

PERN

ANNE McCAFFREY

Dragonriders of Pern trilogy:

Dragonflight(1969)

Dragonquest(1971)

The White Dragon(1978)

Harper Hall trilogy:

Dragonsong(1976)

Dragonsinger(1977)

Drumdrums(1978)

Other Pern novels:

Moreta, Dragonlady of Pern(1983)

Nerilka's Story(1986)

Dragonsdawn(1988)

The Renegades of Pern(1989)

All the Weyrs of Pern(1991)

The Chronicles of Pern(1992)

The Dolphins of Pern(1994)

Dragonseye(1996)

The Masterharper of Pern(1998)

Dissatisfied with life on technologically-advanced Earth, hundreds of colonists travelled through space to the star Rukbat, which held six planets in orbit around it, five in stable trajectories, and one that looped wildly around the others. The third planet was capable of sustaining life, and the spacefarers settled there, naming it Pern. They cannibalized their spaceships for material and began building their homes.

Pern was ideal for settlement, except for one thing. At irregular intervals, the sixth planet of its system would swing close to it and release swarms of deadly mycorrhizoid spores, which devoured anything they touched and rendered the ground where they landed barren for years. The colonists immediately began searching for a way to combat the Thread, as the spores were named. For defence, they turned to the dragonets, small flying lizards that the colonists had tamed when they first landed. The fire-breathing ability of these reptiles had been a great help in the first Threadfall. By genetically enhancing and selectively breeding these reptiles through the generations, the colonists created a race of full-sized dragons.

With the dragons and their riders working together, the Pern colonists were able to fight Thread effectively and establish a firm hold on the planet. They settled into a quasi-feudal agricultural society, building Holds for the administrators and field workers, Halls for the craftsmen, and Weyrs for the dragons and riders to inhabit.

Many of the Pern novels detail the politics of the Holds and Weyrs between Threadfalls. The entire line of books spans over 2,500 years, from the first landing of the settlers to their descendants' discovery of the master ship's computer centuries later.

Dragonflight, the first of the Dragonriders of Pern books, tells of a time 2500 years after the initial landing. The Thread has not been seen in four centuries, and people are starting to be sceptical of the old warnings. Three dragonriders, Lessa, F'lar, and F'nor, believe that the Thread is coming back, and try to mobilize the planetary defences. Lessa, knowing that there are not enough dragons to combat the Thread effectively, time-travels back four hundred years to a point just after the last Threadfall, when that era's Dragonriders are growing restless and bored from lack of activity. Lessa convinces most of them to come back with her to combat Thread in her time. They arrive and fight off the Thread.

Dragonquest, the second book, picks up seven years after the end of the first book. Relations between the Oldtimers, as the time-travelling dragonriders are called, and the current generation are growing tense. After getting into a fight with one of the old dragonriders, F'nor is sent to Pern's southern continent to recover from his wound. There he discovers a grub that neutralizes the Thread after it burrows into the ground. Realizing they have discovered a powerful new weapon against Thread, F'nor begins planning to seed the grubs over both continents.

Meanwhile, an unexpected Threadfall is the catalyst for a duel between F'lar, the Benden Weyrleader, and T'ron, the leader of the Oldtimers. F'lar wins and banishes all dragonriders who will not accept his role as overall Weyrleader. The banished go to the southern continent. The book ends with the grubs being bred for distribution over Pern.

The third book, *The White Dragon*, chronicles the trials of young Jaxom as he raises the only white dragon on Pern, a genetic anomaly. Jaxom encounters prejudice and scorn from other dragonriders

because his dragon is smaller than the rest. He is also scheduled to take command of one of the oldest Holds on Pern, and there are those who doubt his ability to govern. Both Jaxom and his dragon Ruth rise to the challenges and succeed in proving that bigger is not necessarily better. Jaxom commands his Hold, gets the girl, and all is set right with the world.

The Harper Hall trilogy (*Dragonsong*, *Dragonsinger*, *Dragondrums*) is aimed at young readers, and deals with a girl named Menolly and her rise from unappreciated daughter to Journeywoman Harper and keeper of fire-lizards.

In many subsequent novels, and in the short novel published here, McCaffrey has examined various other aspects of life on Pern from the earliest days of its colonization by humans.

RUNNER OF PERN

BY ANNE McCAFFREY

Tenna topped the rise and paused to catch her breath, leaning forward, hands on her knees to ease her back muscles. Then, as she had been taught, she walked along the top on what flat space there was, kicking out her legs and shaking the thigh muscles, breathing through her mouth until she stopped panting. Taking her water bottle from her belt, she allowed herself a swig, swishing it around in her mouth to moisturize the dry tissues. She spat out that mouthful and took another, letting this one slowly trickle down her throat. The night was cool enough to keep her from sweating too heavily. But she wouldn't be standing around long enough to get a chill.

It didn't take long for her breath to return to normal and she was pleased by that. She was in good shape. She kicked out her legs to ease the strain she had put on them to make the height. Then, settling her belt and checking the message pouch, she started down the hill at a rapid walking pace. It was too dark - Belior had not yet risen above the plain to give her full light for the down side of the hill - to be safe to run in shadows. She only knew this part of the trace by word of mouth, not actually footing it. She'd done well so far this, her second Turn of running, and had made most of her first Cross by the suggested easy laps. Runners watched out for each other and no station manager would overtax a novice. With any luck, she'd've made it all the way to the Western Sea in the next sevenday. This was the first big test of her apprenticeship as an express runner. And really she'd only the Western Range left to cross once she got to Fort Hold.

Halfway down from the top of the rise, she met the ridge crest she'd been told about and, with the usual check of the pouch she carried, she picked up her knees and started the ground-eating lope that was the pride of a Pernese runner.

Of course, the legendary 'lopers' - the ones who had been able to do a hundred miles in a day - had perished ages ago but their memory was kept alive. Their endurance and dedication were examples to everyone who ran the traces of Pern. There hadn't been many of them, according to the legend, but they had started the runner stations when the need for the rapid delivery of messages occurred, during the

First Fall of Thread. Lopers had been able to put themselves in some sort of trance which allowed them not only to run extended distances but kept them warm during snowstorms and freezing temperatures. They had also planted the original traces which now were a network crisscrossing the entire continent.

While Lord Holders and CraftMasters could afford to keep runnerbeasts for their couriers, the average person, wanting to contact crafthalls, relatives, or friends across Pern, could easily afford to express a letter across the continent in runner pouches, carried from station to station. Others might call them 'holds' but runners had always had 'stations' and station agents, as part of *their* craft history. Drum messages were great for short messages, if the weather was right and the winds didn't interrupt the beat, but as long as folks wanted to send a written message, there'd be runners to take them.

Tenna often thought proudly of the tradition she was carrying on. It was a comfort on long solitary journeys. Right now, the running was good: the ground was firm but springy, a surface that had been assiduously maintained since the ancient runners had planted it. Not only did the mossy stuff make running easier but it identified a runner's path. A runner would instantly feel the difference in the surface, if he, or she, strayed off the trace.

Slowly, as full Belior rose behind her, her way became illuminated by the moon's light and she picked up her pace, running easily, breathing freely, her hands carried high, chest height, with elbows tucked in. No need to leave a 'handle', as her father called it, to catch the wind and slow the pace. At times like these, with good footing, a fair light, and a cool evening, you felt like you could run for ever. If there weren't a sea to stop you.

She ran on, able to see the flow of the ridge and, by the time the trace started to descend again, Belior was high enough to light her way. She saw the stream ahead and slowed cautiously - though she'd been told that the ford had a good pebbly surface - and splashed through the ankle-high cold water, up on to the bank, veering slightly south, picking up the trace again by its springy surface.

She'd be over halfway now to Fort Hold and should make it by dawn. This was a well-travelled route, southwest along the coast to the farther Holds. All of what she carried right now was destined for Fort Holders, so it was the end of the line for both the pouch and herself. She'd heard so much about the facilities at Fort that she didn't quite believe them. Runners tended to understatement, rather than exaggeration. If a runner told you a trace was dangerous, you believed it! But what they said about Fort was truly amazing.

Tenna came from a running family: father, uncles, cousins, grandfathers, brothers, sisters and two aunts were all out and about the traces that crisscrossed Pern from Nerat Tip to High Reaches Hook, from Benden to Boll.

'It's bred in us,' her mother had said, answering the queries of her younger children. Cesila managed a large runner station, just at the northern Lemos end of the Keroon plains where the immense sky-broom trees began. Strange trees that flourished only in that region of Pern. Trees, which a much younger Tenna had been sure, were where the Benden Weyr dragons took a rest in their flights across the continent. Cesila had laughed at Tenna's notion.

'The Dragons of Pern don't need to rest anywhere, dear. They just *gobetween* to wherever they need to go. You probably saw some of them out hunting their weekly meal.'

In her running days, Cesila had completed nine full Crosses a Turn until she'd married another runner and started producing her own bag of runners-to-be.

'Lean we are in the breeding, and leggy, most of us, with big lungs and strong bones. Ah, there now, a few come out who're more for speed than distance but they're handy enough at Gathers, passing the winning line before the others have left the starting ribbon. We have our place on the world same as holders and even weyrfolk. Each to his, or her, own. Weaver and tanner, and farmer, and fisher, and smith and runner and all.'

'That's not the way we was taught to sing the Duty Song,' Tenna's younger brother had remarked.

'Maybe,' Cesila had said with a grin, 'but it's the way I sing it and you can, too. I must have a word with the next harper through here. He can change his words if he wants us to take his messages.' And she gave her head one of her emphatic shakes to end that conversation.

As soon as a runner-bred child had reached full growth, he or she was tested to see if they'd the right Blood for the job. Tenna's legs had stopped growing by the time she'd reached her fifteenth full Turn. That was when she was assessed by a senior runner of another Bloodline. Tenna had been very nervous but her mother, in her usual off-handed way, had given her lanky daughter a long knowing look.

'Nine children I've given your father, Fedri, and four are already runners. You'll be one, too, never fear.'

'But Sedra's -'

Cesila held up her hand. 'I know your sister's mated and breeding but she did two Crosses before she found a man she had to have. So she counts, too. Gotta have proper Bloodlines to breed proper runners and it's us who do that.' Cesila paused to be sure Tenna would not interrupt again. 'I came from a hold with twelve, all of them runners. And all breeding runners. You'll run, girl. Put your mind at ease. You'll run.' Then she'd laughed. 'It's for how long, not will you, for a female.'

Tenna had decided a long time ago - when she had first been considered old enough to mind her younger siblings - that she'd prefer running to raising runners. She'd run until she could no longer lift her knees. She'd an aunt who'd never mated: ran until she was older than Cesila was now and then took over the management of a connecting station down Igen way. Should something happen and she couldn't run any more, Tenna wouldn't mind managing a station. Her mother ran hers proper, always had hot water ready to ease a runner's aching limbs: good food, comfortable beds, and healing skills that rivalled what you could find in any hold. And it was always exciting, for you never knew who might run in that day, or where they'd be going. Runners crossed the continent regularly, bringing with them news from other parts of Pern. Many had interesting tales to tell of problems on the trace and how to cope with them. You heard of all other holds and halls, and the one dragonweyr, as well as what interested runners most specifically: what conditions were like and where traces might need maintenance after a heavy rain or landslide.

She was mightily relieved, however, when her father said he had asked Mallum of the Telgar station to do her assessment. At least Tenna had met the man on those occasions when he'd been through to their place on the edge of Keroon's plains. Like other runners, he was a lanky length of man, with a long face and greying hair that he tied back with his sweatband as most runners did.

Her parents didn't tell her when Mallum was expected, but he turned up one bright morning, handing in a pouch to be logged on the board by the door and then limping to the nearest seat.

'Bruised the heel. We'll have to rock that south trace again. I swear it grows new ones every

Turn or two,' he said, mopping his forehead with his orange sweatband and thanking Tenna for the cup of water. 'Cesila, got some of that sheer magic poultice of yours?'

'I do. Put the kettle to heat the moment I saw you struggling up the trace.'

'Was not struggling,' Mallum said in jovial denial. 'Was careful not to put the heel down was all.'

'Don't try to fool me, you spavined gimper,' Cesila replied as she was dipping a poultice sack into the heated water, testing it with a finger.

'Who's to run on? Some orders in that need to be got south smartly.'

'I'm taking it on,' Fedri said, coming out of his room and tying on his sweatband. 'How urgent?' His runner's belt was draped over his shoulder. 'I've others to add from the morning's eastern run.'

'Hmmm. They want to make the Igen Gather.'

'Ha! It'll be there betimes,' Fedri said, reaching for the pouch and carefully adding the other messages to it before he put it through the belt loops. Settling it in the small of his back with one hand, he chalked up the exchange time with the other. 'See you.'

Then he was out the door and turning south, settling into his long-distance stride almost as soon as his foot hit the moss of the trace.

Tenna, knowing what was needed, had already pulled a footstool over to Mallum. She looked up at him for permission and, with his nod, unlaced the right shoe, feeling the fine quality of the leather. Mallum made his own footwear and he had set the stitching fine and tight.

Cesila knelt beside her daughter, craning her head to see the bruise.

'Hmmm. Hit it early on, didn't cha?'

'I did,' Mallum said, drawing his breath in with a hiss as Cesila slapped the poultice on. 'Ooooooh! Shards . . . you didn't get it too hot, didja?'

Cesila sniffed denial in reply as she neatly and deftly tied the packet to his foot.

'And is this the lass of yours as is to be taken for a run?' he asked, relaxing his expression from the grimace he'd made when the poultice was first applied. 'Prettiest of the bunch.' And he grinned at Tenna.

'Handsome is as handsome does,' Cesila said. 'Looks is all right but long legs is better. Tenna's her name.'

'Handsome's not a bad thing to be, Cesila, and it's obvious your daughter takes after you.'

Cesila sniffed again but Tenna could see that her mother didn't mind Mallum's remarks. And Cesila was a handsome woman: lithe still and slender, with graceful hands and feet. Tenna wished she were more like her mother.

'Nice long line of leg,' Mallum went on approvingly. He beckoned for Tenna to come closer and

had a good look at the lean muscles, then asked to see her bare feet. Runners tended to walk bare-footed a lot. Some even ran bare-footed. 'Good bone. Hmmm. Nice lean frame. Hmm. Not a pick on you, girl. Hope you can keep warm enough in winter like that.' That was such an old runner comment, but his jollity was encouraging and Tenna was ever so glad that Mallum was her assessor. He was always pleasant on his short stops at Station 97. 'We'll take a short one tomorrow when this foot's eased.'

More runners came in so Cesila and Tenna were busy, checking in messages, sorting the packets for the change-overs, serving food, heating water for baths, tending scratched legs. It was spring of the year and most runners only used leggings during the coldest months.

Enough stayed the night so there was good chatter and gossip to entertain. And prevent Tenna from worrying about satisfying her assessor in the morning.

A runner had come in late that night, on her way north, with some messages to be transferred to an eastern route. His heel bruise much eased, Mallum thought he could take those on.

'It's a good testing trot,' he said and gestured for Tenna to slip the message pouch on her belt. 'I'll travel light, girl.' His grin was teasing, for the pouch weighed little more than the wherhide it was made from. 'First, lemme see what you wear on your feet.'

She showed him her shoes, the most important part of a runner's gear. She'd used her family's special oils to soften the wherhide and then formed it on the lasts that had been carved for her feet by her uncle who did them for her Bloodline. Her stitches were neat but not as fine as Mallum's. She intended to improve. Meanwhile, this pair wasn't a bad effort and fitted her feet like gloves. The spikes were medium length as fit for the present dry trace conditions. Most long-distance runners carried an extra pair with shorter spikes for harder ground, especially during spring and summer. She was working on her winter footwear, hoping she'd need it, for those boots came up to mid-calf and required a lot more conditioning. Even they were lighter weight than the footgear holders would use. But then most holders plodded and the thicker leather was suitable for their tasks as fine soft hide was right for a runner's foot.

Mallum nodded in approval as he handed back her shoes. Now he checked the fit of her belt to be sure it was snug enough not to rub against the small of her back as she ran: that her short trunks would not pull against her legs and that her sleeveless top covered her backside well below her waist to help prevent her getting a kidney chill. Stopping often from a need to relieve one's self ruined the rhythm of a run.

'We'll go now,' Mallum said, having assured himself she was properly accoutred.

Cesila stood in the door, gave her daughter a reassuring nod, and saw them off, up the eastern trace. Before they were out of sight, she gave the particular runner yodel that stopped them in their tracks. They saw her pointing skyward: at the arrow formation of dragons in the sky, a most unusual sight these days when the Dragons of Benden Weyr were so rarely seen.

To see dragons in the sky was the best sort of omen. They were there . . . and then they weren't! She smiled. Too bad runners couldn't *just think* themselves to their destinations the way dragons could. As if he had shared her thought, Mallum grinned back at her and then turned to face the direction in which they were headed and any nervousness Tenna had felt disappeared. When he sprang off again, she was in step with him by the third stride. He nodded again approvingly.

'Running's not just picking up your heels and showing them to those behind you,' Mallum said, his eyes watching the trace ahead, though he must have known it as well as Tenna did. 'A good bit of proper

running is learning to pace yourself and your stride. It's knowing the surfaces of the traces you have to traverse. It's knowing how to save your strength so you'll last the longer hauls. When to ease back to a walk, when and how to drink and eat so's you're not too gutty to run right. It's learning the routes of the various Crosses and what sort of weather you might have to run through . . . and learning to manoeuvre on snowrunners on the northern Crosses. And, most important, when to take cover and just let the weather have its way with the world and you safe out of it. So's the messages and the packets you carry will get through as soon as possible.'

She had responded with a nod of appreciation. Not that she hadn't heard the same lecture time and again in the station from every relative and runner. But this time it was for her benefit and she owed Mallum the courtesy of listening closely. She did watch Mallum's stride though, to be sure his heel wasn't bothering him. He caught her glance once and gave her a grin.

'Be sure you carry a wedge of that poultice on any long laps, girl. You never know, you know, when you might need it. As I just did.' And he grimaced, reminding Tenna that even the best runner can put a foot wrong.

While no runner carries much, the long-tailed orange sweatband runners invariably wore could be used to strap a strain or sprain. An oiled packet, no larger than the palm of a hand, had a cloth soaked in numbweed which both cleansed and eased the scratches one can acquire from time to time. Simple remedies for the most common problems. A wedge of poultice could be added to such travel gear and be well worth its weight.

Tenna had no trouble making that lap with Mallum even when he picked up the pace on the flat section.

'Running with a pretty girl's not hard to do,' he told her when they took one brief pause.

She wished he didn't make so much of her looks. They wouldn't help her run any better and that's what she wanted to be: a top runner.

By the time they reached Irma's station at midday, she was not even breathing very hard. But the moment Mallum slowed, he limped slightly with his full weight on the heel.

'Hmm. Well, I can wait out the day here with more poultice,' he said, pulling the little wedge from one of the pockets of his belt. 'See,' and he displayed it to Tenna, 'handy enough.'

She tapped her aid pocket and smiled.

Old Irma came out with a grin on her sun-dried face for them.

'Will she do, Mallum?' the old woman asked, handing each a cup.

'Oh, aye, she'll do. A credit to her Bloodline and not a bother to run with!' Mallum said with a twinkle in his eyes.

'I pass, do I, Mallum?' Tenna asked, needing to have a direct answer.

'Oh, aye,' and he laughed, walking about and shaking his legs to get the kinks out even as she was doing. 'No fear on that. Any hot water for m'poultice, Irm?'

'Coming up,' and she ducked back into her station and came out with a bowl of steaming water which she set down on the long bench that was an inevitable fixture of every station. The overhang of the roof provided a shelter from sun and rain. Most runners were obsessed with watching the traces to see who was coming and going. The long bench, its surface smoothed by generations of bums sliding across it, was placed so that it commanded a good view of the four traces linking at Irma's.

Automatically, Tenna pulled a footstool from under the bench and held out her hand to receive Mallum's right foot. She untied the shoe, placed the now moistened poultice on the bruise while Irma handed her a bandage to fix it in place, taking a good look at the injury in the process.

'Nother day'll do it. Shoulda stayed off it this mornin', too.'

'Not when I'd a chance to run with such a pretty girl,' Mallum said.

'Just like a man,' Irma said dismissively.

Tenna felt herself blushing, although she was beginning to believe he wasn't just teasing. No one else had ever commented on her looks.

'It wasn't a taxing leg, Irma. It's level most of the way and a good surface,' she said, grinning shyly at Mallum as she tried to divert Irma's criticism.

'Humph! Well, a hill run would've been downright foolish and it is flat this-a-way.'

'Anything for Tenna to take back?' Mallum asked, getting back to business, 'to make her first round trip as a runner?'

'Should be,' Irma said, winking at Tenna for this informal inclusion into the ranks of Pern Runner. 'You could eat now . . . soup's ready and so's the bread.'

'Wouldn't mind a bit myself,' Mallum said, carefully shifting his position as if easing the heat from the poultice, since the heat probably penetrated even the toughened sole of his foot.

By the time Tenna had eaten the light meal, two runners came in, a man she didn't know by sight on a long leg from Bitra with a pouch to go farther west and one of Irma's sons.

'I can run it to 97,' she said, the official designation of her family's station.

'That'll do,' the man said, panting and heaving from his long haul. 'That'll do fine.' He gasped for more breath. 'It's an urgent,' he got out. 'Your name?'

'Tenna.'

'One . . . of . . . Fedri's?' he asked and she nodded. 'That's good . . . enough for me. Ready to . . . hit the trace?'

'Sure,' and she held out her hand for the pouch that he slipped off his belt, pausing only to mark the pass-over time on the flap as he gave it into her keeping. 'You are?' she asked, sliding the pouch on to her own belt and settling it in the small of her back.

'Masso,' he said, reaching now for the cup of water Irma had hastened to bring him. He

whooshed her off to the westward trace. With a final grateful farewell wave to Mallum, she picked up her heels as Mallum cheered her on with the traditional runner's 'yo-ho'.

She made it home in less time than it had taken her to reach Irma's and one of her brothers was there to take the pouch on the next westward lap. Silan nodded approval at the pass-over time, marked his own receipt and was off.

'So, girl, you're official,' her mother said and embraced her daughter. 'And no need to sweat it at all, was there?'

'Running's not always as easy,' her father said from the bench, 'but you made good time and that's a grand way to start. I hadn't expected you back before mid-afternoon.'

Tenna did the short legs all around Station 97 for the first summer and into that winter, building her stamina for longer runs and becoming known at all the connecting stations. She made her longest run to Greystones on the coast, just ahead of a very bad snowstorm. Then, because she was the only runner available in Station 18 when the exhausted carrier of an urgent message came in, she had to carry it two stations north. A fishing sloop would be delayed back to port until a new mast could be stepped. Since the vessel was overdue, there were those who'd be very glad to get the message she carried.

Such emergency news should have been drummed ahead but the high winds would tear such a message to nonsense. It was a tough run, with cold as well as wind and snow across a good bit of the low-lying trace. Pacing herself, she did take an hour's rest in one of the Thread shelters that dotted a trace. She made the distance in such good time in those conditions that she got extra stitches on her belt, marking her rise towards journeyman rank.

This run to Fort Hold would be two more stitches on her belt if she finished in good time. And she was sure she would . . . with the comforting sort of certainty which older runners said you began to sense when you'd been travelling the traces a while. She was also now accustomed to judging how long she had run by the feeling in her legs. None of the leaden feeling that accompanied real fatigue; she was still running easily. So long as she had no leg cramp, she knew she could continue effortlessly at this good pace until she reached Station 300 at Fort. Leg cramp was always a hazard and could strike you without warning. She was careful to renew the tablets a runner chewed to ease off a cramp but a bad one could bench a runner for weeks so she was careful to avoid them. And was not too slow about grabbing a handful of any useful herbs she spotted which helped prevent the trouble.

She oughtn't to be letting her mind wander like this, but with an easy stride and a pleasant night in which to travel, it was hard to keep her mind on the job. She would, smartly enough, if there were complications like bad weather or poor light. This was also far too well travelled country for there to be dangers like tunnel snakes, which were about the worst risk that runners encountered: usually at dawn or dusk when the creatures were out hunting. Of course renegades, while not as common as tunnel snakes, were more dangerous, since they were human, not animal. Although that distinction was often moot. As runners rarely carried marks, they were not as likely to be waylaid as messengers on runnerbeasts or other solitary travellers. Tenna hadn't heard of any renegade attacks this far west but sometimes those people were so vicious that they might just pull up a runner for spite and malice. In the past three Turns, there had been two cases - and those up in northern Lemos and Bitra - where the runners had been hamstrung out of sheer malevolence.

Once in a while, in a bad winter, a flock of very hungry wherries might attack a runner in the open but the instances were rare enough. Snakes were the most likely danger encountered. Particularly mid-summer when there were newly-hatched clutches.

Her father had had injuries two summers back with such a hazard. He'd been amazed at how fast the adult tunnel snake could move when alarmed. Mostly they were torpid creatures, only hunger quickening them. But he'd stepped in the midst of an ill-placed nest and had had the hatchlings swarming up his legs, pricking the skin in innumerable places and even managing to get as high as his crotch. (Her mother had stifled a giggle and remarked that it had been more than her father's pride that had been wounded.) But he'd scars from claw and tooth that he could show.

Moon-lit nights like this one were a joy to run in, with the air cool enough to dry the sweat on her face and chest, the trace springy underfoot and clear ahead of her. And her thoughts could wander.

There would be a Gather shortly after she reached her destination: she knew she was carrying some orders for Crafts displaying at Fort Hold. Pouches were invariably fuller going to or coming from a Gather: orders from those unable to attend, wishing to contact a MasterCraftsman. Maybe, if she was lucky, she could stay over for the Gather. She hadn't been to one in a long while and she did want to find well-tanned leathers for a new pair of running shoes. She'd enough money to her credit to give a fair price for the right hides: she'd checked the books her mother kept of her laps. Most Halls were quite willing to take a runner station chit. She'd one in a belt pocket. If she found just the right skins, she'd a bit of leeway to bargain, above and beyond the surface value of the chit.

A Gather would be fun, too. She loved dancing, and was very good at the Toss dance, if she could find someone who could properly partner her in it. Fort was a good hold. And the music would be special, seeing as how the Harper Hall was right there in Fort. She ran on, tunes of harper melodies flitting through her mind even if she'd no breath to sing them.

She was running along a long curve now, around an upthrust of rock most traces were straight as possible - and brought her mind back to her directions. Just around this curve, she should find a trace turning off to the right, inland, towards Fort. She must pay attention now so she wouldn't have to break stride and backtrack.

Suddenly she could feel vibrations through her feet, though she could see nothing around the vegetation banking the curve. Listening intently, she could now hear an odd phuff-phuff sound, coming closer, getting louder. The sound was just enough of a warning for her to move left, out of the centre of the trace, where she'd have just that much more of a glimpse of what was making the sound and the vibrations. This was a runner track, not a trail or road. No runner made those sounds, or hit the ground that hard to make vibrations. She saw the dark mass bearing down on her, and flung herself into the undergrowth as runnerbeast and rider came within a finger span of knocking into her. She could feel the wind of their passing and smell the sweat of the beast.

'STUPID!' she shouted after them, getting branches and leaves in her mouth as she fell, feeling needly gouges in the hands she had put out to break her fall. She spent the next minute struggling to her feet and spitting bitter leaves and twigs out of her mouth. They left behind an acrid, drying taste: sticklebush! She'd fallen into a patch of sticklebush. At this time of the Turn, there were no leaves yet to hide the hair-like thorns that coated twig and branch. A nuisance which balanced out their gift of succulent berries in the autumn.

Nor did the rider pull up, or even falter, when the least he could have done was return to be sure she hadn't been injured. Surely he'd seen her? Surely he'd heard her outraged shout? And what was he doing, using a runner's trace in the first place? There was a good road north for ordinary travellers.

'I'll get you!' she called, shaking her fist and stamping her feet with frustration.

She was shaking with reaction to such a near miss. Then she became uncomfortably aware of the scratches on hands, arms, legs, chest, and two on one cheek. Stamping with outrage and fury, she got the numbweed from her belt pocket and daubed at the cuts, hissing as the solution stung. But she didn't want the sap to get into her blood. Nor did she want the slivers to work in. She managed to pick the ones out of her hands, daubing the numbweed into those. She couldn't really see the extent of her injuries, some being down the back of her arm. She picked out what slivers she could and carefully pressed in the pad until all the moisture was gone from it. Even if she had avoided infection, she was likely to be teased about falling when she got to the station. Runners were supposed to keep on their feet and in balance. Not that a rider could be expected on the trace at this very early hour. Surely that would also help her find out who the rider had been, besides being bold enough to ride a runner's trace. And if she weren't around to give him a fat lip, maybe another runner would give the lesson in her place. Runners were not above complaining to Lord Holders or their stewards if someone abused their rights.

Having done as much as she could then, she stifled her anger: that didn't get the pouch to its destination. And she mustn't let her anger get the better of common sense. The brush with disaster, close as it was, had resulted in very minor problems, she told herself firmly. What were scratches! But she found it hard to regain her stride. She'd been going so smoothly, too, and so close to the end of this lap.

She could have been killed, smacking into a runnerbeast at the speeds they'd both been travelling. If she hadn't thought to move out of the centre of the trace - where she had every right to be, not him - if she hadn't felt the hoofbeats through her shoes and heard the animal's high breathing. Why, both sets of messages could have been delayed! Or lost.

Her legs felt tired and heavy and she had to concentrate hard to try to regain the rhythm. Reluctantly she realized that she was unlikely to and settled for conserving her energy.

Running into the end of night, the dawn behind her, was not as much a pleasure as it could have been and that annoyed Tenna even more. Just wait till she found out who that rider was! She'd tell him a thing or two. Though common sense told her that she was unlikely to encounter him. He was outbound and she was inbound. If he'd been in that much of a hurry, he might be a relay rider, bound for a distant location. Lord Holders could afford such services and the stabling of fast runnerbeasts along the way. But he shouldn't have been on a runner trace. There were roads for beasts! Hooves could tear up the surface of the trace and the station manager might have to spend hours replacing divots torn up by shod hooves. Traces were for runners. She kept returning to that indignant thought. She just hoped any other runner on the trace would hear him in time! That's one reason you keep your mind on your run, Tenna. Even if you'd no reason to suspect you weren't alone with the night and the moon on a runner trace.

The runner station was just below the main entrance to Fort Hold. History had it that Fort had started runners as short-distance messengers, hundreds and hundreds of Turns ago, even before drum-towers were built. Fort Hold had utilized the skills of runners for many tasks, especially during Threadfall when runners had accompanied all ground crews, vital as couriers in emergencies. The installation of the drum-towers and the development of runnerbeasts had not put an end to the need for the runners of Pern. This main connecting hold was the largest ever built just to house and care for runners. Three levels high, she'd been told, and several back into the Fort cliff. It also boasted one of the best bathing facilities on the continent: hot running water in deep tubs that had eased centuries of runner aches and pains. Cesila had highly recommended that Tenna try for Fort when she got that far west. And here she was and right ready to appreciate the accommodations.

She was very weary and not only out of pace but jarring herself with every step down the broader avenue that led to her destination. Her hands stung from the sap and she hoped she hadn't any slivers left in them. But hands were a long way from the feet.

Beastholders, up early to feed stock, gave her cheery waves and smiles and their courtesies somewhat restored her good humour. She did not care to arrive petulant as well as scratched, not on her first visit here.

Almost as if the manager had a special sensitivity to incoming runners, the double door was thrown open as she came to a rough, gasping halt, hand raised to catch the bell cord.

'Thought I heard someone coming.' The man, welcoming grin on his face, put out both hands to steady her. He was one of the oldest men she had ever seen: his skin a network of wrinkles and grooves, but his eyes were bright - for this hour - and he looked to be a merry man. 'New one, too, at that, for all you look familiar to me. A pretty face is a great sight on a fine morning.'

Sucking in breath enough to give her name, Tenna paced into the large entry room. She unbuckled her message pouch as she eased the tension in her leg muscles.

'Tenna passing 208 with eastern messages. Fort's the destination for all.'

'Welcome to 300, Tenna,' he said, taking the pouch from her and immediately chalking up her arrival on the heavy old board to the left of the station door. 'All for here, huh?' He passed her a cup before he opened the pouch, to check the recipients.

With cup in her hand, she went out again, still flicking her legs to ease the muscles. First she rinsed her mouth, spitting out that first mouthful on to the cobbles. Then she would sip to swallow. Nor was this just water but some sort of fresh-tasting drink that refreshed dry tissues.

'You're a mite the worse for the run,' the man said, standing in the door and pointing to the bloody smears on her bare skin. 'What'd you run into?'

'Sticklebush,' she said through gritted teeth. 'Runnerbeast run me off round the hill curve . . . galloping along *arunner* trace like he must know he shouldn't.' She was astonished at the anger in her voice when she'd meant to sound matter-of-fact.

'That'd be Haligon, more'n likely,' the station keeper said, nodding with a disapproving scowl. 'Saw him peltin' down to the beast hold an hour or so ago. I've warned him myself about using the traces but he says it cuts half an hour off a trip and he's conducting an ex-per-I-ment.'

'He might have killed me,' she said, her anger thoroughly fanned.

'You'd better tell him. Maybe a pretty runner'll get it through his thick skull because the odd crack or two hasn't.'

His reaction made Tenna feel that her anger was righteous. It's one thing to be angry on your own, another to have confirmation of your right to be angry. She felt redeemed. Though she couldn't see why being pretty would be an advantage if you were giving someone what-for. She could hit just as hard as the ugliest runner she'd ever met.

'You'll need a long soak with sticklebush slivers in you. You did have something to put on 'em

right then, didn't you?' When she nodded, now annoyed because he implied that she might not have that much sense, he added, 'I'll send m'mate to look at those cuts. Wrong time of the Turn to fall into sticklebush, ya know.' And she nodded her head vigorously. 'All in all, you made a good time from 208,' he added, approvingly. 'Like that in a young runner. Shows you're not just a pretty face. Now, go up the stairs there, take your first right, go along the corridor, fourth door on the left. No one else's up. Towels on the shelves. Leave your clothes: they'll be washed and dry by evening. You'll want a good feed after a night run and then a good long sleep. We've all for you, runner.'

She thanked him, turned to the stairs and then tried to lift the wooden blocks her legs had become up the steps. Her toes dragged as she made her feet move and she was grateful for the carpeting which saved the wooden stairs from her spikes. But then this place was for runners, shoes, spikes and all.

'Fourth door,' she murmured to herself and pushed against a portal which opened into the most spacious bathing room she'd ever seen. And pungent with something pleasantly astringic. Nothing as grand as this even at Keroon Hold. Five tubs ranged along the back wall with curtains to separate them if one needed privacy. There were two massage tables, sturdy, padded, with shelves of oils and salves underneath. They would account for the nice smells. The room was hot and she began to sweat again, a sweat that made her nicks and scratches itch. There were changing cubicles, too, to the right of the door . . . and behind her she found over-sized towels in stacks higher than her head, and she wasn't short. There were other cubbies holding runner pants and shirts for all weathers and the thick anklets that cushioned and warmed weary feet. She took a towel, her fingers feeling the thick, soft nap. It was as big as a blanket.

In the cubicle nearest the tubs, she shucked off her garments, automatically folding them into a neat pile. Then, looping the towel over the hook set by the side of the tub for that purpose, she eased herself into the warm water. The tub was taller than she was and she let herself down to touch a floor, a full hand of water above her head when she did. Amazing!

This was sheer luxury. She wondered how often she could draw a run to Fort Hold. The water made her scratches sting but that was nothing to the comfort it was giving her tired muscles. Swishing around in the large square tub, her hand connected with a ledge, sort of curved, a few inches below the surface. With a grin she realized that she could rest her head on it and be able to float safely. Which was exactly what she did, arms out to her sides, legs dangling. She hadn't known bathing could be so . . . so splendid. She let every muscle in her body go limp. And lay suspended in the water.

'Tenna?' a woman's voice called gently, as if not to startle the lone bather. 'I'm Penda, Torlo's mate. He sent me up. I've some herbs for the bath that'll help those scratches. Wrong time of the Turn to fall into sticklebush.'

'I know,' Tenna agreed dourly. 'Be glad of any help.' Tenna didn't really want to open her eyes or move but she politely swished herself across the water to the edge of the tub.

'Lemme see them cuts so's I can see didja get any punctures like. That'd be no good with the sap rising,' Penda said. She walked quickly to the tub with a odd sideways gait, so whatever had injured her hip had happened a long time ago and she had learned to cope with it. She grinned at Tenna. 'Pretty runner girl, you are. You give Haligon what-for next time you see him.'

'How'll I know him?' Tenna asked acerbically, though she dearly wished a confrontation with the rider. 'And why is "pretty" a help?'

'Haligon likes pretty girls,' and Penda gave an exaggerated wink. 'We'll see you stay about long

enough to give him what-for. *You* might do some good.'

Tenna laughed and, at Penda's gesture, held out her hands and turned her left arm where Penda could see it.

'Hmmm. Mostly surface but there's punctures on the heels of both hands,' and she ran oddly soft fingers across Tenna's hands, catching on three silvers so that Tenna shivered with the unpleasant sensation. 'Soaking'll do the most good. Loosen them up in your skin. Prolly clean 'em all out. Stickle's a clever bush, harming you so, but this'll help,' she said and took a collection of bottles from the deep pocket in her apron and selected one. 'Got to leave nothing to chance, ya know,' she added as she deftly splashed about twenty drops into the tub water. 'Don't worry about emptying the tub, either. It'll run clear and'll be fresh water by the time someone else climbs in. I'll take out the slivers when you've soaked. You want a rub then? Or would you rather sleep first?'

'A bit of a rub would be marvellous, thanks. And before I sleep.'

'I'll be back with some food.'

Tenna thought of the bathing room in her parents' station and grinned. Nothing to compare with this, though she'd always thought her station was lucky to have a tub so long you could lie out flat in it: even the tallest runners could. But you had to keep the fire going under the tank all the time to be sure there was enough for when a bath was needed. Not like this - the water already hot and you only needing to step into the tub. The herbs scented the steamy water, making it feel softer against her skin. She lay back again.

She was nearly asleep when Penda returned with a tray containing klah, fresh-baked bread, a little pot of, appropriately enough, stickleberry preserve and a bowl of porridge.

'Messages've already been handed over to them they was sent to so you can sleep good, knowing the run's well ended.'

Tenna consumed her meal, down to the last scrap. Penda was making quite a mixture with the massage oils and the runner inhaled the scent of them. Then Tenna climbed on the table, letting her body go limp while Penda used a tweezer on the slivers still caught in her flesh. Penda counted as she deposited the wicked hairs. Nine, all told. She applied more medication and the last of the itching and discomfort vanished. Tenna sighed. Then Penda soothed tired muscles and tendons. Her touch was sure but gentle. She did announce there were more punctures on the backs of Tenna's arms and legs and proceeded to go at them with the tweezers to remove the slivers. That done, her motions became more soothing and Tenna relaxed again.

'There y'are. Just go along to the third door down on your left, Tenna,' Penda said softly when she had finished.

Tenna roused enough from the delightful, massage-induced stupor and wrapped the big towel tightly around her chest. Like most runner females, she didn't have much of a bust, but that was an advantage.

'Don't forget these,' Penda said, shoving the laces of her running shoes at her. 'Clothes'll be clean and dry when you wake.'

'Thanks, Penda,' Tenna said sincerely, astonished that she'd been drowsy enough to forget her

precious shoes.

She padded down the hall in the thick anklets that Penda had slipped on her feet and pushed in the third door. Light from the corridor showed her where the bed was straight across the narrow space, against the wall. Closing the door, she made her way to it in the dark. Dropping the towel, she leaned down to feel for the edge of the quilt she'd seen folded on the foot of the bed. She pulled it over her as she stretched out. Sighed once and fell asleep.

Good-natured laughter and movement down the hall roused her. Someone had half-opened the glowbasket so she saw her own clothes, clean, dry and neatly folded on the stool where she'd dropped her running shoes. She realized she hadn't even taken off the anklets before she got into bed. She wriggled her toes in them. No tenderness there. Her hands were stiff but cool so Penda'd gotten out all the slivers. The skin of her left arm and leg was stiff though and she threw back the quilt and tried to see the injuries. She couldn't but there was a little too much heat in the skin on the back of her left arm and her right leg for her liking. Five sort of sore spots she couldn't really check at all other than identifying them as 'sore'. And, when she checked her legs, two bad red bumps on her thigh, one in the left calf and two on the fleshy part of her right leg by the shin bone. She had suffered more hurt than she'd realized. And stickle slivers could work their way through your flesh and into your blood. One got to your heart and you could die from it. She groaned and rose. Shook out her legs, testing the feel of her muscles, and, thanks to Penda's massage, they didn't ache. She dressed and then carefully folded the quilt, placing it just as she'd found it on the bed.

Making her way back to the stairs, she passed the bathroom and heard the hum of masculine voices, then a laugh that was clearly from a female runner. As she came down the stairs, she was aware of the smell of roasting meats. Her stomach rumbled. One long narrow window lit the hall that led to the main room and she gauged that she had slept most of the day. Perhaps she ought to have had a healer check out the scratches but Penda knew what to do as well as any Hall-trained healer . . . probably better since she was a station manager's mate.

'Now here's a one who's prompt for her supper,' Torlo said, calling the attention of the runners sitting around the room to Tenna's appearance. He introduced her. 'Had a brush with Haligon early this morning,' he added and Tenna did not fail to note that this brash personage was known to them all from the nods and grimaces on their faces.

'I to!' Lord Groghe myself,' one of the older runners said, nodding his head and looking solemn, 'that there'd be an accident . . . then what'd he say to that? I asked him. Someone hurt because a wild lad won't respect what's our rights and propitty.' Then he nodded directly at Tenna. 'You aren't the only one he's knocked aside. Dinncha hear him coming?'

'Met him on the hill curve, she said,' Torlo answered before Tenna could open her own mouth.

'Bad place, bad place. Runner can't see around it,' a second man said and nodded his sympathy to her. 'See you've scratches? Penda put her good junk on ya?' Tenna nodded. 'You'll be right then. I've seen your kin on the traces, haven't I? Betchur one of Fedri and Cesila's, aincha?' He smiled knowingly at the others. 'You're prettier than she was and she was some pretty woman.'

Tenna decided to ignore the compliment and admitted to her parentage. 'Have you been through Station 97?'

'A time or two, a time or two,' he said, grinning amiably. His runner's belt was covered with stitches.

Torlo had come up beside her and now took her left arm to peer at the side she couldn't really see well.

'Punctures,' he said in a flat tone.

The other runners came to be sure his verdict was correct. They all nodded sagely and resumed their seats.

'Sometimes I wonder if all those berries're worth the risk of them slivers in spring,' the veteran runner said.

'Worse time of the Turn to fall into them,' she was told again.

'Misler, you run over to Healer Hall,' Torlo said to one of them.

'Oh, I don't think that's necessary,' Tenna said, because you had to pay healers and she then wouldn't have enough for good leathers.

'Being as how it was the Lord Holder's runnerbeast knocked you in, he'll pay for it,' Torlo said, sensing her reluctance and winking at her.

'One of these days he'll have to pay out blood money iffen he doesn't bring that Haligon up short and *make* him quit our traces. Did those shod hooves leave many holes?' another man asked her.

'No,' she had to admit. 'Surface sprang right back up.'

'Hmmm, that's what it's supposed to do.'

'But we don't need Haligon galloping up and down like traces was put there for *his* benefit.'

Misler had departed on his errand and then, after each runner spoke his or her name and home station, a glass of wine was poured for her. She started to demur but Torlo eyed her sternly.

'You're not on the run-list this day, girl.'

'I need to finish my first Cross,' she said wistfully as she took the glass and found an empty seat.

'You will, lass, you will,' the first man - Grolly - said so assuredly as he held his glass up that she was heartened. The others all seconded his words.

A few scratches and maybe the three-four punctures were not going to keep her from reaching the western seashore. She sipped her wine.

The runners who'd been bathing descended now and were served their wine by the time Misler came trotting back, a man in healer colours following behind, with a hop and a skip to keep up with his long-legged escort.

Beveny introduced himself and asked for Penda to join him. A nicety which pleased Tenna and

gave her a very good opinion of the journeyman. The consultation was conducted right there in the main hall since the injuries were to visible portions of her body. And the other runners were genuinely interested in knowing the worst of her condition and offered suggestions: most of them knowledgeable as to which herbs should be used and how efficacious they had been on such and such an occasion. Beveny kept a grin on his face as if he was well used to runner chaffering. As he probably was.

'I think this one, and the two on your leg, may still have slivers in them,' Beveny said at length. 'Nothing a poultice won't draw out overnight, I'm sure.'

There were approving nods and wise smiles from the audience. Poultices were then discussed again and at length and the appropriate one decided on. During this part of the consultation, Tenna was installed in a comfortable, padded chair, a long stool affair attached to the front of it so her legs could stretch out. She'd never been fussed over so much in her life but it was a runner thing: she'd seen her mother and father take the same personal care of any one arriving at their station with an injury. But to be the centre of so much attention - and at Fort Station - was embarrassing in the extreme for Tenna and she kept trying to discount the urgency of such minor wounds. She did offer her packet of her mother's poultice and three of the runners remarked favourably on Cesila's famous poultice but hers was clearly for bruises, not infections, so the healer told her to keep it for emergencies.

'Which I hope you won't have, of course,' he said, smiling at her as he mixed - with the hot water Penda fetched - an aromatic concoction which everyone now in the room had to approve.

Keenly aware that she must be properly modest and forbearing, as well as brave, Tenna braced herself for the treatment. Hot poultices, however therapeutic, could be somewhat uncomfortable. Then the mixture was ready. With deft fingers, Healer Beveny deposited neat blobs, no larger than his thumbnail, on the sore spots. He must have judged the heat just right because none was too hot. He made sure to position the patches right over each blob before securing them with bandage strips which Penda produced. Tenna felt each of the ten hot spots but the sensation was not all that unpleasant.

'I'll check tomorrow, Tenna, but I don't think we have to worry about any of them,' Beveny said with such conviction that Tenna was relieved.

'Nor do you, here at Fort Station with the Healer Hall a stretch away,' said Torlo and courteously saw Beveny to the door and watched a polite few moments until the healer was halfway to his Hall.

'Nice fella,' he said to anyone listening and smiled at Tenna. 'Ah, here's the food.'

Evidently that meal had been held up for her to be treated because now Penda led in the drudge carrying the roast platter with others behind him, laden with large bowls of steaming food.

'Rosa,' she said, pointing to one of the female runners, 'get the board. Spacia, grab a fork and spoon for Tenna. She's not to move. Grolly, her glass is empty . . .' and, as she directed the others to serve the injured runner, she herself carved fine slices from the roasted ribs of herdbeast. 'The rest of you, get on line.'

Tenna's embarrassment returned, waited on as she was by Rosa and Spacia, who cheerfully performed their assigned tasks. Always she had been the one to help, so this situation was quite novel. Of course it was also a runner thing, to be cosseted in need, but she'd never been the recipient before.

Two more batches of runners arrived in from south and east. When they came back from

bathing, they had to be told all about Haligon's forcing Tenna off the trace and how she had sticklebrush punctures that were severe enough to require a healer. She got the distinct impression that almost everyone had had a run-in, or knew someone who had, with this infamous Haligon. Eventually the tale had been told to everyone and the conversation changed to talk of the Gather three days hence.

Tenna sighed softly to herself. Three days? She'd be fully recovered by then and have to run on. She really did want to get the extra stitches for her first Cross. A Gather, even one at Fort, was not as important as upgrading herself. Well, nearly. It wasn't as if this was the last Gather she'd ever have a chance to attend even if it was the first for her at the First Hold on Pern.

This was home station for two girls. Rosa had a cap of very tight dark curls and a pert face with mischievous eyes. Spacia, with long blonde hair tied back, runner-wise, had a more dignified way about her although she kept up a wickedly bantering conversation with the younger male runners among others there. Then there was an informal concert for Tenna, some of the newer songs that the Harper Hall was airing. Rosa led, Spacia adding an alto line while three of the other runners joined in, one with a little whistle and the others with their voices. The evening became quite enjoyable, especially as either Grolly or Torlo kept filling Tenna's wine glass.

Rosa and Spacia helped her up the stairs, one on either side of her, with the excuse that the bandages mustn't loosen. They chattered about what they intended to wear to the Gather and who they hoped to dance with.

'We're on line tomorrow,' Rosa said as they got her to her bed, 'so we'll probably be off before you get down. Those poultices ought to do the trick.'

They both wished her a good night's sleep. Her head was spinning as she lay down, but pleasantly, and she drifted into sleep very quickly.

Torlo arrived with a tray of food just as she was waking up.

'Not as sore today?'

'Not all over but my leg . . . ' She pulled the quilt back so he could see.

'Hmmm. Need more on that one. Went in at an angle. I'm calling Beveny.'

'Oh, really . . . I'd rather . . . Surely Penda knows what the healer made up for me...'

'She does but we want the healer to speak about your injuries to Lord Groghe.'

Tenna was dismayed now. A runner didn't go to the Lord Holder without *real* cause for complaint and her injuries were not that serious.

'Now, see here, young runner,' and Torlo wagged a finger at her, 'I'm station master and I say we take this to the Lord Holder on account of it shouldna happened at all.'

Beveny recommended a long soak in the tub and provided her with an astringent to use in the water.

'I'll leave more poultice with Penda. We want that final sliver out. See . . .' and he pointed to the thin, almost invisible hairs of the sticklebush which had come from the arm puncture. 'We want another of these fellows on the pad, not in you.'

Two more had also erupted from the puncture wounds and he carefully covered all three pads with glass slides which he tied together.

'Soak at least an hour, Tenna,' he told her. 'You're to take it very handy today, too. Don't want that sliver to work any further down in your flesh.'

She shuddered at the thought of an evil-looking hair loose in her body.

'Don't worry. It'll be out by evening,' Beveny said, grinning reassuringly. 'And you'll be dancing with us.'

'Oh, I'll have to run on as soon as I'm able,' she said earnestly.

Beveny's grin broadened. 'What? And do me out of my dance with you?' Then his expression turned professional. 'I can't release you as fit to run yet, you know. I'd want to see those puncture marks healing. Especially in the shin where just the dirt and dust of a run could be imbedded and cause a repeat infection. The wounds may seem,' and he emphasized the word, 'insignificant but I've tended a lot of runners and I know the hazards of the trace.'

'Oh,' Tenna said meekly.

'Right. Oh!' And he grinned again, pressing her shoulder with a kindly squeeze. 'You will make your first Cross. Now rest. You runners are a breed apart, you know.'

With that reminder, he left her to make her way to the bathroom.

Rosa, Spacia, Grolly - in fact, all the runners at the Fort Station - were in and out, groaning over the special messages that needed to be delivered to the Fort Crafhalls, the Lord Holder, the Harper Hall, coming from the 'backside of beyond' as Rosa termed it.

'Don't mind us,' Rosa said when Tenna began to feel as if she ought to be doing her share. 'It's always like this just before a Gather and we always complain, but the Gather makes up for it. Which reminds me, you don't have anything to wear.'

'Oh, no, don't worry about me...'

'Nonsense,' Spacia said. 'We will if we want to and we do.' She gave Tenna's long frame an intent look and then shook her head. 'Well, nothing we have would fit.' Both girls were shorter than Tenna by a full head and, while neither carried much flesh, they were stockier than the eastern girl.

Then both turned to each other in the same instant and snapped their fingers. 'Silvina!' they exclaimed in chorus.

'C'mon,' Spacia said and reached for Tenna's hand. 'You can walk, can't you?'

'Oh, yes but -'

'On your feet then, runner,' Rosa said and took Tenna's other arm, assisting her to an upright position. 'Silvina's headwoman at the Harper Hall and she always has good things.'

'But . . . I . . . ' and then Tenna gave up protesting. It was obvious from the determined expressions on the two runners' faces that they would brook no argument.

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'You're taking her to Silvina?' Penda asked, sidling out of the kitchen. 'Good. I've nothing here to fit her and she's got to look her best when she meets that wretch, Haligon.'

'Why?' Tenna suspiciously wanted to know. Why would she need to look her best just to give Haligon what-for?

'Why, to maintain the reputation of Fort Station, of course,' Rosa said with an impish grin. 'We've our pride, you know, and you may be a visitor but you're here, now,' and she pointed emphatically to the ground, 'and must be presentable.'

'Not that you aren't,' Spacia hastily added, being slightly more tactful than Rosa, 'except we want you more so than ever.'

'After all, it is your first Fort Gather . . . '

'And you nearly finishing your first Cross, too.'

Their chatter was impossible to resist and there was no way Tenna could appear at a Gather in runner gear which was all she had of her own to wear.

At this evening hour, they found Silvina checking day-records in her office at the Harper Hall and she was more than delighted that she had been approached. She led them down to the storage rooms underneath the Harper Hall.

'We keep quite a few performance dresses in case a soloist wants to wear Harper colours. You wouldn't mind wearing blue, would you?' Silvina said as she paused by the second of a line of locked doors. 'Actually, I think blue would be a very good colour for you.' She had such a lovely speaking voice that Tenna was listening more to her tone than what she was saying. 'And I've one that I think might be just the thing for you.'

She opened a large wardrobe and, from the many there, she brought out a long gown with full sleeves and some fine embroidered trim that made all three girls gasp.

'It's lovely. Oh, I couldn't wear something this valuable,' Tenna exclaimed, backing away.

'Nonsense,' Silvina said and gestured for Tenna to slip out of her runner top.

When Tenna carefully slipped on the dress, the softness of the fabric against her skin made her feel . . . special. She tried a little spin and the long skirt swirled about her ankles while the full sleeves

billowed about her arms. It was the most flattering dress she'd worn and she examined it thoroughly, committing the details of its design to her mind so that she could reproduce it the next time she had marks enough for a Gather dress. The one she had at home was nowhere near as splendid as this. Could she, should she dance, in something as elegant as this? What if she spilled something on it?

'I'm not sure.. .' she began as she faced her companions.

'Not SURE!' Rosa was indignant. 'Why, that deep blue shows up your lovely skin and your eyes . . . they are blue, aren't they, or is it the dress makes them so? And it fits like it was made for YOU!'

Tenna looked down at the low-cut front of the bodice. Whoever it had been made for had had a lot more breast. She didn't fill it out properly. Silvina was rummaging through another box.

'Here,' she said, and stuffed two pads in the front, settling them with such a practised hand that the adjustment was done before Tenna could protest.

'There! That's much better,' Spacia said and then giggled. 'I have to pad, too. But it'd be worse for us as runners to be heavy, bumping around all the time.'

Tenna tentatively felt her newly improved form but, as she looked at herself in the mirror, she could see that the fit of the top was vastly improved and she looked more . . . more . . . well, it fitted better. The fabric was so smooth to the touch, it was a pleasure just to feel the dress on her. And this shade of blue . . .

'This is Harper Blue,' she said with surprise.

'Of course it is,' Silvina said with a laugh. 'Not that it matters. You'll be wearing runner cords . . . though right now,' and Silvina's appreciative grin broadened, 'you don't look runnerish . . . if you'll forgive my frankness.'

Tenna couldn't help admiring how much better her figure looked with that little alteration. She had a slim waist and the dress hugged it before flaring out over hips which she knew to be too bony and best covered.

'The pads won't . . . pop out . . . will they, when I'm dancing?'

'If you'll take off the dress, I'll put a few stitches to secure them where they should stay,' Silvina said.

That was done so quickly that Silvina was folding the lovely dress over Tenna's arm before she realized it.

'Now, shoes?' Spacia asked. 'She can't wear spikes.'

'She might better wear them,' Rosa said dourly, 'with some of those louts who come to a Fort Gather. Haligon's not the only one who'll home in on her, looking that way.'

Silvina had cast a measuring glance at Tenna's long narrow feet and now took a long box down from one of the many shelves in this huge storeroom.

'Should have something to fit even narrow runner feet . . .' she murmured and came up with a pair

of soft, ankle-high, black suede boots. 'Try these.'

They did not fit. But the fourth pair - in dark red - were only slightly too long.

'Wear thick anklets and they'll fit fine,' Spacia suggested.

And the three girls left, Tenna carefully transporting the dress to the station. Rose and Spacia insisted on sharing the burden of the shoes and the underskirt which Silvina offered to complete the costume.

The last sliver of sticklebush was on the pad the next morning and Beveny added it to the others, handing the evidence packet over to Torlo who grinned in satisfaction.

'This'll make Lord Groghe see that we've a legitimate complaint,' he said and nodded emphatically at Tenna. She was about to protest when he added, 'But not until after the Gather for he's too busy to be approached right now. And he'll be in a much better mood after a good Gather.' He turned to Tenna. 'So you have to stay till after and that's that.'

'But I could run short distances now, couldn't I?'

'Mmm,' Torlo said, nodding. 'Iffen a run comes up. Don't like to be idle, do you, girl?' She shook her head. 'Wal, Healer, is she fit?'

'Short run and no hills,' Beveny said, 'and nowhere Haligon might ride.' He grinned mischievously at her and took his leave.

Just before midday, Torlo called her from the front bench where she'd been watching the Gather stalls being erected.

'Run down to the Port for me, will you? A ship just was drummed in and has cargo for the Gather. We're to get its manifests.' He took her by the arm and showed the route to her on the big map of Fort Hold that displayed local traces and roads. 'Straight run . . . downhill all the way to the Port. And not too steep on the way back.'

It was good to be running again and, though the spring weather had turned chilly, she soon worked up enough heat to keep warm. The captain was muchly relieved to deliver the manifests to her. The cargo was being unloaded and he was anxious to get it up the road to the hold in time for the Gather. He was equally anxious to receive payment for the deliveries and she could promise she'd have the manifests in the designated hands before dinner time.

He also had a pouch of letters from the eastern sea coast on board which were addressed to Fort Hold. So she carried a full belt back. Her legs felt the slight incline but she didn't decrease her pace despite a slight soreness in the right leg at the shin.

Well, a warm bath in one of those incredible tubs would take care of that. And the Gather was tomorrow.

Fort Station was full that night, with runners coming from other stations for the Gather the next day. Tenna bunked in with Rosa and Spacia and a southern runner, Delfie, took the fourth bed in their room. It was a front room with a window, and you heard the traffic on the road, but Tenna was tired enough to sleep through anything.

'Which is as well because the comings and goings up the main track kept up all night long,' Rosa said with cheerful disgust. 'Let's eat outside. It's so crowded in here.' So they all sat on the front benches to eat.

Spacia gave Tenna a conspiratorial wink as Tenna followed the others outside. There had been a few spare seats but not all together. It would be nicer to eat outside instead of the packed tables. Penda and her drudges had their hands full pouring klah and distributing bread, cheese and porridge.

Actually, it was much more interesting to sit outside to eat. There was so much going on. Gather wagons kept arriving from both directions and rolled on to the field set aside for their use. Stalls which had been bare boards and uprights last night were being decorated with Hall colours and craft insignia. And more stalls were being erected on the wide court in front of the hold. The long tongue and groove boards for the dancing surface were being slotted into place in the centre and the harpers' platform erected. Tenna wanted to hug herself with delight at all the activity. She'd never actually seen a Gather gathering before . . . especially in such a big hold as Fort. Since she had run yesterday, she felt a little better about not having made a push to finish her first Cross. And she had the chance to see the dragonriders pop into the air above Fort Hold.

'Oh, they are so beautiful,' she said, noticing that Rosa and Spacia were also watching the graceful creatures landing, and the elegantly-clad dragonriders dismounting.

'Yes, they are,' Rosa said in an odd tone. 'I just wish they wouldn't keep going on about Thread coming back.' She shuddered.

'You don't think it will?' Tenna said, for she had recently had several runs into the Benden Station and knew that weyrfolk were certain that Thread would return. Hadn't the Red Star been seen in the Eye Rock at the Winter Solstice?

Rosa shrugged. 'It can for all of me but it's going to interfere with running something fierce.'

'I noticed that the Benden Thread halts are all repaired,' Tenna said.

Spacia shrugged. 'We'd be fools to take any chances, wouldn't we?' Then she grimaced. 'I'd really hate to be stuck in one of those boxes with Thread falling all around me. Why, the wardrobe in Silvina's storeroom is larger. What if it got in a crack, Thread got in, and I couldn't get out?' She pantomimed terror and revulsion.

'It'll never come to that,' Rosa said confidently.

'Lord Groghe certainly got rid of all the greenery around the hold,' Spacia remarked, gesturing around.

'That was as much for the Gather as because the dragonriders said he had to,' Rosa said dismissively. 'Oh, here come the Boll runners . . .' and she jumped to her feet, waving at the spearhead of runners who had just appeared on the southern road.

They were running effortlessly, their legs moving as if they had drilled that matched stride. They certainly made a fine sight, Tenna thought, pride swelling in her chest and catching her breath!

'They must have started last night,' Rosa said. 'Oh, d'you see Cleve, Spacia?'

'Third rank from the rear,' Spacia said pointing. 'As if anyone could misshim !' she added in a slightly derisive tone, winking at Tenna. Then murmured behind her hand for Tenna's ears only. 'She's been so sure he wouldn't come . . . Ha!'

Tenna grinned, now understanding why Rosa had wanted to sit outside that morning and why she had sent Spacia in when they needed more klah.

Then, all of a sudden, as if the arrival of that contingent had been the signal, the Gather was ready. All stalls were up and furnished, the first shift of harpers on the platform and ready to entertain. Then Rosa pointed to the wide steps leading down from the entrance to the hold and there were the Lord and Lady, looking exceedingly grand in brown Gather finery, descending to the court to formally open the Gather Square. They were accompanied by the dragonriders as well as a clutch of folk, young and old and all related to the Lord Holder. According to Rosa, Lord Groghe had a large family.

'Oh, let's not miss the opening,' Spacia told Tenna. Rosa had accompanied Cleve into the station and was helping Penda serve the Boll group a second breakfast after their long run.

So the two girls had excellent seats to watch the two Lord Holders do the official walk through the Gather.

'There's Haligon,' Spacia said, her tone hard, pointing.

'Which one?'

'He's wearing brown,' Spacia said.

Tenna was none the wiser. 'There are a lot of people wearing brown.'

'He's walking just behind Lord Groghe.'

'So are a lot of other people.'

'He's got the curliest head of hair,' Spacia added.

There were two who answered that description but Tenna decided it was the shorter of the young men, the one who walked with a definite swagger. That had to be Haligon. He was handsome enough, though she liked the appearance of the taller man in brown more: not as attractive perhaps, but with a nicer grin on his face. Haligon obviously thought himself very much the lad, from the smug expression on his face.

Tenna nodded. She'd give him what-for, so she would.

'C'mon, we should change before the mob get upstairs,' Spacia said, touching Tenna's arm to get her attention.

Now that she had identified Haligon, Tenna was quite ready to be looking her very best. Spacia

was also determined to assist and took pains with Tenna's appearance, fluffing her hair so that it framed her face, helping her with lip colour and a touch of eye shadow.

'Bring out the blue in 'em, though your eyes are really grey, aren't they?'

'Depends on what I'm wearing.' Tenna gave a little twirl in front of the long mirror in the room, watching the bias-cut swirl around her ankles. As Spacia had suggested, the anklets took up the spare room in the toes of the borrowed boots. Nor did they look ungainly on the end of her legs as her long feet usually did. She was really quite pleased with her looks. And had to admit, with a degree of satisfaction, that she looked 'pretty'.

Then Spacia stood beside her, the yellow of her gown an attractive contrast to Tenna's deep blue.

'Ooops, I'd better find you some spare runner cords or everyone'll think you're new in the Harper Hall.'

No spare cords were found, though Spacia turned out all the drawers.

'Maybe I should be Harper Hall,' Tenna said thoughtfully. 'That way I can deal with Haligon as he deserves before he suspects.'

'Hmm, that might be the wiser idea, you know,' Spacia agreed.

Rosa came rushing in, pulling at her clothes in a rush to change.

'Need any help?' Spacia asked as Rosa pulled her pink, floral-printed Gather dress from its hanger.

'No, no but get down there and keep Felisha from Cleve. She's determined to get him, you know. Waltzed right in before he'd finished eating and started hanging on his arm as if they were espoused.' Rosa's voice was muffled as she pulled the dress over her head. They all heard a little tearing and Rosa cried out in protest, standing completely still, the dress half-on. 'Oh, no, no! What did I rip? What'll I do? How bad is it? Can you see?'

While the seam had only parted a bit, and Spacia was threading a needle to make the repairs, Rosa was so disturbed at the thought of her rival that Tenna volunteered to go down.

'You know which one Cleve is?' Rosa asked anxiously and Tenna nodded and left the room.

She identified Felisha before she did Cleve. The girl, with a mop of curly black tangles half-covering her face, was flirting outrageously with the tall, lantern-jawed runner. He had an engaging smile, though a trifle absent, as he kept looking towards the stairs. Tenna chuckled to herself. Rosa needn't worry. Cleve was obviously uncomfortable with Felisha's coy looks and the way she kept tossing her hair over her shoulder, letting it flick into his face.

'Cleve?' she asked as she approached them. Felisha glared at her and gave her head a perceptible tilt to indicate to Tenna to move on.

'Yes?' Cleve moved a step closer to Tenna, and further from Felisha who then altered her stance to put her arm through his in a proprietary fashion that obviously annoyed Cleve.

'Rosa told me that you'd had a run in with Haligon, too?'

'Yes, I did,' Cleve said, seizing on the subject and trying to disentangle himself. 'Ran me down on the Boll trace six sevendays ago. Got a nasty sprain out of it. Rosa mentioned he pushed you into sticklebush and you had some mean slivers. Caught you on the hill curve, did he?'

Tenna turned up her hands to show the mottled sliver pricks still visible from that encounter.

'How terrible!' Felisha said insincerely. 'That boy's far too reckless.'

'Indeed,' Tenna said, not liking this girl at all, though she smiled amiably. Surely she was too heavysset to be a runner. Her mop of hair covered whatever hall or hold cords she might be wearing. Tenna turned to Cleve. 'Spacia told me that you know a lot about the local leathers and I need new shoes.'

'Don't they tan hides wherever you come from?' Felisha asked snidely.

'Station 97, isn't it?' Cleve said, grinning. 'Come, I've a mind to look for new leathers myself and the bigger the Gather the more chance at a good price, right?' He brushed free of Felisha and, taking Tenna by the arm, propelled her across to the door.

Tenna had a brief glance at the furious look on Felisha's face as they made their escape.

'Thank you, Tenna,' Cleve said, exhaling with exaggeration as they strode across the court to the Gather Square. 'That girl's a menace.'

'Is she a Boll runner? She didn't introduce herself.'

Cleve chuckled. 'No, she's Weaver Hall,' he said dismissively, 'but my station runs messages for her CraftMaster.' He grimaced.

'Tenna?' Torlo called from the door and they both stopped, allowing him to catch up with them.

'Anyone point out Haligon to you yet?' he asked.

'Yes, Rosa and Spacia did. He was behind the Lord Holder. I'll have a word with him when we meet.'

'Good girl, good girl,' Torlo said, pressing her arm firmly in encouragement and then he returned to the station.

'Will you?' Cleve asked, eyes wide with surprise.

'Will I what? Give him what-for? Indeed I will,' Tenna said, firming her mind with purpose. 'A bit of what he gave me.'

'I thought it was sticklebushes you fell into?' Cleve asked, taking it all literally. 'There're none of those in a Square.'

'Measuring his length on a Gather floor will do nicely, I think,' she replied. It ought to be rather

easy to trip someone up with such a crowd around. And she had committed herself rather publicly to giving this Haligon a visible lesson. Even Healer Beveny was helping her. She was obliged to act. She certainly didn't wish to lose respect in the station. She took a deep breath. Would tripping him be sufficient? At least on the personal level. There'd still be the charge of reckless behaviour levelled against him with the healer-verified proof of her injuries. These had certainly kept her from running for three days - loss of income.

'Oh!' she said, seeing the display for fabrics draped on the Weaver Hall booth: brilliant colours, and floral prints, as well as stripes in both bold and muted colours. She put her hands behind her back because the temptation to finger the cloth was almost irresistible.

Cleve wrinkled his nose. 'That's Felisha's hall's stuff.'

'Oh, that red is amazing. . .'

'Yeah, it's a good hall . . .'

'In spite of her?' And Tenna chuckled at his reluctant admission.

'Yes . . . ' and he grinned ruefully.

They passed the GlassCraft display: mirrors with ornate frames and plain wood; goblets and drinking glasses in all shapes and colours, pitchers in all sizes.

Tenna caught a reflection and almost didn't recognize herself except for that fact that there was Cleve beside her. She straightened her shoulders and smiled back at the unfamiliar girl in the glass.

The next stand was a large Tailor Hall display with finished goods in tempting array, dresses, shirts, trousers, and more intimate garments: enticing merchandise to be sure and this one was already packed out with buyers.

'What's keeping Rosa?' Cleve asked, glancing back over his shoulder towards the station which would be visible until they turned the corner.

'Well, she wanted to look extra nice for you,' Tenna said.

Cleve grinned. 'She always looks nice.' And he blushed suddenly.

'She's a very kind and thoughtful person,' Tenna said sincerely.

'Ah, here we are,' he said, pointing to the hides displayed at the stall on the corner of the Square. 'Though I think there are several stalls. Fort Gathers're big enough to attract a lot of CraftHalls. Let's see what's available every place. Are you good at haggling? If you're not, we can leave it to Rosa. She's very good. And they'd know she means business. You being unknown, they might think they could put one over on you.'

Tenna grinned slyly. 'I plan to get the most for my mark, I assure you.'

'I shouldn't teach you how to run traces, then, should I?' Cleve said with a tinge of rueful apology in his voice.

Tenna smiled back and began to saunter aimlessly past the leather stall. Just then Rosa caught up with them, giving Tenna a kiss as if they hadn't parted company fifteen minutes before. Cleve threw one arm about Rosa's shoulders and whispered in her ear, making her giggle. Other shoppers walked around the three, standing in the middle of the wide aisle. Tenna didn't object to the chance to examine the leather goods without appearing to do so. The journeyman behind the counter pretended not to see her not looking at his wares. She was also trying to see if she could spot Haligon among those promenading about the Square.

By the time the three of them had done their first circuit of the Gather, it was almost impossible to move for the crowds. But a goodly crowd also added to the 'gather feeling' and the trio of runners were exhilarated by the atmosphere. They spent so many hours in work that was solitary and time-consuming: often at hours when most other folk had finished their labours and were enjoying companionship and family life. True, they had the constant satisfaction of knowing that they provided an important service but you didn't think of that running through a chilling rain or battling against a fierce gale. You thought more of what you *didn't* have and what you were missing.

Refreshment stalls displayed all kinds of drink and finger edibles. So, when they had finished their circuit, they bought food and drink and sat at the tables about the dance Square.

'There he is!' Rosa said suddenly, pointing across the Square where a group of young men were surveying girls parading in their Gather finery. It was a custom to take a Gather partner - someone with whom to spend the occasion - which could include the day, the evening meal, the dancing and whatever else was mutually decided. Everyone recognized the limitation and made sure that the details were arranged ahead of time so that there wouldn't be a misunderstanding of intent.

This would be an ideal situation in which to make Haligon suffer indignity. The area where he was standing with his friends was at the roadside, dusty and spotted with droppings from all the draught animals pulling Gather wagons past it. He'd look silly, his good clothes mussed. With any luck, she could get his fancy Gather clothing soiled as well as dusty.

'Excuse me,' Tenna said, putting down her drink. 'I've a score to settle.'

'Oh!' Rosa's eyes went wide but an encouraging 'yo-ho' followed Tenna as she cut diagonally across the wooden dancing floor. Haligon was still in the company of the taller man, laughing at something said and eyeing the girls who were parading conspicuously along that side of the Gather Square. Yes, this was the time to repay him for her fall.

Tenna went right up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and when he turned around in response, the arch smile on his face turned to one of considerable interest at her appearance, his eyes lighting as he gave her a sweeping look of appreciation. He was looking so boldly that he did not see Tenna cock her right arm. Putting her entire body into the swing, she connected her fist smartly to his chin. He dropped like a felled herdbeast, flat on his back and unconscious. And right on top of some droppings. Although the impact of her fist on his chin had rocked her back on her heels, she brushed her hands together with great satisfaction and, pivoting on the heel of her borrowed red shoe, retraced her steps.

She was halfway back to Rosa and Cleve when she heard someone rapidly overtaking her. So she was ready when her arm was seized and her progress halted.

'What was that all about?' It was the tall lad in brown who pulled her about, a look of genuine surprise on his face. And his eyes, too, surveyed her in her form-fitting blue dress.

'I thought he ought to have a little of what he deals out so recklessly,' she said, and proceeded.

'Wait a minute. What was he supposed to have done to you? I've never seen you around Fort before and he's never mentioned meeting someone like you. And he would!' His eyes glinted with appreciation.

'Oh?' and Tenna cocked her head at him. They were nearly at eye-level.

'Well, he pushed me into sticklebushes.' She showed him her hands and his expression altered to one of real concern.

'Sticklebushes? They're dangerous at this season.'

'I do know that . . . the hard way,' she replied caustically.

'But where? When?'

'That doesn't matter. I've evened the score.'

'Indeed,' and his grin was respectful. 'But are you sure it was my brother?'

'Do you know all Haligon's friends?'

'Haligon?' He blinked. After a pause in which his eyes reflected a rapid series of considerations, he said, 'I thought I did.' And he laughed nervously. Then he gestured for her to continue on her way. She could see that he was being careful not to annoy her and that provided her further amused satisfaction.

'There is a lot about Haligon that he would want kept quiet,' she said. 'He's a reckless sort.'

'And you're the one to teach him manners?' He had to cover his mouth, but she could see that his eyes were brimming with laughter.

'Someone has to.'

'Oh? Just what offence did he give you? It's not often . . . Haligon . . . measures his length. Couldn't you have found a less public spot to deliver your lesson? You've ruined his Gather clothes with muck.'

'Actually, I chose the spot deliberately. Let him feel what it's like to be flattened unexpectedly.'

'Yes, I'm sure. But where did you encounter him?'

'He was using a runner trace, at the gallop, in the middle of the night. . .'

'Oh,' and he stopped dead in his tracks, an odd, almost guilty look on his face. 'When was this?' he asked, all amusement gone from his face.

'Four nights ago, at the hill curve.'

'And?'

'I was knocked into sticklebushes.' With those words, she held out her right leg and pulled her skirt up high enough to expose the red dots of the healing injuries. And again displayed her free hand and its healing rack of punctures.

'They got infected?' He was really concerned now and obviously knew the dangers of the sticklebush.

'I've saved the slivers,' she said in a firm tone. 'Healer Beveny has them for proof. I wasn't able to continue working and I've been laid up three days.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.' And he sounded sincere, his expression sombre.

Then he gave his head a little shake and smiled at her, a trifle warily, but there was a look in his eyes that told her he found her attractive. 'If you promise not to drop me, may I say that you don't look at all like most runners I've met.' His eyes lingered only briefly on her bodice and then he hastily cleared his throat. 'I'd better get back and see . . . if Haligon's come to.'

Tenna spared a glance at the little knot of people clustered around her victim and, giving him a gracious nod, continued on her way back to Rosa and Cleve.

They were looking pale and shocked.

'There! Honour is satisfied,' she said, slipping into her seat.

Rosa and Cleve exchanged looks.

'No,' Rosa said and leaned towards her, one hand on her forearm. 'It wasn't Haligon you knocked down.'

'It wasn't? But that's the fellow you pointed out to me. He's in brown. . .'

'So is Haligon. He's the one followed you across the dance floor. The one you were talking to and I don't think you were giving him any what-for.'

'OH!' Tenna slumped weakly against the back of her chair. 'I hit the wrong man?'

'Uhhuh,' Rosa said as both she and Cleve nodded their heads.

'Oh dear,' and she made a start to get up but Rosa hastily put out a restraining hand.

'I don't think apologies will help.'

'No? Who did I hit?'

'His twin brother, Horon, who's bad enough in his own way.'

'Quite likely, with the lewd look he gave me.' Tenna was halfway to convincing herself that she had at least hit someone who needed a put-down.

'Horon's a bit of a bully and nice girls won't have anything to do with him. Especially at a Gather.' Then Rosa giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. 'He was sure looking you up and down. That's

why we thought you'd hit him.'

Remembering the force of her punch, Tenna rubbed her sore knuckles.

'You may have done someone a favour,' Cleve said, grinning. 'That was some punch.'

'My brothers taught me how,' Tenna said absently, watching the group across the Square. She was a trifle relieved when Horon was helped to his feet. And pleased that he staggered and needed assistance. Then, as the group around Horon moved about, she saw Haligon's figure striding up to the station. 'Uh oh. Why's he going to the station?'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' Rosa said, standing up. 'Torlo would love to remind him of all the harm he's been doing runners.'

'Even if they weren't as pretty as you are,' Cleve said. 'Let's see about your leathers.'

They took their empty glasses back to the refreshment stand. Tenna managed one more look at the station but there was no sign of Haligon or Torlo, though there was a lot of coming and going. There would be, on a Gather day. Would she have to knock Haligon down, too? To satisfy runner honour? It wouldn't be as easy, for he had been wary enough of her when he had caught up with her on the dance floor.

After a second round of the Gather stalls, they all decided to find out what prices were being asked. At the first Tanner's stall, Cleve did more of the talking so that the real buyer was protected from the blandishments of the Tanner journeyman, a man named Ligand.

'Blue for a Harper singer?' Ligand had begun, glancing at Tenna. 'Thought I saw you eyeing the stall earlier.'

'I'm Runner,' Tenna said.

'She just happens to look her best in blue,' Rosa said quickly in case Tenna might be embarrassed to admit she wore a borrowed gown.

'She does indeed,' Ligand said. 'I'd never have guessed her for a runner.'

'Why not?' Rosa asked, bristling.

'Because she's wearing blue,' Ligand said deferentially. 'So what colour is your delight this fine Gather day?'

'I'd like a dark green,' and Tenna pointed to a stack of hides dyed various shades of that colour in the shelves behind him.

'Good choice for a runner,' he said and, with a deft lift, transferred the heavy stack of hides to the front counter. Then he moved off to the other end of his stall where two holders were examining heavy belts.

'Not that trace moss leaves stains,' Rosa remarked as Tenna began flipping through the pile, fingering the leather as she went along.

'We go for the reddy-browns in Boll,' Cleve said. 'So much of the soil down in Boll is that shade. And trace moss doesn't do as well in the heat as it does in the north.'

'Does fine in Igen,' Tenna said, having run trace there.

'So it does,' Cleve said reflectively. 'I like that one,' he added, spreading his hand over the hide before Tenna could flip to the next one. 'Good deep emerald green.'

Tenna had also been considering it. 'Enough here for boots. I only need enough for summer shoes. He wouldn't want to divide it.'

'Ah, and you've found one you like, huh? Good price on that.' And Ligand was obviously aware of all that went on at his booth. He flipped up the hide to see the markings on the underside. 'Give it to you for nine marks.'

Rosa gasped. 'At five it's robbery.' Then she looked chagrined to have protested when Tenna was the prospective purchaser.

'I'd agree with that,' Tenna said, having only four to spend. She gave the skin one more pat and, smiling courteously at Ligand, walked off, her companions hastily following her.

'You won't find better quality anywhere,' Ligand called after them.

'It was good quality,' Tenna murmured as they walked away. 'But four marks is my limit.'

'Oh, we should be able to find a smaller hide for that much, though maybe not the same green,' Rosa said airily.

However, by the time they had done a third circuit and seen all the green hides available, they had not found either the same green or the same beautifully softened hide.

'I just don't have five. Even if we could bargain him down to that price,' Tenna said. 'That brown at the third stand would be all right. Shall we try that?'

'Oho,' Rosa said, stopping in her tracks, her expression alarmed.

Cleve, too, stopped and Tenna couldn't see what caused their alarm when suddenly a man appeared out of the crowd and stood directly in their path. She recognized the tall, white-haired man from the morning's ceremony as Lord Holder Groghe.

'Runner Tenna?' he asked formally. But the expression in his wide-set eyes was pleasant.

'Yes,' she said, raising her chin slightly. Was he about to give her what-for for punching his son, Horon? She certainly couldn't admit to having hit the wrong one.

'Shall we sit over here, with your friends?' Lord Groghe said, gesturing towards a free table. He put a hand on her elbow and guided her gently in that direction, away from the stream of folk.

Tenna thought confusedly that neither his expression nor his tone was peremptory. He was unexpectedly gracious. A heavysset man with a full face and the beginning of jowls, he smiled to everyone as they made their way to the table, for there were many curious glances at the four of them. He caught

the eye of the wineman and held up four fingers. The wineman nodded and hastened to serve them.

'I have an apology to make to you, Runner Tenna.' He kept his voice low and for their ears alone.

'You do?' And, at Rosa's startled expression, Tenna added courteously with only a short hesitation, 'Lord Groghe?'

'I have verified that my son, Haligon, ran you down four nights ago and you were sufficiently injured so that you were unable to run.' Groghe's brows met in a scowl which was for the circumstances, not her part in them. 'I confess that I have heard rumours of other complaints about his use of runner traces. Station Master Torlo informed me of several near-collisions. You may be sure that, from now on, Haligon will leave the traces for the runners who made them. You're from Station 97? Keroon Hold?'

Tenna could only nod. She couldn't believe this was happening. A Lord Holder was apologizing to her?

'My son, Haligon, had no idea that he had nearly run you down the other night. He may be reckless,' and Groghe smiled somewhat indulgently, 'but he would never knowingly cause injury.'

Rosa prodded Tenna in the ribs, and Tenna realized that she must make as much as she could of this opportunity, not just for herself but for all runners.

'Lord Groghe, I . . . we all,' and she included Rosa and Cleve, 'would be grateful to know that we may run the traces without interference. I had only the briefest warning that someone else was using the path. The hill hid his approach and there was wind, too, covering the sound of his approach. I could have been severely injured. Traces are not wide, you know.' He nodded, and she went on boldly. 'And they were made for runners, not riders.' He nodded again. 'I think Fort Station would be grateful for your help in keeping just runners on the traces.'

Then she couldn't think of anything else to say. And just sat there, smiling with nervous twitches in the corners of her mouth.

'I have been well and truly told off, Runner Tenna.' He smiled back at her, his eyes dropping for a split second to her bodice. 'You're a very pretty girl. Blue becomes you.' He reached over and gave her hand a pat before he rose. 'I've told Torlo that the incursions will cease.' Then, in his usual booming voice, he added, 'Enjoy the Gather, runners, and the wine.'

With that he rose and walked off, nodding and smiling as he went, leaving the three runners stunned. Rosa was the first to recover. She took a good swig of the wine.

'Torlo was right. You did it,' Rosa said. 'And this is good wine.'

'What else would they serve Lord Groghe?' Cleve said and surreptitiously eased the glass left at the Lord Holder's seat closer to his. The level of wine had not been much reduced by the sip that Lord Groghe had taken. 'We can split this one.'

'I can't believe that Lord Holder apologized to . . .' and Tenna shook her head, hand on her chest, 'me. Tenna.'

'You were the one injured, weren't you?' Rosa said.

'Yes, but . . .'

'How did Lord Groghe know?' Cleve finished for Tenna who was puzzling such an answer.

'We all saw Haligon go up to the station,' Rosa said before taking another sip of the wine. She rolled her eyes in appreciation of the taste. 'But Lord Groghe's a fair man, even if he usually thinks women are halfwits. But he's fair.' Then she giggled again. 'And he said how pretty you are so that helped, you know. Haligon likes his girls pretty. So does Lord Groghe, but he only looks.'

The three runners had been so intent on their own conversation that they did not notice Haligon's approach until he unrolled the green hide from Ligand's stall in front of Tenna.

'In apology, Runner Tenna, because I really didn't know there was someone on the curve of the trace the other night,' Haligon said and gave a courteous bow, his eyes fixed on Tenna's face. Then his contrite expression altered to chagrin. 'The station master gave me what-for in triples. So did my father.'

'Oh, didn't you believe Tenna?' Rosa asked him pertly.

'How could I doubt the injuries she showed me?' Haligon said. Now he waved for the wineman to serve their table.

Cleve gestured for him to be seated.

'Is . . . your brother all right?' Tenna asked, a question she hadn't quite dared ask Lord Groghe.

Haligon's eyes twinkled with merriment. 'You have taught him a lesson, too, you know.'

'I don't usually go around knocking people down,' Tenna began and received another surreptitious jab in her ribs from Rosa, sitting beside her. 'Except when they need it.' She leaned forward, away from Rosa. 'I meant to hityou .'

Haligon rubbed his jaw. 'I'm as glad enough you didn't. When Master Torlo told me that you'd been kept from running for three days, I knew I was very much at fault. Then he told me of the other near-misses. Will you accept this leather in compensation, with my apology?'

'Your father has already apologized.'

'I make my own, Runner Tenna,' he said with an edge to his voice and a solemn expression.

'I accept, but . . .'

 and she was about to refuse the leather when, once again, Rosa jabbed her. She'd have sore ribs at this rate. 'I accept.'

'Good, for I should have a miserable Gather without your forgiveness,' Haligon said, his expression lightening. Lifting the glass he had just been served, he tilted it in her direction and drank. 'Will you save me a dance?'

Tenna pretended to consider. But she was secretly thrilled for, despite their first encounter, there was something about Haligon that she found very attractive. Just in case, she shifted in her chair, moving her upper body away from Rosa to avoid another peremptory jab.

'I was hoping to be able to do the Toss dance,' she began and, when Haligon eagerly opened his mouth to claim that, she added, 'but my right leg isn't entirely sound.'

'But sound enough surely for the quieter dances?' Haligon asked. 'You seemed to be walking well enough.'

'Yes, walking's no strain for me . . .' and Tenna hesitated a little longer, 'but I would enjoy having a partner.' Which allowed him to ask for more than one dance.

'The slow ones, then?'

'Beveny asked for one, remember,' Rosa said casually.

'When does the dancing start?' Tenna asked.

'Not until full dark, after the meal,' Haligon said. 'Would you be my supper partner?'

She heard Rosa inhale sharply but she really did find him an agreeable sort. Certainly the invitation was acceptable. 'I would be delighted to,' she said graciously.

It was so arranged and Haligon toasted the agreement with the last of his wine, rose, bowed to them all and left the table.

'Yo-ho, Tenna,' Rosa murmured as they watched his tall figure disappear in the Gather crowd.

Cleve, too, grinned. 'Neatly done. Do hope you'll be back on another Cross soon in case we have some more problems you can help us with.'

'Oh, run off, will you?' Tenna replied flippantly. Now she allowed herself to finger the dark green leather hide. 'Was he watching us, do you suppose? How'd he know?'

'Oh, no one's ever said Haligon was a dimwit,' Rosa said. 'Though he is, riding runner traces like he has.'

'*Hemust* have told his father, then,' Cleve said. 'Owning up to all that shows an honest nature. I might end up liking him after all.'

'Proper order,' Rosa said. 'Though he never admitted using the traces before when Torlo braced him on that.' She grinned at Tenna. 'It's sure true that a pretty girl gets more attention than a plain one like me.'

'You are not plain,' Cleve said indignantly and realized he had fallen into Rosa's neatly-laid trap to elicit a compliment from him.

'I'm not?' she replied, smiling archly.

'Oh, you!' he said with the wordless disgust of the well-baited. Then he laughed and carefully split Groghe's glass between their glasses. 'Much too good to waste.'

Tenna returned to the station long enough to put away the beautiful leather. And long enough to get many requests for dances and to be supper partner from other runners who congratulated her.

'Told ya so, dinnit I?' Penda said, catching Tenna's arm as she was leaving. The woman was grinning from ear to ear. 'Pretty girl's always heard, ya know.'

Tenna laughed. 'And Haligon's going to stay off the traces.'

'So his father promised,' Penda said, 'but we'll have to see does he.'

'I'll see that he does,' Tenna promised airily and returned to the Gather Square. She'd never had such a marvellous time before.

The supper lines were now forming down the road at the roasting pits and she began to wonder if Haligon had just been funning her and had never intended, Lord Holder's son that he was, to honour his invitation. Then he appeared beside her, offering his arm.

'I didn't forget,' he murmured, taking her by the arm.

Being partnered with a Holder's son allowed them to patronize a different line at the roasting pits and so they were served well before Cleve and Rosa. The wine Haligon ordered was more of the excellent one she'd sampled in the afternoon so Tenna was quite merry and relaxed by the time the dancing began.

What surprised her, because she'd given the first dance to Grolly - as much because he didn't expect to get any dances from such a pretty girl as because he asked her first-was that Haligon did not dance it with someone else. He waited at the table for a breathless Grolly to bring her back. It was a sprightly enough tune for dancing but not as fast or complicated as the Toss was. The next dance was at a slower tempo and she held out her hand to Haligon, despite the fact that half the male runners at the Gather were now crowding about for a chance to dance with her.

He pulled her into his arms with a deft movement and they were suddenly cheek to cheek. He was only a little taller than she was so their steps matched effortlessly. One circuit of the room and she had perfect confidence in his leading.

Since they were dancing cheek to cheek she could feel his face muscles lifting in a smile. And he gave her a quick pressure with both hands.

'Do you know when you're running again?'

'I've already had a short leg, down to the Port,' she said. 'Enough for a good warm-up.'

'Howdo you manage such long distances on your own legs?' he asked, holding her out slightly to see her face in the light of the glowbaskets that lined the dance floor. He really wanted to know, too.

'Part of it's training, of course. Part that my Blood is bred to produce runners.'

'Could you have done anything else with your life?'

'I could but I like running. There's a sort of . . . magic to it. Sometimes you feel you could run round the world. And I like night running. You feel like you're the only one awake and alive and moving.'

'Quite likely you are, save for dimwits on mounts on traces they shouldn't be using,' he said in a wry tone. 'How long have you been running?'

He sounded genuinely interested. She had thought perhaps she had made a mistake, being sentimental about something as commonplace as running.

'Almost two whole Turns. This is my first Cross.'

'And I was a dimglowed idiot who interrupted it,' he said in an apologetic tone.

Tenna was almost embarrassed at his continued references to his mistake.

'How often do I have to say I've forgiven you?' she said, putting her lips closer to his ear. 'That green leather is going to make fine shoes for me. By the way, how you'd know that was the hide I wanted? Were you following us about?'

'Father said I had to make amends in some way more personal than handing you marks...'

'You didn't give Tanner Ligand what he asked for, did you?' Her query was sharp because she didn't want him to have had to spend more than she felt necessary. And she leaned away from his guiding arm enough so that she could see his face as he answered.

'I won't tell you how much, Tenna, but we struck a fair bargain. Trouble was,' and now Haligon's voice was rueful, 'he knew just how much I needed that particular hide. It's the talk of the Gather, you know.'

Tenna suspected that it was and she hoped she could tell it to her own station before they heard rumour which always exaggerated.

'Hmmm. I should have expected that,' she said ruefully. 'I shall be able to make two pairs of summer shoes out of that much leather and I'll think of you every time I wear them.' She grinned up at him.

'Fair enough,' and, evidently satisfied by this exchange, he resettled his arms about her, drawing her just that much closer. 'You didn't seem as interested in any other hide, you know. So I'd got off more lightly than I thought I might. I didn't know runners made their own footwear.'

'We do, and it's much better to make them for yourself. Then you've only yourself to blame if you've blisters.'

'Blisters? They would be bad for a runner.'

'Almost as bad as sticklebush slivers.'

He groaned. 'Will I ever be able to live that down?'

'You can try.' Maybe she could get him to dance with her all night. He was possibly the best partner she'd ever had. Not that she ever lacked for them. But he was subtly different. In his dancing, too, for he seemed to know many combinations of the dance steps and she really had to keep her attention on her feet and following his lead. Maybe it was him being a Holder's son.

'Maybe it's being a runner,' and his remark startled her, it being near what she'd just been thinking, 'but you're the lightest thing on your feet.' He reset his hands more firmly about her, drawing her as close as he could.

They were both silent, each concentrating on the complexities of the dance. It ended all too soon for Tenna. She didn't really wish to release him. Nor he, her. So they stood on the dance floor, arms at their sides but not with much distance between them. The music began again: a faster dance and before she could say a word, Haligon had swung her into his arms and moved off in the rhythm of this tune. This time they had to concentrate not only on the steps but also to avoid collisions with more erratic dancers whirling about the floor.

Three dances to a set and Haligon whisked her off the floor during the change of musicians on the pretext of needing a drink. With glasses of chilled white wine, he guided her into the shadow of a deserted stall.

She smiled to herself, rehearsing a number of deft rejections if she needed them.

'I don't think you're at all lame, Tenna,' he said conversationally. 'Especially if the station master let you take a run down to the Port. Care to have a go at the first Toss dance after all?'

His expression dared her.

'We'll see.'

Pause.

'So, will you run on tomorrow?'

'I'll be careful with the wine in case I do,' she said, half-warning him as she lifted the glass.

'Will you make it to the sea from here in one run?'

'Quite likely. It's spring and there'd be no snow on the Pass trace.'

'Would you still go if there were?'

'No one said anything about snow on the Pass trace at the station.'

'Keep your ears open, don't you?'

'A runner always needs to know conditions on the trace.' She gave him a stern look.

'All right, I've got the message.'

'Fair enough.'

Pause.

'You're not at all what I expected, you know,' Haligon said respectfully.

'I can quite candidly say the same of you, Haligon,' she replied.

The new musicians played the first bar of the next song, to acquaint people with a sample of the dance to come.

So, when Tenna felt his arm about her shoulders, she did not resist the pressure. Nor did she when both arms enfolded her and his mouth found hers. It was a nice kiss, not sloppy as others had been, but well placed on her lips, as if he knew what he was about in kissing. His arms about her were sure, too, not crushing her needlessly against him. Respectful, she thought . . . and then, as the kiss deepened with her cooperation, she didn't think of anything but enjoying the experience.

Haligon monopolized her all evening, rather deftly, she realized. Always whisking her off the dance floor before any one else could find her. They kissed quite a bit between dances. He was far more respectful of her person than she expected. And she said so.

'With the punch you can deliver, my girl,' he answered, 'you can bet your last mark I'm not about to risk my brother's fate.'

He also found other chilled drinks for her to drink instead of more wine. She appreciated that even more. Especially when the music of the Toss dance began. The floor cleared of all save a few hardy couples.

'Shall we?' and Haligon's grin was all the challenge she needed.

The ache in her right shin was really minor and her confidence in his partnering had grown throughout the evening otherwise she would not have taken his dare.

During the pattern of the dance, the female partner was to be swung as high as possible, and if she was very clever, she would twirl midair before being caught by the male. It would be a dangerous dance, but it was ever so much fun. Tenna's older brother had taught her and given her enough practice so that she was well able to make the turns. It had ensured her partners at any Gather in the east once it was known how light she was and what a good dancer.

From the very first toss, she knew that Haligon was the best partner she'd ever had. There was great cheering for them when she managed a full two turns in the air before he caught her. In one of the rare close movements of the dance, he whispered swift instructions so that she was prepared for the final Toss. And able to execute it, sure he would be there to keep her from crashing on the floor. She was close enough to being missed so that the spectators gasped just as he caught her caught half a handspan above the floor. Another girl was not so lucky but suffered no more than the indignity of the fall.

Cleve, Rosa, Spacia, Grolly and most of the station crowded about them when they left the dance floor, congratulating them on such a performance. They were offered drinks, meat rolls and other delicacies.

'Upholding the honour of the station,' Cleve loudly proclaimed. 'And the hold, of course,' he magnanimously added, bowing to Haligon.

'Tenna's the best partner I've ever had,' Haligon replied sincerely, mopping his face.

'Well, you had the chance to find out,' muttered Grolly.

Then Torlo reached through the crowd and tapped Tenna's shoulder.

'You're on the run list,' Tenna he said, emphasizing the warning with a nod.

'To the coast?'

'Aye, as you wished.' Torlo gave Haligon a severe look.

'I'll escort you to the station, then, Tenna?' Haligon asked.

The harpers had struck up another slow dance. Rosa and Spacia were looking intensely at Tenna but she couldn't interpret their glances. She also knew her duty as a runner.

'This is the last dance then.' And she took Haligon by the arm and led him to the floor.

Haligon tucked her in against him and she let her body relax against his and to his leading. She had never had such a Gather in her life. She could almost be glad that he'd run her off the trace and so started the events that had culminated in this lovely night.

They said nothing, both enjoying the flow of the dance and the sweet music. When it ended, Haligon led her from the floor, holding her right hand in his, and towards the station, its glowbasket shining at the door.

'So, Runner Tenna, you finish your first Cross. It won't be your last, will it?' Haligon asked as they paused just beyond the circle of light. He lifted his hand and lightly brushed back the curls.

'No, it's unlikely to. I'm going to run as long as I'm able.'

'But you'll be Crossing often, won't you?' he asked and she nodded. 'So, if sometime in the future, when I've got my own holding . . . I'm going to breed runners . . . beasts, that is,' he qualified hastily, and she almost laughed at his urgent correction. 'I've been trying to find the strain I want to breed, you see, and used the traces as sort of the best footing for comparison. I mean, is there any chance you might . . . possibly . . . consider running more often on this side of the world?'

Tenna cocked her head at him, surprised by the intensity and roughness in his pleasant voice.

'I might.' She smiled up at him. This Haligon was more of a temptation to her than he knew.

Now he smiled back at her, a challenge sparkling in his eyes. 'We'll just have to see, won't we?'

'Yes, I guess we will.'

With that answer, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and ducked into the station before she could say more than she ought right now after such a limited acquaintance . . . But maybe raising runners, both kinds -four-legged and two - in the west wasn't a bad idea at all.

