

'A masterpiece of adventure, intrigue and romance'

DANIELLE L. JENSEN

# DRAGONFLIGHT

VOLUME 1 IN  
THE DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNE McCAFFREY



## Praise for Anne McCaffrey and her Dragonriders of Pern series

'I encountered *Dragonflight* at the age of eleven and was immediately charmed. Since then, I've read many, many more of Anne McCaffrey's books, and the feeling of Real Magic has never gone away.' **Diana Gabaldon**

'Anne McCaffrey's Pern books forever changed how readers looked at dragons – not just fearsome beasts to be slain, but bonded warrior partners. She taught a very young me that there was nothing cooler than a dragon you could ride, a dragon that could read your thoughts, that the mastery of a dragon was, basically, the best thing that could happen to you. Combine that with the wonderful world-building of Pern and her unforgettable characters and you get books that shaped a generation and more of fantasy writers. She was a true original.' **Cassandra Clare**

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'Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders of Pern series was the formative series for me growing up . . . The world building opened my eyes to what fantasy could be; the characters introduced me to women in roles of power; and the romances left my young heart flutter. No series has ever captured my imagination so completely as Pern did.'

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'I grew up reading the Dragonriders of Pern, and they sparked a lifelong love of dragons and dragonriders . . . Nowadays, the characters are different, as my own dragon stories have been written and published, but echoes of Pern can be found in every one of them.' **Julie Kagawa**

'Pern was the birthplace of fantasy in the hearts of so many readers of my generation . . . These books were trailblazers, and the land they charted remains as gripping and innovative today as it was upon its discovery. We owe a lot to Pern.' **Seanan McGuire**

'Pern is where dragon riding was conceived, and fifty years later, Anne McCaffrey's epic tale remains a masterpiece of adventure, intrigue, and romance!' **Danielle L. Jensen**

'Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels are truly foundational books. The seeds of every dragonrider story are here, if not of every take on magical bonding. They carried me away as a young reader, and I hope they'll do so for new readers now.' **Naomi Novik**

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sequences are recommended:

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THE WHITE DRAGON  
DRAGONSONG  
DRAGONSINGER: HARPER OF PERN  
DRAGONDRUMS  
MORETA: DRAGONLADY OF PERN  
NERILKA'S STORY & THE COELURA  
DRAGONSDAWN  
THE RENEGADES OF PERN  
ALL THE WEYRS OF PERN  
THE CHRONICLES OF PERN: FIRST FALL  
THE DOLPHINS OF PERN  
RED STAR RISING: THE SECOND CHRONICLES OF PERN  
(published in the US as DRAGONSEYE)  
THE MASTERHARPER OF PERN  
THE SKIES OF PERN  
*and with Todd McCaffrey:*  
DRAGON'S KIN  
DRAGON'S FIRE  
DRAGON HARPER  
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Anne McCaffrey was one of the world's leading science fiction writers, and the first female science fiction writer to achieve *New York Times* bestseller status. She won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards as well as the Margaret A. Edwards' Lifetime Literary Achievement Award. She was deeply honoured to have been made a Grand Master of Science Fiction in 2005, and was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2006. Born and raised in the US and of Irish extraction, she moved to Ireland in 1970 where she lived in the 'Garden of Ireland', County Wicklow, until her death in 2011 at the age of eighty-five. She is the creator of the Dragonriders of Pern® series.

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# DRAGONFLIGHT

Anne McCaffrey



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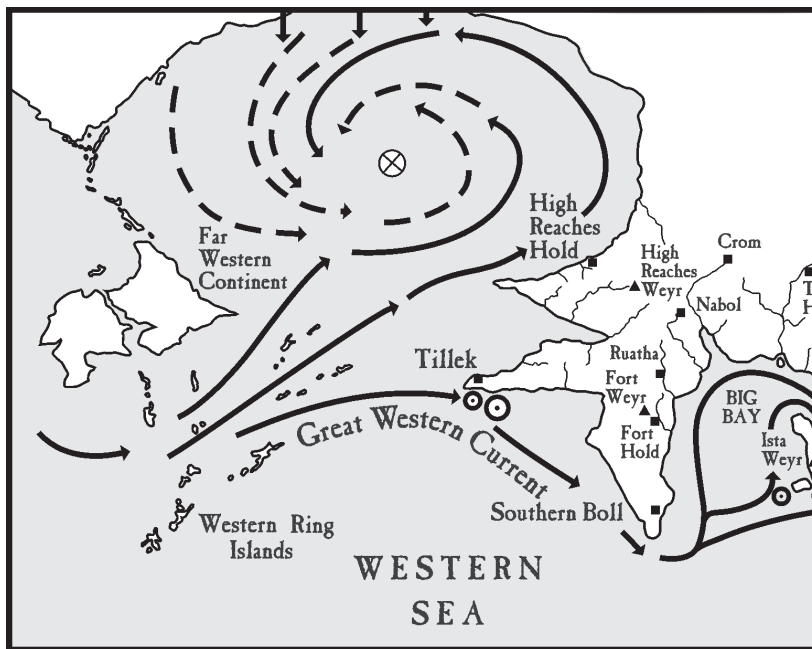
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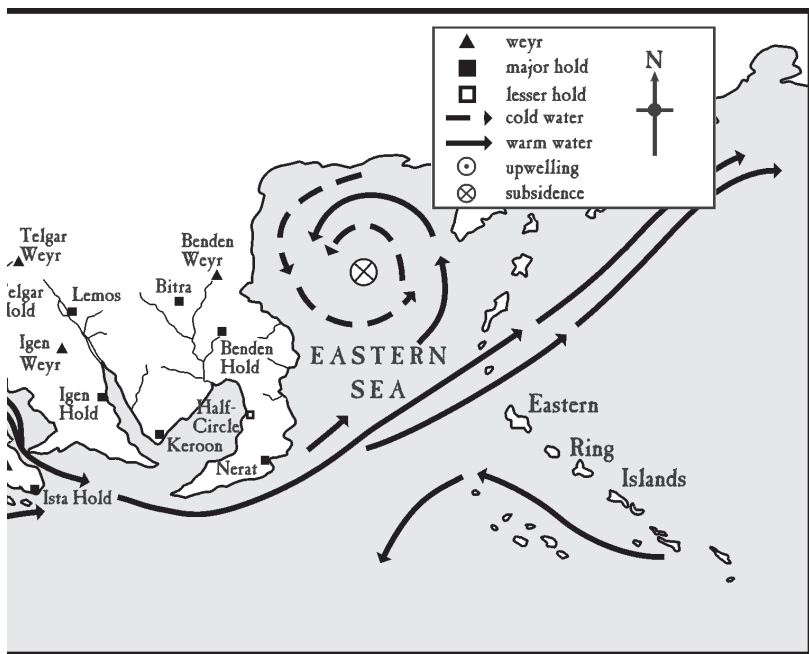
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## *Dedicatory Note*

Dear God,

Yes, there is a Virginia who helped me create this planet and the marvels thereon. And for whom I thank you.

AMJ

## *Introduction*

When is a legend legend? Why is a myth a myth? How old and disused must a fact be for it to be relegated to the category 'Fairy-tale'? And why do certain facts remain incontrovertible while others lose their validity to assume a shabby, unstable character?

Rukbat, in the Sagittarian sector, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets, and one stray it had attracted and held in recent millennia. Its third planet was enveloped by air man could breathe, boasted water he could drink, and possessed a gravity that permitted man to walk confidently erect. Men discovered it and promptly colonized it. They did that to every habitable planet, and then – whether callously or through collapse of empire, the colonists never discovered and eventually forgot to ask – left the colonies to fend for themselves.

When men first settled on Rukbat's third world and named it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger-planet, swinging around its adopted primary in a wildly erratic elliptical orbit. Within a few generations they had forgotten its existence. The desperate path the wanderer pursued brought it close to its stepsister every two hundred (Terran) years at perihelion.

When the aspects were harmonious and the conjunction with its sister planet close enough, as it often was, the indigenous life of the wanderer sought to

bridge the space gap to the more temperate and hospitable planet.

It was during the frantic struggle to combat this menace dropping through Pern's skies like silver threads that Pern's tenuous contact with the mother planet was broken. Recollections of Earth receded further from Pernese history with each successive generation until memory of their origins degenerated past legend or myth, into oblivion.

To forestall the incursions of the dreadful Threads, the Pernese, with the ingenuity of their forgotten Terran forebears, developed a highly specialized variety of a life-form indigenous to their adopted planet. Such humans as had a high empathy rating and some innate telepathic ability were trained to use and preserve this unusual animal whose ability to teleport was of great value in the fierce struggle to keep Pern bare of Threads.

The winged, tailed, and fiery-breathed dragons (named for the Earth legend they resembled), their dragonmen, a breed apart, and the menace they battled, created a whole new group of legends and myths.

Once relieved of imminent danger, Pern settled into a more comfortable way of life. The descendants of heroes fell into disfavor, as the legends fell into disrepute.

Part I  
Weyr Search

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Drummer, beat, and piper, blow,  
Harper, strike, and soldier, go.  
Free the flame and sear the grasses  
Till the dawning Red Star passes.

Lessa woke, cold. Cold with more than the chill of the everlastingly clammy stone walls. Cold with the prescience of a danger stronger than the one ten full Turns ago that had then sent her, whimpering with terror, to hide in the watch-wher's odorous lair.

Rigid with concentration, Lessa lay in the straw of the redolent cheeseroom she shared as sleeping quarters with the other kitchen drudges. There was an urgency in the ominous portent unlike any other forewarning. She touched the awareness of the watch-wher, slithering on its rounds in the courtyard. It circled at the choke limit of its chain. It was restless, but oblivious to anything unusual in the predawn darkness.

Lessa curled into a tight knot of bones, hugging herself to ease the strain across her tense shoulders. Then, forcing herself to relax, muscle by muscle, joint by joint, she tried to feel what subtle menace it might be that could rouse her, yet not distress the sensitive watch-wher.

The danger was definitely not within the walls of Ruath Hold. Nor approaching the paved perimeter without the Hold where relentless grass had forced new growth through the ancient mortar, green witness to the deterioration of the once stone-clean Hold. The danger was not advancing up the now little-used causeway from the valley, nor lurking in

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the craftsmen's stony holdings at the foot of the Hold's cliff. It did not scent the wind that blew from Tillek's cold shores. But still it twanged sharply through her senses, vibrating every nerve in Lessa's slender frame. Fully roused, she sought to identify it before the prescient mood dissolved. She cast outward, toward the Pass, farther than she had ever pressed. Whatever threatened was not in Ruatha . . . yet. Nor did it have a familiar flavor. It was not, then, Fax.

Lessa had been cautiously pleased that Fax had not shown himself at Ruath Hold in three full Turns. The apathy of the craftsmen, the decaying farmholds, even the green-etched stones of the Hold infuriated Fax, self-styled Lord of the High Reaches, to the point where he preferred to forget the reason he had subjugated the once proud and profitable Hold.

Relentlessly compelled to identify this oppressing menace, Lessa groped in the straw for her sandals. She rose, mechanically brushing straw from matted hair, which she then twisted quickly into a rude knot at her neck.

She picked her way among the sleeping drudges, huddled together for warmth, and glided up the worn steps to the kitchen proper. The cook and his assistant lay on the long table before the great hearth, wide backs to the warmth of the banked fire, discordantly snoring. Lessa slipped across the cavernous kitchen to the stable-yard door. She opened the door just enough to permit her slight body to pass. The cobbles of the yard were icy through the thin soles of her sandals, and she shivered as the predawn air penetrated her patched garment.

The watch-wher slithered across the yard to greet her, pleading, as it always did, for release. Comfort-

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ingly, she fondled the creases of the sharp-tipped ears as it matched her stride. Glancing fondly down at the awesome head, she promised it a good rub presently. It crouched, groaning, at the end of its chain as she continued to the grooved steps that led to the rampart over the Hold's massive gate. Atop the tower, Lessa stared toward the east where the stony breasts of the Pass rose in black relief against the gathering day.

Indecisively she swung to her left, for the sense of danger issued from that direction as well. She glanced upward, her eyes drawn to the red star that had recently begun to dominate the dawn sky. As she stared, the star radiated a final ruby pulsation before its magnificence was lost in the brightness of Pern's rising sun. Incoherent fragments of tales and ballads about the dawn appearance of the red star flashed through her mind, too quickly to make sense. Moreover, her instinct told her that, though danger might come from the northeast, too, there was a greater peril to contend with from due east. Straining her eyes as if vision would bridge the gap between peril and person, she stared intently eastward. The watch-wher's thin, whistled question reached her just as the prescience waned.

Lessa sighed. She had found no answer in the dawn, only discrepant portents. She must wait. The warning had come and she had accepted it. She was used to waiting. Perversity, endurance, and guile were her other weapons, loaded with the inexhaustible patience of vengeful dedication.

Dawnlight illumined the tumbled landscape, the unplowed fields in the valley below. Dawnlight fell on twisted orchards, where the sparse herds of milchbeasts hunted stray blades of spring grass. Grass

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in Ruatha, Lessa mused, grew where it should not, died where it should flourish. Lessa could hardly remember now how Ruatha Valley had once looked, sweetly happy, amply productive. Before Fax came. An odd brooding smile curved lips unused to such exercise. Fax realized no profit from his conquest of Ruatha . . . nor would he while she, Lessa, lived. And he had not the slightest suspicion of the source of this undoing.

Or had he, Lessa wondered, her mind still reverberating from the savage prescience of danger. West lay Fax's ancestral and only legitimate Hold. Northeast lay little but bare and stony mountains and the Weyr that protected Pern.

Lessa stretched, arching her back, inhaling the sweet, untainted wind of morning.

A cock crowed in the stable yard. Lessa whirled, her face alert, eyes darting around the outer Hold lest she be observed in such an uncharacteristic pose. She unbound her hair, letting the rank mass fall about her face concealingly. Her body drooped into the sloppy posture she affected. Quickly she thudded down the stairs, crossing to the watch-wher. It cried piteously, its great eyes blinking against the growing daylight. Oblivious to the stench of its rank breath, she hugged the scaly head to her, scratching its ears and eye ridges. The watch-wher was ecstatic with pleasure, its long body trembling, its clipped wings rustling. It alone knew who she was or cared. And it was the only creature in all Pern she had trusted since the dawn she had blindly sought refuge in its dark, stinking lair to escape the thirsty swords that had drunk so deeply of Ruathan blood.

Slowly she rose, cautioning it to remember to be as vicious to her as to all, should anyone be

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near. It promised to obey her, swaying back and forth to emphasize its reluctance.

The first rays of the sun glanced over the Hold's outer wall, and, crying out, the watch-wher darted into its dark nest. Lessa crept swiftly back to the kitchen and into the cheeseroom.

From the Weyr and from the Bowl,  
Bronze and brown and blue and green,  
Rise the dragonmen of Pern,  
Aloft, on wing, seen, then unseen.

F'lar, on bronze Mnementh's great neck, appeared first in the skies above the chief Hold of Fax, so-called Lord of the High Reaches. Behind him, in proper wedge formation, the wingmen came into sight. F'lar checked the formation automatically; it was as precise as on the moment of their entry to *between*.

As Mnementh curved in an arc that would bring them to the perimeter of the Hold, consonant with the friendly nature of this visitation, F'lar surveyed with mounting aversion the disrepair of the ridge defenses. The firestone pits were empty, and the rock-cut gutters radiating from the pits were green-tinged with a mossy growth.

Was there even one Lord in Pern who maintained his Hold rocky in observance of the ancient Laws? F'lar's lips tightened to a thinner line. When this Search was over and the Impression made, there would have to be a solemn, punitive Council held at the Weyr. And by the golden shell of the queen, he, F'lar, meant to be its moderator. He would replace lethargy with industry. He would scour the green and dangerous scum from the heights of Pern, the grass blades from its stoneworks. No verdant skirt would be condoned in any farmhold. And the tithings that had been so miserly, so grudgingly presented,

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would, under pain of firestoning, flow with decent generosity into the Dragonweyr.

Mnementh rumbled approvingly as he vaned his pinions to land lightly on the grass-etched flagstones of Fax's Hold. The bronze dragon furled his great wings, and F'lar heard the warning claxon in the Hold's Great Tower. Mnementh dropped to his knees as F'lar indicated he wished to dismount. The bronze rider stood by Mnementh's huge wedge-shaped head, politely awaiting the arrival of the Hold Lord. F'lar idly gazed down the valley, hazy with warm spring sunlight. He ignored the furtive heads that peered at the dragonmen from the parapet slits and the cliff windows. F'lar did not turn as the rush of air past him announced the arrival of the rest of the wing. He knew, however, when F'nor, the brown rider who was coincidentally his half brother, took the customary position on his left, a dragon length to the rear. From the corner of his eye, F'lar glimpsed F'nor twisting to death with his boot heel the grass that crowded up between the stones.

An order, muffled to an intense whisper, issued from within the great Court, beyond the open gates. Almost immediately a group of men marched into sight, led by a heavy-set man of medium height.

Mnementh arched his neck, angling his head so that his chin rested on the ground. Mnementh's many-faceted eyes, on a level with F'lar's head, fastened with disconcerting interest on the approaching party. The dragons could never understand why they generated such abject fear in common folk. At only one point in his life span would a dragon attack a human, and that could be excused on the grounds of simple ignorance. F'lar could not explain to the dragon the politics behind the necessity of inspiring awe in

the holders, Lord and craftsman alike. He could only observe that the fear and apprehension showing in the faces of the advancing squad which troubled Mnementh was oddly pleasing to him, F'lar.

'Welcome, bronze rider, to the Hold of Fax, Lord of the High Reaches. He is at your service,' and the man made an adequately respectful salute.

The use of the third person pronoun could be construed by the meticulous to be a veiled insult. This fit in with the information F'lar had on Fax, so he ignored it. His information was also correct in describing Fax as a greedy man. It showed in the restless eyes that flicked at every detail of F'lar's clothing, at the slight frown when the intricately etched sword hilt was noticed.

F'lar noticed, in his own turn, the several rich rings that flashed on Fax's left hand. The overlord's right hand remained slightly cocked after the habit of the professional swordsman. His tunic, of rich fabric, was stained and none too fresh. The man's feet, in heavy wher-hide boots, were solidly planted, weight balanced forward on his toes. A man to be treated cautiously, F'lar decided, as one should the conqueror of five neighboring Holds. Such greedy audacity was in itself a revelation. Fax had married into a sixth . . . and had legally inherited, however unusual the circumstances, the seventh. He was a lecherous man by reputation. Within these seven Holds, F'lar anticipated a profitable Search. Let R'gul go southerly to pursue Search among the indolent if lovely women there. The Weyr needed a strong woman this time; Jora had been worse than useless with Nemorth. Adversity, uncertainty: those were the conditions that bred the qualities F'lar wanted in a Weyrwoman.

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‘We ride in Search,’ F’lar drawled softly, ‘and request the hospitality of your Hold, Lord Fax.’

Fax’s eyes widened imperceptibly at mention of a Search.

‘I had heard Jora was dead,’ Fax replied, dropping the third person abruptly as if F’lar had passed some sort of test by ignoring it. ‘So Nemorth has laid a queen, hmmm?’ he continued, his eyes darting across the rank of the wing, noting the disciplined stance of the riders, the healthy color of the dragons.

F’lar did not dignify the obvious with an answer.

‘And, my Lord—’ Fax hesitated, expectantly inclining his head slightly toward the dragonman.

For a pulse beat, F’lar wondered if the man was deliberately provoking him with such subtle insults. The name of the bronze riders should be as well-known throughout Pern as the name of the dragon queen and her Weyrwoman. F’lar kept his face composed, his eyes on Fax’s.

Leisurely, with the proper touch of arrogance, F’nor stepped forward, stopping slightly behind Mnementh’s head, one hand negligently touching the jaw hinge of the huge beast.

‘The bronze rider of Mnementh, Lord F’lar, will require quarters for himself. I, F’nor, brown rider, prefer to be lodged with the wingmen. We are, in number, twelve.’

F’lar liked that touch of F’nor’s, totting up the wing strength, as if Fax were incapable of counting. F’nor had phrased it so adroitly as to make it impossible for Fax to protest the return insult.

‘Lord F’lar,’ Fax said through teeth fixed in a smile, ‘the High Reaches are honored with your Search.’

‘It will be to the credit of the High Reaches,’

F'lar replied smoothly, 'if one of its own supplies the Weyr.'

'To our everlasting credit,' Fax replied as suavely. 'In the old days many notable Weyrwomen came from my Holds.'

'Your Holds?' asked F'lar, politely smiling as he emphasized the plural. 'Ah, yes, you are now overlord of Ruatha, are you not? There have been many from that Hold.'

A strange, tense look crossed Fax's face, quickly supplanted by a determinedly affable grin. Fax stepped aside, gesturing F'lar to enter the Hold.

Fax's troop leader barked a hasty order, and the men formed two lines, their metal-edged boots flicking sparks from the stones.

At unspoken orders, all the dragons rose with a great churning of air and dust. F'lar strode nonchalantly past the welcoming files. The men were rolling their eyes in alarm as the beasts glided above to the inner courts. Someone on the high Tower uttered a frightened yelp as Mnementh took his position on that vantage point. His great wings drove phosphoric-scented air across the inner court as he maneuvered his great frame on to the inadequate landing space.

Outwardly oblivious to the consternation, fear, and awe the dragons inspired, F'lar was secretly amused and rather pleased by the effect. Lords of the Holds needed this reminder that they still must deal with dragons, not just with riders, who were men, mortal and murderable. The ancient respect for dragonmen as well as dragonkind must be reinstilled in modern breasts.

'The Hold has just risen from table, Lord F'lar, if . . .' Fax suggested. His voice trailed off at F'lar's smiling refusal.

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‘Convey my duty to your lady, Lord Fax,’ F’lar rejoined, noticing with inward satisfaction the tightening of Fax’s jaw muscles at the ceremonial request.

F’lar was enjoying himself thoroughly. He had not yet been born on the occasion of the last Search, the one that ill-fatedly provided the incompetent Jora. But he had studied the accounts of previous Searches in the Old Records that had included subtle ways to confound those Lords who preferred to keep their ladies sequestered when the dragonmen rode. For Fax to refuse F’lar the opportunity to pay his duty would have been tantamount to a major insult, discharged only in mortal combat.

‘You would prefer to see your quarters first?’ Fax countered.

F’lar flicked an imaginary speck from his soft wher-hide sleeve and shook his head.

‘Duty first,’ he said with a rueful shrug.

‘Of course,’ Fax all but snapped and strode smartly ahead, his heels pounding out the anger he could not express otherwise.

F’lar and F’nor followed at a slower pace through the double-doored entry with its great metal panels, into the Great Hall, carved into the cliffside. The U-shaped table was being cleared by nervous servitors, who rattled and dropped tableware as the two dragonmen entered. Fax had already reached the far end of the Hall and stood impatiently at the open slab door, the only access to the inner Hold which, like all such Holds, burrowed deep into stone, the refuge of all in time of peril.

‘They eat not badly,’ F’nor remarked casually to F’lar, appraising the remnants still on the table.

‘Better than the Weyr, it would seem,’ F’lar replied

dryly, covering his speech with his hand as he saw two drudges staggering under the weight of a tray that bore a half-eaten carcass.

‘Young and tender,’ F’nor said in a bitter undertone, ‘from the look of it. While the stringy, barren beasts are delivered up to us.’

‘Naturally.’

‘A pleasantly favored Hall,’ F’lar said amiably as they reached Fax. Then, seeing Fax impatient to continue, F’lar deliberately turned back to the banner-hung Hall. He pointed out to F’nor the deeply set slit windows, heavy bronze shutters open to the bright noonday sky. ‘Facing east, too, as they ought. That new Hall at Telgar Hold actually faces south, I’m told. Tell me, Lord Fax, do you adhere to the old practises and mount a dawn guard?’

Fax frowned, trying to parse F’lar’s meaning.

‘There is always a guard at the Tower.’

‘An easterly guard?’

Fax’s eyes jerked toward the windows, then back, sliding across F’lar’s face to F’nor and back again to the windows.

‘There are always guards,’ he answered sharply, ‘on all the approaches.’

‘Oh, just the approaches,’ and F’lar turned to F’nor and nodded wisely.

‘Where else?’ demanded Fax, concerned, glancing from one dragonman to the other.

‘I must ask that of your harper. You do keep a trained harper in your Hold?’

‘Of course. I have several trained harpers.’ Fax jerked his shoulders straighter.

F’lar affected not to understand.

‘Lord Fax is the overlord of six other Holds,’ F’nor reminded his wingleader.

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‘Of course,’ F’lar assented, with exactly the same inflection Fax had used a moment before.

The mimicry did not go unnoticed by Fax, but as he was unable to construe deliberate insult out of an innocent affirmative, he stalked into the glow-lit corridors. The dragonmen followed.

‘It is good to see one Holder keeping so many ancient customs,’ F’lar said to F’nor approvingly for Fax’s benefit as they passed into the inner Hold. ‘There are many who have abandoned the safety of solid rock and enlarged their outer Holds to dangerous proportions. I can’t condone the risk myself.’

‘Their risk, Lord F’lar. Another’s gain,’ Fax snorted derisively, slowing to a normal strut.

‘Gain? How so?’

‘Any outer Hold is easily penetrated, bronze rider, with trained forces, experienced leadership, and well-considered strategy.’

The man was not a braggart, F’lar decided. Nor, in these peaceful days, did he fail to mount Tower guards. However, he kept within his Hold, not out of obedience to ancient Laws, but through prudence. He kept harpers for ostentation rather than because tradition required it. But he allowed the pits to decay; he permitted grass to grow. He accorded dragonmen the barest civility on one hand and offered veiled insult on the other. A man to be watched.

The women’s quarters in Fax’s Hold had been moved from the traditional innermost corridors to those at the cliff-face. Sunlight poured down from the three double-shuttered deep-casement windows in the outside wall. F’lar noted that the bronze hinges were well oiled. The sills were the regulation spear-length; Fax had not given in to the recent practise of diminishing the protective wall

The chamber was richly hung with appropriately gentle scenes of women occupied in all manner of feminine tasks. Doors gave off the main chamber on both sides into smaller sleeping alcoves, and from these, at Fax's bidding, his women hesitantly emerged. Fax sternly gestured to a blue-gowned woman, her hair white-streaked, her face lined with disappointments and bitterness, her body swollen with pregnancy. She advanced awkwardly, stopping several feet from her lord. From her attitude, F'lar deduced that she came no closer to Fax than was absolutely necessary.

'The Lady of Crom, mother of my heirs,' Fax said without pride or cordiality.

'My Lady—' F'lar hesitated, waiting for her name to be supplied.

She glanced warily at her lord.

'Gemma,' Fax snapped curtly.

F'lar bowed deeply. 'My Lady Gemma, the Weyr is on Search and requests the hospitality of the Hold.'

'My Lord F'lar,' the Lady Gemma replied in a low voice, 'you are most welcome.'

F'lar did not miss the slight slur on the adverb or the fact that Gemma had no trouble naming him. His smile was warmer than courtesy demanded, warm with gratitude and sympathy. Judging by the number of women in these quarters, Fax bedded well and frequently. There might be one or two Lady Gemma could bid farewell without regret.

Fax went through the introductions, mumbling names until he realized this strategy was not going to work. F'lar would politely beg the lady's name again. F'nor, his smile brightening as he took heed which ladies Fax preferred to keep anonymous, lounged indolently by the doorway. F'lar would compare notes with him later, although on cursory examination

there was none here worthy of the Search. Fax preferred his women plump and small. There wasn't a saucy one in the lot. If there once had been, the spirit had been beaten out of them. Fax, no doubt, was stud, not lover. Some of the covey had not all winter long made much use of water, judging from the amount of sweet oil gone rancid in their hair. Of them all, if these were all, the Lady Gemma was the only willful one, and she was too old.

The amenities over, Fax ushered his unwelcome guests outside. F'nor was excused by his wingleader to join the other dragonmen. Fax peremptorily led the way to the quarters he had assigned the bronze rider.

The chamber was on a lower level than the women's suite and was certainly adequate to the dignity of its occupant. The many-colored hangings were crowded with bloody battles, individual swordplay, bright-hued dragons in flight, firestones burning on the ridges, and all that Pern's scarlet-stained history offered.

'A pleasant room,' F'lar acknowledged, stripping off gloves and wher-hide tunic, throwing them carelessly to the table. 'I shall see to my men and the beasts. The dragons have all been fed recently,' he commented, pointing up Fax's omission in not inquiring. 'I request liberty to wander through the crafthold.'

Fax sourly granted what was traditionally a dragonman's privilege.

'I shall not further disrupt your routine, Lord Fax, for you must have many demands on you, with seven Holds to supervise.' F'lar inclined his body slightly to the overlord, turning away as a gesture of dismissal. He could imagine the infuriated expression on Fax's face and listened to the stamping retreat. He waited

long enough to be sure Fax was out of the corridor and then briskly retraced his steps up to the Great Hall.

Bustling drudges paused in setting up additional trestle tables to eye the dragonman. He nodded pleasantly to them, looking to see if one of these females might possibly have the stuff of which Weyr-women are made. Overworked, underfed, scarred by lash and disease, they were just what they were – drudges, fit only for hard, menial labor.

F'nor and the men had settled themselves in a hastily vacated barrackroom. The dragons were perched comfortably on the rocky ridges above the Hold. They had so arranged themselves that every segment of the wide valley fell under their scrutiny. All had been fed before leaving the Weyr, and each rider kept his dragon in light but alert charge. There were to be no incidents on a Search.

As a group, the dragonmen rose at F'lar's entrance.

'No tricks, no troubles, but look around closely,' he said laconically. 'Return by sundown with the names of any likely prospects.' He caught F'nor's grin, remembering how Fax had slurred over some names. 'Descriptions are in order and craft affiliation.'

The men nodded, their eyes glinting with understanding. They were flatteringly confident of a successful Search even as F'lar's doubts grew now that he had seen all of Fax's women. By all logic, the pick of the High Reaches should be in Fax's chief Hold, but they were not. Still, there were many large cratholds, not to mention the six other High Holds to visit. All the same . . .

In unspoken accord, F'lar and F'nor left the

barracks. The men would follow, unobtrusively, in pairs or singly, to reconnoiter the crafthold and the nearer farmholds. The men were as overtly eager to be abroad as F'lar was privately. There had been a time when dragonmen were frequent and favored guests in all the great Holds throughout Pern, from southern Nerat to high Tillek. This pleasant custom, too, had died along with other observances, evidence of the low regard in which the Weyr was presently held. F'lar vowed to correct this.

He forced himself to trace in memory the insidious changes. The Records, which each Weyrwoman kept, were proof of the gradual but perceptible decline, traceable through the past two hundred full Turns. Knowing the facts did not alleviate the condition. And F'lar was of that scant handful in the Weyr itself who did credit Records and ballad alike. The situation might shortly reverse itself radically if the old tales were to be believed.

There was a reason, an explanation, a purpose, F'lar felt for every one of the Weyr Laws from First Impression to the Firestones, from the grass-free heights to ridge-running gutters. For elements as minor as controlling the appetite of a dragon to limiting the inhabitants of the Weyr. Although why the other five Weyrns had been abandoned F'lar did not know. Idly he wondered if there were Records, dusty and crumbling, lodged in the disused Weyrns. He must contrive to check when next his wings flew patrol. Certainly there was no explanation in Benden Weyr.

'There is industry but no enthusiasm,' F'nor was saying, drawing F'lar's attention back to their tour of the crafthold.

They had descended the guttered ramp from

the Hold into the craftholds proper, the broad roadway lined with cottages up to the imposing stone craftalls. Silently F'lar noted moss-clogged gutters on the roofs, the vines clasping the walls. It was painful for one of his calling to witness the flagrant disregard of simple safety precautions. Growing things were forbidden near the habitations of mankind.

'News travels fast,' F'nor chuckled, nodding at a hurrying craftsman, in the smock of a baker, who gave them a mumbled good-day. 'Not a female in sight.'

His observation was accurate. Women should be abroad at this hour, bringing in supplies from the store-houses, washing in the river on such a bright warm day, or going out to the farmholds to help with planting. Not a gowned figure in sight.

'We used to be preferred mates,' F'nor remarked caustically.

'We'll visit the Clothmen's Hall first. If my memory serves me . . .'

'As it always does . . .'

F'nor interjected wryly. He took no advantage of their blood relationship, but he was more at ease with the bronze rider than most of the dragonmen, the other bronze riders included. F'lar was reserved in a close-knit society of easy equality. He flew a tightly disciplined wing, but men maneuvered to serve under him. His wing always excelled in the Games. None ever floundered in *between* to disappear forever, and no beast in his wing sickened, leaving a man in dragonless exile from the Weyr, a part of him numb forever.

'L'tol came this way and settled in one of the High Reaches,' F'lar continued.

'L'tol?'

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‘Yes, a green rider from S’lel’s wing. You remember.’

An ill-timed swerve during the Spring Games had brought L’tol and his beast into the full blast of a phosphine emission from S’lel’s bronze Tuenth. L’tol had been thrown from his beast’s neck as the dragon tried to evade the blast. Another wingmate had swooped to catch the rider, but the green dragon, his left wing crisped, his body scorched, had died of shock and phosphine poisoning.

‘L’tol would aid our Search,’ F’nor agreed as the two dragonmen walked up to the bronze doors of the Clothmen’s Hall. They paused on the threshold, adjusting their eyes to the dimmer light within. Glows punctuated the wall recesses and hung in clusters above the larger looms where the finer tapestries and fabrics were woven by master craftsmen. The pervading mood was one of quiet, purposeful industry.

Before their eyes had adapted, however, a figure glided to them, muttering a polite if curt request for them to follow him.

They were led to the right of the entrance, to a small office, curtained from the main hall. Their guide turned to them, his face visible in the wallglows. There was that air about him that marked him indefinitely as a dragonman. But his face was lined deeply, one side seamed with old burn marks. His eyes, sick with a hungry yearning, dominated his face. He blinked constantly.

‘I am now Lytol,’ he said in harsh voice.

F’lar nodded acknowledgment.

‘You would be F’lar,’ Lytol said, ‘and you F’nor. You both have the look of your sire.’

F’lar nodded again.

Lytol swallowed convulsively, the muscles in his

face twitching as the presence of dragonmen revived his awareness of exile. He essayed a smile.

‘Dragons in the sky! The news spread faster than Threads.’

‘Nemorth has laid a female.’

‘And Jora dead?’ Lytol asked concernedly, his face cleared of its nervous movement for a second. ‘Hath flew her?’

F’lar nodded.

Lytol grimaced bitterly. ‘R’gul again, huh?’ He stared off in the middle distance, his eyelids quiet but the muscles along his jaw taking up the constant movement. ‘You have the High Reaches? All of them?’ Lytol asked, turning back to the dragonman, a slight emphasis on ‘all’.

F’lar gave an affirmative nod again.

‘You’ve seen the women.’ Lytol’s disgust showed through the words. It was a statement, not a question, for he hurried on. ‘Well, there are no better in all the High Reaches.’ His tone expressed utmost disdain. He eased himself down to the heavy table that half-filled one corner of the small room. His hands were clenched so tightly around the wide belt that secured the loose tunic to his body that the heavy leather was doubled.

‘You would almost expect the opposite, wouldn’t you?’ Lytol continued. He was talking too much and too fast. It would have been insultingly rude in another, lesser man. It was the terrible loneliness of the man’s exile from the Weyr that drove him to garrulity. Lytol skimmed the surfaces with hurried questions he himself answered, rather than dip once into matters too tender to be touched – such as his insatiable need for those of his kind. Yet he was giving the dragonmen exactly the information