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QUEEN OF THE DRAGONS

ANNE
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DRAGONQUEST

Volume II of Dragonriders of Pern®

Dragonquest

Dragonriders of Pern [2]

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Product Description

The second in the Dragonriders of Pern trilogy.

From the Publisher

There are dragons all over Anne McCaffrey's house. Some she's bought, but many have been made for her by adoring fans and given to her as gifts. I don't make dragons, of course. But whenever circumstances allow, I do try to bring her American bacon, something she can't get easily in Ireland, and something which she has taught all her friends there to love, as well! I remember the first time I went to visit her, when she was still living in her old, much smaller but very homey, house. My husband and I arrived at the doorstep, and she immediately began bustling about, frying up some of the bacon we'd brought and sharing a lovely late breakfast with us before sending us off to the hotel for a nap. She made us dinner that night, too--the one and only time in my life that I've actually liked shrimp cocktail. Maybe that's because if you squint your eyes and look sideways, shrimp are kind of dragonlike, and I was eating them in the right company!

--Shelly Shapiro, Executive Editor

DRAGONQUEST
PRELUDE

Rukbat, in the Sagittarian Sector, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets, two asteroid belts, and a stray planet it had attracted and held in recent millennia. When men first settled on Rukbat's third world and called it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger planet, swinging around its adopted primary in a wildly erratic elliptical orbit. For two generations, the colonists gave the bright red star little thought, until the desperate path of the wanderer brought it close to its stepsister at perilousness.

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

The initial losses the colonists suffered were staggering, and it was during the subsequent long struggle to survive and combat this menace dropping through Pern's skies like silver threads that Pern's tenuous contact with the mother planet was broken.

To control the incursions of the dreadful Threads (for the Pernese had cannibalized their transport ships early on and abandoned such technological sophistication as was irrelevant to this pastoral planet), the resourceful men embarked on a long-term plan. The first phase involved breeding a highly specialized variety of a life-form indigenous to their new world. Men and women with high empathy ratings and some innate telepathic ability were trained to use and preserve these unusual animals. The 'dragons' (named for the mythical Terran beast they resembled) had two extremely useful characteristics, they could get from one place to another instantly and, after chewing a phosphine-bearing rock, they could emit a flaming gas. As the dragons could 'fly,' they'd be able to char Thread mid-air, yet escape its worse ravages themselves. It took generations to develop to the full the use of this first phase. The second phase of the proposed defense against the spore incursions would take longer to mature. For Thread, a space-traveling mycorrhizoid spore, devoured organic matter with mindless voracity and, once grounded, burrowed and proliferated with terrifying speed.

The originators of the two-stage defense program did not compensate sufficiently for chance nor for the psychological effect of visible extermination of this avid foe. For it was psychologically reassuring and deeply satisfying to the endangered Pernese to see the menace charred to impotence in mid-air. Also, the southern continent, where the second phase was initiated, proved untenable and the entire colony was moved to the northern continent to seek refuge from the Threads in the natural caves of the northern mountain ranges. The significance of the southern hemisphere lost meaning in the immediate struggle to establish new settlements in the north. Recollections of Earth receded further from Pernese history with each successive generation until memory of their origins degenerated past legend or myth and into oblivion.

The original Fort constructed in the eastern face of the great West Mountain range soon grew too small to hold the colonists. Another settlement was started slightly to the north, by a great lake conveniently nestled near a cave-filled cliff. Ruatha Hold, too, became overcrowded in a few generations.

Since the Red Star rose in the East, it was decided to start a holding in the eastern mountains, provided suitable accommodations could be found. Suitable accommodations now meant caves, for only solid rock and metal (of which Pern was in distressingly light supply) were impervious to the burning score of Thread.

The winged, tailed, fiery-breathed dragons had now been bred to a size which required more space than the Cliffside Holds could provide. The ancient cave-pocked cones of extinct volcanoes, one high above the first Fort, the other in the Benden mountains, proved to be adequate, needing only a few improvements to be made habitable. However, such projects took the last of the fuel for the great stoncutters (which had been programmed for only diffident mining operations not wholesale cliff excavations), and subsequent holds and weyrs were hand-hewn.

The dragons and the riders in their high places and the people in their caves went about their separate tasks and each developed habits that became custom, which solidified into tradition as incontrovertible as law.

Then came an interval of two hundred Turns of the planet Pern around its primary, when the Red Star was at the other end of its erratic orbit, a frozen, lonely captive. No Thread fell on Pern's soil. The inhabitants began to enjoy life as they had thought to find it when they first landed on the lovely planet. They erased the depredations of Thread and grew crops, planted orchards, thought of reforestry for the slopes denuded by Thread. They could even forget that they had been in grave danger of extinction. Then the Threads returned for another orbit about the lush planet, fifty years of danger from the skies, and the Pernese again thanked their ancestors, now many generations removed, for providing the dragons who seared the dropping Thread mid-air with their fiery breath.

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

By the third Pass of the Red Star, a complicated socio-political-economic structure had been developed to deal with this recurrent evil. The six Weyrs, as the old volcanic habitations of the dragonfolk were called, pledged themselves to protect all Pern, each Weyr having a geographical section of the northern continent literally under its wings. The rest of the population would tithe to support the Weyrs since these fighters, the dragonmen, did not have any arable land in their volcanic homes, nor could they take time away from the nurture of dragonkind to learn other trades during peacetime, nor time away from protecting the planet during Passes.

Settlements, called Holds, developed wherever natural caves were found; some, of course, more extensive or strategically placed than others. It took a strong man to hold frantic terrified people in control during Thread attacks; it took wise administration to conserve victuals when nothing could safely be grown, and extraordinary measures to control population and keep it useful and healthy until such time as the menace had passed. Men with special skills in metalworking, animal breeding, farming, fishing, mining (such as there was), weaving, formed Craftholds in each large Hold and looked to one Master Crafthall where the precepts of their craft were taught, and craft skills preserved and guarded from one generation to another. So that one Lord Holder could not deny the products of the Crafthall situated in his Hold to others of the planet, the Crafts were decreed independent of a Hold affiliation, each Craftmaster of a hall owing allegiance to the Master of that particular craft (an elected office based on proficiency and administrative ability). The Master Craftsman was responsible for the output of his halls, the distribution, fair and unprejudiced, of all craft products on a planetary rather than parochial basis.

Certain rights and privileges accrued to the different leaders of Holds and Masters of Crafts, and naturally, to the Dragonriders to whom all Pern looked for protection during Threadfalls.

The Red Star would swing inexorably close to Pern, but it would also Pass again, and life could settle into a less frenzied pattern. Occasionally, the conjunction of Rukbat's natural five satellites would prevent the Red Star from passing close enough to Pern to drop its fearful spores. Sometimes, though, as siblings will, Pern's sister planets seemed to draw the Red Star closer still and Thread rained relentlessly on the unfortunate victim. Fear creates fanatics and the Pernese were no exception. Only the dragonmen could save Pern, and their position in the structure of the planet became inviolable.

Mankind has a history of forgetting the unpleasant, the undesirable. By ignoring its existence, it can make the source of past Terror disappear. And the Red Star did not pass close enough to Pern to drop its Threads. The people prospered and multiplied, spreading out across the rich land, carving more holds out of solid rock, and so busy with their pursuits, that they did not realize that there were only a few dragons in the skies, and only one Weyr of Dragonriders left on Pern. The Red Star wasn't due back for a long, long while. Why worry about such distant possibilities? In five generations or so, the descendants of the heroic dragonmen fell into disfavor. The legends of past braveries and the very reason for their existence fell into disrepute.

When, in the course of natural forces, the Red Star began to spin close to Pern, winking with a baleful red eye on its intended, ancient victim, one man, Fl'ar, rider of the bronze dragon, Mnementh, believed that the ancient tales had truth in them. His half-brother, F'nor, rider of brown Canth, listened to his arguments and found belief in them more exciting than the dull ways of the lone Weyr of Pern. When the last golden egg of a dying queen dragon lay hardening on the Benden Weyr Hatching Ground, Fl'ar and F'nor seized this opportunity to gain control of the Weyr. Searching through Ruatha Hold for a strong woman to ride the soon-to-be hatched young queen, Fl'ar and F'nor discovered Lessa, the only surviving member of the proud Bloodline of Ruatha Hold. She Impressed young Ramoth, the new queen, and became Weyrwoman of Benden Weyr. When Fl'ar's bronze Mnementh flew the young queen in her first mating, Fl'ar became Weyrleader of Pern's remaining dragonmen. The three riders, Fl'ar, Lessa and F'nor forced the Lord Holders and Craftsmen to recognize their imminent danger and prepare the almost defenseless planet against Thread. But it was distressingly obvious that the scant two hundred dragons of Benden Weyr could not defend the sprawling settlements. Six full Weyrs had been needed in the olden days when the settled land had been much smaller. In learning to direct her queen dragon between one place and another, Lessa discovered that dragons could teleport between time as well. Risking her life as well as Pern's only queen dragon, Lessa and Ramoth went back in time, four hundred Turns, before the mysterious disappearance of the other five Weyrs, just after the Last Pass of the Red Star had been completed.

The five Weyrs, seeing only the decline of their prestige and bored with inactivity after a lifetime of exciting combat, agreed to help Lessa's Weyr and came forward to her Turn.

Seven Turns have now passed since that triumphant journey forward, and the initial gratitude of the Holds and Crafts to the rescuing Oldtime Weyrs has faded and soured. And the Oldtimers themselves do not like the Pern in which they are now living. Four hundred Turns brought too many subtle changes, and dissensions mount.

CHAPTER 1

How to begin? mused Robinton, the Masterharper of Pern.

He frowned thoughtfully down at the smoothed, moist sand in the shallow trays of his workdesk. His long face settled into deep-grooved lines and creases, and his eyes, usually snapping blue with inner amusement, were gray-shadowed with unusual gravity.

He fancied the sand begged to be violated with words and notes while he, Pern's repository and glib dispenser of any ballad, saga or ditty, was inarticulate. Yet he had to construct a ballad for the upcoming wedding of Lord Asgenar of Lemos Hold to the half-sister of Lord Larad of Telgar Hold. Because of recent reports of unrest from his network of drummers and Harper journeymen, Robinton had decided to remind the guests on this auspicious occasion, for every Lord Holder and Craftmaster would be invited of the debt they owed the dragonmen of Pern. As the subject of his ballad, he had decided to tell of the fantastic ride, between time itself, of Lessa, Weyrwoman of Benden Weyr on her great golden queen, Ramoth. The Lords and Craftsmen of Pern had been glad enough then for the arrival of Dragonriders from the five ancient Weyrs from four hundred Turns in the past.

Yet how to reduce those fascinating, frantic days, those braveries, to a rhyme? Even the most stirring chords could not recapture the beat of the blood, the catch of breath the chill of fear and the hopeless surge of hope of that first morning after Thread had fallen over Nerat Hold, when Fl'ar had rallied all the frightened Lords and Craftmasters at Benden Weyr and enlisted their enthusiastic aid.

It had not been just a sudden resurgence of forgotten loyalties that had prompted the Lords, but the all too real sense of disaster as they envisioned their prosperous acres blackened with the Thread they had dismissed as myth, of the thought of burrows of the lightning propagating parasites, of themselves walled up in the cliff-Holds behind thick metal doors and shutters. They'd been ready to promise Fl'ar their souls that day if he could protect them from Thread. And it was Lessa who had bought them that protection, almost with her life.

Robinton looked up from the sandtrays, his expression suddenly bleak.

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

Lord Groghe was undoubtedly out in the fields right now, prowling from one tract of land to another on one of those long-legged running beasts which the Masterherdsman Sogran was developing. Groghe of Fort Hold was indefatigable, his slightly protuberant blue eyes never missing an unpruned tree or a badly harrowed row. He was a burly man, with grizzled hair which he wore tied in a neat band. His complexion was florid, with a temper to match. But, if he pushed his holders, he pushed himself as well, demanding nothing of his people, his children nor his fosterlings that he was not able to do himself. If he was conservative in his thinking, it was because he knew his own limitations and felt secure in that knowledge.

Robinton pulled at his lower lip, wondering if Lord Groghe was an exception in his disregard for this traditional Hold duty of removing all greenery near habitations. Or was this Lord Groghe's answer to Fort Weyr's growing agitation over the immense forest lands of Fort Hold which the Dragonriders ought to protect? The Weyrleader of Fort Weyr, T'ron, and his Weyrwoman, Mardra, had become less scrupulous about checking to see that no Thread burrows had escaped their wing riders to fall on the lush forests. Yet Lord Groghe had been scrupulous in the matter of ground crews and flame-throwing equipment when Thread fell over his forests. He had a stable of runners spread out through the Hold in an efficient network so that if Dragonriders were competent in flight, there was adequate ground coverage for any Thread that might elude the flaming breath of the airborne beasts.

But Robinton had heard ugly rumors of late, and not just from Fort Hold. Since he eventually heard every derogatory whisper and accusation uttered in Pern, he had learned to separate fact from spite, calumny from crime. Not basically an alarmist, because he'd found much sifted itself out in the course of time, Robinton was beginning to feel the stirrings of alarm in his soul.

The Masterharper slumped in his chair, staring out on the bright day, the fresh new green of the fields, the yellow blossoms on the fruit trees the neat stone Holds that lined the road up to the main Hold, the cluster of artisans' cotholds below the wide ramp up to the Great Outer Court of Fort Hold.

And if his suspicions were valid, what could he do? Write a scolding song? A satire? Robinton snorted. Lord Groghe was too literal a man to interpret satire and too righteous to take a scold. Furthermore, and Robinton pushed himself upright on his elbows, if Lord Groghe was neglectful, it was in protest at Weyr neglect of far greater magnitude. Robinton shuddered to think of Thread burrowing in the great stands of softwoods to the south.

He ought to sing his remonstrance to Mardra and T'ron as Weyrleaders, but that, too, would be vain effort. Mardra had soured lately. She ought to have sense enough to retire gracefully to a chair and let men seek her favors if T'ron no longer attracted her. To hear the Hold girls talk, T'ron was lusty enough. In fact, T'ron had better restrain himself. Lord Groghe didn't take kindly to too many of his chattels bearing dragonseed.

Another impasse, thought Robinton with a wry smile. Hold customs differed so from Weyr morals. Maybe a word to F'lar of Benden Weyr? Useless, again. In the first place there was really nothing the bronze rider could do. Weyrs were autonomous and not only could T'ron take umbrage for any advice F'lar might see fit to offer, but Robinton was sure that F'lar might tend to take the Lord Holders' side.

This was not the first time in recent months that Robinton regretted that F'lar of Benden Weyr had been so eager to relinquish his leadership after Lessa had gone back between to bring the five lost Weyrs forward in time. For a brief few months then, seven Turns ago, Pern had been united under F'lar and Lessa against the ancient menace of Thread. Every Holder, Craftmaster, landsman, crafter, all had been of one mind. That unity had dissipated as the Oldtime Weyr-leaders had reasserted their traditional domination over the Holds bound to their Weyr for protection, and a grateful Pern had ceded them those rights. But in four hundred Turns the interpretation of that old hegemony had altered, with neither party sure of the translation.

Perhaps now was the time to remind Lord Holders of those perilous days seven Turns ago when all their hopes hung on fragile dragon wings and the dedication of a scant two hundred men.

Well, the Harper has a duty, too, by the Egg, Robinton thought, needlessly smoothing the wet sand. And the obligation to broadcast it.

In twelve days, Larad, Lord of Telgar, was giving his half-sister, Famira, to Asgenar, Lord of Lemos Hold. The Masterharper had been enjoined to appear with appropriate new songs to enliven the festivities. F'lar and Lessa were invited as Lemos Hold was weyrbound to Benden Weyr. There'd be other notables among Weyr, Lord and Craft to signalize so auspicious an occasion.

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

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

"I must have a tender but intricate theme for Lessa. She's legend already." Unconsciously the Harper smiled as he pictured the dainty, child-sized Weyrwoman, with her white skin, her cloud of dark hair, the flash of her gray eyes, heard the acerbity of her clever tongue. No man of Pern failed of respect for her, or braved her displeasure, with the exception of F'lar.

Now a well-stated martial theme would do for Benden's Weyrleader, with his keen amber eyes, his unconscious superiority, the intense energy of his lean fighter's frame. Could he, Robinton, rouse F'lar from his detachment? Or was he perhaps unnecessarily worried about these minor irritations between Lord Holder and Weyrleader? But without the Dragonriders of Pern, the land would be sucked dry of any sustenance by Thread, even if every man, woman and child of the planet were armed with flame throwers. One burrow, well established, could race across plain and forest as fast as a dragon could fly it, consuming everything that grew or lived, save solid rock, water or metal. Robinton shook his head, annoyed with his own fancies. As if dragonmen would ever desert Pern and their ancient obligation.

Now, a solid beat on the biggest drum for Fandarel, the Mastersmith, with his endless curiosity, the great hands with their delicate skill, the ranging mind in its eternal quest for efficiency. Somehow one expected such an immense man to be as slow of wit as he was deliberate of physical movement.

A sad note, well sustained, for Lytol who had once ridden a Benden dragon and lost his Larth in an accident in the Spring Games, had it been fourteen or fifteen Turns ago? Lytol had left the Weyr, to be among dragonfolk only exacerbated his tremendous loss, and taken to the craft of weaving. He'd been Craffhall Master in the High Reaches Hold when F'lar had discovered Lessa on Search. F'lar had appointed Lytol to be Lord Warde of Ruatha Hold when Lessa had abdicated her claim to the Hold to young Jaxom.

And how did a man signify the dragons of Pern? No theme was grand enough for those huge, winged beasts, as gentle as they were great. Impressed at Hatching by the men who rode them, flaming against Thread, who tended them, loved them, who were linked, mind to mind, in an unbreakable bond that transcended speech! (What was that really like? Robinton wondered, remembering that his youthful ambition had been to be a dragonman.) The dragons of Pern who could transfer themselves in some mysterious fashion between one place and another in the blink of an eye. Between even one Time and another!

The Harper's sigh came from his soul but his hand moved to the sand and pressed out the first note, wrote the first word, wondering if he would find some answer himself in the song.

He had barely filled the completed score with clay to preserve the text, when he heard the first throb of the drum. He strode quickly to the small outer court of the Craffhall, bending his head to catch the summons; it was his sequence all right, in urgent tempo. He concentrated so closely on the drumroll that he did not realize that every other sound common to the Harper's Hall had ceased.

"Thread?" His throat dried instantly. Robinton didn't need to consult the timetable to realize that the Threads were falling on the shores of Tilleg Hold prematurely.

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

There was a soft spring warmth to the afternoon air as F'nor and his big, brown Canth emerged from their weyr in Benden Weyr. F'nor yawned slightly and stretched until he heard his spine crack. He'd been on the western coast all the previous day, Searching for likely lads, and girls, since there was a golden egg hardening on the Benden Weyr Hatching Grounds, for the next Impression. Benden Weyr certainly produced more dragons, and more queens, than the five Oldtimers' Weyrs, F'nor thought.

"Hungry?" he asked courteously of his dragon, glancing down the Weyr Bowl to the Feeding Grounds. No dragons were dining and the herdbeasts stood in their fenced pasture, legs spraddled, heads level with their bony knees as they drowsed in the sunlight.

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

"Slothful wretch," F'nor said, grinning affectionately at his beast.

The sun was full on the other side of the enormous mountain cup that formed the dragonman's habitation on the eastern coast of Pern. The cliffside was patterned with the black mouths of the individual dragon weys, starred where sun flashed off mica in the rocks. The waters of the Weyr's spring-fed lake glistened around the two green dragons bathing as their riders lounged on the grass verge. Beyond, in front of the weyring barracks, young riders formed a semi-circle around the Weyrleader.

F'nor's grin broadened. He stretched his lean body indolently, remembering his own weary hours in such a semicircle, twenty odd Turns ago. The rote lessons which he had echoed as a weyring had far more significance to this present group of Dragonriders. In his Turn, the Silver Thread of those teaching songs had not dropped from the Red Star for over four hundred Turns, to sear the flesh of man and beast and devour anything living which grew on Pern. Of all the dragonmen in Pern's lone Weyr, only F'nor's half-brother, F'lar, bronze Mnementh's rider, had believed that there might be truth in those old legends. Now Thread was an inescapable fact, falling to Pern from the skies with diurnal regularity. Once more, its destruction was a way of life for Dragonriders. The lessons these lads learned would save their skins, their lives and, more important, their dragons.

"The weyrings are promising," Canth remarked as he locked his wings to his back and curled his tail against his hind legs. He settled his great head to his forelegs, the many-faceted eye nearest F'nor gleaming softly on his rider.

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

"Lazybones!"

"When I work, I work," Canth replied. "Without my help, how would you know which holdbred lad would make a good dragonrider? And do I not find girls who make good queen riders, too?"

F'nor laughed indulgently, but it was true that Canth's ability to spot likely candidates for fighting dragons and breeding Queens was much vaunted by Benden Weyr dragonmen.

Then F'nor frowned, remembering the odd hostility of the small holders and crafters he'd encountered in Southern Boll's Holds and Crafts. Yes, the people had been hostile until, until he'd identified himself as a Benden Weyr dragonrider. He'd have thought it'd be the other way round. Southern Boll was weyrbound to Fort Weyr. Traditionally, and F'nor grinned wryly since the Fort Weyrleaders T'ron, was so adamant in upholding all that was traditional, customary ... and static, traditionally, the Weyr which protected a territory had first claim on any possible riders. But the five Oldtime Weyrs rarely sought beyond their own Lower Caverns for candidates. Of course, though F'nor, the Oldtime queens didn't produce large clutches like the modern queens, nor many golden queen eggs. Come to think on it, only three queens had been Hatched in the Oldtime Weyrs in the seven Turns since Lessa brought them forward.

Well, let the Oldtimers stick to their ways if that made them feel superior. But F'nor agreed with F'lar. It was only common sense to give your dragonets as wide a choice as possible. Though the women in the Lower Caverns of Benden Weyr were certainly agreeable, there simply weren't enough weyr-born lads to match up the quantity of dragons hatched.

Now, if one of the other Weyrs, maybe G'narish of Igen Weyr or R'mart of Telgar Weyr, would throw open their junior queens' mating flights, the Oldtimers might notice an improvement in size of clutch and the dragons that hatched. A man was a fool to breed only to his own Bloodlines all the time.

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

Numweed stink notwithstanding, F'nor was hungry. He hadn't eaten since late afternoon yesterday, and, since there was a good six hours' time difference between Southern Boll on the western coast and Benden Weyr in the east, he'd missed the dinner hour at Benden Weyr completely.

With a parting scratch, F'nor told Canth that he'd get some food, and started down the stone ramp from his ledge. One of the privileges of being Wing-second was choice of quarters. Since Ramoth as senior queen would permit only two junior queens in Benden Weyr, there were two unoccupied Weyr-woman quarters. F'nor had appropriated one and did not need to disturb Canth when he wished to descend to a lower level.

As he approached the entrance of the Lower Caverns, the aroma of boiling numbeed made his eyes smart. He'd grab some klah, bread and fruit and go listen to the Weyrleader. They were upwind. As Wing-second, F'nor liked to take every opportunity to measure up the new riders, particularly those who were not weyrbred. Life in a Weyr required certain adjustments for the craft and holdbred. The freedom and privileges sometimes went to a boy's head, particularly after he was able to take his dragon between, anywhere on Pern, in the space it takes to count to three. Again, F'nor agreed with F'lar's preference in presenting older lads at Impression though the Oldtimers deplored that practice at Benden Weyr, too. But, by the Shell, a lad in his late teens recognized the responsibility of his position (even if he were holdbred) as a dragonrider. He was more emotionally mature and, while there was no lessening of the impact of Impression with his dragon, he could absorb and understand the implications of a lifelong link, of an in-the-soul contact, the total empathy between himself and his dragon. An older boy didn't get carried away. He knew enough to compensate until his dragon's instinctive sensibility unfolded. A baby dragon had precious little sense and, if some silly weyrling let his beast eat too much, the whole Weyr suffered through its torment. Even an older beast lived for the here and now, with little thought for the future and not all that much recollection, except on the instinctive level, for the past. That was just as well, F'nor thought. For dragons bore the brunt of Thread-score. Perhaps if their memories were more acute or associative, they'd refuse to fight.

F'nor took a deep breath and, blinking furiously against the fumes, entered the huge kitchen Cavern. It was seething with activity. Half the female population of the Weyr must be involved in this operation, F'nor thought, for great cauldrons monopolized all the large hearths set in the outside wall of the Cavern. Women were seated at the broad tables, washing and cutting the roots from which the salve was extracted. Some were ladling the boiling product into great earthenware pots. Those who stirred the concoction with long-handled paddles wore masks over nose and mouth and bent frequently to blot eyes watering from the acrid fumes. Older children were fetching and carrying, fuelrock from the store caves for the fires, pots to the cooling caves. Everyone was busy.

Fortunately the night hearth, nearest the entrance, was operating for normal use, the huge klah pot and stew kettle swinging from their hooks, keeping warm over the coals. Just as F'nor had filled his cup, he heard his name called. Glancing around, he saw his blood mother, Manora, beckon to him. Her usually serene face wore a look of puzzled concern.

Obediently F'nor crossed to the hearth where she, Lessa, and another young woman who looked familiar though F'nor couldn't place her, were examining a small kettle.

"My duty to you, Lessa, Manora," and he paused, groping for the third name.

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

"How can you expect anyone to see in a place dense with fumes?" F'nor demanded, making much of blotting his eyes on his sleeve. "I haven't seen much of you, Brekke, since the day Canth and I brought you from your crathold to Impress young Wirenth."

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

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

The girl looked startled but managed a hesitant smile, then pointedly looked towards Manora, trying to turn attention from herself. She was a shade too thin for F'nor's tastes, not much taller than Lessa whose diminutive size in no way lessened the authority and respect she commanded. There was, however, a sweetness about Brekke's solemn face, unexpectedly framed with dark curly hair, that F'nor did find appealing. And he liked her self-effacing modesty. He was wondering how she got along with Kylara, the tempestuous and irresponsible senior Weyrwoman at Southern Weyr, when Lessa tapped the empty pot before her.

"Look at this, F'nor. The lining has cracked and the entire kettle of numbeed salve is discolored."

F'nor whistled appreciatively.

"Would you know what it is the Smith uses to coat the metal?" Manora asked. "I wouldn't dare use tainted salve and yet I hate to discard so much if there's no reason."

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

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

The anesthetic ointment, normally a creamy, pale yellow, had turned a reddish tan. Rather a threatening color, F'nor thought. He smelled it, dipped his finger in and felt the skin immediately deaden.

"It works," he said with a shrug.

"Yes, but what would happen to an open Thread score with that foreign substance cooked into the salve?" asked Manora.

"Good point. What does F'lar say?"

"Oh, him." Lessa screwed her fine delicate features into a grimace. "He's off to Lemos Hold to see how that woodcraftsman of Lord Asgenar's is doing with the wood pulp leaves."

F'nor grinned. "Never around when you want him, huh, Lessa?"

She opened her mouth for a stinging reply, her gray eyes snapping, and then realized that F'nor was teasing.

"You're as bad as he is," she said, grinning up at the tall Wing-second who resembled her Weyrmate so closely. Yet the two men, though the stamp of their mutual sire was apparent in the thick shocks of black hair, the strong features, the lean rangy bodies (F'nor had a squarer, broader frame with not enough flesh on his bones so that he appeared unfinished), the two men were different in temperament and personality. F'nor was less introspective and more easygoing than his half brother. F'lar, the elder by three Turns. The Weyrwoman sometimes found herself treating F'nor as if he were an extension of his half brother and, perhaps for this reason, could joke and tease with him. She was not on easy terms with many people.

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

"Well. I've no objections to running your errand to the Mastersmithhall. I'm supposed to be Searching and I can Search in Telgar Hold as well as anywhere else. R'mart's nowhere near as sticky as some of the other Oldtime Weyr-leaders." He took the pot off the hook, peering into it once more, then glanced around the busy room, shaking his head. "I'll take your pot to Fandarel but it looks to me as though you've already got enough numbeed to coat every dragon in all six, excuse me, seven Weysrs." He grinned at Brekke for the girl seemed curiously ill at ease. Lessa could be snappish when she was preoccupied and Ramoth was fussing over her latest clutch like a novice, which would tend to make Lessa more irritable. Strange for a junior Weyrwoman from Southern Weyr to be involved in any brewing at Benden.

"A Weyr can't have too much numbeed," Manora said briskly.

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

"There's the second crop at the Southern Weyr," Brekke suggested, then looked flustered for speaking up.

But the look Lessa turned on Brekke was grateful. "I've no intention of shorting you, Brekke, when Southern Weyr does the nursing of every fool who can't dodge Thread."

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

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

"It's only just past noon in Telgar Hold," he said, patiently. "Yesterday I was all day Searching at Southern Boll so I'm hours behind myself." He stifled a yawn.

"I'd forgotten. Any luck?"

"Canth didn't twitch an ear. Now let me eat and get away from the stink. Don't know how you stand it."

Lessa snorted. "Because I can't stand the groans when you riders don't have numbeed."

F'nor grinned down at his Weyrwoman, aware that Brekke's eyes were wide in amazement at their good-natured banter. He was sincerely fond of Lessa as a person, not just as Weyrwoman of Benden's senior queen. He heartily approved of F'lar's permanent attachment of Lessa, not that there seemed much chance that Ramoth would ever permit any dragon but Mnemeth to fly her. As Lessa was a superb Weyrwoman for Benden Weyr, so F'lar was the logical bronze rider. They were well matched as Weyrwoman and Weyrleader, and Benden Weyr, and Pern, profited. So did the three Holds bound to Benden for protection. Then F'nor remembered the hostility of the people at Southern Boll yesterday until they learned that he was a Benden rider. He started to mention this to Lessa when Manora broke his train of thought.

"I am very disturbed by this discoloration. F'nor," she said. "Here. Show Mastersmith Fandarel these," and she put two small pots into the larger vessel. "He can see exactly the change that occurs. Brekke, would you be kind enough to serve F'nor?"

"No need," F'nor said hastily and backed away, pot swinging from his hand. He used to be annoyed that Manora, who was only his mother, could never rid herself of the notion that he was incapable of doing for himself. She was certainly quick enough to make her fosterlings fend for themselves, as his foster mother had made him.

"Don't drop the pot when you go between, F'nor," was her parting admonition.

F'nor chuckled to himself. Once a mother, always a mother, he guessed, for Lessa was as broody about Felessan, the only child she'd borne. Just as well the Weysrs practiced fostering. Felessan, as likely a lad to Impress a bronze dragon as F'nor had seen in all his Turns at Searching, got along far better with his placid foster mother than he would have with Lessa had she had the rearing of him.

As he ladled out a bowl of stew, F'nor wondered at the perversity of women. Girls were constantly pleading to come to Benden Weyr. They'd not be expected to bear child after child till they were worn-out and old. Women in the Weysrs remained active and appealing. Manora had seen twice the Turns that, for instance, Lord Sifer of Bitra's latest wife had, yet Manora looked younger. Well, a rider preferred to seek his own loves, not have them foisted on him. There were enough spare women in the Lower Caverns right now.

The klah might as well be medicine. He couldn't drink it. He quickly ate the stew, trying not to taste his food. Perhaps he could pick something up at SmithCrafthall at Telgar Hold.

"Canth! Manora's got an errand for us," he warned the brown dragon as he strode from the Lower Cavern. He wondered how the women stood the smell.

Canth did, too, for the fumes had kept him from napping on the warm ledge. He was just as glad of an excuse to get away from Benden Weyr.

F'nor broke out into the early morning sunshine above Telgar Hold, then directed brown Canth up the long valley to the sprawling complex of buildings on the left of the Falls.

Sun flashed off the water wheels which were turned endlessly by the powerful waters of the three-pronged Falls and operated the forges of the Smithy. Judging by the thin black smoke from the stone buildings, the smelting and refining smithies were going at full capacity.

As Canth swooped lower, F'nor could see the distant clouds of dust that meant another ore train coming from the last portage of Telgar's major river. Fandarel's notion of putting wheels on the barges had halved the time it took to get raw ore down river and across land from the deep mines of Crom and Telgar to the Crafthalls throughout Pern.

Canth gave a bugle cry of greeting which was instantly answered by the two dragons, green and brown, perched on a small ledge above the main Crafthall.

"Beth and Seventh from Fort Weyr," Canth told his rider, but the names were not familiar to F'nor.

Time was when a man knew every dragon and rider in Pern.

"Are you joining them?" he asked the big brown.

"They are together," Canth replied so pragmatically that F'nor chuckled to himself.

The green Beth, then, had agreed to brown Seventh's advances. Looking at her brilliant color, F'nor thought their riders shouldn't have brought that pair away from their home Weyr at this phase. As F'nor watched, the brown dragon extended his wing and covered the green possessively. F'nor stroked Canth's downy neck at the first ridge but the dragon didn't seem to need any consolation. He'd no lack of partners after all, thought F'nor with little conceit. Greens would prefer a brown who was as big as most bronzes on Pern.

Canth landed and F'nor jumped off quickly. The dust made by his dragon's wings set up twin whirls, through which F'nor had to walk. In the open sheds which F'nor passed on his way to the Crafthall, men were busy at a number of tasks, most of them familiar to the brown rider. But at one shed he stopped, trying to fathom why the sweating men were winding a coil of metal through a plate, until he realized that the material was extruded as a fine wire. He was about to ask questions when he saw the sullen, closed expressions of the crafters. He nodded pleasantly and continued on his way, uneasy at the indifference, no, the distaste, exhibited at his presence. He was beginning to wish that he hadn't agreed to do Manora's errand.

But Smithcraftmaster Fandarel was the obvious authority on metal and could tell why the big kettle had suddenly discolored the vital anesthetic salve. F'nor swung the kettle to make sure the two sample pots were within, and grinned at the self-conscious gesture; for an instant he had a resurgence of his boyhood apprehension of losing something entrusted to him.

The entrance to the main SmithCrafthall was imposing. Four landbeasts could be driven abreast through that massive portal and not scrape their sides. Did Pern breed Smithcraftmasters in proportion to that door? F'nor wondered as its maw swallowed him, for the immense metal wings stood wide. What had been the original Smithy was now converted to the artificers' use. At lathes and benches, men were polishing, engraving, adding the final touches to otherwise completed work. Sunlight streamed in from the windows set high in the building's wall, the eastern shutters were burnished with the morning sun which reflected also from the samples of weaponry and metalwork in the open shelves in the center of the big Hall.

At first, F'nor thought it was his entrance which had halted all activity, but then he made out two Dragonriders who were menacing Terry. Surprised as he was to feel the tension in the Hall, F'nor was more disturbed that Terry was its brunt, for the man was Fandarel's second and his major innovator. Without a thought, F'nor strode across the floor, his bootheels striking sparks from the flagstone.

"And a good day to you, Terry, and you, sirs," F'nor said, saluting the two riders with airy amiability. "F'nor, Canth's rider, of Benden."

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

"T'reb, Beth's rider, also of Fort. And if Canth's a bronze, warn him off Beth."

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

"One never knows just what is taught at Benden Weyr," T'reb said with thinly veiled contempt.

"Manners, among other things, when addressing Wing-seconds," F'nor replied, still pleasant. But T'reb gave him a sharp look, aware of a subtle difference in his manner. "Good Master Terry, may I have a word with Fandarel?"

"He's in his study ..."

"And you told us he was not about," T'reb interrupted, grabbing Terry by the front of his heavy wher-hide apron.

F'nor reacted instantly. His brown hand snapped about T'reb's wrist, his fingers digging into the tendons so painfully that the green rider's hand was temporarily numbed.

Released, Terry stood back, his eyes blazing, his jaw set.

"Fort Weyr manners leave much to be desired," F'nor said, his teeth showing in a smile as hard as the grip with which he held T'reb. But now the other Fort Weyr rider intervened.

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

"Then he should stay weyrbound."

"Benden doesn't advise Fort," T'reb cried, trying to step past his Weyrmate, his hand on his belt knife.

F'nor stepped back, forcing himself to cool down. The whole episode was ridiculous. Dragonriders did not quarrel in public. No one should use a Craftmaster's second in such a fashion. Outside, dragons bellowed.

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

But the truculent T'reb would not be silenced.

"Don't tell me how to manage my dragon, you ..."

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

"Don't be a fool, T'reb," B'naj said. "Come! Now!"

"I wouldn't be here if you hadn't wanted that knife. Get it and come."

The knife B'naj had been handling lay on the floor by Terry's foot. The Craftsman retrieved it in such a way that F'nor suddenly realized why there had been such tension in the Hall. The Dragonriders had been about to confiscate the knife, an action his entrance had forestalled. He'd heard too much lately of such extortion's.

"You'd better go," he told the Dragonriders, stepping in front of Terry.

"We came for the knife. We'll leave with it," T'reb shouted and, feinting with unexpected speed, ducked past F'nor, grabbing the knife from Terry's hand, slicing the smith's thumb as he drew the blade.

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

T'reb gave a gurgling cry of rage and, before F'nor could duck or B'naj could intervene, the infuriated green rider had plunged his own belt knife into F'nor's shoulder, viciously slicing downward until the point hit the shoulder bone.

F'nor staggered back, aware of nauseating pain, aware of Canth's scream of protest, the green's wild bawl and the brown's trumpeting.

"Get him out of here," F'nor gasped to B'naj, as Terry reached out to steady him.

"Get out!" the Smith repeated in a harsh voice. He signaled urgently to the other craftsmen who now moved decisively toward the dragonmen. But B'naj yanked T'reb savagely out of the Hall.

F'nor resisted as Terry tried to conduct him to the nearest bench. It was bad enough that dragonrider should attack dragonrider, but F'nor was even more shocked that a rider should ignore his beast for the sake of a coveted bauble.

There was real urgency in the green's shrill ululation now. F'nor willed T'reb and B'naj on their beasts and away. A shadow fell across the great portal of the Smithhall. It was Canth, crooning anxiously. The green's voice was suddenly still.

"Are they gone?" he asked the dragon.

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

"I'm all right. I'm all right," F'nor lied, relaxing into Terry's urgent grip. In a blackening daze, he felt himself lifted, then the hard surface of bench under his back before the dizzying shock and pain overwhelmed him. His last conscious thought was that Manora would be annoyed that he had not seen Fandarel first.

CHAPTER 2

When Mnementh burst out of between above Fort Weyr, he entered so high above the Weyr mountain that it was a barely discernible black point in the darkening land below. Flar's exclamation of surprise was cut off by the thin cold air that burned his lungs.

"You must be calm and cool," Mnementh said, doubling his rider's astonishment. "You must command at this meeting." And the bronze dragon began a long spiral glide down to the Weyr.

Flar knew that no admonitions could change Mnementh's mind when he used that firm tone. He wondered at the great beast's unexpected initiative. But the bronze dragon was right.

Flar could accomplish little if he stormed in on T'ron and the other Weyrleaders, bent on extracting justice for his wounded Wing-second. Or if Flar was still seething from the subtle insult implicit in the timing of this meeting. As Weyrleader of the offending rider, T'ron had delayed answering Flar's courteously phrased request for a meeting of all Weyrleaders to discuss the untoward incident at the Craftmasterhall. When T'ron's reply finally arrived, it set the meeting for the first watch, Fort Weyr time; or high night, Benden time, a most inconsiderate hour for Flar and certainly inconvenient for the other easterly Weys, Igen, Ista and even Telgar. D'ram of Ista Weyr and R'mart of Telgar, and probably G'narish of Igen would have something sharp to say to T'ron about such timing, though their lag was not as great as Benden Weyr's.

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

The main issue, to Flar's now calm mind, was not the attack on F'nor. The real issue was the abrogation of two of the strongest Weyr restrictions; restrictions that ought to be so ingrained in any dragonrider that their fracture was impossible.

It was an absolute that a dragonrider did not take a green dragon or a queen from her Weyr when she was due to rise for mating. It made no difference whatsoever that a green dragon was sterile because she chewed firestone. Her lust could affect even the most insensitive commoners with sexual cravings. A mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. Some green-brown pairings were as loud as bronze-gold. Herdbeasts within range stampeded wildly and fowls, wherries and whers went into witless hysterics. Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing consequences. That particular aspect of dragon matings didn't bother weyrfolk who had long since disregarded sexual inhibitions. No, you did not take a dragon out of her Weyr in that state.

It was irrelevant to Flar's thinking that the second violation stemmed from the first. From the moment riders could take their dragons between, they were abjured to avoid situations that might lead to a duel, particularly since dueling was an accepted custom among Craft and Hold. Any differences between riders were settled in unarmed bouts, closely refereed within the Weyr. Dragons suicided when their riders died. And occasionally a beast panicked if his rider was badly hurt or remained unconscious for long. A berserk dragon was almost impossible to manage and a dragon's death severely upset his entire Weyr. So armed dueling, which might injure or kill a dragon, was the most absolute proscription.

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

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

F'lar had suggested.

Common sense had dictated F'lar's policy, eight Turns ago, of throwing open Impressions to likely lads from Holds and Crafts; there hadn't been enough boys of the right age in Benden Weyr to match the number of dragon eggs. If the Oldtimers would throw open the mating flights of their junior queens to bronzes from other Weyrs, they'd soon have clutches as large as the ones at Benden, and undoubtedly queen eggs, too. However, F'lar could appreciate how the Oldtimers felt. The bronze dragons at Benden and Southern Weyr were larger than most Oldtimer bronzes. Consequently, they'd fly the queens. But, by the Shell, F'lar hadn't suggested that the senior queens be flown openly. He did not intend to challenge the Oldtimer Weyrleaders with modern bronzes. He did feel that they'd profit by new blood among their beasts. Wasn't an improvement in Dragonkind anywhere of benefit to all the Weyrs?

And it was practical diplomacy to invite Holders and Crafters to Impressions. There wasn't a man alive in Pern who hadn't secretly cherished the notion that he might be able to Impress a dragon. That he could be linked for life to the love and sustaining admiration of these gentle great beasts. That he could transverse Pern in a twinkling, astride a dragon. That he would never suffer the loneliness that was the condition of most men, a dragonrider always had his dragon. So, whether the commoners had a relative on the Hatching Ground hoping to attach a dragonet or not, the spectators enjoyed the vicarious thrill of being present, at witnessing this 'mysterious rite'. He'd observed that they were also subtly reassured that such dazzling fortune was available to some lucky souls not bred in the Weyrs. And those bound to a Weyr should, F'lar felt, get to know the riders since those riders were responsible for their lives and livelihoods.

To have assigned messenger dragons to every major Hold and Craft had been a very practical measure, too, when Benden had been Pern's only dragonweyr. The northern continent was broad. It took days to get messages from one coast to the other. The Harpercraft's system of drums was a poor second when a dragon could transport himself, his rider and an ungarbled message instantly anywhere on the planet.

F'lar, too, was exceedingly aware of the dangers of isolation. In the days before the first Thread had again fallen on Pern, could it be only seven Turns ago?, Benden Weyr had been vitiated by its isolation, and the entire planet all but lost. Where F'lar earnestly felt that dragonmen should make themselves accessible and friendly, the Oldtimers were obsessed by a need for privacy. Which only fertilized the ground for such incidents as had just occurred. T'reb on a disturbed green had swooped down on the Smithmaster Crafhall and demanded, not requested, that a craftsman give up an artifact, which had been made by commission for a powerful Lord Holder.

With thoughts that were more disillusioned than vengeful F'lar realized that Mnementh was gliding fast toward Fort Weyr's jagged rim. The Star Stones and the watchrider were silhouetted against the dying sunset. Beyond them were the forms of three other bronzes, one a good half-tail larger than the others. That would be Orth, so T'bor was already arrived from Southern Weyr. But only three bronzes? Who was yet to come to the meeting?

"Salth from High Reaches and Branth with R'mart of Telgar Weyr are absent." Mnementh informed his rider.

High Reaches and Telgar Weyrs missing? Well, T'kul of High Reaches was likely late on purpose. Odd though; that caustic Oldtimer ought to enjoy tonight. He'd have a chance to snipe at both F'lar and T'bor and he'd thoroughly enjoy T'ron's discomfiture. F'lar had never felt any friendliness for or from the dour, dark-complected High Reaches Weyrleader. He wondered if that was why Mnementh never used T'kul's name. Dragons ignored human names when they didn't like the bearer. But for a dragon not to name a Weyrleader was most unusual.

F'lar hoped that R'mart of Telgar would come. Of the Oldtimers, R'mart and G'narish of Igen were the youngest, the least set in their ways. Though they tended to side with their contemporaries in most affairs against the two modern Weyrleaders, F'lar and T'bor, F'lar had noticed lately that those two were sympathetic to some of his suggestions. Could he work on that to his advantage today, tonight! He wished that Lessa could have come with him for she was able to use deft mental pressures against dissenters and could often get the other dragons to answer her. She had to be careful, for Dragonriders were apt to suspect they were being manipulated.

Mnementh was now within the Bowl of Fort Weyr itself and veering toward the ledge of the senior queen's weyr. T'ron's Fidrath was not there, guarding his queen Weyrmate as Mnementh would have been. Or perhaps Mardra, the senior Weyrwoman, was gone. She was as quick to find exception and slights as T'ron, though once she hadn't been so touchy. In those first days after the Weyrs had come up, she and Lessa had been exceedingly close. But Mardra's friendship had gradually turned into an active hatred. Mardra was a handsome woman, with a full, strong figure, and while she was nowhere near as promiscuous with her favors as Kylara of Southern Weyr, she was much sought after by bronze riders. By nature she was intensely possessive and not, F'lar realized, particularly intelligent. Lessa, dainty, oddly beautiful, already a Weyr legend for that spectacular ride between time, had unconsciously attracted attention from Mardra. Mardra evidently didn't consider the fact that Lessa made no attempt to entice any favorite from Mardra, did not, indeed, dally with any man (for which F'lar was immensely pleased). Add to that the ridiculous matter of their mutual Ruathan origin, Mardra conceived a hatred for Lessa. She seemed to feel that Lessa, the only survivor of that Bloodline, had had no right to renounce her claim on Ruatha Hold to young Lord Jaxom. Not that a Weyrwoman could take Hold or would want to. The bases for Mardra's hatred of Lessa were spurious. Lessa had no control over her beauty and had had no real choice about taking Hold at Ruatha.

So it was as well the Weyrwomen had not been included in this meeting. Put Mardra in the same room with Lessa and there'd be problems. Add Kylara of the Southern Weyr who was apt to make trouble for the pure joy of getting attention by disrupting others, and nothing would be accomplished Nadira of Igen Weyr liked Lessa but in a passive way. Bedella of Telgar Weyr was stupid and Fanna of Ista, taciturn. Merika of the High Reaches was as much a sour sort as her Weyrleader T'kul.

This was a matter for men to settle.

F'lar thanked Mnementh as he slid down the warm shoulder to the ledge, stumbling as his bootheels caught on the ridges of claw scars on the edge. T'ron might have put out a basket of glows, F'lar thought irritably, and then caught himself. Another trick to put everyone in as unresponsive a mood as possible.

Loranth, senior queen dragon of Fort Weyr, solemnly regarded F'lar as he entered the main room of the Weyr. He gave her a cordial greeting, suppressing his relief that there was no sign of Mardra. If Loranth was solemn, Mardra would have been downright unpleasant. Undoubtedly the Fort Weyrwoman was sulking beyond the curtain between weyr and sleeping room. Maybe this awkward time had been her idea. It was after western dinner hours and too late for more than wine for those from later time zones. She thus avoided the necessity of playing hostess.

Lessa would never resort to such mean-spirited strategies. F'lar knew how often the impulsive Lessa had bitten back quick answers when Mardra had patronized her. In fact, Lessa's forbearance with the haughty Fort Weyrwoman was miraculous, considering Lessa's temper. F'lar supposed that his Weyrmate felt responsible for uprooting the Oldtimers. But the final decision to go forward in time had been theirs.

Well, if Lessa could endure Mardra's condescension out of gratitude, F'lar could try to put up with T'ron. The man did know how to fight Thread effectively and F'lar had learned a great deal from him at first. So, in a determinedly pleasant frame of mind, F'lar walked down the short passage to the Fort Weyr Council Room.

T'ron, seated in the big stone chair at the head of the Table, acknowledged F'lar's entry with a stiff nod. The light of the glows on the wall cast unflattering shadows on the Oldtimer's heavy, lined face. It struck F'lar forcibly that the man had never known anything but fighting Thread. He must have been born when the Red Star began that last fifty-Turn-long Pass around Pern, and he'd fought Thread until the Star had finished its circuit. Then followed Lessa forward. A man could get mighty tired of fighting Thread in just seven short Turns. F'lar halted that line of thought.

D'ram of Ista Weyr and G'narish of Igen also contented themselves with nods. T'bor, however, gave F'lar a hearty greeting, his eyes glinting with emotion.

"Good evening, gentlemen," F'lar said to all. "I apologize for taking you from your own affairs or rest with this request for an emergency meeting of all Weyrleaders, but it could not wait until the regular Solstice Gathering."

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

"Agreed."

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

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

"I don't see that F'lar acted irresponsibly," G'narish said, evidently surprised by T'ron's attitude. G'narish was a stocky young man, some Turns F'lar's junior and the youngest of the Weyrleaders to come forward in time. "Any Weyrleader can call a joint meeting if circumstances warrant it. And these do!" G'narish emphasized this with a curt nod, adding when he saw the Fort Weyrleader scowling at him, "Well, they do."

"Your rider was the aggressor, T'ron," D'ram said in a stern voice. He was a rangy man, getting stringy with age, but his astonishing shock of red hair was only lightly grizzled at the temples. "F'lar's within his rights."

"You had the choice of time and place, T'ron," F'lar pointed out, all deference.

T'ron's scowl deepened.

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

"Have some wine, F'lar?" T'bor suggested, an almost malicious smile playing on his lips for T'ron ought to have offered immediately. "Of course, it's not Benden Hold wine, but not bad. Not bad."

F'lar gave T'bor a long warning look as he took the proffered cup. But the Southern Weyrleader was watching to see how T'ron reacted. Benden Hold did not tittle of its famous wines as generously to the other Weyrs as it did to the one which protected its lands.

"When are we going to taste some of those Southern Weyr wines you've been bragging about, T'bor?" G'narish asked, instinctively trying to ease the growing tensions.

"Of course, we're entering our fall season now," T'bor said making it seem that Fort was to blame for the chill outside, and inside, the Weyr. "However, we expect to start pressing soon.

We'll distribute what we can spare to you northerners."

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

"Well, Southern plays nurse to every wounded dragonrider. We need sufficient on hand to drown their sorrows adequately. Southern Weyr supports itself, you must remember."

F'lar stepped on T'bor's booted foot as he turned to D'ram and inquired of the Istan Weyrleader how the last Laying had gone.

"Very well, thanks," D'ram replied pleasantly, but F'lar knew the older man did not like the mood that was developing. "Fanna's Mirath laid twenty-five and I'll warrant we've half a dozen bronzes in the clutch."

"Ista's bronzes are the fastest on Pern," F'lar said gravely. When he heard T'bor stirring restlessly beside him, he reached swiftly to Mnementh with a silent "Ask Orth to please tell T'bor to speak with great thought for the consequences. D'ram and G'narish must not be antagonized." Out loud he said, "A weyr can never have too many good bronzes. If only to keep the queens happy." He leaned back, watching T'bor out of the corner of his eye to catch in reaction when the dragons completed the message relay. T'bor gave a sudden slight jerk, then shrugged, his glance shifting from D'ram to T'ron and back to F'lar. He looked more rebellious than cooperative. F'lar turned back to D'ram. "If you need some likely prospects for any green dragons, there's a boy ..."

"D'ram follows tradition, Benden," T'ron cut in. "Weyrbred is best for Dragonkind. Particularly for greens."

"Oh?" T'bor glared with malicious intent at T'ron.

D'ram cleared his throat hastily and said in a too loud voice, "As it happens, we've a good group of likely boys in our Bower Caverns. The last Impression at G'narish's Weyr left him with a few he has offered to place at Ista Weyr. So I thank you kindly, F'lar. Generous indeed when you've eggs hardening at Benden too. And a queen, I hear?" D'ram exhibited no trace of envy for another queen egg at Benden Weyr. And Fanna's Mirath hadn't produced a single golden egg since she'd come time between. "We all know Benden's generosity," Tron said in a sneering tone, his eyes flicking around the room, everywhere but at F'lar. "He extends help everywhere. And interferes when it isn't needed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They're in no condition to attend a meeting," Tron seemed surprised at D'ram's request. "Their dragons only returned from flight at sunset."

D'ram stared at Tron. "Then why did you call the meeting for tonight?"

"At F'lar's insistence."

T'bor rose to protest before F'lar could stop him, but D'ram waved him to be seated and sternly reminded Tron that the Fort Weyrleader had set the time, not F'lar of Benden.

"Look, we're here now," T'bor said, banging his fist on the table irritably. "Let's get on with it. It's full night in southern Weyr. I'd like ..."

"I conduct the Fort Weyr meetings, Southern," Tron said in a loud, firm voice, although the effort of keeping his temper told in the flush of his face and the brightness of his eyes.

"Then conduct it," T'bor replied. "Tell us why a green rider took his dragon out of your Weyr when she was close to heat."

"T'reb was not aware she was that close ..."

"Nonsense," T'bor cut in, glaring at Tron. "You keep telling us how much of a traditionalist you are, and how well trained your riders are. Then don't tell me a rider as old as T'reb can't estimate his beast's condition."

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

"A green changes color rather noticeably," G'narish said, with some reluctance, F'lar noted. "Usually a full day before she wants to fly."

"Not in the spring," Tron pointed out quickly. "Not when she's off her feed from Threadscore. It can happen very quickly. Which it did." Tron spoke loudly, as if the volume of his explanation would bear more weight than its logic.

"That is possible," D'ram admitted slowly, nodding his head up and down before he turned to see what F'lar thought.

"I accept that possibility," F'lar replied, keeping his voice even. He saw T'bor open his mouth to protest and kicked the man under the table. "However, according to the testimony of Craftmaster Terry, my rider urged T'reb repeatedly to take his dragon away. T'reb persisted in his attempt to, to acquire the belt knife."

"And you accept the word of a commoner against a rider?" Tron leaped on F'lar's statement with a great show of surprised indignation and incredulity.

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

"Those smithcrafters are the most notorious misers of Pern," Tron replied as if this were a personal insult. "The worst of all the crafts when it comes to parting with honest tithe."

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

"What difference does that make, Benden?" Tron demanded.

F'lar stared back at the Fort Weyrleader. So Tron was trying to set the blame on Terry! Then he knew that his rider had been at fault. Why couldn't he just admit it and discipline the rider? F'lar only wanted to see that there'd be no repetitions of such an incident.

"The difference is that that knife had been crafted for Lord Larad of Telgar as a gift to Lord Asgenar of Lemos Hold for his wedding six days from now. The blade was not Terry's to give or withhold. It already belonged to a Lord Holder. Therefore, the rider was ..."

"Naturally you'd take the part of your rider, Benden," Tron cut in with a slight, unpleasant smile on his face. "But for a rider, a Weyrleader, to take the part of a Lord Holder against dragonfolk," and Tron turned to D'ram and G'narish with a helpless shrug of dismay.

"If R'mart were here, you'd be," T'bor began.

D'ram gestured at him to be quiet. "We're not discussing possession but what seems to be a grave breach of Weyr discipline," he said in a voice that overwhelmed T'bor's protest. "However, F'lar, you do admit that a green, off her feed from Threadscore, can suddenly go into heat without warning?"

F'lar could feel T'bor urging him to deny that possibility. He knew that he had made a mistake in pointing out that the knife had been commissioned for a Lord Holder. Or in taking the part of a Holder not bound to Benden Weyr. If only R'mart had been here to speak in Lord Larad's behalf. As it was, F'lar had prejudiced his case. The incident had disturbed D'ram so much that the man was deliberately closing his eyes to fact and seeking any extenuating circumstance he could. If F'lar forced him to see the event clearly, would he prove anything to a man unwilling to believe that Dragonriders could be guilty of error? Would he get D'ram to admit that Craft and Hold had privileges, too?

He took a slow deep breath to control the frustrated anger he felt. "I have to concede that it is possible a green can go into heat without warning under those conditions." Beside him, T'bor cursed under his breath. "But for exactly that reason, T'reb ought to have known to keep his green in the Weyr."

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

"You're out of order, Southern," Tron said in a loud voice, glaring at F'lar, not T'bor. "Can't you control your riders, F'lar?"

"That is quite enough, Tron," D'ram cried, on his feet.

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

"We're trying to settle the incident, Tron," D'ram continued forcefully, "not complicate it with irrelevant personalities. Since you are involved in this business, perhaps I'd better conduct the meeting. With your permission, of course, Fort."

To F'lar's mind, that was a tacit admission that D'ram realized, however he might try to evade it, how serious the incident was. The Istan Weyrleader turned to F'lar, his brown eyes dark with concern. F'lar entertained a half hope that D'ram might have seen through Tron's obstructiveness, but the Oldtimer's next words disabused him. "I do not agree with you, F'lar, that the Crafter acted in good part. No let me finish. We came to the aid of your troubled time, expecting to be recompensed and supported in proper fashion, but the manner and the amount of tithing rendered the Weys from Hold and Craft has left much to be desired. Pern is much more productive than it was four Hundred Turns ago and yet that wealth has not been reflected in the tithes. There is four times the population of our Time and much, much more cultivated land. A heavy responsibility for the Weys. And," he cut himself off with a rueful laugh. "I'm digressing, too. Suffice it to say that it was obvious a dragonrider found the knife to his liking, Terry should have gifted it him. As craftsmen used to, without any question or hesitation."

"Then," D'ram's face brightened slightly, "T'reb and B'naj would have left before the green went into full heat, your F'nor would not have become involved in a disgraceful public brawl. Yes, it is all too plain," and D'ram straightened his shoulders from the burden of decision, "that the first error of judgment was on the part of the craftsman." He looked at each man, as if none of them had control over what a craftsman might do. T'bor refused to meet his eyes and ground a boot heel noisily into the stone floor.

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

"We cannot, of course, permit a repetition of a green in mating heat outside her weyr. Or Dragonriders in an armed duel ..."

"There wasn't any duel!" The words seemed to explode from T'bor. "T'reb attacked F'nor without warning and sliced him up. F'nor never even drew his knife. That's no duel. That's an unwarranted attack ..."

"A man whose green is in heat is unaccountable for his actions," Tron said, loud enough to drown T'bor out.

"A green who never should have been out of her weyr in the first place no matter how you dance around the truth, Tron," T'bor said, savage with frustration. "The first error in judgment was T'reb's. Not Terry's."

"Silence!" D'ram's bellow silenced him and Loranth answered irritably from her weyr.

"That does it," Tron exclaimed, rising. "I'm not having my senior queen upset. You've had your meeting, Benden, and your, your grievance has been aired. This meeting is adjourned."

"Adjourned?" G'narish echoed him in surprise. "But, but nothing's been done." The Igen Weyrleader looked from D'ram to Tron puzzled, worried. "And F'lar's rider was wounded. If the attack was ..."

"How badly wounded is the man?" D'ram asked, turning quickly to F'lar.

"Now you ask!" cried T'bor.

"Fortunately," and F'lar held T'bor's angry eyes in a stern, warning glance before turning to D'ram to answer, "the wound is not serious. He will not lose the use of the arm."

G'narish sucked his breath in with a whistle. "I thought he'd only been scratched. I think we ..."

"When a rider's dragon is lustful," D'ram began, but broke off when he caught sight of the naked fury on T'bor's face, the set look on F'lar's. "A dragonrider can never forget his purpose, his responsibility, to his dragon or to his Weyr. This can't happen again. You'll speak to T'reb, of course, Tron?"

Tron's eyes widened slightly at D'ram's question.

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

"Good," said D'ram, with the air of a man who has solved a difficult problem equitably. He nodded toward the others. "It would be wise if we Weyrleaders caution all our riders against the possibility of a repetition. Put them all on their guard. Agreed?" He continued nodding, as if to spare the others the effort. "It is hard enough to work with some of these arrogant Holders and Crafters without giving them any occasion to fault us." D'ram sighed deeply and scratched his head. I never have understood how commoners can forget how much they owe Dragonriders!"

"In four hundred Turns, a man can learn many new things," F'lar replied. "Coming, T'bor?" and his tone was just short of command. "My greetings to your Weyrwomen, riders. Good night."

He strode from the Council Room, T'bor pounding right behind him, swearing savagely until they got to the outer passageway to the Weyr ledge.

"That old fool was in the wrong, F'lar, and you know it!"

"Obviously."

"Then why didn't you ...?"

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

"Dragonriders don't fight. Particularly Weyrleaders."

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

"How could you let a chance like that go by? When I think of the times he's criticized you, us, " T'bor broke off. "Never understand how commoners can forget all they owe Dragonriders?" and T'bor mimicked D'ram's pompous intonation, "If they really want to know ..."

F'lar gripped T'bor by the shoulder, appreciating the younger man's sentiments all too deeply.

"How can you tell a man what he doesn't want to hear? We couldn't even get them to admit that T'reb was in the wrong T'reb, not Terry, and not F'nor. But I don't think there'll be another lapse like today's and that's what I really worried about."

"What?" T'bor stared at F'lar in puzzled confusion.

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

"I can't follow that logic any more than I can follow T'ron's."

"It's simple. Dragonmen don't fight. Weyrleaders can't. T'ron was hoping I'd be mad enough to lose control. I think he was hoping I'd attack him."

"You can't be serious!" T'bor was plainly shaken.

"Remember, T'ron considers himself the senior Weyrleader on Pern and therefore infallible."

T'bor made a rude noise. Despite himself, F'lar grinned.

"True," he continued, "but I've never had a reason to challenge him. And don't forget, the Oldtimers taught us a great deal about Thread fighting we certainly didn't know."

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

"That's not the point, T'bor. You and I, the modern Weyrs have certain obvious advantages over the Oldtimers, size of dragons, number of queens, that I'm not interested in mentioning because it only makes for bad feeling. Nevertheless, we can't fight Thread without the Oldtimers. We need the Oldtimers more than they need us." F'lar gave T'bor a wry, bitter grin. "D'ram was partly right. A dragonman can never forget his purpose, his responsibility. When D'ram said 'to his dragon, to his Weyr', he's wrong. Our initial and ultimate responsibility is to Pern, to the people we were established to protect."

They had proceeded to the ledge and could see their dragons dropping off the height to meet them. Full dark had descended over Fort Weyr now, emphasizing the weariness that engulfed

F'lar.

"If the Oldtimers have become introverted, we, Benden and Southern, cannot. We understand our Turn, our people. And somehow we've got to make the Oldtimers understand them, too."

"Yes, but T'ron was in the wrong!"

"Would we have been more right to make him say it?"

T'bor bit back an angry response and F'lar hoped that the man's rebellion was dissipating. There was good heart and mind in the Southern Weyrleader. He was a fine dragonrider, a superb fighter, and his Wings followed him without hesitation. He was not as strong out of the skies, however, but with subtle guidance had built Southern Weyr into a productive, self-supporting establishment. He instinctively looked to F'lar and Benden Weyr for direction and companionship. Part of that, F'lar was sure, was because of the difficult and disturbing temperament of the Southern Weyrwoman, Kylara.

Sometimes F'lar regretted that T'bor proved to be the only bronze rider who could cope with that female. He wondered what subtle deep tie existed between the two riders, because T'bor's Orth consistently outflow every bronze to mate with Prideth, Kylara's queen, though it was common knowledge that Kylara took many men to her bed.

T'bor might be short-tempered and not the most diplomatic adherent, but he was loyal and F'lar was grateful to him. If he'd only held his temper tonight ...

"Well, you usually know what you're doing, F'lar," the Southern Weyrleader admitted reluctantly, "but I don't understand the Oldtimers and lately I'm not sure I care."

Mnemenh hovered by the ledge, one leg extended. Beyond him, the two men could hear Orth's wings beating the night air as he held his position.

"Tell F'nor to take it easy and get well. I know he's in good hands down at Southern," F'lar said as he scrambled up Mnemenh's shoulder and urged him out of Orth's way.

"We'll have him well in next to no time. You need him," replied T'bor.

Yes, thought F'lar as Mnemenh soared up out of the Fort Weyr Bowl, I need him. I could have used his wits beside me tonight. I could have used his thinking on T'ron's invidious attempts to switch blame.

Well, if it had been another rider, wounded under the same circumstances, he couldn't have brought F'nor anyhow. And T'bor with his short temper would still have been present, and played right into T'ron's hands. He couldn't honestly blame T'bor. He'd felt the same burning desire to make the Oldtimers see the facts in realistic perspective. But, you can't take a dragon to a place you've never seen. And T'bor's outbursts had not helped. Strange, T'bor hadn't been so touchy as a weyring nor when he was a Benden Weyr Wing-second. Being Weyrmate to Kylara had changed him but that woman was enough to unsettle, to unsettle D'ram.

F'lar entertained the wild mental image of the blonde sensual Kylara seducing the sturdy Oldtimer. Not that she'd even glanced at the Istan Weyrleader. And she certainly wouldn't have stayed with him. F'lar was glad that they'd eased her out of Benden Weyr. Hadn't she been found on the same Search as Lessa? Where'd she come from? Oh, yes, Telgar Hold. Come to think of it, she was the present Lord's full-blooded sister. Just as well Kylara was in Weyrlife. With her proclivity, she'd have had her throat sliced long ago in a Hold or a Craftball.

Mnemenh transferred them between and the cold of that awful nothingness made his bones ache. Then they emerged over the Benden Weyr Star Stones and answered the watchrider's query.

Lessa wasn't going to like his report of the meeting, F'lar thought. If only D'ram, usually an honest thinker, had seen past the obvious. He had a feeling that maybe G'narish had.

Yes, G'narish had been troubled. Maybe the next time the Weyrleaders met to confer, G'narish might side with the modern riders.

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

CHAPTER 3

Ramoth, Benden's golden queen, was in the Hatching Ground when she got the green's frantic summons from Lemos Hold.

"Threads at Lemos. Thread falls at Lemos!" Ramoth told every dragon and rider, her full-throated brassy bugle reverberating through the Bowl.

Men scrambled frantically from couch and bathing pool, upset tables and dropped tools before the first echo had rolled away. F'lar, idly watching the weyrings drill, was dressed for fighting since the Weyr had expected to be at Lemos Hold late that day. Mnemenh, his magnificent bronze, sunning himself on a ledge, swooped down at such a rate that he gouged a narrow trench in the sand of the floor with his left wingtip. F'lar was atop his neck and they were circling to the Eye Rock before Ramoth had had time to stamp out of the Hatching Cavern.

"Thread at Lemos northeast," Mnemenh reported, picking up the information from his mate Ramoth as she projected herself toward her weyr ledge for Lessa. Dragons were now streaming from every weyr opening, their riders struggling into fighting gear or securing bulging firesacks.

F'lar didn't waste time wondering why Thread was falling hours ahead of schedule or northeast instead of southwest. He checked to see if there were enough riders assembled and aloft to make up a full low altitude wing. He hesitated long enough to have Mnemenh order every weyring to proceed immediately to Lemos to help fly ground crews to the area and then told his dragon to take the wing between.

Thread was indeed falling, a great sheet plummeting down toward the delicate new leafing hardwoods that were Lord Asgenar's prime forestry project. Screaming, flaming, dragons broke out of between, skimming the spring forest to get quick bearings before they soared up to meet the attack.

Incredibly, F'lar believed they had actually managed to beat Thread to the forest. That green's rider would have his choice of anything in F'lar's power to give. The thought of Thread in those hardwood stands chilled the Weyrleader more thoroughly than an hour between.

A dragon screamed directly above F'lar. Even as he glanced upward to identify the wounded beast, both dragon and rider had gone between where the awful cold would shatter and break the entangling Threads before they could eat into membrane and flesh.

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

Virianth, R'nor's brown, Mnemenh informed his rider as he soared in search of a target. He craned his sinuous neck around in a wide sweep, eyeing the forest lest Thread had actually started burrowing. Then, with a warning to his rider, he folded his wings and dove toward an especially thick patch, braking his descent with neck-snapping speed. As Mnemenh belched fire, F'lar watched, grinning with intense satisfaction as the Thread curled into black dust and floated harmlessly to the forests below.

"Virianth caught his wingtip," Mnemenh said as he beat upward again. "He'll return. We need him. This Thread falls wrong."

"Wrong and early," F'lar said gritting his teeth against the fierce wind of their ascent. If he hadn't been in the custom of sending a messenger on to the Hold where Thread was due ...

Mnemenh gave him just enough warning to secure his hold as the great bronze veered suddenly toward a dense clump. The stench of the fiery breath all but choked F'lar. He flung up an arm to protect his face from the hot charred flecks of Thread. Then Mnemenh was turning his head for another block of firestone before swooping again at dizzying speed after more Thread.

There was no further time for speculation; only action and reaction. Dive. Flame. Firestone for Mnemenh to chew. Call a weyring for another sack. Catch it deftly mid-air. Fly above the fighting wings to check the pattern of flying dragons. Gouts of flame blossoming across the sky. Sun glinting off green, blue, brown, bronze backs as dragons veered, soared, dove, flaming after Thread. He'd spot a beast going between, tense until he reappeared or Mnemenh reported their retreat. Part of his mind kept track of the casualties, another traced the wing line, correcting it when the riders started to overlap or flew too wide a pattern. He was aware, too, of the golden triangle of the queens' wing, far below, catching what Thread escaped from the upper levels.

By the time Thread had ceased to fall and the dragons began to spiral down to aid the Lemos Hold ground crews, F'lar almost resented Mnemenh's summary.

"Nine minor brushes, four just wingtips; two bad lacings, Sorenth and Relth, and two face-burned riders."

Wingtip injuries were just plain bad judgment. Riders cutting it too fine. They weren't riding competitions, they were fighting! F'lar ground his teeth ...

"Sorenth says they came out of between into a patch that should not have been there. The Threads are not falling right," the bronze said. "That is what happened to Relth and T'gor."

That didn't assuage F'lar's frustration for he knew T'gor and R'mel as good riders.

How could Thread fall northeast in the morning when it wasn't supposed to drop until evening and in the southwest? he wondered, savage with frustrated worry.

Automatically, F'lar started to ask Mnemenh to have Canth fly close in. But then he remembered that F'nor was wounded and half a planet away in Southern Weyr. F'lar swore long and

imaginatively, wishing Treb of Fort Weyr immured between with Weyrleader Tron fast beside him. Why did F'nor have to be absent at a time like this? It still rankled F'lar deeply that Fort's Weyrleader had tried to shift the blame of the fight from his very guilty rider to Terry. Of all the specious, contrived, ridiculous contentions for Tron to stand by!

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

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

"We're lucky to have so many to fly today," F'lar said, amused despite his other concerns by the bronze's fatuous tone. Lamanth was the queen from Mnementh's second mating with

Ramoth.

"Ramoth flies well too, for one so soon from the Hatching Ground. Thirty-eight eggs and another queen," Mnementh added with no modesty.

"We're going to have to do something about that third queen."

Mnementh rumbled about that. Ramoth disliked sharing the bronze dragons of her Weyr with too many queens, in spite of the fact that she would mate only with Mnementh. Many queens were the mark of virility in a bronze and it was natural for Mnementh to want to flaunt his prowess. Benden Weyr had to maintain more than one golden queen to placate the rest of the bronzes and to improve the breed in general, but three?

After the meeting the other night at Fort Weyr, F'lar hesitated to suggest to any of the other Weyrleaders that he'd be glad of a home for the new queen: They'd probably contrive it to be bad management of Ramoth or coddling of Lessa. Still, Benden queens were bigger than Old-timer queens, just as modern bronzes were bigger, too. Maybe R'mart at Telgar Weyr wouldn't take offense. Or G'narish? F'lar couldn't think how many queens G'narish had at Igen Weyr. He grinned to himself, thinking of the expression of Tron's face when he heard Benden was giving away a queen dragon.

"Benden's known for its generosity, but what's behind such a maneuver?" Tron would say. "It's not traditional."

But it was. There were precedents, F'lar would far rather cope with Tron's snide remarks than Ramoth's temper. He glanced down, sighting the gleaming triangle of the queens' wing, with Ramoth easily sweeping along, the younger beasts working hard to keep up with her.

Threads dropping out of pattern! F'lar gritted his teeth. Worse, out of a pattern which he'd so painstakingly researched from hundreds of disintegrating Record skins in his efforts seven Turns ago to prepare his ill-protected planet.

Patterns, F'lar thought bitterly, which the Oldtimers had enthusiastically acclaimed and used, though that was scarcely traditional. Just useful

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

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

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

Mnementh obediently turned out of the leisurely glide and dropped swiftly. F'lar could thank good fortune that it was Lord Asgenar of Lemos to whom he must explain rather than Lord Sifer of Bitra Hold or Lord Raid of Benden Hold. The former would rant against the injustice and the latter would contrive to make a premature arrival of Thread a personal insult to him by dragonmen. Sometimes the Lords Raid and Sifer tried F'lar's patience. True, those three Holds, Benden, Bitra and Lemos, had conscientiously tithed to support Benden Weyr when it was the sole dragonweyr of Pern. But Lord Raid and Lord Sifer had an unpleasant habit of reminding Benden Weyr riders of their loyalty at every opportunity. Gratitude is an ill-fitting tunic that can chafe and smell if worn too long.

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

Mnementh glided toward the expanse of the Great Lake which separated Lemos Hold from upper Telgar Hold. The Threads' advance edge had just missed the verdant softwoods that surrounded the northern shores. Mnementh circled down, causing F'lar to lean into the great neck, grasping the fighting straps firmly. Despite his weariness and worry, he felt the sharp surge of elation which always gripped him when he flew the huge bronze dragon; that curious merging of himself with the beast, against air and wind, so that he was not only F'lar, Weyrleader of Benden, but somehow Mnementh. immensely powerful, magnificently free.

On a rise overlooking the broad meadow that swept down to the Great Lake, F'lar spotted the green dragon. Lemos' Lord Holder, Asgenar, would be near her. F'lar smiled sardonically at the sight. Let the Oldtimers disapprove, let them mutter uneasily when F'lar put non-weyrfolk on dragonback, but if F'lar had not, Thread would have fallen unseen over those hardwoods.

Trees! Another bone of contention between Weyr and Hold, with F'lar staunchly upholding the Lords' position. Four hundred Turns ago, such timber stands had not existed, were not permitted to grow. Too much living green to protect. Well, the Oldtimers were eager enough to own products of wood, overloading Fandarel's woodcraftsman, Bendarek, with their demands. On the other hand, they wouldn't permit the formation of a new Crafhall under Bendarek. Probably because, F'lar thought bitterly, Bendarek wanted to stay near the hardwoods of Lemos, and that would give Benden Weyr a Crafhall in its jurisdiction. By the Egg, the Oldtimers were almost more trouble than they were worth!

Mnementh landed with sweeping backstrokes that flattened the thick meadow grass. F'lar slid down the bronze's neck to join Lord Asgenar while Mnementh trumpeted approval to the green dragon and Frad, his rider.

Frad wants to warn you that Asgenar ...

"Not much gets through Benden's wings," Asgenar was saying by way of greeting so that Mnementh didn't finish his thought. The young man was wiping soot and sweat from his face for he was one Lord who directed his ground crews personally instead of staying comfortably in his main Hold. "Even if Threads have begun to deviate. How do you account for all these recent variations?"

"Variations?" F'lar repeated the word, feeling stupid because he somehow realized that Asgenar was not referring just to this day's unusual occurrence.

"Yes! And here we thought your timetables were the last word. To be relied on forever, especially since they were checked and approved by the Oldtimers." Asgenar gave F'lar a sly look. "Oh, I'm not faulting you, F'lar. You've always been open in our dealings. I count myself lucky to be weyrbound to you. A man knows where he stands with Benden Weyr. My brother-in-law elect? Lord Larad, has had problems with T'kul of the High Reaches Weyr, you know. And since those premature falls at Tillek and Upper Crom, he's got a thorough watch system set up." Asgenar paused, suddenly aware of F'lar's tense silence. "I do not presume to criticize weyrfolk, F'lar," he said in a more formal tone, "but rumor can outfly a dragon and naturally I heard about the others. I can appreciate the Weyrs not wishing to alarm commoners but, well, a little forewarning would be only courteous."

"There was no way of predicting today's fall," F'lar said slowly, but his mind was turning so rapidly that he felt sick. Why had nothing been said to him? R'mart of Telgar Weyr hadn't been at the meeting about Treb's transgressions. Could R'mart have been busy fighting Thread at that time? As for T'kul of the High Reaches Weyr imparting any information, particularly news that might show him in a bad light, that one wouldn't give coordinates to save a rider's life.

No, they'd have had good reason not to mention premature falls to F'lar that night. If T'kul had confided in anyone. But why hadn't R'mart let them know?

"But Benden Weyr's not caught sleeping. Once is all we'd need in those forests, huh, F'lar?" Asgenar was saying, his eyes scanning the spongewoods possessively.

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

"Your queens' wing reported it safe two hours past." Asgenar grinned and rocked back and forth on his heels, his confidence not a bit jarred by today's unpredicted event. F'lar envied him.

Again the bronze rider thanked good fortune that he had Lord Asgenar to deal with this morning instead of punctilious Raid or suspicious Lord Sifer. He devoutly hoped that the young Lord Holder would not find his trust misplaced. But the question haunted him. How could Threads change so?

Both Weyrleader and Lord Holder froze as they watched a blue dragon hover attentively above a stand of trees to the northeast. When the beast flew on, Asgenar turned to F'lar with troubled eyes.

"Do you think these odd falls will mean that those forests must be razed?"

"You know my views on wood, Asgenar. It's too valuable a commodity, too versatile, to sacrifice needlessly."

"But it takes every dragon to protect ..."

"Are you for or against?" F'lar asked with mild amusement. He gripped Asgenar's shoulder. "Instruct your foresters to keep constant watch. Their vigilance is essential."

"Then you don't know the pattern in the Thread shifts?"

F'lar shook his head slowly, unwilling to perjure himself to this man. "I'll leave the long-eyed Frad with you."

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

"I couldn't ask, but it's a relief. I shan't abuse the privilege."

F'lar glanced at him sharply. "Why should you?"

Asgenar gave him a wry smile. "That's what the Oldtimers carp about, isn't it? And instant transportation to any place on Pern is a temptation."

F'lar laughed, remembering that Asgenar, Lord of Lemos, was to take Famera, the youngest sister of Larad, Lord of Telgar Hold, to wife. While the Telgar lands marched the boundaries of Lemos, the Holds were separated by deep forest and several ranges of steep rocky mountains.

Three dragons appeared and circled above them, wingriders reporting on the ground activities. Nine infestations had been sighted and controlled with minimum loss of property. Sweepriders had reported that the mid-Fall area was clear. F'lar dismissed them. A runner came loping up the meadow to his Lord Holder, carefully keeping several dragonlengths between himself and the two beasts. For all that every Pernese knew the dragons would harm no human, many would never lose their fearfulness. Dragons were confused by this distrust so that F'lar strolled casually to his bronze and scratched the left eye ridge affectionately until Mnementh allowed one lid to droop in pleasure over the gleaming opalescent eye.

The runner had come from afar, managing to gasp out his reassuring message before he collapsed on the ground, his chest heaving with the effort to fill his starved lungs. Asgenar stripped off his tunic and covered the man to prevent his chilling and made the runner drink from his own flask.

"The two infestations on the south slope are char!" Asgenar reported to the Weyrleader as he rejoined him. "That means the hardwood stands are safe." Asgenar's relief was so great that he took a swig on the bottle himself. Then hastily offered it to the dragonrider. When F'lar politely refused, he went on, "We may have another hard winter and my people will need that wood. Crom coal costs!"

F'lar nodded. Free provision of fuel wood meant a tremendous saving to the average holder, though not every Lord saw it in this aspect. Lord Meron of Nabol Hold, for instance refused to let his commoners chop fuel wood, forcing them to pay the high rates for Crom coal, increasing his profit at their expense.

"That runner came from the south slope? He's fast."