'vin said.

"Didn't he know any better than to strike a dragon's rider?" asked Suze's father, shocked by such behaviour.

"I think he has perceived his error," K'vin said dryly and caught Suze's startled reaction. "What has your son (and Charanth, as he always did, supplied the boy's name from his dragon's mind so quickly that the pause was almost unnoticeable), Thomas, decided on for a rider name?"

"Well, I don't think Thomas dared to hope," his mother replied, but her expression expressed both her pride in his modesty and her delight in his success.

"He never liked being a Thomas," Suze said, irrepensible.

"He'll pick a new name," and she gave a snide sideways glance at her parent.

"And here he is, if I don't miss my guess," K'vin said, gesturing towards the lad making his way across the Cavern floor. K'vin had lectured the candidates on their responsibilities to their dragonets so he was familiar with many of them. This Thomas, or whatever, bore a strong enough resemblance to both sister and brother to make him easily identifiable. He hoped that a facial resemblance was all Thomas shared with his sister. She was a spiteful one.

delightful confusion of pride and proprietariness so many brand-new weyrings exhibited while accustoming themselves to their new condition and duties. As K'vin remembered so vividly, that took time.

And there was a T'mas in the first group at Benden.

"He's long dead," his father said, not altogether pleased with his son's choice. "Thomas is a family name," he admitted to K'vin. "I'm Thomas, ninth of my line."

The boy looked at his father with that curious aloofness of independence that came with being a newly paired dragon rider sort of "you can't tell me what to do any more" and "this is my business, Dad, you wouldn't understand."

"Tiabeth and S'mon," K'vin said, lifting the glass he'd been carrying from table to table and drinking a toast to the partners. The others made haste to repeat it.

"Eat, S'mon.

"You'll need every meal you get a chance to eat," he added and left the boy to follow that very good advice.

At each subsequent table, he heard more speculation about the late arrival of Debera. There had been embellishments: one had her father bleeding to death. Another variation suggested that Debera had been the reluctant one and her family had insisted that she try to Impress, having

roast wherry and beef to sop up what was required by the obligatory toasting of the new riders.

He had almost completed his circuit when he saw the Telgar Holders and T'dam leading Debera in, all moving towards the head table. Salda and Tashvi rose and went to meet her half-way. She still had a dazed look on her face and glanced, almost wildly, around the crowded Cavern.

Someone had given her a green gown which showed off a most womanly body, and the style of it as well as the colour suited Debera.

The deep, clear green set off her fine complexion and a head of curling bronze-coloured hair which was now attractively dressed, not straggling unkempt around a sweaty distraught face. No doubt Tisha, the head woman had had a hand in the transformation. Zulaya had once said Tisha treated all the weyrgirls like live dolls, dressing them up and fussing with their hair. Nor was Tisha herself childless, but her excess of maternal instinct was an asset in the Weyr.

Salda put an arm about Debera, her head inclined to the shorter girl as she chatted; evidently determined to make up for the lack of family members on what was generally a very happy occasion for holder or crafter. Had Debera seen the last of her relatives? No matter, she was in the larger, extended family of the Weyr and could find more amiable and sympathetic replacements.

let's all be seated before there's nothing left for us." Salda gave a good-natured snort, grinning down at Debera.

"Not likely. We've been sending you the fatted calves for the past week in anticipation." She turned to the girl as she passed her over to K'vin. "One thing sure, girl, you'll eat higher on the hog here in Telgar than you ever did at home. And not have to cook it!" Debera was so clearly startled by such jocularly that K'vin took her hand, guiding her to the steps up to the platform on which the head table was placed.

"I think you'll be very happy here, Debera," he said gently, "with Morath as your friend."

Immediately the girl's face softened with joy and her eyes watered. Her look of vulnerable wonder struck such a responsive chord in him that he stumbled in following her.

"Oh, and she is more than a friend," she said, more like a prayer than a statement of fact.

"Come, sit beside me," said Zulaya, pulling out the chair, and signalling K'vin to take the one beyond. They were not in their usual centre table position, but quick eye contact with Salda and Tashvi had the Holders pulling out those chairs as if such placement was normal.

of some new music, was very pleased that conversation had trailed off and everyone was hearing what was being sung. Now was the time to spring the big one on them. As soon as the coda on what Jemmy called 'Dragon-love' had finished, he held up the music to the 'Duty Ballad' and then pointed it at Sydra who would sing the boy soprano part.

They hadn't found a lad with a suitable voice yet, but she could whiten her voice to approximate the tone. At Sheledon's signal, Bethany piped the haunting notes of the intro and Sydra rose to sing the opening verse.

All right, they didn't have enough trained voices to really sock the Ballad to this audience - in his mind, Sheledon heard what a full chorus would sound like - but the excellent acoustics in the Cavern were a big help. And the music captivated. Sydra managed to sound very young and awed..

Gollagee came in with his fine tenor as the dragon rider. Sheledon was right on cue with his baritone part and then, with Bethany singing alto and the Weyr's own musicians adding their voices, they wound it all up.

There was just one split second's total silence - the sort that makes performers rejoice - and then everyone was standing, wildly cheering, clapping, stamping their approval.

Even the dragons joined in from outside, caught up in their riders' enthusiasms. Sydra kept bowing and urging the rest of the musicians to stand

lighted. Perhaps there was something to Clisser's notion of redesigning the educational system so less time would be wasted on unessentials and the Real Meaning of Life could be addressed sooner.

Life in the Weyrling Barracks and at the College

It was the Weyrwoman, Zulaya, who noticed Debera's increasing nervousness.

"Go on back to Morath, m'dear. You're exhausted and you'll need your sleep."

"Thank you, ah..."

"We make no use of titles in the Weyr," Zulaya added. "Just go. I've given you permission, if that's what you were so politely waiting for."

Debera murmured her thanks and rose, wanting to slip out as inconspicuously as possible. She'd felt so awkward and unsocial, even when everyone, even the Lord and Lady Holder - she couldn't reconcile their behaviour with her father's stories about them, but she intended to forget everything he'd ever told her - had been so incredibly kind and easy. She thought they would expect her to give an explanation of her unusual behaviour, but they'd supported her instantly. Really, it was as if her real life had started the moment she and Morath had locked eyes.

It had, she decided as she made her way along the side of the Cavern wall, head down so she needn't make eye contact with anyone.

No, she'd had to find that, stuffed in the cupboard where bits and pieces that could be re-used were kept. No-one at Balan Hold, especially her father and stepmother, Gisa, would have thrown out a whole sheet of paper that had a clean side that could be recycled. How she hated that word! Cycle, re-cycle. Use, re-use. The concept dominated every aspect of Balan Hold.

And they were not poor in material possessions: not the way some holders were. But poor Balan Hold had been in spirit ever since her mother had died.

She'd been looking for something else entirely when she found the sheet. Not that she knew the day's date, but it was obvious that the announcement must have come some time before, the paper being soiled and the creases well set. Maybe even weeks. She had been ready to accept Ganmar as an alternative to continued living in her father's house. She'd known that she'd have to work as hard, if not harder, setting up a new hold, chiselling it out of rock above the mine, but it would have been hers - and Ganmar's - and something she could design to her own wishes. Not that she'd been inclined to believe any of the blithe and extravagant promises Ganmar or Boris had made her. All they wanted was a strong body with lots of hard work in it.

sun was streaming in, almost as if adding light to her resolve.

She didn't even go back to the room she shared with her three half-sisters, but grabbed her jacket and made for the paddock where the riding horses were kept. There was no-one about in the yard: all were at work. Assignments had been given out over breakfast, and everyone had better show their father completed chores or there'd be no lunch break until they were done.

She didn't even dare collect a saddle or bridle from the barn because her eldest brothers were restacking hay - they'd done a sloppy job of it the first time round. She just grabbed up a leather thong.

Since she'd had the most to do with the hold horses, she'd have little trouble managing any of them with just a lip rein.

Bilwil would be the fastest. She had probably three hours before the midday meal when her absence would be noticed.

By then, she'd be well up the track to the Weyr.

With one look over her shoulder to see if she was being observed, she walked quickly - as if she were on an errand to the paddock.

Bilwil was not far from the fence which she climbed - the gate would be too near the vegetable garden where two half-sisters were weeding.

They loved nothing better than to report her idling ways to either their mother or her father. Two brothers in the barn, the next pair out with him in

lock. No-one had bothered to rub him down last night and his coat was rough with perspiration from yesterday's timber hauling. Maybe she should take one of the others.

But Bilwil had lowered his head to accept the twist of thong around his lower jaw. She could scarcely risk chasing a better-rested, less amenable mount about the paddock so she inserted the rein, grabbed a handful of mane and vaulted to his back. Would she be vaulting to the back of a dragon tomorrow? She lay as flat as she could across his neck, just in case someone looked out across the paddock, and kneed him forward towards the forest.

Just before they reached the intertwined hedging that marked the far boundary she took one brief look back at the hold buildings - windows chiselled out of the very rock, the uneven entrance to the main living quarters, the wider one into the animal hold. Not a soul in sight.

"C'mon, bilwil, let's get out of here," she'd murmured and kicked him sharply into a trot, heading him right at the fence, a point not far from one of the tracks through the forest.

It was a good thing Bilwil liked to jump anyhow, because she'd given him only enough room to gather himself up. But he was nimbly over and had planted his left front foot, swinging left at it in response to her pull on

As soon as the track widened, she set Bilwil to a canter, enjoying the one activity in which she took any pleasure.

She stopped several times, to rest her own backside as well as Bilwil's and found late berries to eat. She really ought to have snatched up the last of the breakfast cheese or even an apple or two to tide her on the way.

It wasn't until she reached the final leg of the journey up to the Telgar Weyr that she was aware of pursuit. Or at least spied three horsemen on the road. They could well be visitors, coming for the Hatching, but it was prudent to suspect the worst. Her father could be one, and possibly Boris and Ganmar the other two. Either way, she had to get to the safety of the Weyr before they caught her up. How had they made so much time in pursuit of her? Had someone seen her after all and run to alert Lavel?

A long tunnel had been carved in the thinnest wall of the Telgar Crater as access for surface traffic. It was lit with glow baskets.

Bilwil was tired from the last long, steep climb on top of yesterday's work. She thought she heard male voices yelling at her and kicked Bilwil into a weary trot. No matter how she used her heels on his ribs, he wouldn't extend his stride. Then she heard the humming - as if it emanated from the walls around her. She knew what that meant and she gave a cry of despair.

that there were ways of handling a man so he didn't even know he was being managed. But Milla had died before she could impart those ways to her daughter. And Gisa, who had probably given up all thought of a second union if she had been desperate enough to partner her father, was a natural victim who enjoyed being dominated.

More hoof steps sounded in the tunnel and, desperate to reach her objective, Debera kicked Bilwil on. The gallant animal fell into a heavy canter that jarred every bone in her body but they made it into the Bowl.

Debera could see that not only was the Hatching Ground full of people, but also new, staggering dragonets. But, as she got close enough, she saw there were still a few eggs. Her pursuers were catching up. She had no need to halt Bilwil at the entrance; he stopped moving forward the moment she stopped kicking him. She slid off and raced towards the Hatching Ground just as her father, Boris and Ganmar caught up, yelling at her to stop. To come to her senses...

She wrenched herself free of grasping hands just in time to reach Morath. And finally came into her own.

Now, as she made her way back to the weyrling barracks, she was as tired as she had ever been in her life and far happier! As she rattled the door in her nervousness to open it, T'dam poked his head out of the boys' barracks next door.

be transferred to a permanent weyr apartment. The rider's bed was a trundle affair to one side of the dragon's, with storage space underneath and a deep chest at the foot.

She skirted the bed, relieved she had not awakened the occupant, and got to Morath's, the next one in. And hers.

There were several items of clothing on the chest.

"Tisha sent in some other things since you weren't able to bring any changes with you," T'dam said. "And a nightdress, I believe. Open the glow above the bed and then I'll shut this one."

When she had done so, he closed the larger one and then the door behind him. Immediately he had, she examined Morath, curled tightly on her platform, wings over her eyes.

Was that how dragonets slept? Wondering at the good fortune that had happened to her this day, Debera watched the sleeping dragonet as dearly as any mother observed a newborn, much wanted child. Morath's belly still bulged with uneven lumps from all the meat she had eaten.

T'dam had laughed when Debera worried that the dragonet would make herself sick with such greed.

"They repeat the process six or seven times a day the first month," he'd warned her. "You'll end up thinking you've spent all your life chopping gob-bets until she settles to the usual three meals a day."

rise and fall in sleeping rhythm.

Then she could no longer resist fatigue.

She was the lone human in the weyrling barn... no, barracks.

Well, the others had their families to celebrate with.

Who'd have thought that Debera of Balan Hold would be sleeping with dragons this night? She certainly hadn't. She slipped out of the fine dress now, smoothed the soft fabric of the green gown one last time as she folded it. It had felt so good on her body and was such a becoming colour: quite the loveliest thing she had ever worn. Gisa had got all her mother's dresses which ought by custom to have come to her.

Debera shrugged into the nightgown, aware of the subtle bouquet of the herbs in which it had been stored. Once she'd had time to gather the fragrant flowers and leaves for sachets with her mother.

She pulled back the thick woollen blanket, fingering its softness, and not regretting in the slightest the over washed and thin ones she had shared with her step-sisters. The pillow was thick under her cheek, too, as she put her head down, and soft and redolent of yet more fragrances. That was all she had time to think.

Back at the College, Sheledon, Bethany and Sydra arrived a-dragon back full of the ardent reception they'd had at Telgar Weyr.

teachers at the College invariably were included on the Fort guest list and never missed such opportunities, even if they had the option of returning to their native hearths for the three-day celebration.

"Maybe this once," Sydra began, looking at Sheledon, "we should go home and spread the word."

Bethany frowned. The full chorus and accompaniment is what makes the songs so effective.

Sheledon frowned. "We can certainly organize substantial groups for the main Holds. The dragon riders always come as guests anyway, so they'd all get a chance to hear..." Then he smiled down at his wife, settling an affectionate arm across her shoulders. "You sure did the boy soprano bit well. But I think we'd best get the juvenile voice for Year's End. You're hoarse today."

"Hallloo down there," and they all looked up to see Clisser, bending far out from an upper window and waving at them.

"Did the Ballads work?" he yelled, hands to his mouth.

The musicians looked at each other, Sheledon counted the beat and they roared back. "THEY LOVED US!" Clisser made a broad OK gesture with both hands and then waved them to go to his office in the original section of the facility.

Clisser held up one hand. "Not Jemmy. One of those students hacking around." Sheledon's expression suggested dire punishments.

Clisser shook his head. "Lightning."

"Lightning? But we had no storm warnings."

"Fried all the solar panels, too, although at least we can replace those. Corey lost her system, what was left of it, including the diagnostics she's been trying so desperately to transcribe."

Made speechless by such a catastrophe, Sheledon sat down heavily on the corner of the desk while Sydra leaned disconsolately against the wall.

"How much is gone?" Bethany asked, trying to absorb the disaster.

"All of it," and Clisser flicked his fingers before he clasped them together across his chest, chin down.

"But... but, surely, it's only a matter - -" Sheledon began.

"The motherboards are charcoal and glue," Clisser said dully. Jemmy's gone through every box of chips we had left, and there aren't enough to rebuild even a few meg - and that wouldn't operate the system. Even part of the system. It's gone," and he waved his hand helplessly again.

There was silence for long moments as those in the room struggled to cope with such a massive loss.

How much did the students... Bethany began, cutting her sentence off as Clisser waved, almost irritably, to silence her.

asked softly. "Descriptions of archaic devices and procedures which have no relevance on Pern since we no longer operate an advanced technological society? Isn't that what you were doing anyway, Clisser? Changing the direction of teaching in line to what is needed in this time, on this planet, and disregarding I don't know how many gigabytes of stored information that is irrelevant! Now that we don't have to worry about all that," and her hand airily dismissed the loss, "we can forge ahead and not have to concern ourselves with translating useless trivia for posterity. So I ask you, what have we really lost?"

Silence extended until Sheledon uttered a sharp laugh.

"You know, she may be right. We've been knocking ourselves out copying down stuff that won't work here on Pern anyhow. Especially," and his voice hardened, since no-one back on Earth cares enough to find out what's happened to us."

Sydra regarded her husband with a blink. "Not that old Tubberman homing tube business again?" Sheledon went defensive.

"Well, we know from..."

"the Records" Sydra said with a malicious grin, and Sheledon flushed, "that the message tube was sent without Admiral Benden's authority. Without the name of a colony leader on it, no-one on Earth would have paid it any heed if it even got to Earth in the first place."

"That was over three hundred years ago, Shel," Bethany said in her patient teacher-tone.

"And it is totally irrelevant to now," Sydra added. "Look, the loss of the computers is undeniably a blow to us, but not something we cannot overcome."

"But all that information..." cried Clisser, tears coming to his eyes.

"Clisser, dear," and Bethany leaned across to him, patting his hand gently, "we still have the best computers ever invented..." and she tapped her forehead, "and they're crammed full of information: more than we really need to operate - -"

"But... but, now we'll never find out how to preserve vital information -- like early warning of the return of the Red Star."

"We'll think of something," she said in such a confident tone that it penetrated Clisser's distress. And briefly he looked a trifle brighter.

Then he slumped down in even deeper despair. "But we've failed the trust placed in us to keep the data available."

"Nonsense!" Sheledon said vehemently, crashing one fist down on the desk-top. "We've kept them going past their design optimum. I've read enough in the old manuals to appreciate that. Every year for the past fifty has been a miracle. And we haven't, as Bethany says, lost all. A gimmick from the past has failed, like so many of them have. And we're now going

"Ha!" Sydra said. "Ancient history, man. We've survived on Pern and it is PERN that's important. As Bethany said, if we haven't needed it up to now, we never will. So calm down."

Clisser scrubbed at his skull with both hands. "But how will I tell Paulin?"

"Didn't the lightning affect Fort, too?" asked Sheledon and answered himself. "I thought I saw a work force on the solar heights."

Clisser threw both hands up in the air. "I told him we were checking the damage."

"Which is total?" Sheledon asked.

"Total!" and Clisser dropped his head once again to his chest in resignation to the inevitable.

"It's not as if you caused the storm or anything, Cliss", Bethany said.

He gave her a burning look.

"Was the system being run at the time?" Sheledon asked.

"Of course not," Clisser said emphatically, scowling at Sheledon. "You know the rule. All electronics are turned off in any storm."

"And they were?"

"Of course they were."

Bethany exchanged a look with Sheledon as if they did not credit that assurance. They both knew that Jemmy would work until he fell asleep over the keyboard.

lin. "And it's my duty to tell him."

"Then also tell him that our new teaching techniques are in place and that we've lost nothing that future generations will need to know," said Sydra.

"But... but how do we know what they might need to know?" Clisser asked, clearly still despairing with that rhetorical question.

"We don't know the half of what we should know."

Bethany rose and took the two steps to the beverage counter.

"it's not working either," Clisser said in a sharp disgusted tone, flicking one hand at it, insult on injury.

"I shall miss the convenience," she said.

"We all shall miss convenience," said Clisser and exhaled sharply, once again combing his hair back from his forehead with impatient fingers.

"So," said Sydra with a shrug of her shoulders, "we use the gas-ring instead. It heats water just as hot, if not as quickly."

"Now, let's all go and get a reviving cup, shall we?" She took Clisser by the hand, to tug him out of his chair. "You look as if you need reviving."

"You're all high on last night's success," he told them accusingly, but he got to his feet.

"As well we are," said Sheledon. "The better to console you, old friend."

extract from the data left to us on computer. We have been too dependent. It is high time we stood squarely on our own two feet..." She paused, twisting her mouth wryly, to underscore her own uneven stance, "...and made our own decisions. Especially when what the computers tell us has less and less relevance to our current problems."

"You said it, Bethany," agreed Sheledon, nodding approval with a little quirk of his mouth.

Clisser smoothed back his hair again and smiled ruefully.

"It would have been better if this could all have happened just a little -" and he made a space between thumb and forefinger, "later."

"When we found what we need for the dragon riders You mean, a fail-proof system to prove the Red Star's on a drop course?" Sheledon asked and then shrugged. "The best minds on the continent are working on that problem."

"We'll find a solution," said Bethany, again with the oddly calm resolution of hers. "Mankind generally does, you know."

"That's why we have dragons," Sydra said. "I could really murder a cup of klah."

Weyrling Barracks and Bitra Hold

An insistent, increasingly urgent sense of hunger nagged Debera out of so deep a sleep she was totally disoriented.

knobs reassuring her with murmurs of regret and promises to never hurt her again.

The little dragon refocused her eyes, whirling lightly, but with only the faintest tinge of the red of pain and alarm which dissipated quickly with such ardent reassurances.

Your head is much harder than it looks, she said, giving hers a little shake.

Debera rubbed underneath the jaw where the contact had been made.

"I'm so sorry, dearest," and then she heard a giggle behind her and swivelling around, half in anger, half in reflexive defence, she saw that she was not alone in the weyring barracks. The blonde girl from Ista... Sarra, that was her name... was sitting on the edge of her bed, folding clothes into the chest. Her dragonet was still curled up in a tight mound from which a slight snore could be heard.

"Ooops, no offence intended." Sarra said, smiling with such good nature that Debera immediately relaxed. "You should have seen the looks on your faces. Morath's eyes nearly crossed when you cracked her."

Debera rubbed the top of her head, grimacing, as she descended from the bed.

"I was so deeply asleep... I couldn't think where I was at first."

The socks were new, knitted of a sturdy cotton, and she was especially grateful for them since the pair she had had on yesterday had already been worn several days. She stamped her feet into her own boots and stood.

"I'm ready, dear," she said to the little green who stepped down off the raised platform and promptly fell on her nose.

Sarra jumped the intervening bed to help right Morath, struggling so hard to keep from laughing that she nearly choked. Once Debera saw that Morath had taken no hurt, she grinned back at the Istan.

"Are they always this?"

Sarra nodded. "So T'dam told us. You'll find a pail of meat just outside the door. We get a break this first morning," and she wrinkled her nose in a grimace, "but after today, it's up at the crack of dawn and carve up our darlings' breakfasts." There was a long snorting snore from Sarra's green and she whirled, waiting to see if the dragonet was waking up. But the snore trembled into a tiny soprano "oooooh" and then resumed its rhythm.

"Did she do that all night long?" Debera asked.

I am SO hungry.

Debera was all apologies, and so was Sarra who sprinted ahead to fling open both leaves of the door, making a flourishing bow for their exit. Morath immediately crowded against Debera, pushing her to the right, her young

astonishment and reproach that Debera couldn't remain stern.

"Chew," she said, popping a handful of pieces into Morath's open mouth. "Chew!" she repeated and Morath obediently exercised her jaws before spreading them wide again for another batch. Debera had not tended the orphaned young animals of her hold without learning some of the tricks.

Whoever had decided on the quantity, Debera thought, knew the precise size of a dragonet's belly. Morath's demands had slowed considerably as Debera reached the bottom of the pail and the dragonet sighed before she swallowed the last.

"I see she's had breakfast," said T'dam, appearing from behind so suddenly that Morath squawked in surprise and Debera struggled to get to her feet. T'dam's hand on her shoulder pushed her back down.

"We're not formal in the Weyr, Debera," he said kindly.

"Now, lead her over to the lake there," and he gestured to the right where Debera recognized the large mounds as sleeping dragonets

"Then, when she wakes up from this feed she'll be just where you can bathe and oil her." T'dam grinned. "Before you can feed her again, though..." and then he motioned to his left. "Are you squeamish?" he asked.

in the sun.

Morath lifted her head, her eyes glistening bluey-green as she regarded the Weyrlingmaster.

He is a nice man, she said and began to waddle towards the lake; her swaying belly bulged lumpily with her meal.

"When you've settled her, Debera, be sure to get your own breakfast in the kitchen. Good thing you're not squeamish" he said, turning away, but his chuckle drifted back to Debera's ears.

It's awfully far to the lake, isn't it, Debera? Morath said, puffing.

"Not really," Debera said. "Anyway, it's much too rocky underfoot right here to make a comfortable bed for your nap."

Morath looked down her long nose, her left fore knocking a stone out of her path. And she sighed. She kept going, Debera encouraging her with every slow step, until they reached the sandier ground surrounding the lake. It had recently been raked, the marks visible between the paw- and tail-prints of the dragonets Debera urged Morath further on to the sand, to an empty spot between two browns who were tightly curled with wings to shield their eyes from the autumn sun pouring down on them.

With a great sigh, Morath dropped her hindquarters to the sand, with an I'm not going a step further attitude and sank slowly over to her right side.

faded into a trivial moment.

"She's perfectly safe here," Debera told herself finally, and forced herself to leave Morath and make her way across that quadrant of the Bowl to the kitchen caverns. Enticing smells of fresh bread and other viands made her quicken her steps.

She hoped she'd have enough restraint not to bolt her food like her dragonet.

The kitchen cavern at Telgar Weyr was actually a series of caves, each with an entrance, varying in size, width and height.

As Debera paused at the entrance of the nearest and smallest one, she saw that hearths or ovens were ranged against the outside wall, each with a separate chimney protruding up the cliff face. Inside, the many long tables where last night guests had been entertained were reduced to the number needed by the regular population of the Weyr.

But the interior was busy as men and women went about food preparation tasks.

"Breakfast's over there," a woman said, smiling at Debera and pointing. "Porridge's still hot and the klah's fresh made. Help yourself."

Debera looked to her left to the farthest hearth, which had tables and chairs set invitingly near it.

They sent her tentative smiles - they must just be old enough for Impression, she thought, feeling just a trifle older and wiser. They managed - but not without slopping gobs of porridge into the fire and jumping back from the hiss and smell - to get enough in the bowls and to pour klah into their cups.

"C'mon, sit here, I won't bite," she said, tapping her table.

They were certainly not a bit sullen or grouchy, like her younger half brothers

"You've a green, haven't you?" the first one asked. He had a crop of black curls that had recently been trimmed very close to his skull.

"Course she has a green, stupi" the other lad said, elbowing the ribs of the first. "I'm M'rak, and Caneth's my bronze," he added with a justifiable smirk of pride.

"My bronze is Tiabeth," the black haired boy said, equally as proud of his dragon, but added modestly, "I'm S'mon."

"What's yours called?"

"Morath," and Debera found herself grinning broadly. Did all new riders feel as besotted as this?

The boys settled into chairs and began to eat, almost as eagerly as dragonets. Deliberately Debera slowed the rhythm of her spoon.

"How are you today? Settling in all right? Need anything from stores? Parents will pack your Gather best, and you really need your weeding worst," she said, her rich contralto voice bubbling with good humour. "Breakfast all right?"

"Bread's just out of the oven and you can have all you want." She had halted by Debera's chair and her hands, shapely with long strong fingers, patted Debera's shoulders lightly as if imparting a special message to her along with that pressure.

"You lack something, come tell me, or mention it to T'dam. You weyrlings shouldn't worry about anything other than caring for your dragonets. That's hard work enough, I'm telling you, so don't be shy, now." She gave Debera a little extra pat before she removed her hands.

"I didn't think to bring with me the gown you lent me last night," Debera said, wondering if that's what the subtle message was.

"Heavens above, child," said Tisha, big eyes even wider in her round face, "why, that dress was made for you, even if we didn't know you'd be coming." Her deep chuckle made her large breasts and belly bounce.

But it's far too good a dress... Debera began in protest.

Tisha patted Debera's shoulder again. "And fits you to perfection. I love making new clothes. My passion really, and you'll see: I'm always working on something." Pat, pat. "But if I'd no-one in mind when I cut and sewed it

"Well, I don't know what holder women are doing with their young these days. Why, I had a needle in my hand by the time I was three -", Tisha went on.

The boys' eyes were glazing over at the turn of the conversation.

"And you'll learn to sew harness, my fine young friends," she said, wagging a finger at them. "And boots and jackets, too, if you've a mind to design your own flying wear."

"Huh?" was M'rak's astonished reaction. "Sewing's fer women. "

"Not in the Weyr, it isn't," Tisha said firmly. "As you'll see soon enough. It's all part of being a dragon rider. You'll learn."

"Ah, now, here's the bread, butter and a pot of jam."

Sure enough, another ample woman, grinning with the pleasure of what she was about to bestow on them, deposited the laden tray on the table.

"That should help, thank you, Allie," Tisha said as Debera added a murmur of appreciation and S'mon remembered his manners, too. M'rak made no such delay in grabbing up a piece of the steaming bread and cramming it into his mouth.

"Wow! Great!"

"Well, just be sure you don't lose it, preparing your dragonet's next meal," Tisha said and moved off before the astonished bronze rider had absorbed her remark.

"That's what we mean," Debera said. "If you like, I'll do your carving and you can just cut up. Deal?"

"You bet," M'rak agreed fervently. And gulped again, no longer attacking the rest of the bread that hung limply from his fingers. He put the slice down. "I didn't know that was part of being a dragon rider too."

Debera chuckled. "I think we're all going to find out that being a dragon rider is not just sitting on its neck and going wherever we want to."

A prophecy she was to learn was all too accurate. She didn't regret making the bargain with the two youngsters - it was a fair distribution of effort - but it did seem that she spent her next weeks either butchering or feeding or bathing her dragonet with no time for anything else but sleeping. She had dealt with orphaned animals, true, but none the size nor with the appetite capacity of dragonets. Morath seemed to grow overnight, as if instantly transferring what she ate to visible increase - which meant more to scrub, oil AND feed.

"It's worth it, I keep telling myself," Sarra murmured one day as she wearily sprawled onto her bed.

"Does it help?" Grasella asked, groaning as she turned on her side.

"Does it matter?" put in Mesla, kicking her boots off.

"All that oil is softening my hands," Debera remarked in pleased surprise, noticing the phenomenon for the first time.

bone in the tumble. Plath had been beside herself with worry until Maranis had pronounced the damage only a bad wrenching. The other girls had helped Angie tend Plath.

All part of being a dragon rider T'dam had said, but he exhibited sympathy in making sure he was at hand to assist her. too. Nothing you won't grin about later.

Although the room in which Lord Chalkin sat so that the newly-certified Artist lantine could paint his portrait of the Lord Holder was warmer than any other chamber in Bitra that lantine had occupied, he sighed softly in weariness. His hand was cramped and he was very tired, though he was careful not to reveal anything to his odious subject. He also had to do a bang-up job of this portrait as fast as possible, or he might not leave this miserable Hold until the spring.

Fortunately this first snow was melting and, if he finished the painting, he'd leave before the paint was dry. And with the marks he'd been promised!

Why he had ever thought himself able to handle any problem that could occur on a commission, he did not know.

Certainly he had been warned: more about not gambling with any Bi-trans, to be sure, had he had any marks to wager. But the warnings had

"Please, Lord Chalkin, would you hold still just a moment longer? The light is too good to waste," lantine said, aware of the twitching muscles in Chalkin's fat cheeks. The man didn't have a tic or anything, but he could no more be still in his fancy chair than his children.

Impishly, lantine wondered if he could paint a twitch - a muscle rictus - but it was hard enough to make Chalkin look good as it was.

The man's muddy brown, close-set eyes seemed to cross towards the bridge of his rather fleshy, bulbous nose - which lantine had deftly refined.

Master Domaize had often told his students that one had to be discreet in portraying people, but lantine had argued the matter: that realism was necessary if the subject wanted a true portrait.

True portraits are never realistic, his master had told him -and the other students in the vast barn of a place where classes were held.

Save realism for landscapes and historical murals, not for portraits.

No-one wants to see themselves as others see them. The successful portraitist is one who paints with both tact and sympathy.

lantine remembered railing about dishonesty and pandering to egos.

Master Domaize had looked over the half spectacles he now had to wear if he wanted to see beyond his nose and smiled that gentle, knowing smile of his.

pass them creditably.

"Chalkin's what's wrong with it," Ussie said with a cynical snort.

"Oh, I know his reputation," lantine replied, blithely flicking a paint-stained hand, everyone does. But he sets out the conditions," and he tapped the document, "and they're all the ones we're supposed to ask for."

Ussie smothered a derogatory laugh in his hand and eyed him in the patronizing way that irritated lantine so. He knew he was a better draughts man and colourist than Ussie would ever be, and yet Ussie always acted so superior. lantine knew his general skills were better, and improving, because of course, in the studio, everyone had a chance to view everyone else's work. Ussie's anatomical sketches looked as if a mutant had posed as the life model... and his use of colour was bizarre. Ussie did much better with landscapes and was a dab hand at designing heraldry shields and icons and such peripheral art work.

"Yes, but you'll have to live in Bitra Hold while you're doing it, and coming into winter is not the time to live there."

"What? To do four miniatures? How long could it take?" lantine had a seven-day in mind. "Even for very small and active children, that should be sufficient."

"All right, all right, so you've always managed to get kids to sit still for you. But these are Chalkin's and if they're anything like him, you'll have the

Chomas jabbed his finger at the clause that began "on the completion of satisfactory work". "He came back a ghost of himself and poorer than he'd started out."

"Macartor?" lantine knew of the painter. a capable man with a fine eye for detail, now doing murals for the new Hall at Nerat Hold.

He tried to think of a reason why Macartor had not been able to deal well with Chalkin. "Great man for detail, but not for portraiture," he said.

Ussie's eyebrows rose high in his long face and his grey eyes danced with mischief.

"So, take the commission and learn for yourself. I mean, some of us need some extra marks before Turn's End, but not so badly as we'd go to Bitra Hold to earn'em. You know the reputation there for gambling? They'd sooner stop breathing than stop gambling."

"Oh, it can't be half as bad as they say it is," lantine replied.

The sixteen marks, plus keep and travel expenses, is scale.

Ussie ticked the points off on fingers. "Travel? Well, you'd have to pay your own way there."

"But he specifies travel" lantine protested, tapping that phrase impatiently.

"Hmmm, but you have to pay out for the travel there and account for every quarter mark you spent. Take you a few days to sort out right there.

"At Bitra, my friend, everyone's casual," Chomas put in. "Chalkin's never issued a fair service contract in his life. And read EVERY SINGLE WORD on the page if you are foolish enough to take the commission. Which, if you had the sense of little green apples, you won't." Chomas gave a final decisive nod of his head and continued on his way to his own work station, where he was doing fine marquetry on a desk.

However, lantine had a particular need for the marks the commission would bring him. With his professional diploma all but in his hand, he wanted to start repaying what he owed his parents. His father wanted to avail himself of lantine's land allotment to extend his pasturage, but he didn't have the marks to pay the Council transfer fees; never a huge amount, but sufficient so that lantine's large family would have to cut back on what few luxuries they had to save the sum. It was therefore a matter of self-esteem and pride for lantine to earn the fee.

His parents had given him a good start, more than he deserved considering how seldom he had been at the hold since his twelfth birthday. His mother had wished him to be a teacher, as she had been before her marriage. She had taught all the basics to him, his nine siblings and the children in the other nearby Benden mountain sheep and farm holds. And because he had shown not only a keen interest in learning but also discernible skill in sketching - filling every inch of a precious drawing book with

lantine constantly sketched and had many vignettes of unsuspecting classmates: some done at times when he should have been doing other lessons. One in particular - a favourite with Master Clissex - was of Bethany playing her guitar, bending over the instrument for intricate chording. Everyone had admired it, even Bethany.

His portfolio was submitted to several private craft Halls which taught a variety of skills, from fine leather tooling to wood, glass and stone workings. None of those on the West Coast had places for another student, but the woman who was master weaver in Southern Boll had said she would contact Master Domaize in Keroon, one of the foremost portraitists on Pern, for she felt the boy's talent lay in that direction.

To lantine's astonishment, a green dragon had arrived one morning at the College, available to convey him back for a formal interview with Domaize himself. lantine wasn't quite sure what excited him most: the ride on the dragon between, the prospect of meeting Master Domaize or the thought of being able to continue with art as a possible profession. He had been in a worse state on his return because Master Domaize, having set him the task of sketching himself, had accepted him as a student and sent off a message to his parents that very day, arranging terms.

lantine's family had been astounded to receive such a message.

Chalkin had demanded, and received, a verification of lantine's skill from his Master and then returned the signed contract.

Best re-read it, Ian, Ussie said when lantine waved the document about in triumph.

"Why?" lantine glanced down the page and pointed to the bottom lines. Here's my signature, and Master Domaize's, alongside Chalkin's. That is, if that's what this scrawl is supposed to be." He held it out to Ussie.

"Hmmm, looks all right, though I haven't seen Chalkin's hand before. My, where did they find this typewriter? Half the letters don't strike evenly." Ussie passed the document back.

"I'll see if there're any other examples of Lord Chalkin's signature in the files," lantine said, "though how... and why would he deny the contract when he himself proposed it?"

"He's a Bitran, and you know how they are. Are you sure that's your signature?" Ussie grinned as lantine peered with a suspicious glare at his own name. Then Ussie laughed.

"Sure, I'm sure it's mine. Look at the slant of the t. Just as I always make it. What are you driving at, Ussie?" lantine felt the first twinges of irritation with Ussie's attitude.

"Well, Bitrans are known to forge things. Remember those bogus land transfer deeds five years ago? No, I don't suppose you'd have heard about

"If you have any trouble though, at Bitra Hold, let me know instantly."

"It's much easier to sort things out when they start, you know. And don't," and here Master Domaize had wagged a stern finger at him, "allow them to entice you into any games of chance, no matter how clever you think you are. Bitrans make their living at gaming. You can't compete at their level."

Iantine had promised faithfully to eschew any gaming. He'd never had much interest in such things, being far more likely to sketch the players than join the game. But gambling was not a thing that the Master would have meant, Iantine was learning. What did fall into that category: especially the nuances of the word satisfaction. Such a simple word that can be so misconstrued. As he had done.

He had done not four miniatures, but nearly twenty, using up all the materials he had brought with him so that he had had to send for more from Hall Domaize since the wood used in miniatures had to be specially seasoned or it would warp, especially in a damp environment like Bitra Hold. He had done the first four on the canvas he had brought with him for the job, only to discover - along with a long list of other objections from Lord Chalkin and his wife, Lady Nadona that canvas was not satisfactory" If it isn't the best quality," and she ran one of her almost dragon-talon nails

Hall has the very highest standards."

"Master Domaize provided me with the best canvas," and he pushed his remaining frames out of her reach. "He said that is what he always supplies. You should have stipulated skybroom wood in the contract if that's what you wanted."

"Of course it would be what I wanted, young man. The very best is none too good for my children."

"Is there any available in the Hold?" he asked. At least with skybroom you could clean off unsatisfactory work without the risk of damaging the surface.

"Of course."

That was his first mistake. Nevertheless, at that point he was still eager to do a proper job to the best of his abilities.

However, what skybroom there was turned out to be substantial lumber, being cured for furniture, and not thin enough to be used for miniatures: miniatures' which were now twice the ordinary size.

"High on the list of unsatisfactory" were the poses of the children, although these had been suggested by the Lady Holder herself.

"Chaldon doesn't look at all natural," Lady Nadona said. "Not at all. He looks so tense, hunching his shoulders like that."

assume an even halfway cheerful expression.

"And why on earth did you paint on such a small canvas"?

"I'll need to use a magnifying glass," Lady Nadona had said, holding Chaldon's likeness away from her as far as her arm would reach.

lantine had known enough about his patroness by then to suppress a remark about her farsightedness.

"This is the customary size for a miniature -"

"So you say," she replied repressively. "I want something I can see when I'm on the other side of the room."

As she was generally on the other side of her room whenever her children were in her vicinity, the need was understandable. They were the messiest pre-adolescents lantine had ever encountered: plump, since they were indolent by nature, dressed in ill-fitting apparel since the Hold's seamstress was not particularly adept, and constantly eating: generally something that ran, smeared or left crumbs on their chins and tunics. None of them bathed frequently enough and their hair was long, greasy and roughly cut. Even the two girls showed no feminine interest in their appearance. One had hacked her hair off with a knife...

except the long tress she wore down the back, strung with beads and little bells. The other had thick braids which were rarely redone unless whatever fastened the end had got lost.

that she'd look better with proper hair which he could certainly add in if he was any good at all. And why did she have such an awkward expression on her face, when Luccha had the sweetest smile and such a lovely disposition?

(Especially when she was busy trying to unite the Hold's cats by tying their tails together, Iantine had added mentally. Bitra Hold did not have a single unscathed animal, and the spit-boy said they'd lost seven dogs to accidents that year already.) Luccha's mouth was set aslant in her face, the thin lips usually compressed in a sour line.

Lonada, the second daughter, had a pudding face, with small dark holes for eyes, and her father's nose: bad enough in a male, but fatal for a female.

Iantine had also had to buy a lock from the Hold steward to prevent his sleeping-furs from walking out of the narrow little cubicle in which he was quartered. He knew his packs had been searched the first day; probably several times by the variety of smeared fingerprints left on the paint pots. As he had brought nothing of real value with him - not having many possessions - he hadn't worried.

Holds usually had one light-fingered person, and the Hold steward usually knew who it was and retrieved what had gone astray from guests' rooms.

somewhat clearer grasp of just how the parents envisaged their offspring. On his fifth set, he nearly won the accolade of satisfactory". Nearly. Then the children, one after another, succumbed to an infant disease that resulted in such a rash that they could not possibly sit".

"Well, you'd better do something to earn your keep," Chalkin told his contract portraitist when Lady Nadona had announced the children were isolated.

The contract says I will have room and board - - -, Chalkin held up a thick forefinger, his smile not the least bit humorous. When you are honouring that contract - But the children are sick Chalkin had shrugged. That's neither here nor there. You are unable to honour the specific conditions of the contract.

Therefore you are not entitled to be fed and housed at the Hold's expense. Of course, I can always deduct your leisure time from the fee... The smile deepened vindictively.

"Leisure..." Iantine had been so enraged that the protest burst from him before he could suppress it. No wonder, he thought, shaking with the control he had to enforce on himself, no-one else at Hall Domaize would sign with Bitra.

"Well," Chalkin went on, as if he were a reasonable man, "what else does one call it if you are not engaged in the lab ours which you are con-

So, instead of already being on his way home with a satisfactory contract fulfilled and the marks for the transfer fee heavy in his pouch, lantine spent his leisure time touching up the faces of Chalkin's ancestors in the main Hall murals.

"Good practice for you, I'm sure," Chalkin had said, all too amiably, as he made his daily inspection of this project. "You'll be better equipped to do satisfactory portraits of this generation." Pig faces, all of them, with the ancestral bulbous nose, lantine noticed.

Oddly enough, one or two of the ancestresses had been very pretty girls, far too young and attractive for the mean-mouthed men they had been contracted to. Too bad the male genes dominated.

Of course, lantine had had to make up batches of the special paints required for mural work, having initially had no idea that such would be required. He also found his supplies of the oil paints drastically reduced by the repeated 'unsatisfactory' portraits. He had the choice of sending back to Hall Domaize for additional supplies and paying transport charges, plus having to wait for them to reach him - or finding the raw materials and manufacturing the colours himself - which was the better option.

"How much?" he exclaimed in shock when the head cook told him what he'd have to pay for the eggs and oil he needed to mix into his pigments.

in his sinus cavities. "Shoulda brought yer stuff with ye if ye'd need it. Lord Holder sees you usin' things from his kitchen and one of us'll be paying for it. Won't be me!" And he sniffed again, shrugging one dirty white shoulder as emphasis.

"I came with adequate supplies and equipment for the work I was hired to do," lantine said, curbing an intense desire to shove the man's face in the thin soup he was stirring.

"So?"

lantine had walked, stiff-legged with fury, out of the kitchen.

He tried to tell himself that he was learning, the very hardest way, how to deal with the client.

Finding the raw materials for his pigments had proved nearly as difficult since it was, after all, coming on to deep winter here in the Bitran hills. He discovered a hefty hunk of stone with a rounded end that would do as a pestle, and then a hollowed-out rock that would act as a mortar. He had found a whole hillside of the sabsab bush whose roots produced a yellow colour; enough raw cobalt to get blue, and the paw berry leaves that boiled up one of the finest pure reds with neither tint nor tinge of orange or purple. With the greatest of luck he also came across ochre mud. Rather than rent" containers, he used chipped crockery he unearthed from the midden heap.

Chaldon had lost weight during the fever which accompanied the emergence of the rash. He was also lethargic and, as long as Iantine could think up funny stories to tell as he worked, he stayed reasonably still. Calling himself the worst kind of panderer, Iantine made the boy resemble the best looking of the ancestors he'd relinmed. The boy was certainly pleased and ran off to find his mother, shouting that he did look like Greatgranddaddy, just as she always said he did.

The same ploy did not quite work on Luccha's portrait when she had recovered. Her skin was sallow, she'd lost hair and too much weight to improve her undistinguished looks. While he had aimed for her great-grandmother thrice removed, she didn't have the right facial structure and even he had to admit the result was unsatisfactory.

"Her illness," he'd mumbled when Chalkin and Nadona recited the long catalogue of dissimilarities between their daughter and the portrait.

He did better with Lonada and Briskin who, several kilos lighter, had the look of his great-uncle - pinch-faced, lantern jawed and big-eared. Iantine had judiciously reduced the size of those ears even as he wondered what artist had got away with such unflattering appendages on great-uncle.

He redid Luccha's after the other two: she'd put on some weight and her colour was better - not much, but better. And he set her eyes wider in her face, which improved her no end.

cliff walls.

So, as he descended wearily but in great relief to the lower floor cubicle, he became aware of the intense chill in this level.

The temperature in the big Hall had been somewhat warmed by the roaring fires in the four hearths, but there was no heating down here.

In fact, it was so cold that lantine did no more than loosen his belt and remove his boots before crawling on to the hard surface that was supposed to be a mattress. It looked and felt like something recycled from the ships of the First Crossing. He curled up in the furs, more grateful than ever that he'd brought his own, and fell asleep.

Arctic temperatures swirling about his face roused him. His face was stiff with cold and, despite the warmth of his furs, when he tried to stretch his body his muscles resisted. He had a crick in his neck and he wondered if he'd moved at all during the night. Certainly it was cold enough to have stayed in the warm of the furs. But he had to relieve himself.

He crammed his feet into boot leather that was rigid with ice and, wrapping his furs tightly about himself, made his way down the corridor to the toilet. His breath was a plume of white, his cheeks and nose stung by the cold. He managed his business and returned to his room only long enough to throw on his thickest woollen jumper. With half a mind to throw his furs

it. He moved closer and looked out at the courtyard, but it was all one expanse of unbroken snow. Indeed, where the courtyard should have stepped down to the roadway the snow was even, concealing any depression where the road should have been. No-one moved outside. Nor were there any tracks in the expanse of snow-covered court to suggest that anyone had tried to come in from one of the outer holds.

"Just what I needed," Iantine said, totally depressed by what he saw. I could be trapped here for weeks!" Paying for room and board.

If only the kids hadn't come down with measles... If only he hadn't already freshened up the murals - - How would he survive? Would he have anything left of his original fee - that had seemed so generous by the time he could leave this miserable Hold?

Later that morning, when half-frozen people had begun to cope with the effects of the blizzard, he struck another bargain with the Holder Lord and Lady: and very carefully did he word it. Two full-sized portraits, each a square metre on sky broom wood to be supplied by Lord Chalkin, one of Lady Nadona and one of Lord Chalkin, head and shoulders in Gather dress, with all materials and equipment to make additional pigments supplied by the Hold; maintenance for himself and quarters on an upper floor, with morning and evening fuel for a fire on the hearth.

enough of the supposed resemblance between herself and Luccha so that he improved on it, giving her a more youthful appearance.

When she wanted to change the collar of her dress, he improvised one he remembered seeing in an Ancient's portrait - a lacy froth which hid much of the loose skin of her neck. Not that he had painted that in, but the lace softened the whole look of her.

He had not been so lucky with Chalkin. The man was psychologically unable to sit still - tapping his fingers, swinging one leg as he crossed and uncrossed them, twitching his shoulders or his face, making it basically impossible to obtain a set pose.

lantine was nearly desperate now to finish and leave this dreadful place before another snowstorm. The young portraitist wondered if Chalkin's delays, and the short periods in which he would deign to sit, were yet another ploy to delay him - and rake back some of the original fee. Though Chalkin had even invited him to come into the gaming rooms - the warmest and most elegant rooms in the Hold - lantine had managed to excuse himself somehow or other.

"Do sit still, Lord Chalkin, I'm working on your eyes and I cannot if you keep moving them about in your face," lantine said, rather more sharply than he had ever addressed the Lord Holder before.

"I beg your pardon," said Chalkin, jerking his shoulders about angrily.

less porcine and subtracted sufficient flesh from the bulbous nose to give it a more Roman look. He had also widened and lifted the shoulders to give a more athletic appearance, and darkened the hair.

Further, he had meticulously caught the fire of the many jewelled rings.

Actually, they dominated the painting, which he felt would find favour with Lord Chalkin who seemed to have more rings than days of the year.

"There!" he said, putting down his brush and standing back from the painting, satisfied in himself that he had done the best job possible: that is, the best job that would prove 'satisfactory' and allow him to leave this ghastly Hold.

"It's about time," Chalkin said, slipping down from the chair and stamping over to view the result.

Iantine watched his face, seeing that flash of pleasure before Chalkin's usual glum expression settled back over his features.

Chalkin peered more closely, seeming to count the brush strokes although there were none, for Iantine was too competent a technician to have left any.

Watch the paint. It's not yet dry," Iantine said quickly, raising his arm to ward off Chalkin's touch.

"You're a rude fellow, painter."

"My title is artist, Lord Chalkin, and do tell me if this portrait is satisfactory or not!"

Chalkin gave him a quick nervous glance, one facial muscle twitching. Even the Lord of Bitra Hold knew when he had pushed someone too hard.

"It's not bad. Is it satisfactory, Lord Chalkin?" lantine put all the pent-up frustration and anxiety into that question.

Chalkin shifted one shoulder, screwed up his face with indecision and then hastily composed his features in the more dignified pose of the portrait before him.

"Yes, I believe it is satisfactory."

"Then," and now lantine took Lord Chalkin by the elbow and steered him towards the door, let us to your office and complete the contract.

"Now, see here. If it is satisfactory, I have honoured that contract and you may now settle with me for the miniatures," lantine said, guiding the man down the cold corridor and to his office. He tapped his foot impatiently as Chalkin took the keys from his inside pocket and opened the door.

The fire within was so fierce that lantine felt sweat blossom on his forehead. At Chalkin's abrupt gesture, he turned around while the man fiddled with wherever it was he had his strongbox. He heard, with infinite relief, the turn of the metal lock and then silence. A slamming of a lid.

pen in the clutter on his desk.

Chalkin scrawled his name.

"Date it," Iantine added, wishing to have no complaint at later time.

"You want too much, painter."

"Artist, Lord Chalkin," Iantine said with a humourless smile and turned to leave. At the door he turned again. "And don't touch the painting for forty-eight hours. I will not come back if you smear it. It was satisfactory when we left the room, so keep it that way."

Iantine returned to collect his good brushes, but left what remained of the paints he had had to make. Last night, in a hopeful mood, he had packed everything else. Now, he took the stairs up two and three at a time, stored his brushes carefully, stuffed the signed and dated contracts into his pack shrugged into his coat, rolled up his sleeping-furs, looped both packs in one hand and was half-way down the stairs again when he met Chalkin ascending.

"You cannot leave now," Chalkin protested, grabbing his arm. "You have to wait until my wife has seen and approved my portrait."

"Oh, no, I don't," said Iantine, wrenching free of the restraining hand.

He was out of the main door before Chalkin could say another word, and ran down the roadway between the soiled snow banks. If he was be-

and pushing him into a chair. He deposited the packs he was carrying on to the table.

"Klah, for the love of little dragons, please."

Two women came running, one with klah and the other with a hastily filled bowl of soup. Tisha came striding across the cavern, demanding to know what the problem was, who had P'tero rescued and from where.

"No-one should be out in weather like this," she said as she reached the table and grabbed the victim's wrist to get a pulse.

"All but froze, he is." Tisha pulled aside the furs wrapped about his neck and - then let him take the cup. He cradled the klah in reddened - fingers, blowing before he took his first cautious sip. He was also shivering uncontrollably.

"I spotted an SOS on the snow - lucky for him that the sun made shadows or I'd never have seen it," P'tero was saying, thornughly pleased with himself.

"Found him below Bitra Hold..."

"Poor man," Tisha interjected.

"Oh, you're so right there," P'tero said with ironic fervour, "and he'll never return. Not that he's told me all..." and P'tero flopped to a chair when someone brought him a cup of klah.

lightly pinching the tips. "No, cold enough but not harmed."

"Thank you, thank you," the man said, returning his fingers to the warm cup. "I got so cold stamping out that emergency code."

"And out of doors in such weather with no gloves," Tisha chided him.

"When I left Domaize Hall for Bitra Hold, it was only autumn," he said in a grating voice.

"Autumn?" Tisha echoed, widening her fine eyes in surprise.

"How long were you at Bitra Hold then?"

"Seven damned weeks," the man replied, spitting out the words in a disgusted tone of voice. "I had thought a week at the most." Tisha laughed, her belly heaving under her broad apron. "What under the stars took you to Bitra in the first place?"

"Painter, are you?" she added.

"How'd you know?" The man regarded her with surprise.

"Still have paint under your nails." Iantine inspected them and his cold-reddened face flushed a deeper red.

"I didn't even stop to wash," he said.

"As well you didn't, considering the price Chalkin charges for such luxuries as soap," she said, chuckling again.

The women returned with the things Tisha had ordered.

"Now, your name, and whom shall we contact to say that you've been found?" Tisha asked when all this had been done.

"I'm lantine," and then he added in wry pride, "portraitist from Hall Domaize. I was contracted to do miniatures of Chalkin's children.

"Your first mistake," said Tisha, chuckling.

lantine flushed. "You're so right, but I needed the fee."

"Did you come away with any of it?" P'tero asked, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Oh, that I did," the artist replied so fiercely that everyone grinned. Then he sighed. "But I did have to part with an eighth at the woodsman's hold. He had little enough to share, but was willing to do so."

"At a profit, I'm sure."

lantine considered that for a moment. "I was lucky to find any place to wait out the storm. And he did share." He shrugged briefly, and a dejected look crossed his features as he sighed. "Anyway, it was he who suggested I make a sign in the snow to attract any dragon rider I'm just lucky one saw me." He nodded thanks to P'tero.

"No problem," the blue dragon rider said airily. "Glad I came." He leaned towards Tisha across the table. "He'd've been frozen solid in another day!"

"Were you long waiting?"

clutched at the chair for support.

"Have a care, lad, filling the stomach was only half your problem," Tisha said, moving to support him with far more alacrity than her bulk would suggest. She gestured for P'tero to lend a hand.

"I need to..." Iantine began.

"Ach, it's on the way to the sleeping cavern," Tisha told him and drew one of his arms over her shoulder. She was as tall as he.

P'tero took up the packs again and between them, they got him to the toilet room. And then into a bed in an empty cubicle. Tisha checked his feet again, applied another coat of numb weed and tiptoed out. Iantine only made sure that his packs - and the precious fee were in the room with him before he fell deeply asleep.

While he slept, messages went out - to Hall Domaize and to Benden Weyr and Hold, since Iantine nominally looked to Benden. Although Iantine had taken no lasting harm, M'shall recognized yet another instance of Chalkin taking unfair advantage. Irene had already sent in a substantial list of abuses and irregularities in Chalkin's dealings generally with folk who had no recourse against his dictates. He held no court in which difficulties could be aired, and had no impartial arbiters to make decisions.

The big traders, who could be counted on for impartial comment, by-passed Bitra and could cite many examples of unfair dealings since Chalkin

Those in more isolated situations would certainly have a hard time obtaining even basic food supplies. That constituted a flagrant abuse of his position as Lord Holder.

When Paulin read M'shall's report, he asked if Chalkin's holders would speak out against him. M'shall had to report that his initial survey of the minor holders indicated a severe lack of civic duty.

Chalkin had his folk so cowed, none would accuse him - especially this close to a Pass, for he had still had the power to turn objectors out of their holds.

"They may change their minds once Thread has started," K'vin remarked to Zulaya.

"Too late, I'd say, for any decent preparations to be made." K'vin shrugged. "He's really not our concern - for which I, for one, am thankful. At least we rescued lantine."

Zulaya gave a wry chuckle. "That poor lad! Starting his professional career at Bitra, Not the best place."

"Maybe that's all he could aspire to," K'vin suggested.

"Not if he's from Hall Domaize," Zulaya said tartly. "Wonder how long it'll take his hands to recover?"

"Thinking of a new portrait?" K'vin asked, amused.

"Well, he's down an eighth of what he needs," she said.

"The boy may find it as hard to leave Telgar Weyr as it was Bitra. With a much fuller pouch and no maintenance subtracted And soap and hot water and decent food," Zulaya said.

"According to Tisha, he'll need feeding up. He's skin and bones."

When the singing woke lantine, he was totally disoriented.

No-one had sung a note at Bitra Hold. And he was warm!

The air was redolent of good eating odours, too. He sat up.

Hands, feet and face were stiff, but the tingling was gone. And he was exceedingly hungry.

The curtain across the cubicle rustled and a boy's head popped through.

"You're awake, Artist lantine?" the lad asked.

"Indeed, I am," and lantine looked around for his clothes.

Someone had undressed him and he didn't see his own clothes.

"I'm to help you if you need it," the boy said, pushing half-way through the curtains. "Tisha laid out clean clothes." He wrinkled a snub nose.

"Yours were pretty ripe," she said.

lantine chuckled. "They prbably were. I ran out of soap for washing three weeks ago."

"You waz at Bitra. They charge for everything there," and the boy threw up both arms in disgust. "I'm Leopold," he added.

gan to dress in the clean gear.

Odd how important simple things, like freshly laundered clothing, assumed the level of luxury when you've had to do without.

Leopol helped him spread the salve on his feet. They were still tender to the touch and even the act of applying the salve made them suddenly itchy. Fortunately the numb weed or whatever it was, reduced that sensation.

When he had relieved himself again and gingerly washed face and hands, he and Leopol made their way to the Lower Cavern where the evening meal was in progress.

The lad led him to a side table near the hearth which had been set for two. Instantly cooks descended with plates overflowing with food, wine for him and klah for Leopol.

"There now, Artist man," the cook said, nodding appreciation as Iantine attacked the roast meat, eat first and then the Weyrleaders would like a few words with you, if you're not too tired." Iantine murmured thanks and understanding and addressed himself single-mindedly to his food. How long had it been since he'd eaten a decent meal?

He would have had additional servings of the main course, but his stomach felt uneasy: too much good food after several days of semi-fasting, probably. Leopol brought him a large serving of the sweet course, but he couldn't finish it all because the back of his throat felt raw and sore.

made his stomach feel sourer.

"Messages have been sent, and acknowledgments received, that you've been rescued," K'vin said, grinning over the last word. Master Domaize was becoming worried, so we saved him a messenger to Bitra."

"That's very good of you, Zulaya, K'vin," Iantine said, thankful that part of his training at Hall Domaize had included knowing the important names in every Hold, Weyr and Hall.

"I certainly appreciated P'tero's rescue." Zulaya grinned. He'll be dining out on that one for the rest of the year. But it proves the wisdom of sweep riding even during the Interval."

"You should know," Iantine blurted out, "that Lord Chalkin doesn't believe there will be a Pass."

"Of course not," K'vin replied easily. "It doesn't suit him to. Bridgely and M'shall would like a report from you, though, concerning your visit there."

"You mean, there's something that can be done about him?" Iantine was amazed. Lord Holders were autonomous within their borders; he hadn't known there'd be any recourse.

"He may do himself in," Zulaya said with a grim twist of her lips.

"That would be wonderful," said Iantine. "Only," and now honesty forced him to admit this, "he didn't really do anything to me."

to itch again. "Then the children all got measles and so, rather than have anything deducted from the fee for room and board, I agreed to freshen up the Hold murals... only I hadn't brought that sort of paint and had to manufacture the colours."

"Did he charge you for the use of the equipment?" Zulaya asked to lantine's astonishment.

"How did you know?" When she only laughed and waved at him to continue his telling.

lantine went on, "So I excavated what I needed in the midden."

"Good for you," Zulaya clapped her hands, delighted by his resourcefulness.

"Fortunately, most of the raw materials for pigments are readily available. You only have to find them and make the colours up. Which I'd have to do anyhow. Master Domaize was good about passing on techniques like that.

"Then I finally got them to accept the miniatures, which weren't exactly miniature size any more, by the way, just before the first blizzard snowed me in." lantine flushed; his narrative showed him to be such a ninny.

"So? What did you contract for then?" Zulaya shot K'vin a knowing look.

"I was a bit wiser. Or so I thought," he said with a grimace and then told them the clauses he'd insisted on.

then grinned, "until P'tero rescued me." His throat kept clogging up and he had to clear it again. "I want to thank you very much for that. I hope I didn't keep him from proper duties."

"No, no," K'vin said. "Mind you, I'm not all that sure why he was over Bi-tra, but it's as well he was."

"How are your hands?" Zulaya asked, looking down at him as he washed his itching fingers together.

"I shouldn't rub the skin, should I?"

Zulaya spoke over her shoulder. "Leopol, get the numb weed for lantine, please." The young artist hadn't noticed the boy's discreet presence, but he was glad he didn't have to walk all the way to the cubicle to get the salve.

"It's just the after-effects of cold," he said, looking at his fingers, and noticing what Tisha had - pigment under the nails. He curled his fingers, ashamed to be at a Weyr table with dirty hands.

And a deep shiver went down his spine.

"I was wondering, lantine," Zulaya began, "if you'd feel up to doing another portrait or two? The Weyr pays the usual rates, and no extras charged against you."

lantine protested. "I'd gladly do your portrait, Weyrwoman."

"It is of yourself you were speaking, isn't it?" That first shiver was followed by another which he did his best to mask.

Zulaya caught his hands in hers, for he'd been wildly gesticulating in both eagerness and an attempt to disguise another spasm.

"Artist lantine, if you managed to do four miniatures and two formal portraits, and refresh murals for Chalkin, you're more than qualified. Didn't you know that it took Macartor five months to finish Chalkin's wedding-day scene?"

"And he had to borrow marks from an engineer to pay off the last of his 'debt'?" K'vin added. "Here's Waine to greet you. But you're not to start work again until you're completely recovered from the cold."

"Oh, I'm recovered, I'm recovered," lantine said, standing up as the Weyrleaders did, determined to control the next set of shiverings.

After they had introduced him to the little man, Waine, they left him, circulating to other tables as the Weyr relaxed.

There was singing and guitar playing from one side of the room, cheerful noises, above a general level of easy conversation. That was something else which lantine only now realized had been totally absent at Bitra Hold: music, talk, people relaxing after a day's work.

"Heard you ran afoul of Chalkin?" Waine said, grinning and ducking his head. Then he brought from behind his back a sheaf of large-sized paper sheets, neatly tied together, and a handful of pencils. "Thought you might need em, like," he said shyly. "Heard tell you used up all at Bitra."

Waine grinned toothlessly again. " That's a right good trade."

He held out a hand and nearly crushed lantine's fingers with his enthusiasm. But he caught the paroxysm of almost uncontrollable shivering which lantine could not hide.

"Hey, man, you're cold."

"I can't seem to stop shivering, for all that I'm on top of the fire," and lantine had to surrender to the shaking.

"TISHA" lantine was embarrassed by Waine's bellow for assistance, but he didn't resist when he was bundled back into his quarters and the medic summoned while Tisha ordered more furs, hot water-bottles, aromatics to be steeped in hot water to make breathing easier. He made no resistance to the medication that was immediately prescribed for him because, by then, his head had started to ache. So did his bones.

The last thing he remembered before he drifted off to an uneasy sleep was what Maranis, the medic, said to Tisha. "Let's hope they all have it at Bitra for giving it to him!"

Much later Leopol told him that Tisha had stayed by his bedside three nights while he burned of the mountain fever he had caught, compounding his illness by exposure on the cold slopes. Maranis felt that the old woodsman might be a carrier for the disease: himself immune, but able to transmit the fever.

was displeased with the missing eighth mark he'd had to give the woodsman. "And he nearly killed you for that eighth."

"He's a good lad you have for a son," Tisha said with an edge to her voice, "working that hard to earn money from Chalkin."

"Oh yes," his mother hastily agreed as she suddenly realized she ought to be more grateful. "Though why ever you sought to please that old skinflint is beyond me."

"The fee was right," lantine said weakly.

"Don't take on so, now, lan," Tisha said when his mother had to return to the sheep hold "She was far more worried about you than about the marks. Which shows her heart's in the right place. Worry makes people act odd, you know." She patted lantine's shoulder. "She wanted to take you home and nurse you there," she went on reassuringly.

"But couldn't risk your lungs in the cold of between. I don't think she liked us taking care of you!" She grinned. "Mothers never trust others, you know."

lantine managed a grin back at Tisha. I guess that's it."

It was Leopold who restored lantine's peace of mind. "You gotta real nice mother, you know," he said, sitting on the end of the bed. "Worried herself sick about leaving until P'tero promised to convey her again if you took any turn for the worst. She'd never ridden a dragon before."

"She did indeed," Leopol said, giving an emphatic nod to his head.

Leopol seemed to know a great deal about a lot of matters in the Weyr. He also never seemed to mind being sent on errands as lantine made a slow convalescence.

Master Domaize paid him a visit, too. And it was Leopol who told the convalescent why the Master had made such a visit.

"That Lord Chalkin sent a complaint to Master Domaize that you had skived out of the Hold without any courtesy and he was seriously considering lodging a demand for the return of some of the fee since you were so obviously very new at your art, and the fee had been for a seasoned painter, not a young upstart." Leopol grinned at lantine's furious reaction.

"Oh, don't worry. Your master wasn't born yesterday. M'shall himself brought him to Bitra Hold, and they said that there was not a thing wrong with any of the work you'd done for that Lord Chalkin." He cocked his head to one side, regarding lantine with a calculating look.

"Seems like there's lot of people wanting to sit their portraits with you. Didja know that?" lantine shook his head, trying to absorb the injustice of Chalkin's objection. He was speechless with fury. Leopol grinned again.

"Don't worry, lantine. Chalkin's the one should worry, treating you like that. Your Master and the Benden Weyrleader gave out to that Lord Holder about it, too. You're qualified, and entitled to all the courtesies of which you

tone. Then she handed him the sketch paper and pencils that Waine had given him on his first night in the Weyr. "Get your hand back in. At least doing what you're best at can be done sitting still."

It was good to have paper and pencil again. It was good to look about the Lower Caverns and catch poses, especially when the poser didn't realize he was being sketched. And his eye had not lost its keenness, and if his fingers cramped now and then from weakness, strength gradually returned. He became unaware of the passage of time, nor did he notice people coming up behind him to see what he was drawing just then.

Waine arrived with mortar, pestle, oil, eggs and cobalt to make a good blue. The man had picked up bits of technique and procedures on his own, but picking things up here and there was no substitute for the concentrated drill which Iantine had had: drills that he had once despised but now appreciated when he could see what resulted from the lack of them.

Winter had set in but on the first day of full sun, Tisha insisted on wrapping him up in a cocoon of furs to sit out in the Bowl for the good of fresh air". As it was bath-time for the dragonets Iantine was immediately fascinated by their antics and began to appreciate just how much hard work went into their nurture. It was also the first chance he'd ever had of seeing dragonets He knew the grace and power of the adult dragons and their awesome appearance. Now he saw the weyrings as mischievous - even

Ormonth had one wing extended and was gazing at it in an abstract fashion, as if he'd never seen it before. The expression was too much for the artist in lantine and he flipped open his pad and sketched the scene. P'tero noticed, but the class was being extremely attentive.

What T'dam was saying slowly reached through lantine's absorption with line and pose.

"Now, records show us that the worst injuries occur on wing edges, especially if Thread falls in clumps and the partners are not sharp enough to avoid em. A dragon can fly with one third of his exterior sail damaged" and T'dam ran his hand along the edge of Ormonth's wing.

"However," and T'dam looked up at Ormonth, "if you would be good enough to close your wing slightly, Ormonth," and the blue did so.

"Thank you " T'dam had to stand slightly on tip-toe to reach the area of the inner wing. Injuries in here are far more serious as Thread can, depending on the angle of its fall, sear through the wing and into his body. This," and he now ducked under the wing and tapped the side, is where the lungs are and injury here can even be fatal." There was a gasp around the semi-circle of his students.

"That's why you have to be sharp every instant you're in flight. Go between the instant you even suspect you've been hit."

"How do we know?" someone asked.

convulsively.

"She was squealing the instant she lost her balance and actually before she snapped the bone. She knew she would hurt even as she fell."

"Now, you don't have quite the same immediacy in Threadfall since you'll be high on adrenalin, but you'll know. So, this brings up a point that we make constantly in all training procedures, always, ALWAYS have a point to go to in your head. During Fall, it had better be the Weyr since everyone here," and now the sweep of his hand included those lantine recognized as non-riders, "will be ready to help.

"DON'T make the mistake of coming in too low. Going between will have stopped Thread burrowing further into your dragon..." A muted chorus of disgust and fearfulness greeted that concept."So you can make as orderly a landing as injuries permit. What you don't need is a bad landing which could compound the original Thread score. Start encouraging your dragon as soon as you know he's been hit. Of course, you may be hit too, and I appreciate that, but you're riders and you can certainly control your own pain while seeing to your dragon's.

"HE's the important one of you, remember.

"Without him you don't function as a rider.

"Now, the drill is," and once again he swept his glance around his students, "slather!" He picked up the wide brush from the pail at his feet and

that he's not as badly hurt as he or she feels. Your injured dragon needs all the reassurance you can give... No matter how bad you think the injury looks, don't think that at the dragon. Tell him or her what a great brave dragon they are, and that the numb weed is working and the pain will go away.

"Now, if a bone has been penetrated - - -

"Why, you've got P'tero to the life," said an awed voice softly in Iantine's ear, and he shot a glance at the tall lad standing behind him: M'leng, green Sith's rider, and P'tero's special friend. Iantine had seen the two riders, always together, in the kitchen cavern. Oooh, is there any chance I could have that corner?" And he tapped the portion which contained P'tero and Ormonth.

M'leng was a handsome young man, with almond-shaped green eyes in an angular face. The light breeze in the Bowl ruffled tight dark brown curls on his head.

"Since I owe P'tero my life, let me make a larger sketch for you."

"Oh, would you?" And a smile animated M'leng's rather solemn face.

"Can we settle a price? I've marks enough to do better than Chalkin did you!" He reached for his belt pouch.

Iantine tried to demur, pleading he owed P'tero.

"Oh, her," and M'leng dismissed the head woman with a wave of his hand. "She's so fussy at times. But there's nothing wrong with your hand or your eye... and that little pose of P'tero, leaning against Ormonth, why it's him!"

lantine felt his spirits rise at the compliment because the sketch of the blue rider was good - better than the false ones he had done at Bitra Hold. He still cringed, remembering how he had allowed himself to compromise his standards by contriving such obsequious portrayals. He hoped he would never be in such a position again. M'leng's comment was bal to his psyche.

"I can do better But I like the pose."

"Can't you just do it? I mean," and M'leng looked everywhere but at lantine, "I'd rather P'tero didn't know... I mean..."

"Is it to be a surprise for him?"

"No, it's to be for me!" And M'leng jabbed his bwastbone with his thumb, his manner defiant. "So I'll have it."

At such intransigence, lantine was at a loss and hastily agreed before M'leng became more emotional. His eyes had filled and he set his mouth in a stubborn line.

"I will, of course, but a sitting would help."

so you can paint him at his very best."

"But suppose..." lantine began, wondering how he could keep P'tero from knowing he was being done.

"You do the portrait," M'leng said, patting lantine's arm to still his objections. "I'll take care of P'tero - -" and he added under his breath, "as long as I have him."

That little afterthought made the breath stop in lantine's throat. Was M'Leng so sure that P'tero would die?

"I'll do my best, M'leng, you may be sure of that!"

"Oh, I am," said M'leng, tossing his head up so that the curls fell back from his face. He gave lantine a wry smile. "I've been watching how you work, you see." He extended a hand soft with the oils riders used to tend their dragons. lantine took it and was astonished at the strength in the green rider's grip.

"Waine said a good miniature - which is what I want," and he patted his breast pocket to show the intended site of the painting, "by an artist is priced at four marks. Is that correct?" lantine nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat.

Surely M'leng was dramatizing matters? Or was he? In the background, lantine could hear T'dam advising his listeners on the types and severity of injuries and the immediate aid to be given to each variety.

kindnesses to him - he could leave behind a graphic gallery of everyone currently living in Telgar Weyr!

Fort Hold

Classes were also being held that same day in Fort Hold. in the College assembly room, Corey, as Head Medic, was conducting a seminar for healers from all over Pern who had been flown in for a three-day clinic. This included a first-aid session dealing with both human and dragon injuries. She was assisted by the Fort Weyr medic, N'ran, who had originally studied animal medicine before he had inadvertently Impressed brown Galath. Galath, on this occasion, was outside, enjoying the sun, while a green dragon, who was small enough to fit in the Hall, was being used for demonstration purposes much as Ormonth was at Telgar Weyr.

"Now we have been able to duplicate the records of Doctors Tomlinson, Marchane and Lao which include some fading photos of actual injuries. Lunch is fortunately sufficiently in the future," she said with a quirky smile. Then her expression turned sober. "The verbal descriptions are worse, but it's necessary to impress on all those who have to deal with a man began and his ground injuries how incredibly fast," she ticked off one finger, how horrendous Thread is," another and then with a sigh, "and how quickly we must act to..." her pause was longer now, "...to limit suffering."

the speed with which Thread consumes organic material. Too swiftly to call a dragon, even if any were available, in your locale. A whole cow goes in less than two minutes."

"Why, that's not even time to..." voice trailed off.

"Precisely," Corey agreed. "If a limb is scored, there's the chance it could be amputated before the organism spreads over the body."

"Shards! You can't just..." another man began.

"If survival means loss of just a limb, it can be done."

"But only if you're right there." Corey recognized him as a practitioner in a large hold in Nerat.

"And many of us will be right there," Corey said firmly, "with the ground crews, sharing their dangers and hopefully saving as many as we can."

She managed a wry smile. "Any body of water handy is useful since Thread drowns. Quickly, according to reports. Depending on the site of the injury, water can impede the ingestion long enough for an amputation to be performed. Even a trough is sufficient." She glanced down at her notes. "Thread needs oxygen as well as organic material. It drowns in three seconds."

"What if it's burrowed into flesh?"

final vestige of Thread. There will be significant trauma so fellis recommended if the patient is still conscious.

She glanced down at her notes. "Tomlinson and Marchane also indicate that the mortality rate, due to heart failure or stroke, is high in Thread injuries. Lao, who practised until the end of the First Pass, notes that often patients who had received slight scores, successfully treated, died from the pathological trauma of being scored. In preparing our groups for this problem, do stress that Threadscore can be successfully treated."

"If we can move fast enough," a man said facetiously.

"That's why it's important for a medic to accompany as many ground-crew teams as possible. And why first-aid procedures must be taught to every Hold and Hall within your practice. There are only so many of us, but we can teach many what to do and cut down on fatalities.

"And," Corey went on, "we must emphasize that all nonessential personnel is to STAY safely indoors until ground crews report the area safe.

"Now, we will go on to dragon injuries since these, too, will occur and those of us on the spot may need to assist the dragon and rider. They will have the one advantage we can't provide - the chance to go between and freeze the attacking organism.

"But the score will be just as painful.

senior medics.

"Corey, what is your position on... mercy?" asked Joanson in a very thoughtful tone.

She regarded the tall man for a long moment. "What it has always been, Joanson. We have, as you realize, quite a few persons in this audience who have not received full medical training. I cannot ask them to do what I would find very, very difficult to do: administer mercy." She gave Joanson a long stare, then glanced at Frenkal who seemed to enjoy the ethical spot she was in.

"We are sworn to preserve life. We are also sworn to maintain a decent quality of life for those under our care." She felt her lips twitch, remembering that there were occasions when those two aims were in conflict. "We must, each of us, reflect on how we will face such a desperate situation: whether to cut short a final agony is necessary, even ethical. I don't think there will be much time to consider morals, ethics, kind or cruel, at the time we are forced to take action."

She paused, took a deep breath. "I do remember seeing the tapes the Infirmary used to have, showing very graphically an animal being eaten alive by Thread..." She noticed Joanson's wince.

"Yes, eaten alive because Thread caught the hind end of it. I think, if it was someone you knew, you'd opt for the quickest possible end to that."

"Best edge we've ever been able to make on a surgical tool, Corey," he told her with some pride. Had them tested at the abattoir. Cut through flesh and bone like going through cheese. Gotta keep'em honed, though. And I've made eases for the blades so no-one slices off a finger by mistake."

Surgeons were not the only ones with a ghoulish sense of humour, Corey decided.

Meanwhile, in the Great Hall of Fort Hold, with Lord Paulin seated in the front row, Kalvi himself was demonstrating to those who would form the Fort ground crews how to use and service the HNO₃ cylinders, taking his audience from assembly of the parts and then a quick rundown of common problems likely to be encountered in the field. Every small holder within Fort's authority was present; many had brought their elder children. All had come on foot, their own or on horseback. Fort Weyr, like the other five, was beginning to restrict dragon rides.

Lord Paulin understood and approved.

"We've had it far too easy, using the dragons the way our ancestors would have used the sleds and airborne vehicles," he was heard to say when one of his holders complained that he had been denied his right to a dragon ride. "We haven't been breeding horses just to run races, you know. And the dragon riders have been far too accommodating."

"We still have two sleds in the north, but no power to run em."

"Never did find out what they used," he said. "No way of duplicating such power packs either, or I'm sure our ancestors would have. Otherwise why did they engineer the dragons?"

"Anyway, renewable resources make more sense than erudite or exotic imports."

When the main lecture was concluded, everyone was told to reassemble after the noon meal for target practice. This was vastly more interesting than having to listen to Kalvi waffle on about how to adjust the wands of the HNO₃ throwers to give a long, narrow tongue of fire or a broader, shorter flame. Or how to clear the nozzle of clogged matter.

"You've got almost as much variation in flame as a dragon has..." Kalvi said as he slung the tanks to his back, his voice slightly muffled by his safety gear. "You, there, the hard hat has a purpose. Put it on your head! Lower the face screen!" The offender immediately complied, Kalvi scowling at him.

"The effective range of this equipment is six metres on the narrowest setting, two on the broader. You wouldn't want it to get closer to you..." He was fiddling with his wand. "Damn thing's stubborn."

He took out a screwdriver and made a slight adjustment.

his Master.

"Now, signal the topside crews, will you, Paulin?" said Kalvi, setting himself firmly on both feet and aiming the wand up.

Paulin waved a red kerchief and suddenly a tangle of 'something' catapulted off the cliff, startling everyone in the crowd behind Kalvi.

Those with wands raised them defensively and others gasped as the tangle separated into long silver strands - some fine, some thick and falling at slightly different rates. As soon as they were within range, Kalvi activated his flame-thrower.

There was a brief second when the fire seemed to pause on the ends of the launched strands before the flame raced along the material and consumed it so that only bits of smoking char reached the ground and the rock that had been tied to the leading edge. There was a roar of approval and great applause.

"Not bad," Paulin said, grinning as he noted the new alertness in the crowd.

"Well, we tried for the effect we just delivered," said Kalvi, turning off both tanks. "Used a retardant on the rope, too. Had plenty of description of how Thread falls, and this is as near as we can get.

"Now," and he turned back to his students, "it's best to get Thread before it gets to you or to the ground. We know there are two kinds: first the

then it can propagate, or divide or whatever it is Thread does. This is what ground crews were needed for. This is the type we don't want hanging around and burrowing out of sight. Our ancestors thought Thread had to have some trace minerals or elements in the dirt but, as they never figured out what, we're not likely to now." Kalvi heaved a sigh of regret.

"So," and with a wide sweep of his arm, "we incinerate all the buggers the dragon riders miss!" He paused and looked up the cliff-side where the catapult crews were waiting.

"OK UP THERE?" he yelled, hands bracketing his mouth.

Immediately in response, red flags were waved at intervals along the cliff.

"All right, in groups of five, range yourself parallel to the red flags you now see. When we're all in place - and out of range of anyone's wand," and Kalvi gave a wry grin, "I'll give the signal and we'll see how you manage."

The results were somewhat erratic: some men seemed to get the hang of their equipment immediately, while others couldn't even get the right mix on the gases to produce flame.

"Well, it happens," Kalvi said in patient resignation. Should make'em climb the thread back up the cliff he added.

"Do'em good."

nearest him as they walked back to the Hold.

The practice area had been some distance up the North Road from Fort Hold, where there were neither beasts nor cot holds that could be affected.

"HNO₃ isn't all that hard to manufacture, but the equipment is. Don't wear it out before it's needed."

During their practice, the main Hall had been rearranged for the evening meal and the trainees were as hungry as gatherers.

"Tomorrow we'll clean the gear," Kalvi announced while klah was being served, "and you'll strip down and reassemble the units so I'm sure you know what you're doing. The man who does it fastest and best will get Lord Paulin's reward." A loud cheer resounded through the Hall.

"Morale's good," Paulin said to Kalvi who nodded, well satisfied with the way this first instruction session had gone.

If all of those meetings planned for the Head Engineer at the other major holds went as smoothly, Kalvi thought he might even get a chance for a few days off to fish in Istan waters. In the frantic search during the run-up to the Second Pass for materials long left in storage, some reels of stout nylon fishing line had been found. The bar-coding on the carton had been damaged so there was no way of knowing how long ago the line had been manufactured, but Kalvi was eager to put it to the test with some of the big ones that swam in the tropical waters. This sort of synthetic material was

during Threadfall.

Clisser had been inundated with complaints that the Weyrs were restricting rides which had been the accustomed mode of transport. Not all the teachers were familiar with, nor competent to ride, the sturdy horses that had been bred for long-distance and mountain travel. He was going to have to reassign a lot of his older teachers, yet another headache.

But for this three-day period at least, the emphasis would be on the music and the new curriculum. Not that he hadn't had contentious reactions to that. He was beginning to think that Bethany had had the right of it when she suggested that they, like the first Settlers, had relied too heavily on easy access to information. Oddly enough, some of the older teachers loudly approved the new curriculum.

"High time we brought things up to date, with relevance to the life we're leading here, not what folks had there," Layrence of Tillek said, "stuff we'll never have, so what's the point of quizzing them on it?"

"But we have traditions we must uphold," Sallisha said, her brow creased in a frown. Which made Clisser realize once again that her reputation for being a 'right wagon' was not without merit. Traditions which they must understand to appreciate what we have."

"If they wish to know more, they can read it" Sheledon said, "for advanced study. Right now, they have to cope with the problem of Threadfall."

"And that's far more important than which planets outlasted the Nathi bombardments and who was World Leader in 2089," said Shulse. "Or how to plot a parabolic course around a primary."

Sallisha glared implacably at the maths teacher.

"Of course," Shulse went on, "I do approve of mentioning such history where it pertains to Emily Boll as Governor, or Paul Benden as Admiral of the Fleet, because they are part and parcel of Pernese history."

"But you have to show students the overall picture - - -." Sallisha was persistence itself.

"And some students will be vitally interested, I'm sure," Shulse said, "but I agree with Clisser that we have to streamline the material to be studied to the point where it has relevance to this world and our civilization."

"Civilization?" Sallisha said at her most scornful.

"What? You don't call what we've made here 'civilized'?" Sheledon loved to tease the literal-minded Sallisha.

"Not in terms of what our ancestors had."

"And all that went with a high-tech society - like prepubescent addicts, city gangs, wild plagues, so much tech fraud that people were stuffing credits in their mattresses to protect their income, the..."

"That is not a problem on Pern," Sallisha said loftily.

"And we'll keep it that way," said Clisser firmly, " by adjusting what interests our classes and dispensing with irrelevancies."

Sallisha whirled on Clisser. "What you decide is relevant?"

Clisser pointed to the files along one wall of the library in which they were talking. "I sent out questionnaires to every teacher on the rolls, and to holders, major and minor, asking for input. I got it, and this curriculum," he lifted the thick volume, "is the result. You've all received copies.

"And the Teaching Ballads will be part of the package you receive during the conference."

Sallisha retired with poor grace, sulking as obviously as any intractable student would. He wondered if she saw the resemblance in attitude. However, Sallisha was a very good teacher, able to impart knowledge at the level needed, and was therefore supervisor of Southeastern Pern. But she had her little quirks - like everyone else in the world.

Making the children memorize the Teaching Ballads would improve their retention of words: a skill that Clisser realized he had lost with his dependence on technology. But then, one of the reasons the Colonists had come to Pern with its limited resources was to revert to a society that was not so dependent on technology. He read accounts of persons who never left their

Clisser sucked in his breath in a sort of reverse whistle. Everyone on the planet - with one notable exception - was girding their loins and securing their premises against that attack.

Preparing was one thing, but enduring fifty years of an aerial attack was another. Briefly he reviewed the accounts published by the besieged colonists on Sirius III and Vega IV when the Nathi started bombarding the planets. Day after day, according to the history tapes, the worlds had been shelled with dirty missiles, rendering the surface uninhabitable. Whole generations had grown up on colonial planets, living in deep shelters.

Clisser smiled to himself - not much different from the cave holds in which the Pernese now lived. And indeed those accommodations had benefited by the Sirian and Vegan experiences - using the magma core taps to provide heat and solar panels for power. Humans had survived under far worse conditions than pertained on this planet. At least on Pern, you knew when and where Thread would fall and could mount effective defences. And yet, the scale of Threadfall was awesome and failure had appalling consequences. Failure usually did.

Therefore, Clisser hoped that the music which had been composed as psychologically uplifting would have the desired effect: developing the morale and encouraging the effort.

tions of those readily available, so that even inexperienced players in the most isolated Hold or Hall would be able to accompany singers.

Jemmy's riddling song was a delight and Clisser hadn't quite got all the answers yet, but it would prove useful during the hours of a Fall to distract folk about what was happening outside. Bethany's lament - the first song she had ever composed - was next on the programme and he settled back to listen to it.

But his mind, working overtime in anxiety over the success of his new programme, refused to be caught up in the music.

Among other things, WHAT was he going to do about Bitra Hold? The last teacher he'd sent there had left, voiding his contract with Chalkin - not that Clisser blamed Issony when he'd heard the way the man had been humiliated and threatened by unruly holder children - but children had to receive rudimentary education. You couldn't afford to let one whole province lapse into illiteracy.

To be sure, children learn at different rates; he knew that, and learning should be made as interesting as possible, to lay the foundations for further study and for life itself, for that matter.

That was the purpose of education: to develop the skills required to solve problems. And to utilize the potential that existed in everyone - even a Bitran, he added sourly.

"That's not all," M'shall was saying, a deep frown on his usually amiable face, "he's put up guards at the borders, and anyone who wants to leave can take only their clothes with them. Nothing else, not even the animals which they may have raised themselves."

Clisser had not realized that the Benden Weyrleader had arrived, but his presence was certainly fortuitous.

"You're speaking of Chalkin?" he asked when the others acknowledged his presence and made room for him in their circle.

M'shall gave a scornful laugh. "Who else would turn folks out of their holds right now?"

"I've just heard from one of my travelling teachers, Issony, and he's quit and nothing would persuade him to go back to Bitra. But even they have to grow up literate."

"Ha!" M'shall's scoffing was echoed by the others.

"School hours keep Bitrans from other jobs which earn their Holder more marks. What did he do to Issony?"

"He'll give you chapter and verse if you ask him. In fact, it would do him good. I understand one of your riders rescued him."

"We do a lot of rescue work in Bitra," M'shall said, not at all pleased by the necessity.

"But only non-Bitrans," he added.

"Chalkin has always been contrary by nature," Clisser said.

"But never such an outright fool."

"Well, he's exceeded even 'damned fool'," Bridgely said. "Is your teacher, Issony, here now?"

"Well, then, bring him up to Fort. We're about to do something definitive about Chalkin."

"Right now?" Clisser couldn't help looking over at the roasting carcasses and sniffing at the succulent odours they were producing.

"I expect to eat, too," said Bridgely, relenting.

"I just finished eating at Benden," M'shall said, but his nose was twitching at the aromas. "Ah, well, we could have a slice to allow you to enjoy your meal."

"Timed it just right, didn't you?" Farley said with a grin for their obvious interest in the roasting meats. "Can something be done about an irresponsible Lord Holder?"

"Read your copy of the Charter, Farley," Clisser advised.

"And how long have border guards - -" and Paulin paused, made indignant by such a measure "been in place?"

He'd assembled those concerned in his office at the Hold when they'd finished eating.

Issony was on call if his testimony was required.

seem to have a mark to spend even when they do bring work to sell at a Benden Gather. Not that they're encouraged to travel at all."

"Even to Gathers?" Paulin answered his own query. "No, he wouldn't encourage them, would he?"

"Not if he's afraid they'll compare conditions in another Hold. Also, he doesn't like Bitran marks to go past his borders. And gets every one those high rollers have when they attend those friendly little games he runs," M'shall said.

"I must confess I hadn't known how restrictive he is." Paulin spoke in a very thoughtful tone of voice.

"Well, how would you?" Bridgely replied, absolving him. "You're west coast. We know because we see so few Bitrans at east coast gathers. Oh, his gamesters attend every one."

"Hmm, yes, they're ubiquitous, you might say," Paulin murmured under his breath. "So, if he's had to close the it would appear that some holders panicked when they learned Threadfall is indeed expected?"

"Indeed," Bridgely agreed with a grim expression, "and when delegation got the nerve to approach him, he had them beaten out of the Hold. I saw the lash marks so I know they aren't lying. They said they'd never seen him in such a temper.

ers told mine."

"Either way, there'll be no ground crews."

"I think he's gone far enough to warrant impeachment," Paulin said with slow deliberation.

"As a Lord Holder, it's his duty to inform, and prepare his folk, for Threadfall. That's why the Holder system was adopted: to give people a strong leader to supply direction during a Fall and to provide emergency assistance. By closing his borders, he's also abrogated one of the basic tenets of the Charter: freedom of movement. He's turned autonomy into despotism. I'll send all Lord Holders and Professional Heads particulars..."

"Oh," and he glanced at Clisser in dismay, "we can't make quick copies any more, can we?"

"One dragon rider could contact all the other Lord Holders," M'shall suggested. "Or one messenger on this coast and another on ours. That makes only two copies needed."

"I'll request a rider from S'nan," said Paulin, reaching for a pad.

"That'll please S'nan no end," M'shall said. He's not been least bit pleased with Chalkin's defiance. Simply isn't done, you know," and M'shall grinned as he mimicked S'nan's prim tones.

"Well, keep at it..." and then Paulin touched Clisser's shoulder and smiled, "along with everything else you're doing.

"By the way, the teaching songs are very good indeed." Then he put a finger in his ear, drilling it briefly as he grinned more broadly.

"The kids sing'em all the time, not just in class."

"That's what we intended," Clisser said with droll satisfaction. "Shall I wait for your message?"

"No need for that, my friend, but thanks for offering."

"This I will take pleasure in penning." And Fort's Lord Holder grinned. "And I'll remember to keep a copy for the Archives.

"By the way, wasn't there some ancient way of making copies... something that would transfer the writing to the next page under?"

Clisser bowed his head briefly in thought. "Carbon copying, I think you mean. We don't have it, but Lady Salda might have some ideas. We've got to figure a way to make multiple copies or else spend hours copying." He gave a heavy sigh of regret.

"I'll leave it to you then, Clisser," said Paulin. "Thank you all. Now get out here, the lot of you," and he grinned at the Benden leaders and Kalvi, "and enjoy the rest of the evening while I get on with this task. Not that I won't enjoy it in some respects," he added, picking up his pen and examining the tip.

Iantine furiously sketched the various scenes around him: the big dusty carts with their multiple teams of the heavy-duty ox-types which had been bred for such work. They had been one of the last bio-engineering feats from Wind Blossom, whose grandmother had done such notable work creating the dragons of Pern.

Iantine had seen traders come and go on their routes since childhood, and fondly remembered the stellar occasions when the Benden trading group had arrived at their rather remote sheep hold. More specifically, he recalled the taste of the boiled sweets, flavoured by the fruits which grew so abundantly in Nerat, which the traders passed out by the handful. Once, there'd been fresh citrus, a treat of unsurpassed delight to himself and his siblings.

For a remote holding, having travellers drop by was almost as good as a Gather. To Iantine's surprise, weyrfolk were equally delighted. Despite the fact that they could usually find a dragon to convey them wherever they wanted to go, the arrival of the traders was even better than tithe trains.

(The tithe wagons were a different matter, since everyone had to pitch in to store the produce given to the support of the Weyr.) And traders brought the news of all the Holds and Halls along the way.

There were as many clusters of folks just talking, Iantine noticed, as examining goods in the stalls the Liliencamps set up. Tables and chairs were

Course, they can use what caves there are, but no more camping out in the open."

"That's going to cramp their style," and he grinned broadly.

"But if ya gotta, ya gotta. See," and one jam-stained finger pointed to a group of men and women seated with the two Weyrleaders.

"They were all hunched over maps spread out on the table. They're checking the sites over so's everyone here'll know where they might be if they're caught out in a Fall."

"Who trades through Bitra?" lantine asked with considerable irony.

Leopol snorted. "No-one in their right mind! Specially now."

"Didja hear that Chalkin's closed his borders to keep his own people in? Didja know that Chalkin doesn't believe Thread's coming?" The boy's eyes widened in horrified dismay at such irreverence.

"And he never told his holders it is?"

"Actually I got that distinct impression while I was there," lantine said, "more from what wasn't said and done than what was. I mean, even Hall Domaize was stocking food and supplies against Threadfall. They'd talk enough about odds and wagers at Bitra, but not a word about Thread."

"Did they sucker you into any gaming?" Leopol's avid expression suggested he yearned for a positive answer.

lantine shook his head and grinned at his eager listener.

"Shelters are going to have to be huge," he added, gesturing towards the solid beasts who were being led to the lake to drink.

Either they were accustomed to dragonets from coming to Telgar Weyr, or they were so phlegmatic they didn't care.

However, the weyrlings had never seen them before in their short lives, so they reacted with alarm at the massive cart beasts, squealing with such fright that dragons, sleeping in the pale wintry sun on their weyr ledges, woke up to see what the fuss was about. Iantine grinned.

He did a rapid sketch of that in a corner of the page. At the rate he was going, he'd use up even this generous supply of paper.

"Well, they've had to use a lot of sheet roofing, I know," Leopol said. "The Weyr contributes, too, ya know, since the Liliencamps have to detour to get up to us."

Iantine had never given any thought to the support system required to serve a Weyr and its dragons. He had always assumed that dragons and riders took care of themselves from tithings, but he was acquiring a great respect for the organization and management of such a facility.

In a direct contrast with what he had seen at Bitra, everybody in the Weyr worked cheerfully at any task set them and took great pride in being part of it. Everyone helped everyone else; everyone seemed happy.

his right hand now rapidly completed the sketch of the Weyrleaders in earnest collaboration with the Liliencamp trail bosses.

That Bloodline had been the first of the peripatetic traders, bringing goods and delivering less urgent messages on their way from one isolated hold to another. A Liliencamp had been one of the more prominent First Settlers. Lantine thought he'd been portrayed in the great Mural in Fort Hold, with the other Charterers: a smallish man with black hair, depicted with sharp eyes and a pad of some sort depending from his belt, and Lantine had of course noted them several writing implements stuffed in his chest pocket, and one behind his ear. It had seemed such a logical place to store a pencil that Lantine had taken to the habit himself.

He peered more closely at the trail bosses. Yes, one of them had what looked like a pencil perched behind one ear - and he also had an empty pouch at his belt: one that probably accommodated the pad on the table before him.

But, even with such wayside precautions, would such traders be able to continue throughout the fifty dangerous years of a Pass? It was one thing to plan and quite another, as Lantine had only just discovered, to put plans into operation. Still, considerable hardship would result in transporting items from Hall to Hold to Weyr during Threadfall, especially since dragons

As quickly as he neatly could, he filled his last empty page with a montage: the train entering the Weyr Bowl, people rushing out to meet it, the goods being exhibited, deals being made, with the central portion the scene of the trail bosses discussing shelters with the Weyrleaders. He held the pad at arm's length and regarded it critically.

"That's marvellous," a voice said behind him, and he twisted about in surprise.

"Why, you did it in a flash!" The green rider, her dragonet lounging beside her, smiled self-consciously, her green eyes shining with something akin to awe. Leopold had pointed this new rider out to him the other day and related the circumstances of her precipitous arrival at the Hatching.

"Debera?" he asked, remembering the name. She gasped, slightly recoiling from him in her startlement. Her dragon came immediately alert, eyes twirling faster with alarm. "Oh, say, I didn't mean to."

"Easy, Morath, he means me no harm," she said to the dragon and then smiled reassuringly up at him. "I was just surprised you'd know my name."

"Leopold," and Lantine pointed his pencil to where the boy stood in earnest bargaining with a trader lad about the same age, "used to tell me everything that happened in the Weyr while I was recovering."

"Oh, yes," and the girl seemed to relax and even managed a wider smile, "I know him. He's into everything. But kindhearted," she added hast-

"Let's see if the subject likes it." He was amazed to hear the edge in his voice. She glanced warily up at him.

"If that's what you can do quickly," she said reassuringly. "I'd like to see what you do when you take your time."

He couldn't resist and flipped over pages to where he had made a sketch of her oiling Morath.

"Oh, and I didn't see you doing this." She reached out to touch it, but he was flipping to the page where he had sketched her and Morath listening to T'dam at the lecture.

She'd had one arm draped over her dragon's neck and he thought he had captured the subtle bond that had prompted the embrace.

"Oh, that's marvellous," and lantine was amazed to see tears in her eyes. In a spontaneous gesture, she clung to his arm, feasting her eyes on the drawing and preventing him from turning the page over.

"Oh, how I'd..."

"You like it?"

"Oh, I do," and she snatched her hands away from his arm and clasped them behind her back, blushing deeply. "I do." and bit her lip, swaying nervously.

"What's the matter?"

nervously and with some other fear lurking in the shadows of her lovely green eyes.

"You should have it, you know, to remind you of Morath at this age." One hand crept from behind her back and reached for the sheet.

"You're very good, lantine," she murmured and held the sketch by fingertips as if she was afraid she'd soil it. "But I've nothing to pay."

"Yes, you have," he said quickly with sudden inspiration and gestured towards the traders still in their group about the table.

You can be a satisfied customer and help me wheedle another pad out of the traders in return for this drawing of them.

"Oh, but..." She had shot a quick, frightened glance at the traders and then, in as rapid a change of mood, gave herself a shake, her free hand going to her dragon's head as if seeking reassurance. The dragonet turned adoring eyes to her and Debera's eyes briefly unfocused, the way lantine had noticed in riders who paused to talk to their dragons. She let out a breath and faced him resolutely.

"I would be glad to say a good word for you with Master Jol. He's by way of being a cousin of my mother's."

"Is he now?" lantine said with fervour. "Then let us see if kinship is useful in trading."

"Master Jol?" Debera said, her voice cracking slightly and not reaching very far. "Master Jol," she repeated, projecting a firmer tone. Iantine wondered if she was afraid the trader wouldn't recognize her at all.

"Is that Debera?" the trader said, peering at her as if he didn't believe his eyes. Then a broad smile of recollection covered his face and he strode rapidly across the distance between them, hands extended.

Debera seemed to shy from such a warm welcome.

"My dear, I'd heard that you'd impressed a dragon." Iantine put a reassuring hand at her waist and gave her an imperceptible forward push.

"Yes, this is Morath," and suddenly her manner became sure and proud. Dragon and rider exchanged one of those melting looks that Iantine found incredibly touching.

"Well, well, my greetings to you, young Morath," he said, bowing formally to the dragonet, whose eyes began to whirl faster.

Debera gave her a reassuring little pat. "Master Jol is my mother's cousin," she explained to Morath.

"Which makes me yours as well, my lass," Jol reminded her.

"And very proud to have dragon rider kin. Ah, you're so like your mother. Did you know that?" Iantine watched as Debera's expression turned sad.

"Ah, now, I didn't mean to grieve you, child," Jol said with instant dismay. "And how happy she would be to see you." he paused and cleared his

you'll have come with little if I know your father." Such plain speaking momentarily made Debera uneasy, but her dragonet crowded reassuringly against her.

"The Weyr has furnished me with everything I need, Master Jol." she replied with quiet dignity.

"Master? Am I not cousin to you, young woman?" Jol asked with mock severity.

Now her smile returned. "Cousin, but I thank you, though I do have a favour to ask..

"And what might that be?"

Debera flipped open her sketch and showed it to the trader. "lantine here did this of me. and he has one of you..." On cue, lantine offered his sketch pad, open to the montage.

"Only lantine's used up his pad and, like me, hasn't a sliver to spend."

Master Jol reached for the pad, his manner altering instantly to a trader's critical appraisal. But he had only cast an eye over the sketch when he paused, peering more closely at the artist.

"lantine, you said?" And when both Debera and lantine nodded, his smile quirked the line of his generous mouth.

cocked behind his ear.

"You've got me to the life, pencil and all, and he touched the tool to be sure it was in place. May I?" he asked courteously, indicating a desire to look at the other pages.

"Certainly," said Iantine, making a polite bow. He could have kicked himself when he swayed a bit on his feet.

"Here now, lad, I know you're not long recovered from your ordeal," Jol said, quickly supporting him. Let's just take a seat so I can have a good look at everything this pad seems to have on offer."

Ignoring Iantine's protests, Jol led him to the table he had just left and pushed him onto a stool. Debera and Morath followed, Debera looking very pleased with this consideration.

And Jol went through the pad as thoroughly as Master Domaize would have done, making comments about those Weyr folk he knew, smiling and nodding a good deal. He also knew when Iantine had left a pose unfinished.

"Now, what is it you require, Artist Iantine?"

"More paper, mainly," Iantine said in a tentative tone.

Jol nodded. "I believe I do have a pad of this quality paper, but smaller. I bring some in for Waine from time to time. I can, of course, get larger sheets."

said Leopol, who had eased himself unnoticed close enough to hear what was being said.

"So you've many commissions already, have you?" Master Jol asked approvingly, pencil poised over the fresh leaf of his pad.

"Well, no, not exactly, you see," lantine stammered.

"You've three I know of," said Leopol. "P'tero for M'leng And the Weyrleaders."

lantine almost bit Leopol's nose off. "The Weyrleaders're different. I will do them in oils, but the sketches are to thank those in the Weyr who've been so kind to me."

"Doing portraits of an entire Weyr is quite an undertaking, and Master Jol scribbled a line. "You'll need a good deal of paper and plenty of pencils. Or would you prefer ink? I stock a very good quality. Guaranteed not to fade or blot." He looked at lantine expectantly.

"But I've only this sketch to trade with you," lantine said.

"Lad, you've credit with Jol Liliencamp Traders," Jol told him gently, touching his pencil to lantine's shoulder and giving it a little push. "I'm not Chalkin, mind you. Not any way, shape or form." And he gave a burst of such infectious laughter that lantine grinned in spite of himself.

"I've no water colours with me." he began, wishing to indicate his willingness to finish the montage.

"Ah, but I just happen to have some, which is why I suggested them," said Jol, beaming again. "Really, this meeting is most serendipitous," he added, and his smile included Debera. "And this," he touched the montage again in a very proprietary fashion, coloured up a bit and with glass to protect it, "will look very good indeed in my wagon office. Indeed it will. Advertising, I believe the ancestors called it."

"Ah, Master Jol?" called someone from one of the trade wagons. "A moment of your time."

"I'll be back, lad, just you stay there. You, too, Debera. I've not finished with the pair of you yet, so I haven't." As lantine and Debera exchanged stunned looks, he trotted off to see what was required of him, tucking the pencil behind his ear again and folding up his pad as he went.

"I don't believe him," lantine said, shaking his head, feeling weak and breathless.

"Are you all right?" Debera asked, leaning across the table to him.

"Gob-smacked," lantine told her, remembering a favourite expression of his father's. "Completely gob-smacked!"

Debera grinned knowingly. "I think I am, too. I never expected."

"Neither did I!"

thank you very much for introducing me to your cousin."

"Once he saw that sketch, you really didn't need me," she remarked, almost shyly.

"I believe you ordered these," said a baritone voice. Rider and artist looked up in astonishment as a trader deposited an armful of items on the table: two pads, one larger than the other, a neat square box which held a full glass bottle of ink, a sheaf of pens and a parcel of pencils. "Special delivery." With a grin, he pivoted and went back the way he had come.

"Master Jol does pride himself on his quick service," Leopold said with a wide grin.

"There now! You're all set," said Debera.

"I am indeed," and the words came out of Lantine like a prayer.

Fort Hold and Bitran Borders - Early Winter VI

Lord Paulin's message to the other Lords Holder and Weyrleaders received a mixed reception: not everyone was in favour of impeachment, despite the evidence presented.

Paulin was both annoyed and frustrated, having hoped for a unanimous decision so that Chalkin could be removed before his Hold was totally demoralized.

Jamson and Azury felt that the matter could wait until the Turn's End Council meeting: Jamson was known to be conservative, but Paulin was

shelters on the main roads and for ground crews. Not to mention training holders how to combat Thread burrows.

There was the added disadvantage that Chalkin's folk seemed generally dispirited anyhow - though that should not be used as an excuse for denying them news of the impending problem.

And who would succeed to the Hold? A consideration that was certainly fraught with problems.

In his response, Bastom had made a good suggestion: the appointment of a deputy or regent right away until one of Chalkin's sons came of age - sons who would be specifically, and firmly, trained to Hold properly. Not that the new Holder had to be of the Bloodline, but following the precepts of inheritance outlined in the Charter would pacify the nervous Lords. To Paulin's way of thinking, competence should always be the prime decider in succession, and that was not always passed on in the genes of Bloodlines.

For that matter, Paulin's eldest nephew had shown a sure grasp of hold management. Sidney was a hard worker, a fair man, and a good judge of character and ability. Paulin was half tempted to recommend him for Fort's leadership when he was gone. He had a few reservations about his son, Matthew, but Paulin knew that he tended to be more critical of his own Blood than others were.

himself that they could still get Bitra Hold right and tight in time for Threadfall.

But the sooner it was done, the better. He hoped M'shall could get back to him about locating the Bitran uncle, and whether he was competent to take Hold. Otherwise a Search must be made of legitimate heirs to - -

"Fraggital!," Paulin muttered, pushing back from his desk and sighing deeply in frustration. One could no longer do a quick search on the Bloodline Program for a comprehensive genealogy. Surely that was one program Clisser had printed out, and copied. "Well, we'll need a copy of whatever form that program's in," he told himself, sighing again. To cheer himself up, he reviewed the progress report from the new mine.

They wanted permission to call the hold CROM, an acronym of the founders: Chester, Ricard, Otty and Minerva.

Paulin didn't see a problem with that but, as a matter of form especially right now - the request should first be presented to the Council. During the Interval so many procedures had been relaxed and the leniency was now coming back to plague them, as in the case of Chalkin becoming Lord Holder. At least Paulin was consoled by the knowledge that it was his father, the late Lord Emilin, who had voted Fort on that score.

That evidence of bad judgment wasn't Paulin's error even if it was now up to him to rectify the situation.

M'shall's face looked pinched with the cold of between and more.

"I got it. And that's not the end of it. There's rough weather in Bitra and people freezing to death because they will not leave the border," M'shall announced.

"Will not? Or cannot?"

"More cannot than will not. Though Chalkin sent down orders that none of the 'ungrateful dissenters' could expect to reclaim their holdings - - - punishment for defying him. Way irrespective of the fact that he's putting their lives at risk by his notion of Holding.

"How many are involved?" Paulin's sense of alarm increased.

M'shall ruffled thick greying hair that had been pressed down by his helmet. "L'sur says there must be well over a hundred at the main border crossing into Benden with women, children and elderlies.

"There are as many or more at other border points and no shelter at any, bar what the guards are using. The refugees have all been herded into a makeshift pen. What's more atrocious, L'sur saw several bodies hung up by the feet which seemed to have been used as target practice. Benden Weyr cannot ignore such barbarity, Paulin."

"No, it can't, nor can Fort Hold!" Paulin was on his feet and pacing. If that's what he calls Hold management, he has to be removed."

security, which obviously they don't expect to find in Bitra." He hitched himself forward in the chair. "Thing is, Paulin, if we hand out supplies, what's to keep the border guards from just collecting them the moment we take off? So, I think I'll have to leave a couple of riders as protection.. which'll give Chalkin a chance to cry 'Weyr Interference!'."

Paulin felt nauseous. That sort of thing was straight out of the ancient bloody history the settlers had deliberately left behind: evolving a code of ethics and conduct that would make such events improbable! This planet was settled with the idea that there was room enough for everyone willing to work the land that was his or hers by Charter-given birthright.

"There's no interference if your riders stay on your side of the border. Besides which, Bitra Hold looks to Benden Weyr for protection."

"Thread protection," M'shall corrected.

"In a matter of speaking," and Paulin's smile was grim, "this is partly Thread protection. They're looking for what they should have had from their Lord Holder, and who else should they turn to but the Weyr? No," and he brought one fist down sharply on the desk. "You're within your rights - - if you've riders willing to volunteer for such duty."

"L'sur's stayed on, or so his dragon told Craigath."

"But no firestone," and Paulin held up a stern finger, "much as some might like to show force."

M'shall didn't wait for Paulin's invitation but grabbed up the soup and blew on its surface, sipping as soon as he dared.

"That hits the spot and if you've a cauldron of it, I'll take it back with me." He grinned, licking his lips. "It's certainly hot enough to survive a jump between."

"You may have it, cauldron and all."

"L'sur has stayed on, you say? How about riders at other crossing points?" Paulin asked, stirring sweetener into his klah. M'shall nodded.

"Good. Their presence ought to inhibit any further violence."

"But that presence was only a deterrent, not assistance. He would like to do more than send soup but his position at this point, even as Council Chair, might be compromised. At least the Weyr has a right to take action, and so does Bridgely," he added thoughtfully. He thumped his fist again. "But I will go personally to see both Jamson and Azury; especially since Chalkin has used such extreme measures. I'm hard-pressed to see the reason for them."

M'shall shrugged. "Fort holders have every reason to trust you, Paulin. Bitrans never have had any with Chalkin holding."

"What I'd like to do is haul the indecisive like Jamson and Azury - and show them what's happening at Bitra. They probably think we've exaggerated the situation."

"I just heard about the border trouble, M'shall. Zulaya had Meranath bespeak Maruth, so Charanth and I thought to catch you here," the young Weyrleader said, his expression as grim as Benden's.

"So he's blocked the western borders as well?" K'vin nodded.

"Telgar has no grounds to object to his closing his borders, but he's deliberately killing people, turfing them out in this weather. I can't, and won't permit people to be treated like that." He fixed an expectant stare on Paulin.

"M'shall and I have been discussing the intolerable situation. I've already polled the Lord Holders with a view to taking immediate action. The response was not unanimous so even as Council Chair, there is little I can do - officially, that is. But, as M'shall pointed out, the Weyr has certain responsibilities to protect people. By stretching a point, you could say they're Thread-lost," and Paulin's smile was wry, "escaping a Hold which is unprepared. So the Weyrs can move where the Council Chair may not."

"That's all I need to know!" K'vin slapped his riding gloves against his thigh to emphasize his approval.

"Of course," and Paulin held up one hand in restraint, "you must be careful not to give Chalkin due cause to cite an infringement against Hold autonomy."

the government of a Hold."

"You may not, Paulin," K'vin said. "But M'shall and I do. There's truth in what you said about Weyrs protecting people from peril.

"From Threadfall." Paulin reminded the younger Weyrleader.

"From peril," K'vin repeated firmly. "Freezing to death without shelter from inclement weather constitutes peril as surely as Threadfall does."

Paulin nodded approvingly. "I may even forget that you visited here this morning." He grinned. "M'shall, you don't happen to know where Chalkin's remaining uncle lives?"

"I already thought of that and he's not there," replied M'shall. "Place was empty. Too empty. I know Vergerin was alive and well last autumn."

"How do you mean 'too empty'?" Paulin asked, jotting down the uncle's name.

"It had been cleaned out too thoroughly. Not," and M'shall held up one hand to forestall Paulin's query, "as if it had been set to rights after a man's death, but as if to prove no-one had been there at all.

"But Vergerin had cleared vegetation back from his front court, as every smart holder should."

"Someone had thrown debris all around to disguise the clearance."

"Has Chalkin anticipated us?" Paulin asked in a rhetorical question.

Then he looked from one dragon rider to the other.

"As if we would..." K'vin remarked to M'shall as they strode out of Fort Hold.

"I'd like to," said M'shall, in a taut voice, "that's the problem. But then, I've known Chalkin longer than you."

Craigath and Charanth were already on the court, awaiting their riders.

"You'll take the western and northern crossings, K'vin?" M'shall asked as they separated to reach their bronzes.

"Have you been checking on numbers for transport?"

"Yes, and had sweep riders checking in ever since Chalkin closed the borders. Zulaya will warn Tashvi and Salda that we're proceeding. We'll take all to the Weyr first. The entire Weyr is organized to help."

"You're a good man, K'vin," and M'shall grinned at his colleague.

"So let's do it!" The Benden Weyrleader launched himself up his dragon's shoulder and swung neatly between the end ridges.

We go to help? Charanth asked K'vin.

"Indeed we do. Tell Meranath to have Zulaya put our plan into operation. I'll meet my wing at the Falls road. And I think we'd better ask lantine to come along."

When K'vin returned to Telgar, the first rescue wave was ready to take off at his signal. He paused long enough to haul lantine behind him on Charanth.

sit down - in the churned mud of an inadequate space. He drew the haggard faces, the chilled bodies bent inward from cold, or those clumped together to share what warmth they had. Some had been stripped of all but what covered private parts, and they had been surrounded by their fellows in an attempt to keep them from freezing.

Some were standing barefoot on the rough rags and boots of their neighbours, feet blue and dangerously white from frostbite. Children wandered weeping with hunger and fatigue, or slumped in unconscious bundles in the mud at the feet of the adults. Three elder lies were stiff in death. Bloodied faces and bruised eyes were more common than the unmarked.

The guards, however, were warm with many layers of clothing, good fires with cooking spits turning to roast the meat of such animals as the refugees had brought with them.

Others were tied or penned up for future use. Such belongings as the refugees had brought with them were now piled at the side of the guard house or in the barrows or carts lined up behind. Lintine faithfully recorded rings and bracelets, even earrings, inappropriately adorning the guards.

They had been alarmed at the arrival of the dragon riders as many as could retreating into the shelter of the stone border facility.

folk, their haunted eyes, the contortions of their abused bodies, their ragged coverings, and the piles of human ordure because the guards had made no provision for that human requirement, and the abandoned belongings and carts.

Now that he had seen real privation, lantine realized how lucky he had been in his brief encounter with the Lord Holder of Bitra.

lantine returned with the last group, letting his hand rest only in between, sketching as they flew, propping his pad against P'tero's back.

"You haven't stopped a moment," P'tero shouted over his shoulder.

"You'll freeze your hand up here, you know." lantine waved it to prove its flexibility and continued to sketch. He was adding details to the men who had been hung by their heels and used in target practice. The men had been cut down - one of the first things the rescuers had done.

lantine had only had time enough to do an outline but the details - despite all the other sketches he had made that day - were vivid in his mind's eye, and he had to get every one down on paper or he would feel he had betrayed them.

When the young blue rider deposited him in front of the Lower Cavern, lantine, still filling in substance, managed to get himself to a table near enough the fire to get the good of the warmth - and increase the fluidity of his drawing. His fingers gradually thawed and his pencil raced faster.

caught by the scene and her free hand went to her mouth, her eyes widening in shock. "Oh, they couldn't have."

"I sketched what I saw," he said, exhaling in a remorse that came from his guts and then inhaling the tantalizing odour emanating from the stew. He looked down at it, thick with vegetables and chunks of meat. They really could do miracles with wherry here. He picked up the spoon and began to eat, only then realizing how empty his stomach was. It almost hurt receiving food, and that nearly made him stop eating altogether. Chalkin's prisoners had been without food for three or four days.

"They're all fed now," Debera murmured.

Iantine gave her a startled glance and she patted his shoulder reassuringly, as she often patted her Morath.

"I felt the same way when I ate earlier on." She sat down across from him. "We'd been going flat out to feed them when Tisha made us all stop to get something to eat, too." She started turning the pages of his book, the look on her face becoming more and more distressed at each new scene of the tragedy.

"How could he?" Iantine reached over and gently pulled the sketch-pad from her, setting it down, closed, between them.

"He gave the orders." Iantine began, "And knew just what would happen when he did, I know."

She glanced around the cavern, which was occupied by only a few riders and folk finishing their evening meal. "They've all been sorted out and you'll be lucky if you have your room to yourself. But I'd better get some sleep, too. That Morath of mine! She wakes positively starved, no matter how much I give her."

lantine smiled at the affection that softened Debera's voice.

He got to his feet, swaying slightly. "You're right. I need sleep."

"Good night, Debera." He watched her, striding purposefully out of the cavern, observing the proud tilt to her head and set of her shoulders. She'd changed a great deal since she Impressed Morath.

He grinned, picked up his pad and slowly made his way to his quarters.

He wasn't sharing with any refugee, but Leopold sprawled on a bed-pad along one wall and didn't even stir as lantine prepared himself for bed.

There were more refugees than originally estimated and while the resources of the two Weyrs were stretched, the Lord Holders immediately sent additional supplies and offered shelter. Some of those rescued were in bad shape from the cold and could not be immediately transferred to the sanctuaries offered by Nerat, Benden and Telgar Holds.

Zulaya had headed a rescue team of the other queens and the green riders. She came back, seething with rage.

criminal activities, of course," Zulaya replied, almost spitting in anger. "And that blizzard's closed in. We moved just in time. If we hadn't, I fear most of these people would be dead by morning. Absolutely nothing allowed them! Not even the comfort of a fire!"

"I know, I know," he said, as bitter about the sadistic behaviour as she was. "We should have treated those guards to a taste of absolute cold. Like a long wait between. Only that would have been a clean death."

"We still can," Zulaya said in a grating tone. K'vin regarded her in astonishment and she glared at him, clenching her fists at her sides. "Oh, I know we can't, but that doesn't keep me from wanting to!"

"Did you take lantine with you? I thought of how useful on-the-spot sketches might be."

"In fact, he asked to come. He's got plenty to show Lord Paulin and the Council," he said. He swallowed, remembering the stark drawings that had filled one pad. lantine's quick hand had captured the reality, made even more compelling by the economy of line, depicting horrific scenes of deliberate cruelty.

The Weyrleaders introduced themselves to the first of the refugees, and started off by interviewing an older couple.

"M'grandsir's grand sir came to Bitra with the then Holder," the man said, his eyes nervously going from one Weyrleader to the other. He kept

the Hold when we wanted her land grant. Said we didn't work what we had good enough so we couldn't have more."

"Really?" said Zulaya, deceptively mild as she shot K'vin a meaningful glance. "Now that's interesting, holder Ferina."

K'vin envied Zulaya's trick of remembering names.

You could've asked me, Charanth said helpfully.

You've been listening?

The people needed dragons' help. I listen. We all do.

When the pity of dragons has also been aroused, surely that's enough justification for what we've just done, thought K'vin, if the Council should turn up stiff. I must remember to tell Zulaya.

"But he says we got it wrong and we ain't had no teacher to ask," the man said. An' that's another thing - we should have a teacher for our kids."

"At least so they can read the Charter and know what rights you all do have," Zulaya said firmly. "I've a copy we can show you right now, so you can refresh your memories."

The two exchanged alarmed glances.

"In fact," Zulaya went on smoothly, "I think we'll have someone read you your rights... since it would be difficult for you to turn pages with bandaged hands, Brookie. And you're not in much better case, Ferina."

"We'll make sure you hear it all, and you can ask any questions you want."

She helped the two to their feet and started them on their way across the Bowl as K'vin whistled for Leopold.

"Go get the Weyr's copy of the Charter, will you, lad?"

"You want me to read it to them, too?" the boy asked, eyes glinting partly in mischief and partly because he enjoyed second-guessing errands.

"Smart pants, are we?" K'vin said. "No, I think we need T'lan for this." He pointed towards the white-haired old brown rider who was serving klah to the refugees. "Just get the Charter now. I'll request T'lan's services."

Leopold moved off at his usual sprint and K'vin went over to speak to the elderly brown rider. He had exactly the right manner to deal with nervous and frightened holders.

Bridgely arrived in Benden Weyr, his face suffused with blood, torn between fury and laughter.

"The nerve of the man, the consummate nerve!" he exclaimed and threw down the message he carried. It landed closer to Irene than M'shall, so she picked it up.

"From Chalkin?" she exclaimed, looking up at Bridgely.

Therefore I must add..."

She peered more closely at the written page. "His handwriting's abominable. Ah. 'dereliction' - -".

"Really, where does he get off to cry 'dereliction'?"

"- -of their prime duty to the other complaints I am forced to lay at their door. Not only have they been interfering with the management of this Hold but they fill the minds of my loyal holders with outrageous lies. I demand their immediate censure. They are not even reliable enough to perform those duties which fall within their limited abilities."

"Limited abilities?" Irene turned pale with fury. "I'll un limit him!"

"Especially when we've had an earful of how he treats his loyal holders." M'shall said, his expression grimmer than ever. "Wait a minute. What's the date on his letter?"

"Five days ago," Bridgely answered, with a malicious grin.

"He had to send it by rider. From what the fellow told me, Chalkin's sent messengers to Nerat and Telgar as well. He wants me, you'll see in the last paragraph, Irene," and Bridgely pointed to that section of the missive, "to forward it by a reliable messenger to Lord Paulin, registering his complaint with the Council Chair. I suppose," and his grin was droll, "I'll get another one when he finds out about yesterday's airlift rescue."

ticipation, "drop them off on the way, did you?"

"No," and M'shall shrugged with mock regret. "But I felt it might be wise to... ah, sequester? Yes, that's the word, sequester certain of them should they be required to stand before the Council and explain exactly what orders they received."

"Oh," and Bridgely turned pensive.

"Oh, I was selective, you might say," and M'shall's face was grim. "I found out which had had a hand in those killings and took testimony against them from bereaved witnesses. Not even guards, acting under a Lord Holder's orders, may execute without trial, you know."

"Oh, indeed, and you've acted circumspectly," Bridgely said, nodding with understanding. "Really, I don't think this can wait until Turn's End. And I shall so inform Jamson and Azury."

"I'd be happy to take you myself," offered M'shall, "and speak for the Weyr. In fact," and the Weyrleader reached for Chalkin's written message, "you could deliver this at the same time, Bridgely."

"You are all consideration, Weyrleader," Bridgely said, gesturing grandly and looking exceedingly pleased.

"My pleasure at any time, Lord Holder." M'shall swept his arm in an equally grand gesture.

"Whenever you can spare a moment from your duties, Weyrleader?"

he shifted uneasily in his chair.

High Reaches was invariably a cold place and today, in Jamson's private office, was no exception. The Benden Holder was glad he had riding flirs on and made no attempt to open his jacket nor unglove his left hand after the usual handshake with Jamson. He noted M'shall did the same. "I cannot believe that a Lord Holder would treat the very people he depends on in such a way. Not in midwinter."

"With my own eyes I saw it, Lord Jamson," M'shall said in an unequivocal tone. "And I thought it wise to ask several of the guards to stay in the Weyr so you may learn what their orders were."

"But here, Chalkin complains that you have not accorded him the courtesy of conveyance." Jamson frowned.

"If you had seen what I have, Lord Jamson, you might find it hard to oblige him," M'shall said, his face stark.

"Really, Jamson, don't be such a prick," Bridgely said, under no similar restraint of courtesy with his peer. "Nerat and Telgar are taking in refugees as well as Benden. You can speak to any you wish to, to determine the extent of Chalkin's perfidy."

"I'll gladly convey you where you wish to go." M'shall offered.

"I've my own Weyr," Jamson said stiffly, "if I need transport. But it's not the weather to be travelling about in unnecessarily at all." Which was true

"He doesn't mention that in this," Jamson said, peering at the letter on the table.

"Doubtless he'll circulate a longer letter on that score," said Bridgely with deep irony. "But what I saw required me to give aid without any delay to meditate."

"As you know, Lord Jamson," M'shall put in, "Weyrs are also autonomous and may withhold services with sufficient justification. I feel perfectly justified in refusing him basic courtesies. Come, Bridgely. We're wasting Lord Jamson's valuable time. Good day to you."

Before the astonished High Reaches Holder could respond to such peremptory behaviour, the two men had left the room.

"My word! And I always considered M'shall to be a sensible man. Thank goodness, G'don is a solid, predictable Weyrleader - One simply does not impeach a Lord Holder overnight! Not this close to Threadfall." Jamson buried his hands more deeply into the sleeves of his fur-lined jerkin.

Azury was so shocked he did not even comment on M'shall's dereliction of services.

"I'd no idea, really," he said.

In direct contrast to High Reaches, Southern Boll's weather was hot enough for Bridgely to wish he'd worn a lighter shirt.

keep his folk in the dark about something as critical to their survival as Thread. Does he really think it won't come? That we're all foolish or stupid?"

"He is both foolish and stupid," Bridgely said. "Why else did our ancestors bio-engineer the dragons? And develop a totally unique society to nurture and succour the species, if not for future need?" He glanced at M'shall who merely raised his eyebrows. "It isn't as if we didn't have graphic proof of the existence of Thread, which was part of our education. Nor tons of records annotating the problem. It's not something we thought up to inconvenience Chalkin of Bitra!"

"Preaching to the converted, Bridge," Azury said. "He's ten times the fool if he thinks to brace the rest of the planet on this score. But," and he leaned forward on his wicker wood chair which creaked slightly, "Holders can spin great lies."

"And I can spot a whinge and a bitcher as fast as you can, Azury," said Bridgely, moving to the edge of his chair which also reacted noisily to the weight shift. "Like this chair. You can interview any of those we've taken in... and the sooner the better, so you can judge the condition they were in before we rescued them."

"I think I'd better have an eyes-on at that," Azury told him.

verdict?"

"It does," Bridgely agreed, and set his lips in an implacable line.

Azury grinned, thanking the attendant who had quickly returned with his gear. "Then you also need me to add weight to a second delegation to High Reaches?"

"If you feel you can turn Jamson's opinion?" Azury stamped into his boots. "That one's just perverse enough to hold out, but we'll see. Tashvi, Bastom and Franco are involved, and I know Paulin is agitated... Who does that leave?"

"Richud of Ista? Well, he will go along with a majority." He rose.

"Now, let's leave before I swim in my own sweat."

Azury interviewed each of the fourteen refugees still housed in Benden Weyr as unfit to be transferred elsewhere. He then had a chat with three of the guards.

Not that they were in a chatting mood, he said, his light blue eyes vivid with anger in his tanned face, but they may soon have second thoughts on how much their loyalty is worth to Lord Chalkin.

"They do claim," and, as he grinned, his teeth were very white against his skin, "that they were outnumbered by the influx of so many ranting, raving maniacs and had to use force to restrain them until they could receive orders from the Hold."

"Well said," Bridgely nodded.

"So let's speak with Richud."

It was harder to find the Lord Holder of Ista because he had taken the afternoon off to fish - his favourite occupation.

The harbour master was unable to give any specific direction for a search.

The dolphins went with him. Circle your dragon, and see can he spot them? Small sloop with a red sail but a lot of dolphins. Richud claims they understand him. He may be right," and the elderly man scratched his head, grinning with amusement at the notion.

"They do - according to the records," Azury said. "My fishers always watch out for them in the Currents."

"Well, as you wish," the Harbourmaster said and went back to his tedious accounting of creel weights lifted ashore the previous seven days.

Craigath flew his passengers in a high-altitude circle, spiralling outwards from Ista Harbour. It was he who spotted the craft and, with mighty use of his pinions, dived for it.

Despite the broad safety band securing him to his position, Azury grabbed frantically at Bridgely who was sitting in front of him and Bridgely worried lest his own grip bruise the dragon rider

small to Bridgely's mind - the bronze went into hover, startling the two crew who were watching Richud struggle with a pole bent almost double by his efforts to land the fish he'd hooked.

"Any time you're free, Lord Richud," shouted M'shall between his cupped hands.

Richud glanced once over his shoulder, then again, and lost control of pole and fish - the reel spinning wildly as pressure ended.

"Don't creep up on me like that! Lookit what you made me do! Fraggit! Can't I ever get an afternoon off? Oh well, what catastrophe's hit us now? Must be something bad to bring the three of you this far south."

He handed his pole to a crewman and came to the starboard side.

There was still some distance between him and his visitors.

"I'd ask you aboard, but the bronze would sink us," he said.

"No problem," M'shall said and his eyes unfocused as he spoke to his dragon. Can you get us a little closer, Craigath?

Craigath, eyes gleaming bluey and whirling with some speed, set himself down in the water, wings neatly furled to his backbone while with his left forearm he took hold of the safety rail, pulling himself and his passengers closer to the hull of the ship. The sloop began to heel over at the strength of the dragon's hold.

Wayrleader explained.

This is fun. I like it, Craigath informed his rider.

"He's enjoying himself," said M'shall.

"He won't snap the rail, will he?" Richud asked, staring with some apprehension at the huge forepaw clutching the metal upright.

The dragon shook his head. It is fragile so I don't hold it hard.

M'shall paused a moment. Good lad. "He says he's well aware of its fragility."

"He didn't say that," Richud replied, shaking his head in denial.

"Fragility? His very word. Craigath's got quite a vocabulary. You know how Irene speaks... Well, he has to keep up with Maruth, doesn't he?" The dragon nodded.

"Well, I never, Never seen Ronelth or Jemath swim like this either," Richud murmured. "So, what urgent matter brings you here?"

"Chalkin must be impeached as soon as possible. A Hold is autonomous until it exceeds its rights," Bridgely said, and went on to give the Istan Lord Holder details of Chalkin's heinous behavior.

"I'd no idea he'd evict so many. Surely it's winter up there and they'd be in danger of freezing?"

"They would be and have been," M'shall said.

"Agreed. I'll go along with you. Only," and his tone turned entreating, "not when I have an afternoon off to fish?" Craigath let go of the rail and the two groups drifted apart.

Suddenly the bronze shuddered from pate to tail.

I like that. Do it again.

Who are you talking to, Craigath? M'shall demanded, having had to clutch the neck ridge and lift his legs high above sudden waves sloshing Craigath's sides. His passengers had reacted as well to keep from a wetting.

Doll fins rubbed me.

Playful, are they? Well, another time, my friend. We still have work to do. "Sorry about that. The dolphins were tickling Craigath."

"Dragons are ticklish?" Bridgely asked, startled.

"Their bellies, yes."

Dolphins flowed from under the dragon now, leaping up in the air and diving neatly back into the water as they sped off after the sloop.

"So what do we do now? Beard Jamson again?" asked M'shall, stroking the bronze's neck affectionately. He was amused to see that Richud had retrieved his pole and was evidently baiting his hook.

Maruth says there are pictures. At Telgar.

"At Telgar?"

"Oh, that young painter," M'shall and Bridgely said in unison.

"What painter?" Azury wanted to know.

Bridgely explained.

"Very good idea, if Jamson will accept the proof as genuine," the Southern Boll Holder said, sceptically.

Which was exactly what happened.

"How can you be sure these are accurate?" asked the High Reaches Lord Holder when he had leafed through the vivid and detailed drawings on lantine's pad. "I think the whole matter has been exaggerated out of all proportion." He closed the pad halfway on the stark sketch of the hanging men.

"And you won't even accept my word, Jamson?" Azury said. "I've just been there and spoken to these people..." He riffled through the pages and came to one of a holder he'd interviewed.

"That fellow, for instance. I spoke to him myself, and I've no trouble accepting the truth of his story. He was four nights in an animal pen with no food and only the moisture he could get from snow, with his wife and elderly parents. Incidentally, they died of exposure despite all that Benden Weyr could do to try to revive them."

that many we should all stir ourselves!"

"Well, I for one shall not, Bridgely. And that's final." He folded his arms across his chest and sat there, glaring at his visitors.

"Jamson," Azury said in a very controlled, calm voice as he pushed Bridgely to one side and leaned across the desk towards Jamson huddled in his furs. "I, too, was sceptical when Bridgely came to me, unwilling to believe his report, much less his solution to the problem. One does not lightly impugn the honour of a peer. and I could not understand why Bridgely was so agitated over a few insignificant holders. Then, too, Bitra is too far to affect anything in my Hold.

"Though I quite took his point that Thread must not be allowed to burrow unchecked anywhere on the northern continent. So I conceived that it was my duty, my responsibility, to personally investigate the allegations.

"I have the witness of my own eyes and ears now. As well as the disparity between what the guards told me and the evidence of my own eyes. The Bitran situation is dire and must be rectified. We cannot, as intelligent, responsible leaders, allow such a situation to fester and spread. It affects the very roots of our society, the strength of the Charter, the fundamentals on which this whole society is based. We cannot ignore it as the internal problem of an autonomous Holding.

meddling noses and spurious charges out of here, right now!" This time he rang a hand bell and, when his oldest son opened the door in response, he said, "They're leaving. See them out." Bridgely took in a deep breath, but a sudden short blow to his midriff by Azury robbed him of wind to speak and he was helpless as the Southern Boll Holder dragged him out of the room.

"No matter what you said, he's not in a mood to listen," Azury told him, straightening Bridgely's jacket in a tacit apology.

"Lord Azury's right, I'm afraid," M'shall agreed.

"You came about Bitra?" the son asked, leaning against the heavy office door to be sure it was tightly closed. "I'm Gallian, his eldest and acting steward."

"You've heard?"

"Hmmm, the door was a bit ajar," said Gallian, not at all penitent about eavesdropping, "and during your last visit too."

"Father's memory's slipping a bit, so one of us tries to be nearby for important visits. He sometimes gets details muddled."

"Any chance you can unmuddle this visit to get his cooperation?"

"May I see the sketches?" He held out one hand.

"Certainly," Bridgely said and put the pad in his hand.

"Awful," Gallian said, shaking his head as he viewed the distressing scenes and peering briefly with intent gaze at one or two.

down the steps to the front door and out into the icy air.

"One can never tell," Azury admitted. "Shards, but it's colder than between here. Get me back to my sun as fast as possible."

"Would a stop at Fort Hold be too much to expect from you?" asked Bridgely, grinning at the southerner's chattering teeth.

"No, and I expect it's a tactical necessity in this struggle with Chalkin."

M'shall nodded approvingly and, vaulting to Craigath's back, lent a hand to the other two to mount.

The ambient temperature at Fort Hold was not warm but a decided improvement over High Reaches. Warmer still was the greeting Paulin gave them, insisting on a hot mulled wine when he heard of their adventures.

"I don't expect Jamson will change his mind, especially now he has been specifically asked to do so," Paulin said when his guests were settled near the good fire he had on his office hearth. "Jamson's always been perverse."

"Then the son is unlikely to be able to alter him?" Bridgely suggested humour. K'vin knew that Zulaya found it amusing to sit for a portrait at all, and was twitting him about what he should wear to be immortalized. K'vin also knew about lantine's project to do miniatures of all the riders. Ambitious, considering there were close to six hundred in the Weyr at the mo-

"It's not as if we knew who will not be here this time next year," she added. "But it'd be nice to know that they were here."

"How much longer, lantine?" Zulaya asked plaintively. The fingers of the hand she had resting on her thigh twitched. "I can't feel my feet or my left hand any more."

lantine gave an exaggerated sigh and laid down the palette, scratching his head with the now free hand as he swished the fine brush in the jar on the table. "Soon, Zulaya. You should by rights have had a break some time ago. But the light's perfect and I didn't want to stop."

"Oh, help me up, K'vin," Zulaya said, holding out a hand.

"I don't usually get a chance to sit still so long."

K'vin was glad to assist her and she was stiff enough so that her first steps were awkward. Then she recovered her mobility and walked firmly to the easel.

"My word, you did do yards today, didn't you? Filled in that whole panel of the dress and... have you got my eyes crossed?"

lantine laughed. "No, step a little to this side. Now back again. Do the eyes seem to follow you?"

Zulaya gave a little shake, widening her eyes. "They do. How do you contrive that? I must say, I'm not so sure I like me watching everything I do.

"Maybe I should leave now?" Iantine suggested, looking from one to the other.

"No," she said quickly.

"I wanted to be sure your sketches were safely in your possession," said K'vin, taking a chair.

"And, did they solve the problem?" Zulaya asked, spooning sweetener in the cups and passing him his. "Come, sit, Iantine. You must be more tired than I am. I've been sitting the whole time."

Iantine grinned as if, K'vin noted with a twinge of jealousy, totally at his ease with the Weyrwoman. Few were, except Tisha who treated everyone like an errant child or Leopold who was impudent with everyone.

"So? What's the result?" She indicated with a wave of her hand that he should speak out in the portraitist's presence.

"M'shall's disgusted. They still don't have a unanimous decision about impeachment. Jamson's the hold-out."

"He's not always dealing with a full deck," Zulaya said succinctly, "at least so Mari of High Reaches Weyr told me."

"And he's getting worse. Thea takes charge when she can, and that older lad of his."

"Gallian's my age," K'vin exclaimed. "Can't they get around that?"

Benden so they, and representatives from every Weyr and Hold, were present: with the exception of Lord Jamson of the High Reaches who was very ill of a respiratory fever.

The Lady Holder Thea came, annoyed that Jamson had a legitimate excuse for his absence and had sent Gallian in his place.

"It might have done that stubborn streak of his some good to hear just how that Chalkin conducts his Hold. Oh, he'd've spouted on about autonomy but he most certainly is against any harm coming to unborn children." Thea gave Zulaya a significant nod, reminding those around her that she had borne fourteen children to Lord Jamson in the course of her fertile years: sufficient to substantially increase the borders of the Hold when the children were old enough to claim their land grants.

Held in the capacious Lower Cavern at Benden Weyr, the first of the two trials was a sobering, well-conducted affair. At one time there had been trained legists on Pern, but the need for such persons had waned. Most arguments were settled by negotiated compromise or, when all negotiation efforts failed, by hand-to-hand combat.

Consequently a spokesperson for the accused guards had to be found: one of the teachers from Fort Hold who specialized in legal contracts and land deeds reluctantly agreed to officiate.

but that did not mitigate the circumstances of the grievous bodily and mental harm inflicted on them.

"Sure I rehearsed," the oldest of the women said loudly. "In me mind, night after night, how I was flung down and done by dirty men as wouldn't have dared step inside a decent woman's hold with such notions in their head. I ache still rehearsing..." and she spat the word at him, "what they again and again and again." For emphasis she slammed one fist into the other hand. Gardner ceased that line of questioning.

In the end, he managed one small concession for the the right to be returned to their Contract Hold, following the trial, rather than have to make their own way back to Bitra.

"Fat lot of good that'll do them," Zulaya muttered under breath when he won that point. "Chalkin hates losers and the guys have lost a lot more than their contract."

"I wonder what sort of tone Chalkin's next letter of protest will take," Irene said with a malicious chuckle. Paulin had received a thick screed from the Bitran Holder when he discovered the unmitigated interference of assorted renegade dragon riders in his affairs and the abduction of 'loyal holders' from their premises. "If he dares make one." She went on.

"Oh, why did it have to snow so hard? I'd love to have had him here when his guards said they 'was only following orders to keep the holders

Zulaya had nodded approvingly. "He'd have been a good legist or did they call them lawyers?"

"No, barristers."

"Yes, barristers stood before the judge and handled the trial procedures," Irene replied.

"Gardner wasn't half bad, you know. He tried," Zulaya remarked. "I'll even forgive him asking for mercy for those miserable clods.

"After all, he had to appear to work for his clients," she added tolerantly. "I'm glad we had lantine sit up close. I want to see his sketches of the trial. I could wish he worked as fast with my portrait."

"Your portrait is scarcely the same thing as annotating a trial. And he's to come to Benden when he's finished with you two, you know."

Zulaya was pleased to hear the pride in Irene's voice when she mentioned lantine. He was a Bendenian.

"You mean, when he's finished sketching our riders?"

Irene gave a wistful smile, tinged with sadness. "You'll be glad he did. I wonder will he do the same thing for us at Benden?"

"Whatever he can fit in, I'm sure. That young man's got himself more work than he can handle."

"If he can get it all done before.. oh, the jury's back." The twelve men and women, picked at random by straw from those who had come to ob-

"They were lucky there isn't Fall," Zulaya remarked to Irene, Lady Thea and K'vin. "Otherwise they could also have been tied out during the next Fall."

Despite herself, Thea gave a shudder. "Which is probably why there are so few cases of rape recorded in our Hold's annals."

"Small wonder," K'vin said, crossing his legs again. Zulaya had noticed his defensive position and her lips twitched briefly. He turned away. His Weyrmate had nearly cheered aloud when the verdict was delivered

"You can't do that to me," one of the guards was roaring now as he belatedly realized the significance of the verdict.

He had been the leader of the men stationed at the eastern border crossing. The other defendants were too stunned, their mouths moving in soundless protest, Morinst being loud enough to drown out any complaint they could voice. "You're none of you my Lord," he'd railed at three Lord Holder judges. "You've got no right to do this."

"And you had no right to rape a pregnant woman!"

"But Chalkin ain't even here." The man writhed in the grip of his guards.

"Chalkin's presence would have had no effect on the trial or the verdict," said Tashvi, at his most repressive.

"But he should've been here!" Morinst protested.

"He was invited to attend," Tashvi said without regret.

lowed to witness the corporal punishment.

When that, too, had been completed and the men removed to have their wounds treated, the observers filed back into the Lower Cavern.

While this was scarcely an occasion for celebration, except that justice had been served, a substantial meal had been prepared. Wine was the first item sought and served.

"You were superb, M'shall," said Irene when her Weyrmate joined her, a newly opened skin of Benden wine on his shoulder, "and do please give me a glass. Though I'm sure you need one more than I. Nice of Bridgely to supply it," she added to Zulaya.

"I think we all need it," the Telgar Weyrwoman said, glancing over to where the three plaintiffs were celebrating with considerable enthusiasm. "Well, let them. Now what do we do?"

"Well, we've the second trial to get through. I hope it goes as well," M'shall said.

"No, with them," and his Weyrmate pointed to the three women.

"Oh. That them. They say they just want to go back to their homes. Not going to let Chalkin take it because they're not there holding their places." He made a grimace. "Some of them don't really have much to go back to. Chalkin's bullies burned what was flammable and pulled down what they could. I'd say the storms kept more damage from being done. But," and he

"D'you have numbers yet?"

"Actually we do," Zulaya said, including Irene in her nod.

"Three hundred and forty-two - no, forty-three with that premature baby. It's very good of you to offer, Thea."

Thea snorted. "I've reread the Charter, too, and know my duty to my fellow creatures."

"You wouldn't also happen to know how many poor wretches hold in Bitra?"

M'shall had that answer. "Of course, you can't tell if Chalkin doctored the last census or not, but he's supposed to have 24,657 inhabitants."

"Really?" Zulaya was surprised.

"But then, Bitra's one of the smaller holds and doesn't have any indigenous industry - apart from some forestry. The 5 down to what's needed locally. There're a few looms, but no great competition for Keroon or Benden.

"And the gaming," Thea added with a disgusted sniff.

"That's Chalkin's main industry."

"Well, he's lost a lot on this gamble," Zulaya said.

"Has he?" K'vin wanted to know.

The second trial was almost anticlimactic. Gardner again presented the seven defendants accused of allegedly 'causgrievous bodily harm and

no right to take the lives of any holders without due cause and/or trial by jury.

The day's jury retired and, within half an hour, unanimously rendered a verdict of guilty. The men were sentenced to be transported by dragon back to the eastern islands with a seven-day supply of food, which was the customary punishment for murderers.

"Are there many on the islands?" Thea asked. "I mean, there have been others sequestered there. Even families, I read, but that was years ago."

Zulaya shrugged. "Telgar's never had to take anyone there, so I wouldn't know."

"Benden hasn't," Irene said, "at least not as long as we've been Leaders."

"My father sent two," Paulin said. "And I do believe that both Ista and Nerat have sent killers there."

"Chalkin did, too," Gallian surprised them by saying. "About four years ago. I don't know where I heard about them. Some sort of real trouble down in his Hold, and he had Ista transport them since the men originated from that Hold."

"Oh, I remember now," Irene said. "M'shall only mentioned he was glad he hadn't had to do the transport."

the ritual disfigurement of men "only doing their duty". This time, however, an elderly green rider collected the message when the urgent banner was seen flying from the panel heights of Bitra Hold. F'tol endured a long harangue from Chalkin that letter had better be delivered, that dragon riders were parasites on the face of Pern, that there'd be some changes made or... F'tol was neither intimidated nor impressed.

Stoically he took the letter and responsibly delivered it.

Whether Chalkin knew, or cared, that the refugees had been returned to their holdings was not known. F'tol was reasonably sure that would have been included in the tirade, since Chalkin seemed to have included every other shortcoming, mistake and venial sin ever committed by a dragon rider

Both Telgar and Benden Weyrs made daily checks on the returned, to reassure them as well as those concerned with their welfare. Of course the conditions in Bitra, with dragon-high drifts blocking major roads and tracks, made it improbable that any of Chalkin's men would have been able to move, much less go the distance to the far-flung properties.

Benden Hold and Weyr became the latest winter victims as the blizzards which had hovered over Bitra made their way eastward, coating the eastern seaboard, even down into the northern section of Nerat which hadn't seen any snow since the settlement of the Bendens in the early decades of the First Pass.

net and allow it to rinse itself off in the frigid water. But y washings resulted in some distress for the rider.

"I've chilblains again," Debera complained to Jantine, showing him her swollen fingers when he came out to watch her tend Morath.

The little green was a favourite subject of his because, he told Debera, "she has a tremendous range of expression on her face and gets in the most incredible positions." Debera was far too besotted with her dragon to disagree with such an impartial opinion. If she herself figured in every sketch Jantine did, she did not wonder about it. But the other green riders did.

"You should get some of Tisha's cream. It stopped my fingers from itching," he snapped his fingers, like that!"

"Oh, I have some of that," she told him.

"Well, it doesn't do you any good in the jar, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said, ducking her head, her tone low and apologetic.

"Hey, I'm not scolding, he said gently, putting one finger under her chin and lifting her head. "What'd I do wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied and pushed his finger away, giving him a too-bright smile. "I get silly notions sometimes. Don't pay me any mind."

"Miss him?" Debera echoed, surprised at the question.

I will miss him, Morath said in such a mournful tone that the other dragonets turned towards her, their eyes whirling in minor distress.

"What did she say that's got them all upset?" Jule demanded.

"That she'd miss him. But, love, he's not Weyrbred," Debera told her dragon, stroking her cheek and then her head-knob. "He can't stay here indefinitely."

"If anyone asked me, I'd say lantine would like to," Sarra put in.

"No-one's asked you," Angie replied tartly.

Has he ever done anything, I mean, beyond sketching you, Deb?" Jule asked with an avid glint in her eyes.

"No, of course not. Why would he?" responded Debera, and flustered. That was the trouble with having to sleep with the others. They could be terribly nosy, even if they weren't as mean as her stepmother and sisters had been. She t pry into where they were when they were late in at

"I give up on her," said Jule, raising her hands skyward in asperahon. "The handsomest unattached man in the Weyr and she's blind."

"She's Morath-besotted," Sarra put in. "Not that any of us is much better."

Jule smiled mysteriously. "From the only Weyrbred resident this barracks, let me assure you that our wishes can encephalograph our dragons' choices."

"They won't rise for another eight or ten months," said though she had obviously taken heed of Jule's remark.

"Jule, suppose your dragon fancies a dragon whose rider can't stand?"

"You mean, O'ney?" and she grinned at Angie's discomfort.

The girl overcame her embarrassment and snapped back y enough.

He's impossible, even for a bronze rider. you ever heard him go on about how his wing is always ps in competitions! As if that was all that mattered!"

"To him it probably is," Grasella said, but, "Jule, I'm more ried about the blue riders. I mean, some of them are very nice guys and I wouldn't want to hurt their feelings, but they don't like girls."

"Oh," and Jule shrugged indolently, "that's easier still. You make an arrangement with another rider to be on hand when your green gets proddy. Then the blue rider gets his mate, if he's got one, or anyone else who's willing - and you'd better believe that anyone's willing when dragons are going to participate. So you bed the one you like, and the blue rider his choice, and you ALL enjoy!" The girls absorbed this information with varying degrees of enthusiasm or distaste.

"Ah, but can we go to other Weyrns?" Sarra asked, wagging a finger at Jule. "In four-five months, we'll have Fall and then we'll really work hard, ferrying firestone sacks to the fighters." Her eyes gleamed brightly in anticipation and she hugged herself. "We'll be doing something a lot more exciting than having just one mate and plenty of kids."

Debera averted her face, not wanting to take part in such a ridiculous discussion.

Something bothers you, Morath said and slowly lowered her head to her rider's lap. I love you. I think you're wonderful.

Lantine does, too.

That confidence startled Debera. He does?

He does! And Morath's tone was emphatic. He likes your green eyes, the way you walk, and the finny crackle in your voice. How do you do that?

Debera's hand went to her throat and she felt really silly now.

Can you talk to him, too? Or just listen to what he's thinking?

He thinks very loud. Especially near you. I don't hear him too good far away. He thinks loud about you a lot.

"DEBRA?" Sarra's loud call severed that most interesting conversation.

"What? I was talking to Morath. What did you say?"

"Never mind," and Sarra grinned broadly. "Have you got your Turn's End dresses finished yet?"

had, she admitted very very quietly to herself, hoped that lantine would notice her in them. Now, with Morath's information, she wondered if he'd notice at all that she was wearing new clothes.

"Speaking of weyrs," Mesla said.

"That was half an hour ago, Mesla," Angie protested.

"Well?"

"There aren't that many left and the bigger dragons would have first choice, wouldn't they?" she went on.

"Don't worry," Jule told her, "some'll come free by the time we need them." Then she covered her mouth, aware of what she had just implied. I didn't mean that. I really didn't. I

mean, I wouldn't think of moving in."

"Just shut up, Jule," Sarra said in a quiet but firm voice.

There was a long moment of silence, with no-one daring to look at anyone.

"Say, who has the salve?" Grasella asked softly from the bunk beyond her, breaking the almost intolerable silence. "My fingers are itching again. No-one told me I'd have to cope with chilblains while dealing with dragons."

Angie found it in her furs and passed it on.

"After you," Debera said softly as she gave it to Grasella.

The easy laughing chatter was over for the night.

farce."

"The trials were not farces, Jemmy," said Clisser, so uncharacteristically reproving that Jemmy looked up in a state of amazement. "The trials were necessary. To prove that we would not act in an arbitrary fashion.

"You mean, the way Chalkin would have," and Jemmy grinned, his uneven teeth looking more vulpine than ever in his long face.

"Exactly."

"You're wasting too much time on him." Jemmy turned back to reading.

"What are you looking up?"

"I don't know. I'm looking because I know there's something we can use to check on the Red Planet's position, something so simple I'm disgusted I can't call it to mind. I know I've seen it somewhere." Irritably he pushed the volume away from him.

"It'd help a great deal if the people who copied for us had had decent handwriting. I spend too much time trying to decipher it." Abruptly he reached across the cluttered work-top to the windowsill and plonked down in front of him a curious apparatus. "Here's your new computer." He grinned up at Clisser who regarded the object - bright coloured beads strung on ten narrow rods, divided into two unequal portions.

"What is it?" Clisser exclaimed, picking it up and finding that the beads moved stiffly up and down on the rods.

a slide rule looks like. I saw one mentioned in a treatise on early calculators but I never thought we'd have to resort to ancient devices. And mention of an abacus, too, actually. You have been busy reinventing alternatives."

"And I'll find that other device, too, if you'll leave me alone and don't dump more vitally important, urgent research on me."

"I'm hoping," Clisser said at his most diplomatic, "that you can give me something to show before the Winter Solstice and Turn's End."

Jemmy shot straight up in his chair. cocked his head and stared at Clisser so that Clisser leaned forward hopefully, holding his breath lest he disrupt Jemmy's concentration.

"Fraggit," and Jemmy collapsed again, beating his fists on the table. "It has to DO with Solstices."

"Well, if you've gone back to abacii and slide-rules, why not a sun-dial clock?" Clisser asked facetiously.

Jemmy sat up again, even straighter. "Not a sun-dial," he said slowly, "but a cosmic clock - a star dial like... stone stone SOMETHING."

"Stonehenge?"

"What was that?"

"A prehistoric structure back on Earth. Sallisha can tell you more about it if you'd care to ask her," Clisser said slyly and was rewarded by Jemmy's rude dismissal of the suggestion. "It turned out to be rather an astonishing

"Not necessarily since you've been on these relevant only historical entries," Jemmy contradicted him.

"I remember accessing it once. It's only that we'll have to adapt it to fit our needs, which is framing the Red Planet when the conjunction is right." He was scrabbling amongst the litter on his desk for a clean sheet of paper and a pencil.

"The first three he found were either stubs or broken. That's another thing we've got to re-invent... fountain pens."

"Fountain pens?" Clisser echoed. "Never heard of fountain pens."

"I'll do them tomorrow. Leave me to work this out but," and Jemmy paused long enough to grin diabolically up at Clisser's befuddlement, "I think I'll have something by Turn's End. Maybe even a model... but only if you leave now." Clisser left, closing the door quietly behind him and pausing a moment.

"I do believe I've been kicked out of my own office," he said, pivoting to regard the door. His name, which had recently been repainted, was centred in the upper panel.

"Hmm." He turned the sign hung there on a nail to DO NOT DISTURB and walked away whistling the chorus from the 'Duty Song'. He'd catch Sallisha before she climbed up the stairs to his office. That would please her. Well, it might.

was that children learned their lessons to get out of her clutches - but her attitude towards him, and his proposed revitalization programme, was totally hostile.

Clisser smiled as graciously as he could. "It's empty right now and will be for at least two hours."

She sniffed but, when he courteously gestured for her to precede him, she tramped on in an implacable fashion. Like a Morinst to his Clisser shuddered and hurriedly followed her.

The lounge was empty, a good fire crackling on the hearth.

The klah pitcher rested on the warmer and there were, for a change, clean cups. He wondered if Bethany had done the housekeeping.

The sweetener jar was even full. Yes, it would have been Bethany, trying to ease this interview.

As he closed the door, he also turned the "DO NOT DISTURB" sign around and flipped the catch. Sallisha had seated herself in the least comfortable chair - the woman positively enjoyed being martyred. She still held the notebook, like a precious artifact, across her chest.

"You can not exclude Greek history from study," she said, aggressively launching into an obviously prepared speech.

"They've got to understand where our form of government came from to appreciate what they have. You have to include..."

"No, I save them hours of dull study by replacing it with the history of Pern."

"There is scarcely enough of that to dignify the word 'history'."

"Yesterday is history today, but do you want to repeat it?"

"'History' is what happened in the life or development of a people... we," and he tapped his chest, "the Pernese. Also a systematic account of us," he tapped his chest again, "with an

analysis and explanation. From the beginning of the Pern colony. That is history, grand and sweeping, surviving against incredible odds and an implacable menace, daring-do, ingenuity, courage, and of this planet, not of a place that's only a name. It's better than our ancient history - if it's taught right."

"Are you impugning my -"

"Never, Sallisha, which is why I particularly need your complete cooperation for the new, enriched, relevant curriculum. On average, your students rank higher in their final examination papers than any other teacher's... and that includes the hill-farmers and the plains drovers. But they never again use the information you imparted. Pern is difficult enough... with an external menace to contend with... Let them be proud of the accomplishments of their ancestors, their most recent ancestors. Not the confused and tortured mindlessness the Pern colonists left behind.

as she enunciated the last word, "as that awful man. Don't think you can get me to teach there now Issony's left!" She waggled her index finger at him and her expression was fierce.

"Not you, Sallisha, you're far too valuable to waste on Bitra," he said, soothing her. Bitra would need a more compassionate and flexible teacher than Sallisha. But I'm amazed at just how many people were unaware of the Charter Rights. And that's wrong. Not that I think the cowed folk up in Bitra would have dared cite the clauses to him... even if they had known about them. I mean, it was appalling to realize just how few people who attended the trial KNEW that ordinary holders had the RIGHT to freedom of movement, and lawful assembly, or to appeal for mediation for crippling tithes.

"Why haven't the Lord Holders impeached him?" she wanted to know, her fierceness diverted towards a new victim. It's patently obvious he is unfit to manage a Hold, much less one during a Fall. I cannot see why they have been waffling about over the matter.

"Sallisha, it takes a unanimous decision to impeach a Lord Holder," he said with a light admonishment.

She regarded him blankly for a moment. Then flushed.

"Who's holding out?"

"Jamson."

sure that everything complies with your wishes as regards conditions." He reached into his jerkin pocket and pulled out the document. "I thought you might like to see it today."

"Sweetening me up, are you?" she said with an almost coquettish smile, hand half outstretched to the sheets.

"You are my best teacher, Sallisha," he told her and extended his hand until her fingers closed around the contract.

"This won't make me approve your butchery of pre-Pernese history, Clisser."

"It's not intended to, but we can't have you in danger on the plains of Keroon."

"I did promise to come back."

"They will understand."

"There are some really fine minds there."

"You will find them wherever you go, Sallisha, you have the knack." Then he hauled out the larger sheaf of papers, the new syllabus. "You may find this much easier to impart to your students." She eyed it as she would a tunnel snake.

High Reaches and Fort Holds

trouble of a different sort now," Gallian added, mimicking his father's thin, wheezing voice. "If he would only give me authorization to deal with all Hold matters..." and he raised his hands in helplessness.

"He's too sick."

"Wait a minute. He is sick," Paulin interrupted, "and your weather here is only aggravating the respiratory problem, isn't it?" Thea's eyes widened as she jumped to a conclusion.

"If he was sent to Ista or Nerat to recuperate, why he'd have to authorize Gallian - -", she began.

"Precisely."

"What happens when he recovers and finds out what I did knowing, as he's made sure I do, his views on impeachment," Gallian said, "and finds out I've gone against him? I could very likely lose my chance of succession."

"That not likely, dear. You know how he carries on about your stupid 'younger brothers'," said Thea reassuringly, laying a hand on her son's arm. "You just know when to stand up to him. You've always had a flair for dealing with people. As for the nephews." She threw up her hand in despair.

Gallian looked uncertain.

"Don't worry, lad," said Paulin. "You've already got full marks in my book for cooperation. And, as long as I'm Chair, you've my support. The Conclave doesn't necessarily have to abide by the deceased's wishes as to successor. But we've got to take action now.

"Even waiting until Turn's End is dangerous. We rescued those people, their rights were upheld in a duly assembled court, and Chalkin's in some state of mind over that." Paulin's laugh was mirthless. "We can't let him take his vengeance out on them, or we've spent a lot of time and effort to no avail. With this thaw setting in, he'll be able to move about. And I think we all have a good idea that he'll retaliate in some fashion."

Thea shuddered, her comfortably plump body rippling under her thick gown. "I won't have that on my conscience, no matter what my Lord Jamson says." She rose.

"Jamson spent such a poor night, I'll catch him now, before he can put up any more objections. One thing's certain, he doesn't want to die. He likes Richud more than Franco.

I'll suggest Ista Hold. I wouldn't mind the winter there myself, In fact."

And suddenly, she straightened her shoulders, "I think I'm gomig dowd wifa gold, too..." and she altered her voice appropriately, sniffing. "He might just humour me where he wouldn't do a thing for himself. If you'll excuse

with a resolute expression. "I suppose I should get accustomed to making decisions, not merely carrying them out."

Paulin clapped him on the shoulder encouragingly. "That's it exactly, Gallian. And I'll guarantee, not all the decisions you'll be called upon to make will be the right ones. Being a Lord Holder doesn't keep you from making mistakes: just make the right wrong ones!"

Paulin grinned as Gallian tried to absorb that notion. "If you are right most of the time, you're ahead of the game. And you're right in this one for the good reasons which your father declines to see."

Gallian nodded his head. Then he asked more briskly, "Will you have some wine now, Paulin?"

"You've your mother's way with you," Paulin said, accepting the offer. "Which you will find is an advantage... Not, mind you, that I in any way imply a lack in your father's manners."

"No, of course not," Gallian agreed but he smiled briefly, then cleared his throat. "Ah, what happens to Chalkin when he's removed? I mean, it's not as if he could be dropped on the southern islands, is it?"

"Why not?" Paulin replied equably. "Not," he added hastily when he saw Gallian's consternation, "that he would be placed on the same one as the murderers. There is a whole chain an archipelago of them."

"Aren't they volcanic?"

"I heard a rumour though that Vergerin and Chalkin had played a game, the stakes being an uncontested succession."

"My father mentioned that, too, early on when impeachment first came up. Said he ought to have insisted that Vergerin stand in spite of what the old Neratian Lord wanted. Chalkin's spouse is Franco's sister, you know."

"I'd forgotten that. Amazing," Paulin added.

"Franco's totally different, but then his mother was Brenton's first spouse.

They were discussing the ever-interesting problem of heredity when the door suddenly opened and Thea came in, almost bent double.

"Great Stars, mother!" Gallian rushed to assist her. "Why, what's the matter? You're so flushed."

She slammed the door shut, waved aside her son's help and collapsed in her chair with laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, your father, dear..." She wiped tears from her cheeks and some of the 'flush' came away, too. She looked at the handkerchief and rubbed her cheeks more vigorously, still laughing.

"We did it! He's going to the warm. I left him writing to ask for Richud's hospitality. I said I'd have a message pennon flown, but your rider would take it, wouldn't he, Paulin? When he takes you back to Fort?"

Canell, as if there were an emergency. I primed Canell to back me up, and it was he who suggested the rouge. So when I came into your father's room, I arrived moaning over my aches and pains which had developed so rapidly overnight. And sneezing constantly fortunately, I have a small sneeze so I can imitate it... Then Canell took over - really, the man was quite convincing. He got alarmed over my rapid pulse and flushed face. He made much of worrying about the condition of my lungs and the strain on my heart. So between us, why, Jamson agreed to take me south to Ista until I'm completely recovered. So there!" She beamed from one to the other, quite delighted.

"Mother! You are the living end."

"Of course," she said patronizingly. Then she surprised both men by sneezing. "Oh, good heavens!"

"Hmmm," said Gallian with mock severity, "that's what happens when you tell stories. You get what you pretended you had."

"He's sent someone looking for you, too, son.""

There was a polite tap at the door. Gallian went immediately to answer it, opening only wide enough to be seen.

"Yes, tell Lord Jamson that I'll be there directly."

you get him out? And what will happen to him, for that matter?"

"That has to be decided."

"We were just discussing that, Mother," Gallian said.

"There's Vergerin, the uncle on the father's side."

"But Vergerin gambled his succession rights away," Thea said sternly.

"You heard that, too?" Paulin asked.

"Well, you know that Bloodline," Thea said. "Always gambling. On the most ridiculous things, too, and for the most bizarre wagers. But to gamble on the succession?" Her expression showed her disgust over that wager.

"Perhaps Vergerin learned a lesson," Gallian remarked a trifle condescendingly, Paulin thought.

"Perhaps," Paulin said. "If we find him alive."

"Oh, no!" Thea's hand went to her throat in dismay.

"If the Council votes to impeach..."

"Not if, Gallian, when," said Paulin, raising his hand in correction.

"When they do, how do they go about getting Chalkin out of Bitra Hold?" Gallian asked.

"I think that will require thought and planning," Paulin replied.

"But go now and see your father, Gallian. Mustn't keep him waiting. He might change his mind."

Weyrleaders convened an emergency meeting at Telgar Hold and formally impeached Lord Chalkin for dereliction of his duties and responsibilities to Benden Weyr, for the cruel and unusual punishment of innocent holders (Iantine's drawings were submitted as well as the proceedings of the recent trials), for refusing to allow the Charter to be taught so that all would know their rights as well as their responsibility (Issony gave testimony on that account) and for denying these rights to his holders without due reason.

Gallian soberly voted 'Yea' in his turn, having duly exhibited his authorization to act in all matters concerning High Reaches Hold.

"So, now what do we do?" Tashvi asked, clasping his hands together with an air of relief at a difficult decision completed.

"Obviously, we inform Chalkin and remove him," Paulin said.

"No other trial?" Gallian asked, startled.

"He just had it," said Paulin. "Judge and jury of his peers."

"It would be against all precedent to employ dragon riders to effect his removal," S'nan stated flatly.

Everyone turned to the Fort Weyrleader, showing varying degrees of surprise, disgust, anger or incredulity at such a fatuous statement.

"Impeachment is also against all precedent, too, S'nan," M'shall said, "because this is the first time that Clause has been invoked since it was written two-hundred and fifty-odd years ago. But it's now a matter of record.

Then she blinked and cocked her head, puzzled.

"You know, I don't know enough about the interior lay-out of Bitra Hold to know where to find him, much less grab him with all those bodyguards he has around him. Franco?" "What?" The Nerat Lord Holder responded nervously. "I can't tell you what Bitra's like. I've never been in more than the reception rooms even if Nadona is my sister."

"How curious," Bastom remarked.

"What will we do when we do get him out?" Franco asked. "Who's to Hold? Those kids of his are too young."

"The uncle, Vergerin..." Paulin began.

"What about a regency till they're of age?" Azury Suggested, cutting across the Fort Lord's beginning.

"Or a promising younger son from a well-conducted Hold?" Richud of Ista asked, looking about brightly.

"We know the Bloodline's tainted with the gambling addiction," put in Bridgely.

"That trait can be remedied by strict discipline and a good education," Salda of Telgar said firmly. "As the seed is sowed so will it ripen."

"Vergerin." Paulin said again, raising his voice to be heard above the various arguments.

stipulation of the Charter which I intend to follow to the letter. He is missing from the property where he had quietly resided since Chalkin took Hold."

"Missing?"

"Chalkin do it?"

"Where? Why?"

"Vergerin would have had training from his brother in Hold management," Paulin continued, and I believe that the records state that Kinver was a capable and fair Lord Holder."

"He gambled, too," Irene remarked in an undertone.

"But he didn't cheat," M'shall said, giving his Weyrmate a stern look.

"We all adhere, do we not," Paulin went on, "to the Charter Inheritance Clause which stipulates that a member of the Bloodline must be considered first? Now, if Vergerin is available."

"And willing," M'shall added.

"And able," G'don of the High Reaches Weyr amended in a firm voice.

"Able and willing," Paulin echoed, "we would then be following the Charter -"

"We've set one precedent today," Bastom said. "Why not give Bitra a break and put in someone trained and competent? Especially since there's so much to be done to get that Hold cleared for the spring action."

"ORDER! ORDER!" and Paulin banged his gavel forcefully until silence prevailed. "There! Now, we can think again. First, we must remove Chalkin."

"What good does that do if we've no-one to put in authority in a Hold that will be totally demoralized to find itself leaderless?" S'nan asked, so incensed that he was speaking faster than anyone had ever heard him talk.

"Ah, but we put in a new Holder so quickly no-one will have time to become demoralized," Tashvi said.

"I suspect that we will," Paulin said. "Vergerin is not in his known holding, and indeed the place looks to have been deserted for some length of time."

S'nan was aghast. "Chalkin has removed him?"

"Probably to that cold storage he's said to have in his lower levels," M'shall said grimly.

"Master Domaize insisted that we learn the rudiments of architectural draughting," the young portraitist said.

"There's another level," Issony put in, tapping the right-hand corner of the paper. "You were lucky not to visit it." He gave a snort. "Chalkin calls it his cold storage." The teacher glanced around the table. "A lot of small

disappear from storage, but I know for a fact he's the one snitching." Issony grinned. "I was trying to get some food one night and he nearly caught me at it."

"There's an upper level over this section," lantine said his pencil poised. "But the door was padlocked."

"Supposedly due to subsidence," said Issony with a bit of a snort.

"But there wasn't as much dust in the hall as usual in his back corridors. I think it could be an access to the panel heights."

"We'll have a dragon up there, too," Paulin said. He wasn't the only one to stand behind the artist to watch him work.

"Quite a warren. Glad you looked about you when you were there, lantine." He patted the young man's shoulder in approval. "So how many... ah... discreet exits are there?"

"I know of nine, besides the front one and the kitchen door," Issony said as he pointed out the locations.

Paulin rubbed his hands together and, waving everyone to resume their seats at the table, stood for a long moment looking at the floor plan.

"So, let us not waste time and let us agree on the... ah... strategy here and now. Irene, I appreciate your willingness to be bait, but let us use surprise instead. Issony, lantine, when would the Hold be at its most vulnerable?"

seat him.

"Give over, S'nan," he said wearily.

"You're excused from the force, S'nan," Paulin told him, equally exasperated.

"But... but..." Even his Weyrmate shushed him.

"There're more than enough of us quite willing," said Shanna of Igen with a withering glance at the dismayed Fort Weyrleader.

"Good. Then we'll cover all the exits."

"There's one window in the kitchen that they always forget to lock," lantine said, "and I don't think they ever feed the watchwher enough. He's all bones. Something juicy might occupy him. And I think the window's beyond his chain's reach."

"Good points, lantine," said Paulin. "Through the window, then, and we'll infiltrate immediately up to Chalkin's private quarters through the back stairs."

"The hidden door's the panel next to the spice cupboard."

"If you take me along, I can find it in a jiffy," Issony suggested, his eyes bright with anticipation.

"If you're willing..." Paulin said.

"I am, too," lantine added.

Chalkin. He has no allies among us," the Tillek Lord said, with a reproving glance at S'nan who sat with face set in such a mournful expression that Bastom was nearly sorry for the punctilious Weyrleader.

"So we are agreed, Lords, Ladies and Leaders?" Paulin said when he was sure everyone had grasped their roles in the deposition. "Then let us refresh ourselves and rest until it's time to depart."

Bitra Hold and Telgar Weyr

Except for the fact that the watchwher did not succumb to the choice bits of meat brought to lure it from its duty and M'shall had to have Craigath speak sharply to it, entry was obtained.

Whoever should have heard the watchwher's one bellow did not.

Issony had no trouble entering by the unlocked window and opening the kitchen door to that contingent. Those who were assigned to watch the various other exits from the Hold were by then in place. Iantine sped through the kitchen and up into the main reception rooms where he opened the front entrance and the rest of the group entered.

Meanwhile, Issony had found the hidden door in the kitchen. Although the stairway was lit by dying glows, there was enough illumination for Paulin and the arresting Lords, Ladies and Leaders.

Paulin opened the access door at the top and entered Chalkin's private apartments first. Behind him came eight Lords and Ladies Holder and

grabbed a discarded dress from the pile on the floor.

Paulin indicated that she could clothe herself. As smoothly as she moved, or perhaps because she had the sheet up to her chin and let in cold air, the other girl was awakened. She did scream.

"As loud as a green in season," M'shall said later chuckling at the memory. At that, Chalkin didn't rouse.

His guards had been alerted though and charged into the room, to be flabbergasted by the sight of so many armed folk in Chalkin's most private apartment.

"Chalkin has been impeached for failure to prepare this Hold for Threadfall, for abuse of his privilege as Lord Holder and for denying his holders their Charter-given rights," Paulin said in a loud voice, sword drawn. "Unless you wish to join him in his exile, put up your weapons."

To a man, they did just that as the reinforcements, led by lantine, burst in from the hall. That was what finally roused Chalkin from a drunken sleep.

Later Paulin remarked that he'd been disappointed at such an anticlimactic outcome of their dawn invasion.

"S'nan will be reassured," K'vin said. I think he was certain we intended to humiliate Chalkin."

"We have," Tashvi said with a chuckle.

Holder after another, with hints of unusual treasure if they assisted him. If anyone had been in the least bit tempted, their resolve was strengthened when the broken, shivering wrecks were released from 'cold storage'.

"The place was full," Issony said, looking shattered by what he had seen on that level. "Border guards, most of them, but they didn't deserve that from Chalkin!" Even the hardest of them would bear the marks of their incarceration for the rest of their lives.

"Iantine? Did you bring... ah, you did. Do a quick sketch of them, will you?" Issony asked, pointing to the two so close to death: the two who had been castrated for rape. All that could be done for them was to ease their passing with fellis juice. "To show S'nan. In case he has lingering doubts as to the justice of what was done here today."

"Any sign of Vergerin?" Paulin asked when all the cells had been emptied.

"No," M'shall said grimly. That shouldn't reassure you any." He jerked his thumb at some of the stretcher-bearers who had previously been the 'cold storage' guards. They said there were four dead ones who were slipped into the lime pits day before yesterday. We may have moved too late for Vergerin." Paulin cursed under his breath.

"Did you ask if any had heard the name?"

M'shall grunted. "No-one down there had a name."

ers clapping him on the back or whatever part of him they could touch.

"Guess who just walked in?" B'nurrin of Igen cried, seeing Paulin and M'shall.

"Vergerin?" Paulin asked.

"Optimist," M'shall muttered, and then, taking a second hard look at the face no longer hidden by a big furred hat, exclaimed, "It is!"

"It is?" Paulin hastened across the broad Hall.

"Has the family eyebrows," M'shall said with a chuckle.

"Where've you been hiding, Vergerin?" M'shall?" Vergerin peered around, a hopeful smile breaking across his weather-beaten face. He did bear a facial resemblance to Chalkin; as if Chalkin's features had been elongated and refined. "You don't know how glad I was to see all those dragons on the heights. I figured you had to come to your senses and get rid of him." He jerked his thumb ceiling-ward. "You've no idea."

"Where did you hide? When did you hide?" Paulin asked, clasping Vergerin's hand and shaking it enthusiastically.

Vergerin's grin turned wry. "I figured the safest place was under Chalkin's nose." He gestured in the general direction of the cot holds.

"He houses his beasts better than his folk, so the smell of me is at least clean horse manure. I've been earning my keep at the beast hold."

"But your holding has been empty."

impressed Paulin. Nor was he alone in noticing it.

"Admittedly, my Blood claim to the Hold was squandered foolishly but then, I should have known that Chalkin was likely to cheat that night, if ever, with such stakes. It took me quite some while to figure out how he managed it, for I'm not without knowing a few tricks myself, and most of those that can be played on the unwary."

He gave a self-deprecating little smile. "I forgot just how hungry Chalkin was for a Lord Holder's power."

"But you kept your promises," Paulin said, nodding approval.

"The least I could do to restore self-esteem," and Vergerin executed a little bow to Paulin and the others.

"Dare I hope that you wish to keep this Bloodline in Bitra Hold?" He cocked one of his heavy dark eyebrows, his glance candid and accepting.

Paulin did a quick check of the expressions on the faces of the other four Lord Holders who had arrived on the scene.

"You will certainly be considered by the Conclave when it meets at Turn's End," Paulin said, nodding. The others murmured agreement.

Loud protestations of innocence suddenly broke up the tableau as Chalkin, bracketed by Bastom and Bridgely, was walked down the main stairs. The tears of his wife and the frightened shrieks of his children added to the tumult.

away from him.

Then Lady Nadona saw Vergerin and her cries turned raucous with hatred. "You've taken my husband and now you stand there to take my Hold, my children's inheritance - - Oh, Franco, how can you let them do this to your sister?" She fell against the Neratian's chest.

Franco's expression was far from repentant as he quickly unwound her plump arms from his neck with the help of Zulaya and the Istan Laura. Nadona was still in her nightdress, with a robe half-closed over the thin garment. Richud had the two boys by the arm, and his spouse the two weeping little girls who certainly didn't understand what was happening but were hysterical because their mother was.

Paulin took Vergerin by the arm and led him towards the nearest door, which turned out to be Chalkin's office.

Decanters and glasses were part of the appointments and Paulin hurriedly poured two glasses. Vergerin took his and drank it down, the draught restoring some colour to his face.

He exhaled deeply.

Paulin, impressed by the man's control in a difficult situation, clapped his shoulder and gripped it firmly.

"It can't have been easy," he said.

she'd probably fainted. Either way the silence was welcome.

More shouting and confused orders! With an exasperated sigh, Paulin went to the shuttered window and threw it open on the most extraordinary scene: five men struggling to lift Chalkin to Craigath's back while the dragon, eyes whirling violently with red and orange, craned his neck about to see what was happening. Abruptly Chalkin's body relaxed and was shoved into position on Craigath's neck. M'shall leaped to his back and waited while two other Weyrmen roped Chalkin to M'shall and then added the collection of sacks and bags which would accompany the former Lord Holder into exile.

Craigath took off with a mighty bound and brought his wide wings down only once before he disappeared between.

"An island exile?" Vergerin asked, pouring himself another glass of wine.

"Yes, but not the same one we sent the guards to. Fortunately, there's a whole string of them."

"Young Island would be the safest one," Vergerin said dryly, sipping the wine. Then he made a face, looking down at the glass. "Wherever does he get his wines?"

Paulin smothered a laugh. "He's got no palate at all. Or did you like the idea of your nephew on an active volcanic island?"

doors, turned back to Paulin.

"Should I start right in? Or wait for the Conclave's decision?"

"Since we didn't know whether or not you had escaped Chalkin's grasp, we decided to let competent younger sons and daughters see what order they could contrive. However, since you would know a lot more about this Hold than they could, would you take overall charge?"

Vergerin now exhaled and a smile of intense relief lit his features. "Considering what I know of the state of this Hold and the demoralization of its holders, I'll need every bit of assistance I can muster." He shook his head. "I don't say my late brother was the best Holder in Pern, but he would never have countenanced the neglect much less Chalkin's ridiculous notion that Thread couldn't return because it would reduce the gaming he could do."

There was a polite rap on the door and when Paulin answered, Irene poked her head in.

"We managed to get the kitchen staff to prepare some food. I can't vouch for more than that the klah is hot and the bread fresh made."

Vergerin looked down at himself. "I couldn't possibly eat anything until I've washed."

Irene grinned. "I thought of that and had a room, and a bath, prepared for you. Even some clean clothing."

Pointing to the inner wall where Chalkin's portrait by lantine was ostentatiously illuminated, he pivoted, eyes wide, his expression incredulous.

"My nephew never looked like that," he said, laughter rippling through his tone.

Paulin chuckled, too, having his first good look at the representation. "I believe it took the artist some time to paint a.... satisfactory portrait of your nephew."

"With so little to work on... but I can't have that hanging there," Vergerin exclaimed. "It's... it's..."

"Ludicrous!" Paulin suggested. "Poor lantine, to have had to prostitute his abilities to create that!"

"That will do for starters." Paulin leaned close to Vergerin, trying not to inhale because the warmth of the Hall was increasing the pong of manure emanating from Vergerin's clothing.

"I don't think you'll hurt the artist's feelings by removing it from such a prominent place."

"Would he consider repainting it to a closer likeness to the model?" Vergerin asked. "That would remind me of my youthful follies as well as how not to manage a Hold."

"lantine's here - helped us get in, in fact. You can ask him yourself."

Irene put a wing of Benden riders at Vergerin's disposition to use in contacting the larger holdings in Bitra and announcing Chalkin's impeachment and exile.

By then M'shall had returned. "I dumped him... and his packages, on Island 32. You'll need to know that for the records. It's rather a nice place. Too bad he gets it."

"Did you have any trouble with him?" Paulin asked.

M'shall looked amused as he unbuckled his flight gear.

"With the wallop Bastom gave him? He was still unconscious when I left him. Near a stream." M'shall made a face. "I should have dumped him in it. Serve him right for what he did to those he had in cold storage."

By mid-morning matters seemed to be in Vergerin's complete control and the Council members felt able to leave Bitra Hold.

Iantine begged a ride from K'vin for himself and Chalkin's portrait.

"When are you coming to Benden Hold?" Bridgely wanted to know, catching the young portraitist coming down the courtyard steps.

"Lord Bridgely, I am sorry not to be ready quite yet," Iantine said.

Bridgely jabbed his finger at the painting. "You're not letting that take precedent, are you?" And he scowled.

"No, never," Iantine said, recoiling slightly. Then his grin fled.

K'vin was hiding his grin behind his gloved hand. "One can be too successful, you know," he said. Then he gestured for Iantine to mount Charanth, while he held the painting which he passed up to the artist when he was settled. "I'm glad you're going to fix this."

"Lord Holder Vergerin specifically requested me to. And I must say, I'm glad to do the sitter - justice."

"Justice?" K'vin laughed as he landed neatly between the bronze neck ridges. "I think that's possibly a dirty word to Chalkin now!" Iantine grunted as the dragon suddenly launched himself.

Not only was Iantine going to be able to set right that inaccurate portrait - he felt he had demeaned himself and Hall Domaize by succumbing to Chalkin's coercion, in spite of having no viable alternative - but he had given himself more time at Telgar Weyr. And Turn's End was nearing: Turn's End and the festivities that the mid-winter holiday always incurred. Maybe then he could come to some agreement with Debera.

Dragonriders could and often did take mates from non riders. It would have been easier if his profession was one that he could offer the Weyr in return for staying on in Telgar.

But, once Morath was able to fly, Debera could fly him wherever his commissions took him.

"It isn't this," lantine said, shaking his head and grinning.

He thoroughly enjoyed flying and, after the first experience with the utter cold and nothingness of between, had not been nervous about that transfer. He took a firmer grip on the strings about the painting. Charanth was now high enough above Bitra Hold to go between.

Meranath, bearing Tashvi and Salda as well as Zulaya, zoomed up beside his right wing: the dragon's golden body gleaming in the bright morning sun as her riders waved at him.

As he waved back, lantine was surprised to think it was still morning. The invasion of Bitra Hold had begun in such early hours that the day was not that old. So much happened these days!

BLACKNESS! lantine couldn't feel the cord on the painting, his butt on Charanth's neck, and then they were out in the sun, hanging over Telgar's familiar cone.

Far below, above the prow of Telgar Hold, a sparkle showed that Meranath had arrived. The big bronze now turned gracefully on one wing and headed down towards the Weyr.

For lantine, this happened all too swiftly, for he saw so much more from this vantage point than he did from the ground: the dragons sleeping in the sun on their weyr ledges, the younger riders practising catch and throw with firestone sacks, even the weyrings getting their morning scrub around the

As they dropped, K'vin turned his head. "At the Cavern?"

"Please," and lantine nodded, struggling to keep a grip on the painting. Not that losing it would bother him, but then he'd have to waste another board.

He swung his leg over and slid down Charanth's shoulder as quickly as he could.

"My thanks, K'vin," he said, grinning up, having to shield his eyes from the sun.

"Not needed. You more than earned it with today's doings." Charanth rumbled again, his gently whirling blue eyes focused on lantine who saluted him in gratitude. Then the bronze leaped up, flapped his wings twice and was landing on the ledge of the Weyrwoman's quarters.

"You're back, you're back, and safe," and Leopol came racing out of the Lower Cavern, leaping towards lantine who put out a restraining hand so the boy wouldn't carom off the edge of the painting.

"What have you done now?" Leopol demanded, taking care not to batter it.

"It's to be redone," lantine said, knowing the uselessness of avoiding Leopol's interest.

"Oh, the Chalkin portrait?" Leopol reached for it and lantine pivoted, putting his body between it and the lad's acquisitive hands.

gone, too. Three, we all know that Chalkin's for the chop, and four, you come back with a portrait and it isn't one you've done here." Leopold spread his hands. "It's obvious. The Lords and Leaders have got rid of Chalkin. Impeached, deposed and exiled him. Right?" He grinned at the summation, cocking his head over the other shoulder.

"Right?" he repeated.

Iantime sighed. "It's not my place to confirm or deny," he said tactfully, and started again for his quarters.

Leopold dodged in front, halting him again. "But I'm right about Chalkin, aren't I? He won't get ready for Threadfall, he's been far too hard on his people and half the Lord Holders owe him huge sacks of marks in gambling debts."

Iantime stopped. "Gambling debts?" He brushed past, determined to get to the dubious safety of his room without giving anything away to such a gossip as Leopold.

"Ah, Iantime." Tisha caught sight of him and moved her bulk through the tables with surprising speed and agility to intercept him.

"Did they catch Chalkin all right? Did he struggle? Did that spouse of his go with him, which frankly would surprise me? Did they find Vergerin alive? Will he take Hold, or does he have to wait till the Conclave at Turn's End?" Leopold bent double with laughter at Iantime's expression.

"I'll take it and put it very carefully in your room," Leopold said, grabbing hold of the wrapped painting and then snatching it out of lantine's unconsciously relaxed grip. "And I won't look until you tell me I can."

"No, wait, Leo," said Tisha. "I want to see what Chalkin considered 'satisfactory'"

"Do I have no privacy around here?" lantine demanded, raising his hands in helplessness. "Is there no way to keep secrets?"

"Not in a well-run Weyr, there isn't," said Tisha. "Eat. Drink. And, Leo, take the basket I made ready for K'vin up to his weyr. I didn't see Zulaya and Meranath, so she may have stopped over at Telgar Hold."

His knees weakened, as did his resolve, and lantine collapsed into the chair Tisha had invitingly pulled out for him.

"Shall I?" Leopold asked in his best wheedling tone, one hand on the cord knot.

"I'm not sure I could stop you," lantine said, and caught the pad he had stuffed inside the wrapping as Leopold made short work of opening.

lantine put the pad to one side. He didn't really want to show the latest drawings he'd done. The two castrati had died shortly after he had finished the sketches. He intensely regretted how pleased he had been with their sentences. Had they had any idea of what additional torment Chalkin would inflict on them when they asked to be returned to their Hold?

from joining in wholeheartedly, at least he was made to grin.

Tisha's amusement alerted the rest of the weyrfolk to lantine's return, and the table was shortly surrounded by people having a good laugh over what Chalkin had considered to be a 'satisfactory portrait' of himself. He sated their curiosity by giving a brief report of what had happened.

Everyone was much relieved that Chalkin was not only no longer Bitra's Lord, but also that he had been exiled far away from the Mainland.

"Too good for him, really," someone said.

"Ah, but he's lord of all he surveys, ain't he? Suit him!"

"No-one was hurt?"

"Who's going to take Hold there now, with so much to do close to Fall?" lantine answered as circumspectly as he could, though he was amazed at how accurately the weyrfolk had guessed what had happened. They also seemed to know a great deal about a Hold that was not beholden to Telgar Weyr. He didn't think he'd talked much about his uncomfortable stay at Bitra, so they must have had their information from other sources.

Weyrfolk did get to travel more than holders, so perhaps their level of information was more comprehensive.

Riders drifted in, early for the noontime meal but just as interested in what had happened at Bitra Hold. Some of the older ones remembered the

pad under his arm - because he knew nothing would keep Leopold from looking all through it - and then made his way to K'vin.

Since he had obviously told all he was going to tell, he was allowed to pass, with good-natured mauling on his way.

"I'm sorry, Weyrleader, if I was speaking out of turn."

K'vin regarded him with widened eyes. "Speaking out of turn? Ha, they had probably figured out everything on their own. What could you possibly tell them that they didn't know?"

"How many people Chalkin had in those appalling cells," lantine said, blurting out the words before he realized what he was saying.

K'vin put a sympathetic arm around his shoulders. "I think I'll have a few bad dreams over that myself," and he gave a deep shudder.

"Perhaps you'd best get some rest."

"No, I'd rather not, if you'd something else for me to do," lantine said truthfully. He didn't even need to stop off at his own quarters as his tubes of oil and brushes were already in the Weyrleaders' quarters.

K'vin's solicitous expression brightened. "I've some time now, and you've the painting to finish of me... unless you'd rather redo Chalkin... but Bridgely made it very plain to me that he'd like you at Benden to do his commissions by Turn's End. You're much sought after, you know."

"Yes, isn't she?" Something about the tone of his voice made Iantine wonder at such a response. They were Weyrleaders, together, weren't they? They always made such a stance of a good partnership.

But Iantine was getting as good at hearing things that weren't expressed as he was at seeing all that could be seen. Not his place to comment, though, despite a growing admiration for K'vin as Weyrleader.

Zulaya was a bit reserved, he knew from having spent so much time painting her, but she was much older than Iantine. And older than K'vin, too, for that matter.

"That gown was perfect for her," Iantine remarked to break an awkward silence.

"Yes, she had it made for the last Hatching," K'vin said and the smile he turned towards Iantine was easy, relaxed.

Iantine wondered if all he'd seen that morning hadn't skewed his judgment. They were at the weyr stairs now and climbed up. At the top of the steep flight, Iantine was glad he wasn't even out of breath.

"You're in good shape," K'vin said, with another friendly slap to his back to push him on into the high-ceilinged entrance to the weyr.

"I'd need to be, wouldn't I?" Iantine replied with a droll laugh.

He paused briefly, his eyes seeking the weyrlings at the lake. Yes, Debera was there, oiling Morath. He'd have a chance to talk to her later:

ser kept his request to a need to discuss something vital with Kalvi since S'nan felt such bells, whistles and signals should be unnecessary if the Weyrs were kept on their toes during Intervals.

Jemmy had meticulously drawn a replica of the prehistoric stone circle, plus another of a reconstruction of what it had originally looked like, and such description as might be valuable to Kalvi and his team.

Kalvi took one quick, almost derisive glance at the drawings, and then a second, more respectful one.

"Eye Rock? Finger Rock? Solstice?" He gave Clisser a broad smile. "I do believe it will suffice and rather neatly."

Then he frowned. "Couldn't you have given me a little more time? Solstice is only two weeks off.

"I..." Clisser began.

"Sorry, friend," Kalvi said with a self-deprecating smile, "you'd be busy with rehearsing and all that. Hmmm. Just leave it with me. I think we can contrive something." and he riffled through Jemmy's sketches. "Hmmm, yes, the lad has real talent."

"Don't you dare seduce him away from the College," Clisser said, assembling as fierce a frown on his face as he gave to wayward students.

Kalvi grinned, pretending to recoil in terror but his eyes were on the drawings. "We'll manage." He gave an exaggerated sigh. "It's what we're

also be read out that evening in every main Hold and Hall. If voting was required, votes were cast the morning of the First Day of Turn's End, the results counted and returned to the second traditional sitting of the Conclave on the day after Turn's End, when the New Year started.

The tradition was even more important in this 258th year after Landing with the Pass so imminent. Although Vergerin had been in charge but twenty days before the Conclave, it was obvious that he was taking a firm, but just Hold on Bitra.

He was also working his assistants hard but fairly. None of them had any complaint to register when adroitly queried by their fathers or mothers. Vergerin's first official act had been to send riders to every single known holding and announce Chalkin's removal and that as many as could attend Turn's End at Bitra Hold would be made welcome. Vergerin paid for additional supplies out of his own funds.

(No-one had found Chalkin's treasury; nor had he taken it with him into exile. Nadona had denied any knowledge of its whereabouts and moaned that he had left her without a mark to her name.) Altering a previously made decision, the Teachers' College planned now to supply a Turn's End concert to Bitra. They would bring the copies of the Charter which Vergerin had requested, to be given to each small holder. That would deplete to a few

confirm Vergerin as Lord Holder of Bitra. He was not abjured to train his young relatives, Chalkin's sons - to succession although he was in conscience bound to see them well taken care of, educated and prepared to make their own living as adults. He was relieved of his promise to forego having legitimate heirs and promptly installed at Bitra a nine-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. No-one ever knew who their mother had been. Vergerin made it plain that he was interested in acquiring a spouse suitable to hold as his Lady.

Clisser was called on to report on the matter of an indestructible and unambiguous method of confirming a Pass, and said that Kalvi and he had agreed on the mechanism and it would be installed on the eastern face of every Weyr. Kalvi looked suitably smug and nodded wisely, so Paulin allowed himself to be reassured. He wanted no more problems like Chalkin to arise again! Ever! And now was the moment to prevent them.

The matter of a new hold being established and named CROM came up, and there was considerable discussion.

"Look, they are entitled to use their Charter-granted acres, and that amounts to a fair whack of land," Bastom said, unexpectedly coming down on the side of the applicants. "Let'em call it a hold."

"Yes, but they want autonomy and besides, they're too far from any other Hold up there in the hills," Azury put in.

the motion which was carried.

There were a few more minor details to be discussed but these were carried as well. This year there was no referendum to be presented to the population.

"However, I want every one of you to give a fitly report of the trials and Chalkin's impeachment to the assembled," Paulin reminded the Lord Holders. "We want the truth circulated and believed: not a mess of rumours."

"Like the cannibalism!" Bridgely had been highly indignant over that one. "Sadistic Chalkin was, but let's squash that one now!"

"How under the sun did such a rumour ever get started?" Paulin asked, appalled. S'nan looked in a state of shock, staring incredulous at the Benden Lord Holder.

"The 'cold storage', I suspect," Bridgely said, disgusted.

"We didn't coin the term," said Azury with a shrug.

"Well, we don't want it circulated," M'shall said angrily. "Bad enough having to live with the facts without having to debunk the fantasies."

"We do want the swift justice meted out to the rapists and the murderers to be well publicized, though," Richud put in.

"That, yes! Speculation, no," Paulin said. He rose, and tapped the gavel on its block. "I declare this session of the Conclave dismissed. Enjoy Turn's End and we'll meet in three days' time."

Turn's End was a holiday for everyone except for those involved in the ambitious 'Landing Suite' debut at all the Weyrs and the major Holds. Clisser was run ragged with rehearsals and last-minute assignments, and understudies for those with winter colds. Then he had the extra burden of preparing for the precise calculations needed to set up the fail-safe mechanism to predict a Pass. Torn between the musical rehearsals and observing the installation of a permanent Thread-Fall warning device, he opted for the latter. Of course, his role was supervisory, as the more precise location had to be conducted by teams of astronomers, engineers and Weyrleaders on the eastern rim of all six establishments. He, Jemmy and Kalvi were to set the mechanism at Benden, the first Weyr to see the phenomenon, then skedaddle on dragon back to each of the other five Weyrs to be sure all went smoothly.

It was imperative that the first installation, at Benden, had to be spot on in case there might be a distortion at any other.

Though Clisser doubted it, not with Kalvi fussing and fussing over the components. Clisser had been over and over the requisite steps to pinpoint the rise of the Red Star. Once that 'circular eye' was set on the Rim, they could install the pointer, the finger. But the 'eye' had to be spot on! The teams had been in place for the past week, with pre-dawn checks on the Red Planet's position at dawn. All that was necessary now was a clear

had to accommodate different physical heights. Old diagrams of Stonehenge and other prehistoric rings had surfaced.

Actually Bethany's students had found them after an intensive search of long-unused documents. Fortunately for Clisser's peace, Sallisha had gone to Nerat for the Turn's End celebration, ready to start her next year's teaching Contract. He was spared any reminder from her of how important it was to keep such ancient knowledge viable.

He had rehearsed arguments, in case he had a letter from her, about the fact that, in the crunch, someone had remembered.

He was quite excited - if freezing - to be on Benden Weyr's Rim with the others, telescopes set up, aimed in the appropriate direction while Kalvi and Jemmy fiddled with their components. Kalvi had put up a cone for the pointer; the notion being that a person resting their chin on the cone's tip would see the Red Planet bracketed just as it cleared the horizon. They'd have to try it with folks of various statures to be sure that the device worked, but technically, Clisser thought it would. Kalvi was the shortest, he was tallest, M'shall was a half-head shorter, and Jemmy between the Weyrleader and Kalvi. If all could see the Red Planet in the Eye, the device would be proven.

Well, it would really be proven in another two hundred and fifty years or so with the Third Pass!

this distance, it wouldn't be, Clisser thought, though they had the measurements of it from the Yokohama observations. It was approximately the same size as Earth's old sister, Venus. And about as hospitable.

Somehow, Clisser thought - and told himself to breathe as he watched, the wanderer managed to look baleful in its redness. "Hadn't one of the other Sol satellites been called the red planet"?

"Oh, yes, Mars. Suitable, too, since it had been named after a war god."

"And equally a suitable colour for a planet that was about to wreak havoc on us. How could such an avaricious organism develop on a planet that spent most of its orbit too far away from Rubkat's warmth to generate any life form?" Of course, he was aware that very odd Life forms had been found by the early space explorers. Who had blundered into the Nathi, to name another vicious species?

But the reports on this mycorrhizoid gave it no intelligence whatsoever. A menace without malice. Clisser sighed. Well, that was some consolation: it didn't really mean to eat everything in sight, people, animals, plants, trees; but that was all it could do.

Which was more than enough, Clisser thought grimly, remembering the visuals of recorded incidents. That's another thing he ought to have done - a graphic record - even a still picture would make vividly plain how devastating Thread could be. Iantine's sketches done at the Bitran borders had

"Yup, that'll do it. You got that solidly in place? Good," and the energetic engineer turned to M'shall. "As you love your dragon, don't let anyone or anything touch that iron rim. I've used a fast-drying cement, but even a fraction out of alignment and we've lost it."

"No-one'll be up here after we leave," M'shall promised, eyeing the metal circle nervously. For all he knew that the ring was iron, it looked fragile sitting there, the Red Planet slowly rising above it.

"But that's going to be replaced, isn't it? With stone?"

"It is, and don't worry about us messing up the alignment later. We won't," Kaivi said, blithely confident, rubbing his hands together and grinning with success. "Now, we've got some more dawns to meet."

"Yes, surely, but take time for breakfast."

"Ha! No time to pamper ourselves. But I was indeed grateful for the klah." Kalvi was gathering up his equipment, including five more iron circles, and gesturing to his crew to hurry up. "Not with five more stops to make this morning. The things I talk myself into!" He looked around now in the semi-dark of false dawn.

"Where's our ride?"

"That way," M'shall said, pointing to the brown dragons and riders waiting around on the Rim.

S'nan's pride all that much, but sunrise came forty-five minutes later in the northernmost Weyr due to the longitudinal difference. However, S'nan couldn't argue the point that Benden had to have its equipment installed first since it was the most easterly.

Clisser had heard the talk about S'nan's continued distress over Chalkin's impeachment. The Fort Weyrleader was not the oldest of the six: G'don was, but no-one worried about his competence to lead the Weyr. S'nan had always been inflexible, literal, didactic, but that wouldn't necessarily signify poor leadership during the Pass. Clisser sighed. That was a Weyr problem, not his. Thank goodness! He had enough of them.

He'd catch some rest when they finished at Fort Weyr so he'd be fresh for the final rehearsal at the Hall. If Sheledon had altered the score again during his absence, he'd take him to task. No-one would know what to play with all the changes.

Get this performance over with and then refine the work. It was, Clisser felt, quite possibly Sheledon's masterpiece.

"You're riding with me, Teacher," a voice said. "Don't want you walking off the Rim!"

Clisser shook himself to attention and smiled up at the brown rider. "Yes, yes, of course."

"Here's my hand," and Clisser reached up to it.

upward.

They were facing east, and the malevolence of the Red Star was dimmed by the glow of Rukbat rising, altering the rogue planet's aspect to one of almost negligible visibility, almost anonymity, in the brightening sky.

Amazing! thought Clisser. I must remember to jot that down.

But he knew he never would. And Pernese literature was thus saved another diarist, he amended. Clisser saw that the rider, too, had his eyes fastened on the magnificent spectacle. He must savour this ride.

The dragon veered northward, pivoting slowly on his left wing-tip. The dragons would soon have more important journeys to make. Clisser did observe the majestic snow capped mountains of the Great Northern Range, tinted delicate shades of orange by the rising sun. What lantine could make of such a scene! Then abruptly all he could see was the black nothingness of between.

"What happens if you wear your fingers out?" Leopol asked lantine.

The artist hadn't even been aware of the lad's presence but the comment - because lantine was sketching the scene of the dragonets so fast that his elbow was actually aching - caused him to burst out laughing, even though he didn't pause for a moment.

I'd be useful," and Leopol's expression was earnest, his grey eyes clouded. "I know how you like your paints mixed, your brushes cleaned, and even how to prepare wood or canvas for portraits." His pathetic stance could have persuaded almost anyone.

Iantine chuckled and ruffled the boy's thick black hair. "And what would your father do?"

"Him? He's winding himself up for Threadfall." A discreet question to Tisha had produced the information that a bronze rider, C'lim, was the boy's father; the mother had died shortly after Leopol's birth. But he, like every other child of the Weyr, had become everyone's child, loved and disciplined as the need arose. "He doesn't half pay attention to me any more."

Which was fair, Iantine thought, since Leopol had become his shadow. "Tisha?"

"Her? She'll find someone else to mother."

"Well, I will ask, but I doubt you'd be allowed. The other riders think you'll impress a bronze when you're old enough."

Leopol tossed off that future with a shrug. What he could do now was more important than what might be three or four years in the future. "D'you have to go?"

Chalkin's face like he really is, you know, and it isn't as if you were doing anyone else out of a place to sleep." Leopol's face was completely contorted now by his dismay. "Debera really wants you to stay, you know." lantine shot him an almost angry look.

"Leopol?" he said warningly.

"Aw," and the boy screwed his boot toe into the dirt, everyone knows you fancy her, and the girls say that she's gone on you. It's only Morath who's the problem. And she doesn't have to be. Soon as she can fly, she'll have a weyr and you'll have some privacy."

"Privacy?" lantine knew that Leopol was precocious but...

Leopol cocked his head and had the grace not to grin.

"Weyrs're like that. Everyone knows everyone else's secrets." lantine hung amid irritation to relief in the information about Debera and amusement that his carefully hidden interest was so transparent.

He had never thought about loving someone so much that their absence could cause physical discomfort. He never thought he would spend sleepless hours reviewing even the briefest of conversations; identify a certain voice in a crowded cavern; have to rub out sketches of imagined meetings and poses which his fingers did of their own accord.

It appeared that a dragon could talk to an yon she/he wished to.

They did so for reasons of their own, which sometimes they did not discuss with their riders. Or they did. None of the other weyrings, even the greens with whom lantine was now quite familiar, spoke to him.

It was Morath who counted.

Not that the green dragon - who was the largest of that colour from that clutch - ever explained herself. Nor did lantine ask.

He merely treasured the immense compliment of her conversation.

She did ask to see his sketch-pad once. He noticed the phenomenon of the pad reflected in every one of the many facets of her eyes.

They'd been bluey-green at the time, their normal shade, and whirling slowly.

"Do you see anything?"

Yes. Shapes. You put the shapes on the pad with the thing in your hand?

"I do." How much could a dragon see with that kind of optical equipment? Still, lantine supposed it would be useful when Thread was falling from all directions. As the dragon eye protruded out from the head, it obtained overhead images, too. Good design. But then, dragons had been designed, though no-one nowadays knew who could have managed the genetic engineering. It was one thing to breed animals for specific traits, but

Debera would be constant, but any love left over from Morath for him could scarcely match his commitment.

Did it have to? After all, he was totally committed to his work.

Could he fault her for being equally single-minded? There was, however, a considerable difference between loving a dragon and loving to paint. Or was there?

Maybe it was as well, lantine thought, tucking his pencil behind his ear and closing his pad, that he was going to Benden after Turn's End. Maybe if Debera... and Morath were out of sight, they might also go out of mind and his attachment would ease off.

"You got your Turn's End clothes ready? Need ironing, er, anything?" Leopold asked, his expression wistful.

"You did'em yesterday, and I haven't worn'em yet," he said, but he ruffled the boy's thick hair again and, looping his arm over the thin shoulders, steered him to the kitchen. Let's eat."

"Ah, there's not much to eat," Leopold said in disgust. "Everyone's getting ready for tonight."

"They've been getting ready all week," lantine said. "But there's bread and cold meats set out."

"Huh!" lantine noticed that Leopold had no trouble making himself several sandwiches of what was available, and had two cups of soup and two ap-

and carisaks were passed around. Tisha sailed out, her assistants with her, and shortly everyone was in the Lower Cavern and being served a lunch considerably more complicated than soup and sandwiches. Leopold was in the thick of it, too, the rascal, and the recipient of a huge wedge of iced cake. Iantine selected a good spot against the wall, sharpened his pencil with his knife and opened his pad. This was a good scene to preserve. If he got them down on paper now, maybe he could listen to the music this evening without itchy fingers.

As he worked, he realized that Telgar had rated some of the best musicians, called back from wherever their contracts had taken them, for Turn's End celebrations. He'd finish in time for the concert, and that would be that for the day!

It wasn't, of course. But then, he found it hard not to sketch exciting moments and scenes. Especially as he didn't want to leave this pad anywhere that it could be casually opened.

And he could listen to the music just as well while drawing.

Sketching also kept his hands where they should be and not itching to go round Debera's shoulder, or hold her hand.

Sketching did allow him some licence, for he could always apologize that he didn't realize his leg was against hers, or that their shoulders were

dress she was wearing. Green was her colour and she must know that: a gentle green, like new leaves, which made her complexion glow. Angie had told him the colour of Debera's Turn's End gown, so he'd bought a shirt of a much deeper green so that they'd go together. He liked the way she'd made a coronet of her long hair, with pale green ribbons laced in and dangling down her back. Even her slippers were green. He wondered if there'd be dancing music, too, but there usually was at Turn's End. Although maybe not, what with the 'Landing Suite' first. He bent to ask her to reserve dances for him, but she shushed him.

"Listen, too, Ian," she said in a soft whisper, gesturing to his pad. "The words are as beautiful as the music." Iantine glanced forward again, only now realizing that there were singers, too. Had he been that rapt in being next to Debera without Morath?

I'm here. I listen, too and Morath's voice startled him, coming into his head so unexpectedly.

He gulped. Would the dragon always be able to read his mind?

He asked the question again, more loudly, in his own head.

There was no reply. Because there was no reply? Or because there was none needed to such an obvious question?

But Morath hadn't sounded upset that he was luxuriating in Debera's proximity. She had sounded pleased to be there and listening.

leaving the great colony ships for the last time. A poignant moment, and the tenor voice rose in a grateful farewell to them where they would orbit over Landing for ever, their corridors empty, the bridge deserted, the bays echoing vaults. The tenor, with creditable breath control, let his final note die away as if lost in the vast distance between the ships and the planet.

A respectful pause followed and then the ovation which his solo had indeed merited burst forth. Quickly lantine sketched him, taking his bows, before he stepped back into the ensemble.

"Oh, good, Ian. He was just marvellous," Debera said, craning her head to see what he was doing. She kept right on clapping, her eyes shining. "He'll be delighted you did him, too." lantine doubted that, and managed a smile that did not echo the stab of jealousy he felt because Debera's interest had been distracted from him.

She likes you, Ian, said Morath as if from a great distance, though she was ranged with the other still flightless dragonets on the Bowl floor.

Ian? he echoed in surprise. Other riders had told him that, while dragons would talk to people other than their own rider, they weren't so good at remembering human names. Morath knows my name?

Why shouldn't I? I hear it often enough. And Morath sounded sort of tetchy.

He didn't pay such close attention to the second and third parts of the 'Landing Suite', which brought events up to the present. A cynical section of his mind noticed that Chalkin's impeachment was not mentioned, but then it was a very recent incident which the composer and lyricist would not have known about. He wondered would it ever make history? Chalkin would love it. Which might well be why no-one would include him. That'd be the final punishment anonymity.

Dinner was announced at the conclusion of the Suite, and the big Lower Cavern was efficiently reorganized for dining.

In the scurry and fuss of setting up tables and chairs, he got separated from Debera. The panic which that caused him made it extremely clear that he could not divorce his emotions from the girl.

When they found each other again, her hand went out to him as quickly as his to her, and they remained clasped while they waited in line to collect their food.

Iantine and Debera finally found seats at one of the long trestle tables where everyone was discussing the music, the singers, the orchestration, how lucky they were to be in a Weyr which got preferential treatment. There was, of course, a tradition of music on Pern, brought by their ancestors and encouraged by not only the Teaching Hall but also Weyr and Hold. Everyone was taught how to read music from an early age and encouraged

her so elated. But then, he knew he was feeling high with an almost breathless anticipation of the dancing.

He'd have her in his arms, then, even closer than they were now. He could barely wait.

But he had to, for of course on First Day, ice-cream, the special and traditional sweet, was available and no-one would want to miss that. It was a fruit flavour this year, creamy, rich, tangy with lots of tiny fruit pieces, and he was torn between eating slowly - which meant the confection might turn sloppy since the Lower Cavern was warm indeed - or gulping it down firm and cold. He noticed that Debera ate quickly, so he did the same.

As soon as the diners finished, they dismantled the tables and pushed back the chairs so that there'd be space for the dancing. The musicians, re-assembling in smaller units so that the dance music would be continuous, were tuning up their instruments again.

When all was ready, K'vin led Zulaya - resplendent in the red brocade dress of her portrait - on to the floor for their traditional opening of the dance. Iantine caught himself wanting to sketch the distinguished-looking couple, but he'd hidden his pad in the pile of tables and had to content himself with storing the details in his mind.

He'd never seen Zulaya flirt so with K'vin and the Weyrleader was responding gallantly. He did notice some riders talking among themselves,

Eyes gleaming, head held high and smiling as if her face would split apart, Debera responded with a deep dip. "Why, I was hoping you'd ask, lantine!"

"I get the next one," Leopold cried, appearing unexpectedly beside them and looking up at Debera, his eyes exceedingly bright.

"Did you sneak some wine tonight?" lantine asked, suspicious.

"Who'd give me any?" Leopold replied morosely.

"No-one would give you anything you couldn't take another way, Leo," Debera said. "But I'll keep you a dance. Later on."

And she stepped towards the floor, lantine whisking her away from the boy as fast as he could.

"Even for a Weyr lad, he's precocious," Debera said, and she held up her arms as she moved into his.

"He is at that," lantine replied, but he didn't want to talk about Leopold at all as he swung her lithe body among the dancers, and eased them away to the opposite side of the floor from Leopold.

"He'll follow, you know, until he gets his dance," she said, grinning up at him.

"We'll see about that," and he tightened his arms possessively around her strong, slender body.

Will I dance when I'm older? lantine clearly heard the green dragon ask.

lantine grimaced, wondering how under the sun he could manage any sort of a private conversation with his beloved.

I won't listen then. Morath sounded contrite.

"How long do you think you'll be at Benden, Ian?" Debera asked.

He wondered if Morath had spoken to her, too, but decided against asking, though he didn't want to discuss his departure at all.

Certainly not with Debera, the reason he desperately wanted to stay at Telgar.

"Oh," he said as casually as he could, "I'd want to do my best for Lord Bridgely and his Lady. They've been my sponsors, you see, and I owe them a lot."

"Do you know them well?"

"What? Me? No, my family's mountain holders."

"So were mine."

"Were?"

Debera gave a wry laugh. "Don't let's talk about families."

"I'd far rather talk about us," he said, and then mentally kicked himself for such a trite response.

Debera's face clouded.

"Now what did I say wrong?" He tightened his arms on her reassuringly. Her expression was so woeful.

She gave him an odd glance. "That's just it."

"What is?"

"You wanting to talk to me, dance with only me and Ooooh," and suddenly lantine had a hunch. "Tisha gave all the riders that don't-do-anything-you'll-be-sorry-for at Turn's End lecture?"

She gave him a startled look, and he grinned back at her. "I've been read that one a time or two myself, you know."

"But you don't know," she said, "that it's different for dragon riders."

"For green riders with very immature dragons."

Then she gave him a horrified look as if she hadn't meant to be so candid.

"Oh!" He pulled her closer to him, even when she resisted, and chuckled. All those casual questions he'd asked dragon riders explained all that she didn't say.

"Green dragons are. how do I put it, kindly? Eager, loving, willing, too friendly for their own good."

She stared up at him, a blush suffusing her cheeks, her eyes angry and her body stiffening against the rhythm of the dance.

They were about to pass an opening, one of the corridors that led back to the storage areas of the Weyr. He whirled them in that direction despite her resistance, speaking in a persuasively understanding tone.

and only because he was leaning against the wall did he have the strength to support them both.

That's very nice, you know.

"Morath!" Debera jerked her body upright, though her hands clenched tightly on his neck and shoulder. "Morath dear, what have I done?"

"Not as much to her as you have to me," lantine said in a shaky voice. "She doesn't sound upset or anything."

Debera pushed away to stare up at him - he thought she had never looked so lovely. "You heard Morath?"

"Hmmm, yes."

"You mean, that wasn't the first time?" She was even more startled.

"Hmmm. She knows my name, too," he said, plunging in with a bit of information that he knew might really distress her, but now was the time to be candid.

Debera's eyes widened even more and her face had paled in the glow light of the corridor. She leaned weakly against him.

"Oh, what do I do now?" He stroked her hair, relieved that she hadn't just stormed off, leaving all his hopes in crumbs.

"I don't think we upset Morath with that little kiss," he said softly.

"Little kiss?" Her expression went blank. "I've never been kissed like that before in my life." lantine laughed. "Me neither. Even if you didn't want to

He nodded. "That's as it should be," he said, although he heartily wished he could be her sole and only concern.

"I'm glad you do know that but I don't know what I feel about you, Ian, except that I did like your kiss." Her eyes were tender and she glanced shyly away from him. "I'm even glad you did kiss me. I've sort of wanted to know - - -" she said with a ripple in her voice, but still shy.

"So I can kiss you again?"

She put her hand on his chest. "Not quite so fast, lantine! Not quite so fast. For my sake as well as Morath's. Because," and then she blurted out the next sentence, "I know I'm going to miss you... almost... as much as I'd miss Morath. I didn't know a rider could be so involved with another human.

"Not like this. And," she increased her pressure on the hand that held them apart because he wanted so to kiss her for that, "I can't be honestly sure if it's not because Morath rather likes you, too, and is influencing me."

I am not, said Morath firmly, almost indignantly.

"She says..." Debera began as lantine said, "I heard that."

They both laughed and the sensual tension between them eased. He made quick use of the opportunity to kiss her, lightly, to prove that he could and that he did understand about Morath. He had also actually asked as many questions about rider liaisons as discretion permitted.

come to come back... to the Weyr, I will return. Am I welcome?"

"Yes, you are," Debera said as Morath also confirmed it.

"Well, then," and he kissed her lightly, managing to break it off before the emotion that could so easily start up again could fire, "let us dance, and dance and dance. That should cause no problems, should it?"

"Of course," the words were no sooner out of his mouth than he knew that having her so close to him all evening was going to be a trial of his self-control.

His lips tingled as he led her back, her fingers trustingly twined into his. The dance was ending as he put his arms around her, so they managed just one brief spin. Since he now felt far more secure, he did let Leopold partner Debera for one fast dance, or he'd never hear the last of it from the boy.

Other than that surrender, he and Debera danced together all night, cementing the bond that had begun: danced until the musicians called it a night.

He was going to hate to be parted from her, more now because they did have an understanding - of sorts - but there was no help for it.

He had the duty to Benden Hold.

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woodwind section: he'd've sung the part himself, but he hadn't the voice for it.

But then, the only solos which Sheledon wouldn't find fault with would be Sydra's, and she never failed to give a splendid performance.

Bethany's flute obligatos had been remarkable, matching Sydra's voice to perfection.

Paulin had been on his feet time after time, applauding the soloists and, at the finale, surreptitiously brushing a tear from his eye. Even old S'nan looked pleased - also fatuous, but on the whole Clisser was relieved at the reception. He hoped the two performances had been popular elsewhere on the continent. A great deal of work had been put into rehearsals by folks who had little spare time as it was.

The Teaching Songs and Ballads had been just as well received, with people going about humming some of the tunes. Which was exactly what the composers had hoped for. Fortunately, honours were even between Jemmy and Sheledon for catchy tunes. He caught himself humming the 'Duty Song' chorus, which had gone particularly well. He wouldn't have to deal with a laborious copying of the Charter once youngsters learned those words off by heart. It certainly fitted the bill.

One tangle of Thread could destroy acres of trees in the time it took to get a ground crew to the affected area.

He sighed. If only the organics plastic machinery were still operating... but the one unit housed in the Fort storage had rusted in the same flooding that had ruined so much else.

"Ours not to wonder what were fair in life," he quoted to himself, "which is a saying I should have made up to remind me that we've got what we've got and have to make do." He couldn't help but feel somewhat depressed, though.

There had been some high moments these last few days, and it was hard to resume normal routine. Not everyone on the teaching staff was back, though all should have checked in by late evening. He'd hear then how the performances went elsewhere. He'd have to wait to learn how the new curriculum was working. By springtime he'd know what fine tuning would be needed. He could count on Sallisha for that, he was sure.

By springtime, Thread would fall and the easy pace they had all enjoyed would be a memory.

Ah, that was what he had to do - he'd put it off long enough write up the roster for ground crews drafted from students over fifteen and teachers. He'd promised that to Lord Paulin and, what with everything else, never produced it. He pulled a fresh sheet of paper from the drawer, then

He answered as well as he could, amazed at the difference between his reception here and the one he'd had at Bitra. Lady Jane was a fluttery sort of woman, not at all what he would have expected as the spouse of a man like Bridgely. She must be extremely efficient under all that flutter, he thought, contrasting the grace, order and appearance of the public rooms with those at Bitra, and seeing a vast difference between the two.

No low-level living for him here, either. Lady Jane led him on to the family's floor, urging the two drudges who were carrying the canvases and sky broom wood panels to mind their steps and not damage their burdens.

She opened the door, presenting him with the key, and he was bemused as he followed her into a large day room, at least ten times larger than the cubicle at Bitra, on the outside of the Hold so that it had a wide, tall window facing northeast. It was a gracious room, too, the stone walls washed a delicate greeny-white, the furnishings well-polished wood, with a pleasing geometric pattern in greens and beige on the coverings.

I do know that artists prefer a north light, but this is the best we can do for you on that score. Benden's Lady fluttered her hands here and there. They were graceful, small hands, with only the wide band of a spousal ring on the appropriate finger. Another contrast to the Bitran tendency to many gaudy jewels.

Lesnour. D'you know his work?"

"Lesnour?"

"Indeed."

Iantine dropped his hand from the smoothly waxed upright. Lesnour, who'd lived well past the hundred mark, had designed and executed Benden Hold's murals and had been famed for his use of colour.

He'd also compiled a glossary of pigments available from indigenous materials, a volume which Iantine had studied and which had certainly helped him at Bitra.

Lady Jane pushed open the wooden door into the sleeping room, which was not large but still generous in size. He could see the large bed, its four posts carved with unusual leaves and flowers: probably taken from Earth's botany. She pointed at the back to the third room of the suite: a private toilet and bath. And the whole suite was warm. Benden had been constructed with all the same conveniences that Fort Hold boasted.

"This is much more than I need, Lady Jane," Iantine said, almost embarrassed as he dropped his carisak to the floor of the day room.

"Nonsense! We know at Benden what is due a man of your abilities. Space," and she gave a graceful sweep of her hand about the room, "is so necessary to compose the thoughts and to allow the mind to relax."

tainly enough space for the boy to be accommodated in with him.

So she left, after he had once again expressed his profuse thanks for the courtesies.

He prowled about the rooms, then washed his hands and face, learning that the water came very hot out of the spigot.

The bath had been carved out of the rock, deep enough for him to immerse himself completely and sufficiently long to lie flat out in the water. Even the Weyr had not such elegant conveniences.

He unpacked his clothing so that the wrinkles would hang out of his good green shirt and began setting up his workplace.

And then sat down in one of the upholstered chairs, plunked his feet down on the footstool, leaned back and sighed. He could get accustomed to this sort of living, so he could! Except for the one lack - Debera.

He wondered briefly if Lady Jane would flutter while she posed for him. And how would he pose her? Somehow he must put in the flutter of her, but also her grace and charm.

He wondered what instrument she played with those small hands. If only Debera weren't so far away lantine might not have been pleased to know that Debera was at that very moment the subject of discussion between the Weyrleaders at Telgar.

"Well, the fighting wings, certainly. Leave the training ones here, give them responsibility... and see how they like it."

"J'dar had better be in charge," K'vin said, glancing to see if she agreed. She shrugged. "J'dar or O'ney."

"No, J'dar." Oddly enough, she gave him a pleased smile. He hadn't expected that, since she had specifically named O'ney, one of the oldest bronze riders. He tried to defer to her judgment whenever possible, but he'd noticed that O'ney tended to be unnecessarily officious.

"Now, this is as far as grubs had migrated on last winter's check," she said, running her finger along Rubicon River.

"How're the grubs supposed to get across that?" K'vin asked, tapping the contour lines for the steep cliffs which lined the river, gradually tapering down above the Sea of Azov.

"The Agric guys say they'll either go around or be carried across the river as larvi in the digestive tracts of wherries and some of those sport animals that were let loose. They have been breeding, you know."

Zulaya was teasing now, since she knew very well that Charanth had had to rescue him from a very large, hungry orange and black striped feline. Charanth had been highly insulted because the creature had actually then attacked him, a bronze dragon! The incident had been a levelling one for both rider and dragon.

you be good enough to spread the word that the Weyr's going off on exercise," and she grinned at K'vin, "tomorrow, first light? That should startle a few."

"Undoubtedly," and glancing at Zulaya for permission, K'vin made a second request of Meranath. "And ask J'dar and T'dam to step up here, please?"

The sun will be much warmer in the south, Meranath said, and we will all like that, K'vin.

"Glad you approve," he told her, giving the gold queen a little bow. He was also considerably gratified that she was using his name more. Could that mean that Zulaya was thinking of him more often? He kept that question tight in his mind, where even Charanth wouldn't hear it. Did she really approve of his leadership? Zulaya never gave him any clues despite her courtesies to him in public; though he certainly appreciated that much. He didn't seem any closer to a real intimacy with her, and he wanted one badly. Would he ever figure out how to achieve that? Could that be why she had suggested this excursion?

"How long has it been since there was an update on the grubs?"

She shrugged. "That's not the point. We need a diversion, and this makes a good one. Also, someone should do it for the Agric records. And

mentioning the destination, and it was all over the Weyr by dinner-time. They were besieged by requests from weyrfolk to be taken along. Even Tisha was not shy about requesting a lift.

"Some of the bronzes would need to carry two passengers," K'vin said, doing some quick calculations.

"The weyrlings would have to stay," Zulaya told him, that necessity causing a brief hitch to the euphoria. But she shrugged.

"We'll make an occasion for T'dam to take them down once they are flighted, but they're weyrbound this time."

"That wouldn't be until after Thread has started," K'vin said, looking doubtful.

"Sure, we know when it falls, north or south, and a day off for the auxiliaries is no big thing. Plan it for a rainy day, here," Zulaya said, "and they won't mind for the sun down south." So that issue was settled.

The entire Weyr assembled, loading passengers and supplies for an outing that was now scheduled for three days.

K'vin allowed they would need that long to make a diligent survey of grub penetration. He brought with him maps and writing material so he could make accurate records.

The morning had its moment of humour: getting Tisha aboard brown Branuth had been a struggle, involving not only Branuth's rider, T'lel (who

better than to leave my caverns for any reason whatsoever. This is very uncomfortable. Stop that guffawing, T'lel. Stop it right now. It isn't funny where I'm sitting. Get up here and let's go!" Getting Tisha aboard Branuth had taken so much time that everyone else was in place and ready to go by the time T'lel did manage to take his place in front of Tisha.

"Not only am I being split, I'm also been bisected by these ridges. Did you sharpen them on purpose, T'lel? No wonder riders are so skinny. They'd have to be. Don't dragons grow ridges for large people? I should have had K'vin take me up. Charanth is a much bigger dragon. Why couldn't you have put me up on your bronze, K'vin?" Tisha shouted across the intervening space.

K'vin was trying to preserve his dignity as Weyrleader by not laughing at the sight of her, but he didn't dare look in her direction again. Instead he swivelled his torso so he could scan everyone, pleased to see all eyes on him, rider, passengers and dragon. He peered upwards to the rim where more dragons awaited their departure, poised well clear of the newly positioned Eye and Finger Rocks. Now he raised his arm.

Charrie, they are to assume their wing positions in the air.

They know, Charnath sounded petulant, for this was a frequent drill. K'vin slapped his neck affectionately with one hand while he gave his up-held right arm the pump.

so that all could see the Weyrleader.

Inform the Weyr that our destination is the Sea of Azov.

I have!

K'vin pumped his arm in the continuous gesture to signal, Go between!
The entire Weyr blinked out simultaneously.

Steady, he cautioned Charanth, pleased with that disciplined departure.
Now we go!!

Three seconds he counted, and then the warm air above the brilliantly blue Sea of Azov was like the smack of a hot towel in his face. Charanth rumbled in pleasure.

K'vin was far more interested in discovering that the ranks of the dragons, wing by wing, had arrived still in formation.

He grinned.

Please inform the wing leaders to take their riders to their separate destinations.

One by one the wings disappeared, with the exception of T'llel's which had picked the Sea area for their excursion site.

The queens started to glide towards the shore too, for they carried quite a few of the supplies which Tisha would need to set up her hearths for the evening meal.

That was much more dignified.

Branuth says it was easier on him, too, but he doesn't think he should do the same back at Telgar.

Not with the water that cold this time of year.

We can now land? Branuth says the sun is warm.

I thought you wanted to hunt. Later. NOW I want to get warm all over.

Charanth's preference was almost unanimous as the dragons spread out on both the pebbled beach and the shore line which was covered with a shrub that, when bruised by large dragon bodies, gave off a rich pungent odour which was not at all unpleasant.

Tisha had some of the weyrfolk off finding kindling and stones to make camp-fires, and to see what fruits might be ripe, and another group set to fish where boulders had tumbled down in to the Sea like a breakwater.

"I'm going for a long swim," Zulaya called out to him as he and Charanth glided to a landing. She was already stripping off her jacket. "Meranath wants one, too." She touched down long enough to strip off the rest of her clothing, which she left in a neat pile on a boulder before making her way to the water.

"What about the grubs?"

"They'll wait," she yelled over her shoulder, wading out until the water was deep enough for swimming.

probably the last thing on anyone's mind. Sunning, swimming in the pleasant waters, hunting for dragons and food-gathering for humans took precedence and space and time for absolute privacy.

P'tero and M'leng asked permission of V'last, their wing leader to take their dragons hunting.

"Remember what K'vin told you about the sport creatures down here," V'last said, serving the same warning to the other riders wishing to hunt their dragons.

P'tero and M'leng nodded obediently but, as soon as they left the clearing where their wing had landed on the Malay River, they laughed at the very notion that any creature could be dangerous to their dragons.

"It's really hot here," M'leng said, glancing back at the river.

"We'll be hotter after we've hunted the dragons," said P'tero.

"But once that's done, we really don't have to do another thing until dinner."

"So let's not come back here until just before," M'leng suggested, laughing recklessly. "Or we'll end up having to hunt or fish or gather."

"There're enough weyrfolk with us to do all that - and enjoy," P'tero said, rather condescendingly. "Let's get out of here." He made a running jump and neatly vaulted onto Ormonth's blue back. M'leng simultaneously boarded green Sith.

were winter weight anyhow. P'tero admired M'leng's compact body. The green rider was small boned which had always delighted P'tero, with a surprisingly strong and agile wiry frame. He was also winter-white, right to his collar. He looked so funny, as if he had two different skins.

Then the blue rider became fascinated with the tropical terrain around them, subtly different from the north's warmer Holds. Nerat was rain forests and vast tracks of almost impenetrable jungle except along the western side, whereas Ista was sharp hills and deep valleys, also densely vegetated.

But here a vast grassland, similar in some respects to the plains of Keroon, spread out in all directions, dotted by up thrusts of bare yellow rock, occasional copses of angular trees with fronds spilling from the crests, and large, wide branched trees like islands. The dragons' flight over some of these caused flocks of wherries and other avian forms to debouch in frantic escape. Can I eat them? Ormonth enquired of his rider, speeding up in case he was allowed to give chase.

What? Those tough mouthffils? P'tero asked scornfully.

Then he cupped his hands and shouted at M'leng: "Ormonth's hungry enough to eat wherries!"

"Sith wanted to, as well. We'd better feed them," M'leng yelled back. "Over there!" and he pointed to one of the rock piles. One of the spreading

torsos.

Immediately they landed, the two young men stripped off their heavy flight pants and boots. They had to put their socks back on, for the rock was far too hot for bare feet.

M'leng, who had good distance vision, covered his eyes with one hand, peering to the west where a long dark line seemed to be moving.

"Oh, good, herd beasts." He hauled Sith's head round and then pushed it in the right direction. "See? You can eat those. Much better than wher-ries. Off you go, now!" And he gave Sith a thump of dismissal.

"Follow Sith, Ormonth," and P'tero shoved the blue's head to the right. Hunt with her and you can't get into any trouble that way.

"We'll watch from here." Ormonth shifted weight from one diagonal to the other, his whirling eyes with a trace of anxious yellow.

"What's the matter with you?" P'tero demanded, wanting both dragons to be away so that he and M'leng could have some real privacy.

And if the pair were busy enough hunting and eating, they'd pay no attention at all to what their riders were doing.

Smell something!

"M'leng, does Sith smell anything?" P'tero was annoyed, but you didn't ignore your dragon.

"Oooh, your hide is hot. We'd best be careful not to burn in this sun."

"We'll be all right if we move a lot."

"And we will, won't we?" They enjoyed each other's company so much that neither was aware when the breeze altered to the west. It still cooled their bare bodies, drying the sweat they had generated. They weren't even aware of much until two things happened at the same instant: Ormonth's angry scream reverberated in P'tero's skull, and he was rammed down hard against M'leng so that he cracked his chin on the rock as sharp things tore into his buttocks.

ORMONTH he shrieked mentally and vocally.

M'leng was limp under P'tero as he writhed in agony from whatever was attacking him.

"HELP ME!" he howled, struggling to turn and see that was trying to eat him!

A dark shadow, and the air pressure above him seemed compressed: a most hideous roar sent a carrion stink and hot breath across his bare back! The talons were ripped from his flesh, causing him to shriek again. Something heavy and furry was being hauled across his tortured legs and away! He caught a glimpse of green hide and then blue...

And then something large and tawny that seemed to come from nowhere. A blue tail curled protectingly around him. Above his head he heard

unsheathing and curling into his weyrmate's back, blood welling up. Despite the pain in his legs and back, he lurched across M'leng and beat at the paw, struggling to lift the claws out of his lover's body.

More noise, more draconic roars, and suddenly there was space above him, letting in fresh air and the sight of other dragons. Two were attacking the tawny lean creatures that were swarming up the rock out-thrust. The dragons hauled them backwards by their tails or hind quarters while the creatures writhed and roared and spat defiance, turning to attack the dragons. One had curled itself around a brown's forearm, slashing out at a dragon face.

"M'leng, M'leng, answer me!" P'tero cried, turning his lover's face towards him, slapping his cheeks. Booted feet stopped by M'leng's head.

"Oh help us, help us!" he pleaded, clutching at the boots.

"Help me! I'm dying!" The pain in his legs was so awful.

"Who's got the fellis? Where's the numb weed?"

As P'tero felt himself slipping into oblivion, he wondered how under the sun Zulaya had got here, and if he was dying.

Cathay, Telgar Weyr, Bitra Hold, Telgar

P'tero didn't die, although for some days he wished he had.

The shame of being attacked, of endangering M'leng, of being responsible for the injury of nine dragons - when K'vin had particularly warned

tacking him. The dragon-lion battle had been fierce while it lasted, for the lions had no fear of the dragons and the entire pride of some fourteen adult beasts had joined battle with them.

Meranath had reacted instantly to Ormonth's shriek - in fact, so quickly that she actually left Zulaya behind. The Weyrwoman had been astonished: dragons simply didn't do that. Though later, Leopold told P'tero, she had laughed about it - since she'd been swimming and would not have appreciated being hauled dripping wet to companion her dragon.

She'd followed, quickly enough, with V'last, K'vin and others who answered the mayday call.

"She was some put out, too," Leopold went on, relishing the telling, "because the dragons made a mess of good lion fur well, what they didn't eat."

"The dragons ate the lions?" P'tero gasped.

"Sure, why not?" Leopold shrugged, grinning. "The entire pride attacked the dragons. But they let the cubs go, you know, though some folks thought they ought to get rid of all they could find. V'last said Collith said they were quite tasty, if a bit tough to chew. Waste not, want not. But Zulaya really would have liked a lion fur for her bed."

P'tero shuddered. He never wanted anything to do with lions ever again.

heart, had never once criticized his rider: another source of infinite distress to P'tero. The blue had been intensely grateful to his weyrmates for their assistance, as he couldn't leave his rider out of his sight. It had been all the other dragons could do - although Leopol did not relate this - to reassure Ormonth and Sith that neither of their riders would die.

The Weyr had set up a hasty camp to tend the injured for some, like P'tero and Collith, couldn't risk being taken between until their wounds had scabbed over. K'vin had sent to Fort for Corey to stitch the worst injuries. Maranis, the Weyr medic, was more than competent for the dragons' wounds, but he needed reassurance on his treatment of the two injured riders. Messengers had gone back to Telgar Weyr to reassure those whose dragons had reported the accident and to bring back more equipment for an extended stay.

In their innocence, the two young riders had chosen a site just above the cave home of a pride of lions. P'tero had never even heard of lions. Evidently he could thank Tubberman for their existence, for they'd broken out of Calusa and bred quite handily in the wild.

"They were," Leopol told him with great relish, "some of the sport beasts that Tubberman had been experimenting with. They had got loose, after killing Tubberman."

Zulaya had arrived to see P'tero trying to remove the claws from M'leng's back, so there was little the blue rider could say to contradict the Weyrwoman's version.

Tisha, coming to give him fellis early one morning, found him in tears, positive that he had lost M'leng with such a marred body.

"Nonsense, my lad," Tisha had said, soothing back his sweaty hair as she held the straw for his fellis juice to his lips. "He will only see what you endured for his sake, to save him."

"And those scars will heal quite nicely, thanks to Corey's neat stitching." The reference to the skill of the Head Medic almost reduced him to tears again. He'd caused so much fuss, he said.

"Indeed you have, but you've livened things up considerably, young man, and taught everyone some valuable lessons."

"I have?" P'tero would just as soon not have done.

"For one, dragons think they're invulnerable... and they aren't. A very good lesson to take into Fall with them, I assure you. Cool some of the hot-heads, so certain that it's just a matter of breathing fire in the right direction.

"For another, the southern continent has developed its own hazards.

"Did the Weyr ever find out about the grubs?" P'tero asked, suddenly recalling the reason for the excursion.

forest lands preserved.

"So the trip hasn't been a waste?" P'tero asked, relaxing as he felt the fellis spreading out.

Tisha gave him more maternal pats, settling the furs and making sure nothing was binding across his bottom and legs.

"By no means, lovey. Now you go back to sleep..."

As if he could prevent that, P'tero thought as the fellis took over and blotted out conscious thought as well as the pain.

It was three weeks before P'tero's wounds had healed sufficiently for the trip back. The makeshift infirmary had more patients since there were other hazards besides large, hungry and territorially-minded felines in the southern continent: the heat, unwary exposure to too much sun, and a variety of other minor injuries. Leopol got a thorn in his foot which had festered, so that he joined P'tero in the infirmary shelter until the poison drained.

Tisha and one of the weyrfolk came down with a fever that had Maranis sending back to Fort for a medic more qualified than he in such matters. The woman recovered in a few days but Tisha had a much harder time of it, sweating kilos off her big frame, to leave her so enervated Maranis was desperately worried about her. K'vin sent to Ista to beg a ship to transport her back north, since he could not subject her to trying to climb aboard a dragon.

"Huh?"

"Tisha's illness is not your fault. Leopold wasn't wearing shoes when he was told to, and so his infected foot also isn't your fault. In fact, it isn't even your fault that we picked that rock out of all the ones we could have picked. It was bad luck, but nothing more, and I don't want to have Ormonth upsetting Sith any more. D'you hear me?" P'tero burst into tears. Just as he'd thought: M'leng didn't love him any more.

Then M'leng's gentle arms went around him, and he was pulled to M'leng's lightly bandaged back and comforted with many caresses and kisses.

"Don't be such a stupid idiot, you stupid idiot! How could I not love you?"

Later, P'tero wondered how he could ever have doubted M'leng.

When the convalescents did return to Telgar Weyr, they found Tisha once more in charge of the Lower Caverns. If her clothes were still loose on her frame, she was tanned from the sea voyage back from the mouth of the Rubicon and looked completely recovered.

Some of the green and blue riders in the wing had freshened up both P'tero's and M'leng's weyrs, with paint and new fabrics. The worn pillows had been replaced with plump ones.

"Because Tisha said you'd need to sit real soft for a while longer," and Z'gal sniggered into his hand. "Lady Salda let us have feathers from the

muscles in the buttocks and down his legs that needed strengthening and massage to get them back in full working order. Of course, M'leng had been assiduous in the massage sessions, but P'tero was now concerned that he'd be fit for fighting when Threadfall began.

M'leng had been wounded in a much better site; he wouldn't miss a day's fighting.

There was wine, biscuits and cheese for a small in-weyr party.

M'leng capped the return celebrations by presenting P'tero with a flat, wrapped parcel.

M'leng's eyes were shining in anticipation as P'tero untied the string, wondering what on earth this could be.

"lantine's back, you know," M'leng said, breathlessly watching every movement of P'tero's hands.

The other riders were equally excited and P'tero felt a spurt of petulance that they all knew what this was and were dying to see his reaction.

Naturally, the picture was face down when he finished unwrapping.

P'tero was stunned silent when he turned it over and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head at the scene depicted.

"But... but... lantine wasn't even there!"

"He's so good, isn't he?" Z'gal said. "Did he get it all right? M'leng described it over and over."

that wasn't the worst of the inaccuracies: both riders were fully clothed.

"P'tero?" M'leng's voice was quite anxious.

The blue rider swallowed. "I don't know what to say!"

Where am I? Ormonth wanted to know, evidently viewing it through his rider's eyes as a dragon sometimes could.

"There!" and P'tero pointed to the dragons high up in the sky, wings straight up in a landing configuration, claws unsheathed, ready to grab the attacker, eyes a mad whirl of red and orange.

"Of course, I was unconscious," M'leng was saying, "but that's what Ormonth and Sith would have been doing. Wasn't it?" And he jabbed P'tero warningly.

"Exactly," P'tero said hurriedly. And it probably was, although he hadn't seen it since he'd been looking in the other direction.

"Everything happened so fast it's almost eerie how lantine has got it all down in one scene!" The amazement and respect in his voice was not the least bit feigned.

"Now," and M'leng pointed to the wall, "we've even got a hook for you to hang it on." "Wouldn't you rather have it?" P'tero suggested hopefully.

"I've a copy of my own. lantine did two, one for each of us," M'leng said, beaming proudly at his lover.

"So Meranath tells me," Zulaya said before K'vin could speak. "He wants to know all about our trip south."

"I thought he'd given up on that notion to practice on the first Falls in the South," K'vin said. He tried to sound diffident.

Then Zulaya put a finger across her lips and pointed to the sleeping Meranath, a signal to K'vin to guard his thoughts to Charanth outside on the ledge. He nodded understanding.

"You don't fool me, Kev," and then she wagged her finger at him. "You and B'nurrin would give your eye-teeth to be in on the first real Fall - even if it does take place in the South where nothing could be hurt. Or, for that matter, saved."

"The grubs haven't spread across the entire southern continent, you know."

"That has nothing to do with seeing Thread for the first time in two hundred years."

He answered her droll smile with an abashed grin.

"We don't need to have the dragons stoked up or anything," he said.

"Yes, but do you really want to have S'nan reproaching you for the rest of your career? That is, if you have one as a Weyrleader with this sort of antic in mind."

tition of Zulaya's signal to shield their thoughts from their dragons.

"In the first place, we wouldn't be landing anywhere. And I don't mean for whole wings to go, Kev," B'nurrin said, "not like it makes sense to do with the first actual Falls we do get - wherever that actually is..."

"And you're hoping S'nan doesn't get first go," Zulaya said with a malicious grin.

"Too right on that," B'nurrin agreed in a sour tone. He really gets up my nose, you know. I don't see any harm in having a look. I mean..." He paused, steeling himself a moment and staring straight into K'vin's eyes, "I'll be frank.

"I'm scared I'll be needing clean pants half a dozen times the first Fall I have to lead.

"I've wondered about that myself," K'vin admitted drolly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he was rather surprised to notice a fleeting expression of approval on Zulaya's face. "Surely B'ner had never mentioned that even as a remote possibility"?

"So, I figure, if I get a good look at it before I have to act brave and un-concerned - - -"

"Anyone who isn't concerned about Thread's a damn fool," Zulaya put in.

"Agreed." B'nurrin nodded at her, grinning. "So, will you join me?"

the first actual Fall we meet."

"M'shall might just be amenable at that," Zulaya said, "though he's the last one of the whole lot of you to doubt his abilities."

"That's true enough," said B'nurrin, "then his enthusiasm got the better of him. But look at it this way, even if old S'nan gets to fight this Pass's first Fall over Fort, we'll have been to one before him, so to speak." The Igen Weyrleader grinned with such boyish delight in the scheme that K'vin had to chuckle.

"How long is there between Southern's first and ours?" he asked.

He was astonished to see that Zulaya was already unrolling Telgar Weyr's Thread chart onto the table.

"Roughly two weeks," she said.

"So we could have gone and seen and not jeopardized the readiness of our own Weyrs," B'nurrin said, adding one more argument in favour of his idea.

"The first possible Fall over Fort is number seven. Number four is over the Landing Site," Zulaya went on, tapping her finger on the various Thread corridors. "Five's no good, but six starts offshore of the mouth of Paradise River, not far from where we just were."

"What about the first three?" B'nurrin asked, craning his neck to see. "Oh, not really as good for good coordinates, are they?"

Grinning even more broadly, B'nurrin said, "Only if you were going."

"At least one of you at Igen Weyr has some sense," said Zulaya. "Let's just sit on the idea for a few days. Just to be sure."

"Who will know, if we don't mention it?" B'nurrin asked, swivelling around to pointedly regard a sleeping Meranath.

Paulin took Jamson with him to Bitra Hold. The older Lord Holder was still furious with his son for voting High Reaches Hold in the impeachment. But he had been unable to fault his son's management during his two-month convalescence. This had indeed restored Jamson to vigorous health, if not tolerance.

The change in Bitra was obvious from the moment Magrith dropped to the courtyard and Vergerin hurried down the steps to greet his guests.

He had been alerted.

S'nan had insisted on being allowed to convey the two Lords Holder for he had been as stunned by the impeachment as Jamson.

"My word!" the Fort Weyrleader said, staring about him.

Magrith was staring too, and Paulin had to suppress a grin since the dragon was looking in one direction, his rider in the other.

The courtyard was neat and the recent snow swept from the paving which showed fresh cement grouting. The road, in either direction, was no longer bordered by straggling bushes and weed trees. The row of cot holds

of Vergerin taking Hold. And the following week he had sent his best teachers to instruct in their use and maintenance.

Vergerin wore a good tunic over his trousers, but they were made of stout material and he had obviously been working before his guests arrived. He greeted Paulin affably and responded courteously to the introduction to Jamson, whose response was frosty.

"You've done a lot since you took over, Vergerin," Paulin said, giving the man the encouragement of his public support. "I wouldn't have believed it possible, frankly."

"Well," and Vergerin grinned in the most charming way, "I found Chalkin's hoard, so I've been able to hire in craftsmen."

"Even the nearest holders aren't accustomed to me yet and timid?"

"Scared, more likely," said Paulin dryly.

"That, too, I'm sure, but I've done what I can to supply them with materials to make their own repairs. The Hold was in an appalling state, you know."

Jamson grunted, but his eyes widened as he saw the quiet order and cleanliness of the first reception room. S'nan made approving noises deep in his throat and even ran a finger across the wide table with its attractive arrangement of winter berries and leaves. A drudge, in livery so new the creases hadn't been lost, was hurrying across the hall with a heavy tray.

awaited the tray. Polished metal vases on the deep window-ledge held arrangements of bright orange berries and evergreen boughs: altogether a different room under Vergerin's management.

"There's klah, an excellent broth which I do recommend, and wine, mulled or room temperature," Vergerin said, gesturing for his three guests to take the comfortable chairs.

"You've a new cook as well, Vergerin?" Paulin asked, and pointed to the steaming pitcher when Vergerin grinned." I'll sample the broth, then." Jamson didn't mind if he did, too, but S'nan wanted the klah.

"You remember the back staircase, Paulin?" Vergerin asked, taking the broth as well and pulling up a straight chair for himself.

"I do. Was that where the marks were hidden?"

"Yes, in one of the steps." Vergerin chuckled. "Chalkin must have forgotten that I knew about that hidey-hole, too. It's been a life-saver, both to return unnecessary tithings and to buy in supplies. One thing Chalkin did do correctly was keep records. I knew exactly how much he had extorted from his people." Jamson cleared his throat testily.

"Well, he did, Lord Jamson," Vergerin said without cavil. "They hadn't even enough in stores to get by on this winter, let alone have reserves for Fall. I'm still unloading what we couldn't possibly use from what Chalkin had amassed." Vergerin gave a mirthless laugh.

much as touched dice or card since that game with Chalkin."

"What about his games men?"

Vergerin's smile was grim. "They had the choice of signing new contracts with me - for I will not honour the old ones or leaving. Not many left!"

S'nan barked out a cackle of a laugh. "Not many would, considering the hazards of being holdless during a Pass. You have done well, Vergerin." He nodded in emphasis.

"You've had a second chance, Vergerin," Jamson said, wagging his finger, "so see that you continue to profit by such good fortune." He had finished the broth and now stood. "We will go on a quick survey of the holds, if you please."

"Of course," and Vergerin rose hastily, pushing back his chair. "By horse."

"No, no." Jamson dismissed that. "You've no need to accompany us. Better if you don't." "Now, Jamson," Paulin began, for it was discourteous of the High Reaches Holder even to suggest Vergerin stay behind.

"Certainly, as you wish." Vergerin motioned them to pause at the map and indicated directions. "We've managed to complete all the necessary repairs on the holds adjacent to or not far from the major link roads. Those high up have had to wait on supplies. I can't overdo my welcome at Benden Weyr, though M'shall has been far more obliging than I thought he'd be."

Paulin and S'nan peered in the direction indicated.

And Paulin had to laugh.

"When did lantine get a chance to redo it?" he asked.

Vergerin, who was also broadly grinning, answered "I got it yesterday," and he walked across the Hall to stand beneath it. "I think the likeness is now excellent."

There was a moment of silence as they all viewed the portrait, now altered to an honest representation of the former Bitran Lord close-set eyes, bad complexion, scanty hair and the mole on his chin.

S'nan sniffed. "Why would you want his face around at all, Vergerin?"

"One, to remind me to improve my management of Bitra, and two, because it's traditional to display the likenesses of previous Lord Holders." He gestured up the double-sided staircase where hung the portraits of previous incumbents.

Jamson harumphed several times. "And Chalkin? How's he doing?" Paulin shrugged and looked to S'nan, for only dragon riders could get to the exile's island.

"He was supplied with all he needs. There is no need to exacerbate his expulsion by further contact."

"And his children?" Jamson asked, eyes glinting coldly.

He led them down the corridor, towards what Paulin remembered as one of the gaming rooms. They could hear muted singing: Paulin instantly recognized the melody as one of the College's latest issues.

As they got closer to the source, he heard the words of the 'Duty Song.' Jamson gave another one of his harumphs and sniffed.

Carefully Vergerin opened the door on a mightily altered room.

The students - and there were far more of them than Paulin had expected - were seated with their backs to the door. The teacher - and Paulin was surprised to recognize Issony back at Bitra - gave an additional nod to his head to acknowledge their presence as he continued to beat the tempo of the song.

Children's voices - even those who couldn't carry the tune - are always appealing; perhaps it is the innocence of the tone and the guilelessness in their rendition of the song's dynamics.

Even Jamson smiled, but then the verse they were singing was about the Lord Holder's responsibilities.

"Which ones are Chalkin's?" Paulin whispered to Vergerin.

He pointed, and only then could Paulin pick out the children in the front rows: the girls on the one side and the boys on the other.

deal with them."

"And he does. Most effectively."

"Nadona?" Paulin asked.

Vergerin raised his eyebrows. "She's learning much the same lessons as her children, but she's not as quick a study, as Isony would say. She has her own quarters," and he inclined his head towards the upper levels. She stays within."

"And leaves you to get on with the real work?" Paulin asked in a droll tone.

"Exactly."

"Hmm, yes, well, that's it here, I think," Paulin said, and then made much of fastening his riding jacket to indicate his willingness to depart on the inspection tour. "Do you agree, Jamson?" Jamson harumphed, but the fact that he did not have questions Paulin took as a good sign.

When they left the house, men and women were busy putting on the flame-thrower tanks.

"I've scheduled a drill. Have to make up for lost time, you know," Vergerin said by way of explanation. Jamson and S'nan exchanged such fatuous glances that Paulin did his best not to laugh out loud.

Vergerin caught his eye and winked, then bade a polite farewell to his guests before he returned to the ground crew.

innocent and guileless holders."

"No gambling should be allowed for any reason in a Weyr", said S'nan, as portentous as ever.

Paulin mounted silently, hoping that these two would see sufficient in a quick swoop to reassure them about Vergerin's worth and the wisdom of Chalkin's impeachment. The brief visit had satisfied him especially the sight of Chalkin's much improved portrait. He must send a message to lantine at Telgar Weyr; Bridgely had said the artist had returned there as soon as he was finished at Benden Hold and enquired when he and his spouse could hope to have a sitting.

During the rest of the inspection circuit, Paulin addressed the more important problem of subtly reinstating Gallian in his father's favour. Paulin didn't know if it was working, and probably wouldn't until Jamson died and the succession was in question. There were so many instances of visible repairs and clearings that Jamson could certainly see how poor a Holder Chalkin had been. For once, S'nan's critical comments were a positive encomium of Vergerin's effort at taking Hold.

Paulin was well pleased he had taken the trouble to accompany Jamson. He hoped Lady Thea would be able to tell him that Gallian was off the hot seat.

be back on duty."

"But... but..." and P'tero, eyes wide with fright, recoiled from his Weyrleader's fury, clutching the neck ridge before he over-balanced. The pad which T'sen had given him now slipped, the ties torn loose some time during the exercises.

Blood spotted it.

"Get down here," K'vin roared, pointing to where he wanted P'tero: on the ground. "Right now."

P'tero obeyed as promptly as he could, but he was stiff from sitting so long during the day's manoeuvres and from the barely healed flesh of his buttocks.

K'vin caught him by the shoulder and whirled him around.

"Not only new blood, but old stains," he said, his voice trenchant with scorn and fury. "You're off duty."

"But... but... Thread's nearly here!" P'tero cried in anguish, almost in tears with frustration and the fear of being unable to show M'leng just how brave he really was. Not mock-brave, like the lion attack, but brave in the air.

"And Thread'll be here for fifty years, young man. That's plenty long enough for it to fear you and Ormonth in the air!

"Report to Maranis immediately. You're grounded!"

self on his weyr ledge to get what sun remained.

Then you're as bad as the pair of them! K'vin had the satisfaction of seeing Charanth quail at his fury.

From now on, you are to report to me - instantly - when any rider, or his dragon, is not one hundred percent fit for duty. Do you understand me?

Charanth's eyes whirled, the yellow of anxiety colouring the blue.

His tone was remorseful. I will not fail you again.

If they had been in real danger, I would have warned them off, Meranath said, entering the conversation.

I didn't ask you! K'vin was so irate he didn't really care if he offended Meranath, or her rider. But he was not going to lose riders from foolish and vainglorious actions. There were fifty years of Thread fighting ahead of them, and he was not going to lose partners or risk their injuries due to some cockamamie notion of what comprises courageous actions.

If you think that I would jeopardize a single rider...

K'vin took the stairs up to the queen's weyr three at a time, trying to work out his rage before he had to confront Zulaya and explain why he thought he could speak to her queen in such a peremptory fashion.

I should be informed of ANY unfit rider or dragon, at any time, anywhere. Meranath and you should know that or, by the first egg, why are you senior queen?

into the weyr, away from him. He was rather magnificently furious, eyes blazing, face stern, the epitome of indignation.

"Tisha remarked that Maranis wasn't pleased with him assuming duty. The scar tissue is thin."

"And you said nothing to me?"

"He's only a blue rider."

"EVERY ONE OF MY RIDERS IS IMPORTANT TO ME!" K'vin roared, clenching his fists at his sides because they wanted to grab something to release the pent-up fury in him.

"Threadfall is two days away. I need to have a Weyr in full readiness. I need to be sure of everyone I ask to face Thread in two days' time. I don't need secrets or evasions or..."

"K'vin," Zulaya began, reaching out a hand to him, "Kev, it's all right. The Weyr is ready perhaps tuned a little too tight, but that's all to the good."

"ALL TO THE GOOD?" and K'vin batted her hand away, "when we have unfit riders taking positions they couldn't possibly manage in their condition?" He began pacing now and Zulaya watched him, smiling with relief and pride. He was going to be a splendid Weyrleader, much better than B'ner would have been.

He halted just short of where she stood - his eyes, brilliant with his anger and frustration, fixed on her face.

K'vin was still very much in complete control even very early the next morning, before dawn in fact, when Meranath told them that B'nurrin and Shanna were waiting for them.

"Waiting for what?" K'vin asked, pulling himself reluctantly away from Zulaya to reach for his pants.

It is time to go, Charanth added.

"Go where?" asked K'vin in a querulous tone of voice.

"Go where?" Zulaya echoed sleepily.

South, they say, Meranath and Charanth echoed.

Suddenly K'vin remembered. Today was the day they would go to see Thread. He said that very, very quietly in the back of his mind where Charanth might not hear it. Both dragons had been asleep when B'nurrin had made his visit.

Which was just as well, or the whole Weyr might have been privy to the notion of a pre-viewing of Thread.

"B'nurrin wants us to join him," K'vin said, giving Zulaya a cautionary look.

She frowned for a moment, then her face cleared abruptly as she said, "Oh." With a conspiratorial grin, she was out of the bed, trailing the sheet on her way to her riding gear.

"Yes, how could I forget?"

If the dragon and rider on watch on the Rim wondered why the two Weyrleaders were slipping away long before dawn, neither asked and the rider gave a cheery swing of his arm as they passed over him.

Ianath says to count to three and then go, Charanth told his rider, still mystified.

Landing is where we're going, K'vin replied, glancing across the space between his dragon and Meranath. Zulaya showed him a thumb's-up signal to signify she had had the same message. Visualizing the arid sweep of desolate volcanic ash from Mount Garben down to Monaco Bay, K'vin nodded his head three times.

GO!

Abruptly Charanth rumbled deep in his belly while his mind said in surprised shock OH! K'vin felt him shift. Consequently he was perhaps not as surprised as he might have been to realize that the airspace around them, and Meranath and Zulaya, was well occupied. With that extra sense dragons had, the two had averted a collision. In fact, as K'vin swivelled about to check, the only two Weyrleaders he didn't see were S'nan and Sarrai, although they might well have been among those who winked out of sight between so as not to be recognized.

Had every rider on Pern been possessed of the compulsion to come here this morning? Of course, the particular site of Landing was well known to all riders. But for so many to decide independently to come here... Probably every one certain he or she'd be the only ones daring enough!

Nor was K'vin the only one laughing hard. Right now he was more in danger of wetting his breeches from mirth - not fright at seeing Thread for the first time. Which reminded him why he was here. Again that realization became universal.

Laughter faded as every dragon and rider irresistibly turned north-eastward.

It was there, too, the much-described silvery-grey haze on the upper levels of the blue sky. Not a dragon wing moved, not a rider recoiled as the silver stuff began to drop on to the sea. THREAD! And so aptly called. THREAD!

The word seemed to rumble from dragon to dragon and K'vin had to grab hold of the neck ridge as Charanth started to lurch towards what he had known all his life as his adversary.

I have no firestone! How can I flame it? What is wrong?

Why have you brought me here where there is Thread and I have no fire to char it!

It's all right, Charanth. We're here to watch. To see.

We leave. Now!

Leave? But we have not met Thread.

Not here or now or in this place, Charanth.

It took K'vin every bit of will-power and moral strength, and Charanth's faith in him, to overcome his bronze's impassioned protest.

Then, all of a sudden, Charanth stopped flying towards Thread.

Oh, all right! The tone was that of a petulant child forced by a senior authority to follow orders totally against the grain.

What?

The queens say we must go to the Red Butte.

Then let us go there. K'vin did not question the order, being far too glad that one was given which the dragon would obey.

The Butte was a training landmark in lower Keroon, a laccolithic dome so difficult to mistake that it figured in all weyrling training programmes. And there the would-be observers managed to get their dragons to land. Even the queens eyes were revolving at a stiff red-orange pace, but some of the bronzes were so distraught with anger that their eyes pulsed wickedly, revolving at incredible speed.

K'vin was almost relieved to swing down from Charanth's neck. But he, and the other Weyrleaders, all kept one hand on their dragons, leg, shoulder or muzzle: some contact was maintained. In a wide outer circle were

knew none of the queen riders had had an easy time to get their queens to insist on the disengagement.

"Dragons know what they're supposed to do when Thread falls," M'shall said, nodding. And then he started to laugh.

K'vin grinned and, when he heard G'don's bass chuckle, saw no reason to hold his laughter in any longer. B'nurrin was howling so that he had to clutch at K'vin to keep his balance. Even D'miel looked properly abashed, and Laura's giggle was infectious enough to increase the volume. Beyond the inner circle, the rest of the riders caught the joke on themselves and joined in the laugh. It was a good release from the fright that they had all just had.

"Did anyone happen to notice a Fort rider disappearing in guilty retreat?" M'shall asked when the laughter died down.

He'd been checking the identity of those on the rim of this informal assembly.

"They'd be the last to admit coming," said Irene.

"I doubt that, Renee," G'don said. "S'nan runs a strict Weyr, it's true, but I'll wager there're a few renegades among his wing leaders."

"I know there are," Mari agreed, blotting her eyes which were still merry from laughter. "It's just such a hoot that we all..." and she ringed them with a swirl of her hand, "thought to come and have a peek."

influence on our bronzes," G'don said with a formal hand over his heart as he bowed to the five queen riders.

"The advantage of having three very senior queens," said Zulaya, and two very strong-minded young women.

Laura blushed while Shanna stood even straighter.

"All right then," M'shall began, having taken note that most of the male dragons' eyes were resuming normal colour and speed. He took a step towards the centre of the sandy circle and cupped his hands, turning as he spoke. "All right, then, every one of you. This is a meeting that never happened and isn't to be referred to in any Weyr for any reason. Do you understand me?" The response was loud and clear.

He nodded and stepped back towards Craigath. "We'll meet..." he said now to the other leaders, "where Thread first... officially falls North."

"We've sweep riders out all the time," G'don reminded them.

"And we're all very sure that S'nan has, too," B'nurrin put in, grinning.

"So we'll know when and where to meet again."

"Wait a moment more, G'don," K'vin said. "Why don't we rotate the wings that meet that first Fall, wherever it is?"

A little cheer from the outer circle gave instant approval to that suggestion. "That'll give even more riders a chance for at least a little experience before the individual Weyrs have to meet Thread on their own.

deserves that much from us. I'll initiate the idea," and he grinned again, since S'nan would listen to him as the oldest Weyrleader where he would summarily dismiss a younger man. "I'll let you know when we'll meet to make the changes we've already agreed to." Red dust swirled up in a cloud around the Butte as all the dragons leaped almost simultaneously from the ground.

Threadfall

Bitter cold weather and winds swept down from the icy poles of Pern on the day that S'nan set up a meeting with the other five Weyrleaders to discuss the rotation of wings which G'don had suggested to him. Freezing weather was likely to do Fort Weyr out of its chance to be the first Weyr to meet Thread in this Fall.

That S'nan keenly felt deprived was obvious. Throughout the meeting he paced the floor, pausing to peer out of the slanting corridor to the sleet falling heavily into Fort Bowl.

He had only half his mind on the discussion. B'nurrin was all but laughing, only the kicks he received under the table from K'vin keeping him from bursting out. Not that K'vin could blame the Igen Weyrleader, for the meeting was a charade: each of them giving soberly presented reasons for the two hourly rotation while S'nan said little more than monosyllables. He kept his expression blank. it was Sarrai's petulant expression that was honest.

Thread came down as black dust, sifted in with snow or sleet.

Fort sweep riders brought buckets of it for S'nan to see and mournfully wave off. High Reaches were even more diligent in their efforts to locate live, dangerous Thread.

Some riders even suffered frostbite, so earnestly did they watch for the reappearance of the old enemy, although one long piece of frozen Thread was brought for G'don to examine. The stench of it as it melted was enough to dispose of it completely.

By the time of Benden's First Fall - by the numbers, Ten - the weather pattern had shifted sufficiently on the east coast to a warmer front so that a good deal of that projected Fall would be considered 'live and dangerous'. The call went out to all the Weyrs of Pern.

K'vin and Telgar Weyr's two full wings of dragon riders reassembled in the upper right quadrant of air above Benden Weyr, not a rider out of alignment. Below him the Weyr was ablaze with lights in this dark pre-dawn time, lighting the bellies of the dragons in their ranks. He wasn't sure if the Telgar contingent got there before the units of the other Weyrs, but they were certainly all present and accounted for at the designated hour and in the assigned positions. Everyone would have preferred a daylight defence, but Thread didn't need to see to Fall.

The final decision by the Weyrleaders had been unanimous - when M'shall had made S'nan put it to a vote - to ride the entire Fall over the ranges, harmless or not, to see it for themselves. Everyone was too keyed-up over the first three 'dud' Falls to wait any longer to go into action. Of course, some of the peaks jutted at altitudes where oxygen had thinned to an unsustainable level even for dragons. But it could be seen in actual descent and the general aspect of this Fall judged.

"The wings would be rotated after two hours, giving as many as possible a chance at the real thing". K'vin briefly thought of P'tero's vain attempt to be included in the fighting force Telgar would launch. Maybe he should have put the blue rider in, sore ass and all, to prove that there was a lot more to fighting Thread than having the guts to do it. But to include P'tero would have been to exclude a perfectly healthy and less erratic rider. K'vin had not selected M'leng of the green riders chosen for the First Fall. That would ease any discord between the pair: that one had gone and the other had not.

Basically, they were good weyrmates having a reasonably stable relationship ever since P'tero, who was the younger, had Impressed Ormonth.

Movement and a shift in air pressure caught K'vin's attention and he looked down at Benden's Rim.

Craigath warns us, Charanth told his rider. Three, two, one...

orb of the Red Planet, vivid amongst the stars.

Spits of fire blossomed in the darkness all around as eager dragons belched. Too full a belly of firestone, K'vin thought with professional detachment, but he could hardly fault rider or dragon for over-priming.

For two centuries they had waited for this moment: centuries of training and lives lived so that dragons - and riders - would be here, right now, waiting to defend Pern.

Yet this was a first, too. For Pern had had no dragons the first time Thread had fallen. And the planet had been so close to total disaster before the first eighteen dragons had emerged from between above Fort Hold to flame the parasite from the skies and give hope to the beleaguered defenders. K'vin had always been struck by the courage - he should make P'tero read those entries - of the despairing Admiral Paul Benden in his diary written just prior to that magnificent triumph.

Even in his most recent reading of that journal, his throat closed over as he read the words: And then that young rogue had the temerity to salute and say, "Admiral Benden, may I present the Dragonriders of Pern?"

More spurts of fiery breath and every dragon head turned slightly northward.

It comes! Charanth said, rumbling deep in his chest, a vibration that K'vin felt through his legs. He was aware then that the only warm part of

an odd coldness in his guts, but it could simply be because it was very, very cold at this altitude.

Charanth's rumble increased and a little spit of flame spilled from his mouth.

Steady, lad!

I'm not moving! It is! And I can flame this time!

K'vin could not reproach Charanth for that snide reminder.

And, oddly enough, he also felt no fear as he regarded the advance. There was this sense of inevitability, that he would be here, at this moment in time, to observe this phenomenon, to be part of this defence.

Closer and closer the waves of Thread came as the massed wings watched. The leading edge was now falling visibly on the mountainsides. In this cold air not even the steam of its dissolution was visible.

Thread was falling in a steady stream, freezing dead in the snow.

A steady stream, no tangles, no bare spots.

Craigath says we regroup at the second meeting point.

Agreed.

Oddly enough, K'vin did not like even to regroup, though there was nothing Thread could have done to harm the snowy mountainsides and it was foolish to waste time and flame here.

But it felt like retreat.

Two hundred years! When would they begin?

But Thread fell on snow, and K'vin was close enough to Leading Edge now to see the holes it made in the whiteness.

NOW! Craigath's command reached K'vin's mind in the same moment that Charanth roared, full flame erupting from his mouth, as he beat his wings to power his forward surge.

K'vin clutched at the flight strap, felt frantically for the rope that tethered the firestone sacks to the neck ridge in front of him, and clamped his knees as tight as he could to his bronze!

His right arm raised and pointed forward, as if any rider had missed Craigath's command or the roars that emerged from dragon throats across the sky.

They were flying in ranks, Telgar being the second and slightly behind the uppermost wings which were from High Reaches. There was sufficient air between the two layers of dragons so that flame from one level would not interfere with another; and a corridor for manoeuvre as well. Every Weyr had drilled its wings for this strategy until it was instinctive to stay within the plane assigned them.

The moment when Charanth's breath sizzled up descending Thread was a transcendental experience for both partners.

head to peer far below.

They are? Turn. K'vin looked below and saw the unmistakable arrow of golden bodies in their low-level position, the flame-throwers which the queen riders used spouting here and there as they disintegrated stray strands escaping the higher ranks.

Does Meranath fly well?

Meranath flies very well, Charanth said proudly.

Tell the wings it is time to execute the first change-over, K'vin said. He swivelled his body around to watch that manoeuvre, holding his right arm up high, sweeping his eyes across Telgar's wings. He dropped his arm and counted nine or ten dragons still flaming. Then they, too, went off. He counted to five and suddenly full wings flew behind him. He raised his arm high in recognition of their arrival, which was all he had time for because the wall of Thread advanced to flaming distance and Charanth was ready with his fire. So far he could find no fault with the performance of Telgar's wings.

It seemed no time after that when he realized his sacks of firestone were empty, and he had Charanth call for more. It surprised K'vin to notice that they had flown from night into day, for the sun slanted right into the eyes as they flew east again. There was good reason to use tinted glass in the goggles.

plete destruction of Thread was more crucial now. The queens' wing was more visible, gold against the dark green or brown of fields not yet verdant with spring growth.

Sacks had to be replenished again. He called in the second change-over of wings, only then realizing that he was beginning to tire.

Are you all right, Charanth?

I flame well. My wings beat strongly. We are together. There is no problem.

The calm, strong tone of his bronze was like a tonic. Yes, they were together, doing what they had been bred and maintained to do.

Meranath says we are over Bitra Hold now. They were turning west again, back for another run. K'vin did notice that there seemed to be less Thread falling now, even gaps between the sheets of it. This Fall is nearly over?

K'vin wasn't sure if Charanth was pleased, surprised or disappointed. He, for one, was enormously relieved! He had survived the ultimate test of the Weyrleader.

They did one more pass eastward and then there was no more Thread visible above. A cheer echoed from rider to rider, and all those within K'vin's range pumped both arms in jubilation.

one cared to report to you.

K'vin wasn't that pleased that news had been withheld, but he could understand the reluctance of any rider in today's Fall retiring for a mere char burn. Now he noticed that he had quite a few black spots on his own riding leathers, but nothing had penetrated through to his flesh. Would that every Fall would be so trouble-free! And the next one which Telgar flew would show up the foolhardy. He'd have to give the entire Weyr a hard bollocking to prevent the cocksure from disaster.

Today the queens' wing would join the wing leaders at Bitra Hold, though traditionally they stayed aloft to assist ground crews.

Zulaya sought K'vin immediately she was on the ground and embraced him, seeking his mouth to kiss him with enthusiasm.

"We did it! We did it!"

"This time," K'vin said, hugging her tightly to him. He could almost have thanked P'tero for getting him so angry. It had done the world of good for his relations with Zulaya.

The way she looked at him now, the way she had to touch him... Well, they were truly weyrmates.

M'shall was moving among the riders, slapping one on the shoulder, thanking each Weyrleader for participating in this almost scatheless Fall, a wide smile plastered on his face.

young Igen Weyrleader should stop baiting S'nan.

"We got off much too easily," said D'miel of Ista, shaking his head. "I mean, we were all on a high. I for one was expecting far worse."

"Isn't it nice to be disappointed?" K'vin said, but he agreed with D'miel. Everything had gone too well.

"Nonsense," said G'don. "We were all flying our best riders."

"We've been keyed up for weeks, and nervous. And I don't mind admitting I was," he added, glancing around him, but he winked at K'vin and B'nurrin. Others nodded agreement. "So we were very cautious."

"It's when we're so accustomed to the menace that we're liable to be careless, to take unnecessary risks, to stop watching out of the backs of our heads."

A murmur of agreement and nods greeted that observation.

"We must never relax our guard during Fall," S'nan declared, again sententious. "Never!"

"We'll have to be doubly cautious during the second Fall over south Benden and Keroon," Zulaya said softly to K'vin.

"Well, I for one was pleased with the way the wings performed. Not much got through," he repeated. "Between the upper flights and the queens' wing, only four incidents of burrow, and those were handled with great dispatch. Thanks to Vergerin."

"How'd you get the sparkly out of Hegmon, Vergerin?" G'don wanted to know, cradling his glass lovingly.

"We're old friends, you might say," Vergerin replied with a droll grin.

"Did any wing report injuries?" asked M'shall, his expression turning sober.

"Nothing above char burns in mine," K'vin said. And that was what the other wing leaders reported one after another.

"Well, we're fragging lucky if that's all. Though I shudder to think how careless the average rider can get," M'shall said.

"We'll have to keep them on their toes."

"And on their dragons," his weymate added.

"Look at it this way," said B'nurrin, grinning from ear to ear, "We've only five thousand eight hundred and fourteen more Falls to attend, give or take a few, before it's all over for another two hundred years!" There was a moment of dumbfounded silence as that fact was absorbed and then B'nurrin ducked away before the wrath of his peers could descend on him.

"But Fall has begun," K'vin said softly to Zulaya, standing proudly beside him, "and we have met the enemy again.

"What a time to be alive."

"And riding a dragon!"

And thus began the Second Pass of Thread on Pern!