

DRAGONSEYE

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ANNE McCAFFREY



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Anne McCaffrey



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The Finger points
To an Eye blood-red.
Alert the Weyrs
To sear the Thread.
from Dragonflight

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Dedication

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Prologue

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 planet and called it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger planet swinging around its adopted primary in a wildly erratic orbit—until the desperate path of the wanderer brought it close to its stepsister at perihelion.

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

The initial losses the colonists suffered from the voracious mycorrhizoid organism that fed on them were staggering. They had divorced themselves from their home planet, Earth, and had already cannibalized the colony ships, the *Yokohama*, the *Bahrain*, and the *Buenos Aires*, so they would have to improvise with what they had. Their first need was an aerial defense against the Thread, as they named this menace. Using highly sophisticated bioengineering techniques, they developed a specialized variant of a Pernese life form which had two unusual, and useful, characteristics: the so-called fire-lizards could digest a phosphine-bearing rock in one of their two stomachs and, belching forth the resultant gas, create a fiery breath which reduced Thread to harmless char; and they were able both to teleport and to share an empathy that allowed limited understanding with humans. The bioengineered “dragons”—so called because they resembled the Earth's mythical creatures—were paired at hatching with an empathic human, forming a symbiotic relationship of unusual depth and mutual respect.

The colonists moved to the Northern Continent to seek shelter from the insidious Thread in the cave systems, new homes that they called “Holds.” The dragons and their riders came, too, housing themselves in old volcanic craters: Weyrs.

The First Pass of Thread lasted nearly fifty years, and what scientific information the colonists were able to gather indicated that Thread would be a cyclic problem, occurring every 250 years as the path of the wanderer once again approached Pern.

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

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

This is what happened 257 years later.

Early Autumn at Fort's Gather

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

The skies above Fort Hold, the oldest of the human settlements on the Northern Continent, were brilliantly clear on this early autumn day: that special sort of clarity and depth of color that their ancestors in the New England sector of the North American continent would have instantly identified. The sun gleamed on healthy dragon hides and intensified the golden queen dragons who flew at the lowest level, sometimes seeming to touch the tops of the nearby mountains as they circled Fort. It was a sight to behold, and always brought a thrill of pride to those who watched the display: with one or two exceptions.

"Well, that's done for now," said Chalkin, Lord Holder of Bitra, the first to lower his eyes, though the fly-past was not yet over.

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

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

The dragons were just one more of the settlers' weird experiments, altering an avian species to take the place of the aircraft they had once had. He'd seen the airsled that the Telgar Foundry treasured as an exhibit: a vehicle much more convenient to fly in than aboard a dragon, where one had to endure the black-cold of teleportation. He shuddered. He had no liking for *that* sort of ultimate cold, even if it avoided the fatigue of overland travel. Surely all those records the College was mustering folks to copy, there were other materials that could be substituted for whatever the ancients had used to power the vehicles. Why hadn't some bright lad found the answer before the last of the airsleds deteriorated completely? Why didn't the brainy ones develop a new type of airworthy vessel? A vessel that didn't expect to be thanked for doing its duty!

He glanced down at the wide roadway where the gather tables and stalls were set up. He were empty: even his gamesters were watching the sight. He'd have a word with them later. They should have been able to keep some customers at the various games of chance, even with the dragonrider display. Surely everyone had seen that by now. Still, the races had gone well and, with every one of the wager-takers *his* operators, he'd've made a tidy profit from his percentage of the bets.

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

The Bitran Holder mentally ran through possible excuses for leaving right after dinner: one plausible enough to be accepted by the others. This close to putative Thread-fall, he had to be careful of alienating the wrong people. If he left *before* the dinner ... but then he wouldn't have a chance to sample this champagne-style wine, and he was determined to. He'd taken the trouble to go to Hegmon's Benden vineyard, with the clear intention of buying cases of the vintage. But Hegmon had refused to see him. Oh, his eldest son had been apologetic—something about a critical time in the process requiring Hegmon's presence in the caverns—but the upshot was that Chalkin couldn't even get his name put down on the purchase list for the sparkling wine. Since Benden Weyr was likely to get the lion's share of it, Chalkin had to keep in good with the Benden Weyrleaders so that, at the Hatching which was due to occur in another few weeks, he'd be invited and could drink as much of *their* allotment of wines as he could. More than one way to skin a wherry!

He paused to twirl one of the bottles in its ice nest. Almost perfectly chilled. Riders *must* have brought the ice in from the High Reaches for Paulin. Whenever he needed some, he couldn't find a rider willing to do him, Bitra's Lord Holder, such a simple service. Humph. But of course, certain Bloodlines always got preferential treatment. Rank didn't mean as much as it should, that was certain!

He was surreptitiously inspecting the label of a bottle when there was a sudden, startled intake of fearful breaths from the watchers, instantly followed by a wild cheer. Looking up, he saw he just missed some sort of dangerous maneuver ... Ah, yes, they'd done another midair rescue. He saw a bronze dragon veering from under a blue who was miming a wounded wing: both riders now safely aboard the bronze's neck. Quite likely that Telgar Weyrleader who was such a daredevil.

Cheers were now punctuated with applause and some banging of drums from the bandsmen on their podium down on the wide courtyard that spread out from the steps to the Hold down to the two right-angled annexes. Once again both the infirmary and the Teachers' College were being enlarged, if the scaffolding was a reliable indication. Chalkin snorted, for the

buildings were being extended outward, wide open to any Thread that was purported supposed to start falling again. They really ought to be consistent! Of course, tunneling in the cliff would take more time than building outside. But too many folks preached one thing and practiced another.

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

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

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

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

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

"Knew you'd catch me," he bellowed back. "Too many people watching to let me swing and give Weyr secrets away!" Then P'tero waved encouragingly at Ormonth, who was not flying anxiously at Charanth's wing tip. Though unseen from the ground, the safety-tethers still linked the blue rider to his dragon. P'tero unbuckled his end of the straps and they dangled free.

"Lucky you that *I* was looking up just then!" K'vin said so harshly that the brash lad flushed to his ear tips. "Look at the fright you've given Ormonth!" And he gestured toward the blue rider, his hide flushing in mottled spots from his recent scare.

P'tero yelled something else, which K'vin didn't catch, so he leaned forward, putting his right ear nearer the blue rider's mouth.

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

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

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

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

Spilling off his blue before K'vin had passed the word was taking a totally unnecessary risk. Fortunately, K'vin had seen P'tero dive. His heart had lurched in his chest, even if he knew P'tero was equipped with the especially heavy and long harness as a fail-safe. Even if he and Charanth had not accurately judged the midair rescue, those long straps would have saved the blue rider from falling to his death. Today's maneuver had been precipitous instead of well-executed. And, if Charanth had not been as adept on the wing, P'tero might be nursing broken ankles or severe bruising as a result of his folly. No matter how broad, those safety straps really jerked a man about midair.

P'tero still showed no remorse. K'vin only hoped that the stunt produced the effect that

love-struck P'tero wished. His mate would have been watching, heart in mouth, no doubt and P'tero would reap the harvest of such fear sometime this evening. K'vin wished that more girls were available to Impress green dragons. Girls tended to be steadier, more dependable. But with parents keenly interested in applying for more land by setting up coholds for married children—and no dragonriders, male or female, were allowed to own land—fewer and fewer girls were encouraged to stand on the Hatching Grounds.

The dragons who had taken part in the mass fly-by were now landing their riders in the wide road beyond the court. Then they leaped up again to find a spot in which to enjoy the last of the warm autumnal sun. Many made for the adjoining cliffs as space on Fort's height filled up on either side of the solar panels. Dragons could be trusted not to tread on what remained of the priceless installations. Fort's were the oldest, of course, and two banks had been lost last winter to the unseasonably fierce storms. Fort, being the largest as well as the oldest northern installation, needed all its arrays in full working order to supply heat for its warren of corridors, power for air circulation units and what equipment still worked. Fortunately, a huge stockpile of panels had been made during the first big wave of constructing new Weyrs and Holds. There would be enough for generations.

Weyrleaders sought their tables on the upper level with Lord Holders and professional riders while riders joined whatever company they preferred at tables set up on the huge expanse of the outer apron. Not a sprout of vegetation anywhere on that plaza surface, K'vin noticed with approval. S'nan, Fort's Weyrleader, had always been fussy, and rightly so.

The musicians had struck up sprightly music, and couples were already dancing on the wooden floor set over the cobbles. Beyond the dance square were the stalls, tents, and tables where goods were being sold or exchanged. There'd been brisk business all day, especially for items needed during the winter months when there would be fewer big Gathers. The various Craftsmen would be pleased, and there'd be less for the dragons to haul back.

Charanth was now circling over the annexes, which had been started to increase living space for both Pern's main infirmary-research facility and teacher training. The dormitories were also going to house volunteers who were assiduously trying to save the records damaged during last spring when water had leaked down the walls of the vast storage caverns under Fort. Riders had offered to spend as much time as possible from their training schedules to help in the project. Everyone who had a legible script was acceptable, and Lord Paulin had done a bang-up job in making the copyists comfortable. The other Holds had contributed material and workforces.

The exterior buildings of the College were designed to be Thread proof, with high peaked roofs of Telgar slate, and gutters that led into underground cisterns where errant Thread would be drowned. All the Craftsmen involved, including those destined to inhabit the facility, would have preferred to enlarge the cave system, but there had been two serious collapses of caverns, and the mining engineers had vetoed interior expansion for fear of undermining the whole cliffside. Even the mutant, blunt-winged, flightless photosensitive watchwhers had refused to go on further subterranean explorations which, their handlers insisted, meant dangers human eyes couldn't see. So build externally they did: stout walls more than two and a half meters thick at ground level, tapering to just under two meters beneath the roof. With the iron mines at Telgar going full-blast, the necessary structural beams to support such weight had posed no problem.

The new quarters were to be finished within the month. Even today there had been workforce, though they had taken a break to watch the aerial display and would finish time for the evening meal and entertainment.

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

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

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

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

Charanth's attitude toward his mate, Meranath, amused, and pleased, his rider. No one had expected K'vin to accede to Telgar's Weyrleadership when it fell open after B'ner's death nine months before. Who would have expected that the sturdy rider, just into his sixth decade, had any heart problems? But that is what the medics said killed him. So, when Meranath was ready to mate again, Telgar's senior Weyrwoman, Zulaya, had called for an open flight leaving it up to the dragons to decide on the next Leader. She'd insisted that she had no personal preference. She had been sincerely attached to B'ner and was probably still grieving for him. There had certainly been no lack of "suitors."

K'vin had sent Charanth aloft in the mating flight because all the Telgar Weyr wingleaders were expected to take part, as well as bronze riders from the other Weyrs. He had no real wish to lead a Weyr into a Pass. He considered himself too young for such responsibilities. He had observed from B'ner that the normal duties of an Interval were bad enough, but to *know* that a high percentage of your fellow riders would be injured, or killed: that the lives of so many people rested on your expertise and endurance was too much to contemplate. Some nights, now, he was wracked by terrifying dreams, and Threadfall hadn't even started. On those occasions when he was in Zulaya's bed, she had been understanding and calmly reassuring.

"B'ner worried, too, if that's any consolation, Key," she said, using his old nickname and soothing sweat-curling hair back as he trembled with reaction. "He had nightmares, too. Comes with the title. As a rule, the morning after a nightmare, B'ner'd go over Sean's notes. I figure he had to have memorized them. I've seen you do the same thing. You'll do well, Key, when push comes to shove. I know it."

Zulaya could sound so *sure* of something, but then she was nearly a decade his senior and had had more experience as a Weyrleader. Sometimes her intuition was downright uncanny; she could accurately predict the size of clutches, the distribution of the colors, the sex of babies born in the Weyr, and occasionally even the type of weather in the future. But then she was Fort Weyrbred, a linear descendant of one of the First Riders, Aliana Zuleita, and *knew* things. It was odd how the golden queens seemed to prefer women from outside the Weyrs—but sometimes a queen had a mind of her own and chose a Weyrbred woman, defying custom.

However, just like his predecessor, he constantly reviewed accounts of the individual Threadfalls, how they differed, how you could *tell* from the Leading Edge of Fall that this would be an odd one. Most often the accounts were dry statements of fact, but the prosa

language did not disguise the presence of great courage: especially as those first riders had figure out how to cope with Thread, easy or hard.

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

“Maybe that’s why Meranath let Charanth catch her,” Zulaya said, her face dead serious but her eyes dancing.

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

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

“I’m not my many-times-great-aunt, Zulaya ...”

She chuckled. “Fortunately, or you wouldn’t be Weyrleader, but Blood will tell!”

Zulaya had a disconcerting directness but gave him no real hint how she, the woman, not the Weyrwoman, personally felt toward him. She was kind, helpful, made constructive suggestions when they discussed training programs, but so ... Impersonal ... that K’vin had to conclude that she hadn’t really got over B’ner’s death yet.

He himself was obscurely comforted that his great great-aunt had managed to survive Fa and he would attempt to do the same. As, he was sure, would his two siblings and four cousins who were also dragonriders. Though no others were Weyrleaders ... yet. Still, if he being of the Ruathan Bloodline, which had produced Sorka, M’ball, M’dani, Sorana, Mairia offered reassurance to his Weyr, he’d reinforce that at every turn during the Pass.

Now, at probably the last large gather Pern would enjoy under Threadfree skies for the next fifty years, he watched his Weyrwoman leave the group of Telgar holders she had been talking to and stride toward him across the open courtyard.

Zulaya was tall for a woman, long-legged—all the better for bestriding a dragon’s neck. He was a full head taller than she was, which she said she liked in him: B’ner had been just her height. It was her coloring that fascinated K’vin: the inky black curly hair that, once freed of the flying helmet, tumbled down below her waist. The hair framed a wide, high cheek-boned face, set off the beige of her smooth skin and large, lustrous eyes that were nearly black; wide and sensual mouth above a strong chin gave her face strength and purpose which reinforced her authority with anyone. She strode, unlike some of the hold women who minced along, her steel-rimmed boot heels noisy on the flagstones, her arms swinging at her side. She’d had time to put a long, slitted skirt over her riding gear, and it opened as she walked, showing a well-formed leg in the leather pants and high boots. She’d turned the high riding boot cuffs down over her calf, and the red fur made a nice accent to her costume, echoed in the fur trim of her cuffs and collar, which she had opened. As usual, she wore the sapphire pendant she had inherited as the eldest female of her Blood.

“So, did P’tero win M’leng’s undying affection with that stunt?” she demanded, an edge to her voice. “They’ve gone off together ...” and she looked in the direction of the two riders.

who were headed toward the temporary tents along the row of cots.

“You might have a word with both later. They’re afraid of you,” K’vin said, grinning.

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

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

“However,” and now Zulaya cleared her throat, “the Telgarians thought it was ‘just marvelous!’ ” she added in a gushing tone. “Especially since they won’t get much chance to see the dive in real action.” Now she grimaced.

“Well, at least Telgarians believe,” K’vin said.

“Who doesn’t?” Zulaya demanded, looking up at him.

“Chalkin, for one.”

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

“If there’s one, there may be others, for all the lip service they give us.”

“What? With First Fall only months away from us?” Zulaya demanded. “And why, pray tell, do we have dragons at all, if not to provide an aerial defense for the continent? Oh, we provide transportation services, but that’s not nearly enough to justify our existence.”

“Easy, lady,” K’vin said. “You’re preaching to the dedicated.”

She made a disgusted sound deep in her throat and then they had reached the steps up to the Upper Court. She put her hand through his arm so that they would present the proper picture of united Weyrleadership. K’vin stifled a sigh that the accord was only for public display.

“And Chalkin’s already into that new bubbling wine of Hegmon’s,” Zulaya said irritably.

“Why else do you think he came?” said K’vin as he deftly guided her away from the Bitran who was smacking his lips and regarding his wineglass with greedy speculation. “Though today’s also a chance for his gamesters to profit.”

“One thing’s sure, I hear tell he’s not on Hegmon’s list,” she said as they reached the table, which the Telgarians shared, by choice, with the High Reaches Weyr and hold leaders and those from Tillek. The senior captain of the Tillek fishing fleet and his new wife completed the complement at their table.

“That was quite a show you put on,” said the jovial shipmaster, Kizan, “wasn’t it, Cherrym’dear?”

“Oh, it was, indeed it was,” the girl replied, clapping her hands together. While the gesture was close to an affectation, the young wife was clearly awed by the company she kept at the Gather, and everyone was trying to help her cope. Kizan had let it be known that she came from a small fishing hold and, while a capable shipmaster, she had little experience with the wider world. “I’ve often seen the dragons in the sky, but never so close up. They are so beautiful.”

“Have you ridden one yet?” Zulaya asked kindly.

“Oh, heavens, no,” Cherry said, modestly lowering her eyes.

“You may, and soon,” her husband said. “We came overland here to Fort for the Gatherings but I think we’d better see how good our credit is ...”

“Very good, Captain,” said G’don, the High Reaches Weyrleader, “as you’ve never applied for us half as much as you’re entitled to.” Mari, his Weyrwoman, nodded and smiled encouragingly at Cherry’s almost horrified reaction.

“What?” Kizan teased his bride, “the woman who sailed through a Force Nine gale without a complaint is nervous about flying on a dragon?”

Cherry tried to respond but she couldn’t find words.

“Don’t tease,” Man said. “Riding a dragon is considerably different to standing on your own deck, but I don’t know many people who refuse a ride.”

“Oh, I’m not refusing,” Cherry said hastily, startled.

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

“All of you, leave her alone,” said the Telgar Lady Holder, scowling at them. “I remember my first ride a-dragonback—”

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

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

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

“Do us the honor,” Tashvi said, gesturing to the chilled bottles.

Hegmon complied and, in his experienced hands, the plug erupted from the bottle neck with speed and a “plop.” The wine bubbled up but he deftly put a glass under the lip before a drop could be spilled.

“I think we’ve done it this time,” he said, filling the glasses presented to him.

“I say, it does look exciting,” Salda said, holding her glass up to watch the bubbles make their ascent.

Thea, the High Reaches Lady Holder, did likewise and then sniffed at her glass. “Oh, my word,” she said, putting a hand to her nose just in time to catch a sneeze. “The bubbles tickle.”

“Try the *wine*,” Hegmon urged.

“Hmmm,” Tashvi said, and Kizan echoed the sentiment.

“Dry, too,” the captain said. “Go on, Cherry,” he urged his wife. “It’s quite unlike Tillebrews. They tend to be foxy and harsh. This’ll go down easily.”

“Ohhh,” and Cherry’s response was one of sheer delight. “Oh, I like this!”

Hegmon grinned at her ingenuousness and accepted the approving nods from the others at the table.

“I quite like it, too,” Zulaya said after letting a sip slide down her throat. “Rather nice.”

“I say, Hegmon, wouldn’t mind a refill,” and Chalkin appeared at the table, extending his glass under the mouth of the bottle the vintner held.

Hegmon kept the bottle upright and regarded the Lord Holder coolly. “There’s more

your own table, Chalkin.”

“True, but I’d rather sample different bottles.”

Hegmon stiffened and Salda intervened.

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

Chalkin hesitated between a scowl and a smile, but then, keeping his expression bland, he bowed and backed away from the table with his empty glass. He did not, however, return to his own table but moved on to the next one where wine was being poured.

“I could—” Hegmon began.

“Just don’t supply him, Hegmon.”

“He’s already insisting that I give him vine starts so he can grow his own,” Hegmon said, furious at such importunity. “Not that he’d do that any better than any of those other projects he starts.”

“Ignore him,” Zulaya suggested with a flick of her fingers. “M’shall and Irene do. He’s such a toady.”

“Unfortunately,” said Tashvi with a grimace, “he’s managed to find like minds ...”

“We’ll settle him at the meeting,” K’vin said.

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

“Not where it matters,” Zulaya said.

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

Zulaya waved at the wine cooler. “I doubt there’s more than two glasses apiece, scarcely enough to muddle us, though it’s lovely stuff.” And she sipped judiciously. “Hegmon is generous but not overly so. And here’s our dinner ...”

She sat back as a swarm of men and women in Fort colors began to distribute platters of steaming food among the tables. And bottles of red wine.

“You spoke too soon about muddling, *Zuli*,” K’vin said, grinning as he served her roasts and slices from the platter before passing it around the table.

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

K’vin hoped the musicians would still be playing when the meeting ended. Despite the height of her, Zulaya was so light on her feet she was a pleasure to partner, and because he was so tall, she preferred him as hers. And a full orchestra of professionals was far more entertaining than the half-trained, if enthusiastic players currently in the Weyr. Different music, too.

“Ah,” said Zulaya appreciatively as they filed into Fort’s Great Hall, “they’ve done a great job of freshening the murals.”

“Hmmm,” K’vin agreed, craning his neck around and impeding Chalkin’s entrance into the Hall. “Sorry.”

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

“Consider the source,” K’vin said when he thought Zulaya might fire a tart comment after

the Lord Holder.

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

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

"Indeed," said Zulaya, and allowed herself to be guided to Telgar Weyr's usual seat at the big conference table. "I wonder did anyone get any sleep in this hold the past week," she said, stroking the banner of Telgar's colors, which clothed their portion of the table. "Make such a nice display," she murmured as she pulled out the chair which also sported Telgar's white field and black grain design.

The table itself was made up of many smaller units hooked together, forming a multifaceted circle: Telgar's Weyr and hold leaders were between High Reaches and Tille since they were the northernmost settlements. Across from them were Ista Weyr and Hold and Keroon Hold, with their brilliant sun-colors. Benden Weyr was seated with Bitra on one side and Nerat and Benden on the other. The Chief Engineer, the Senior Medic, and the Headmaster were also included in the meeting. Fort, traditionally the senior hold, with Ruathà and Southern Boll on either side, was at table center, and this time was the "Chair."

"Now, if any of us still have our heads after Hegmon's fine new wine, let's get this over with so we can get in some dancing," said Paulin, smiling around the table.

Chalkin banged the table in front of him with a very loud "Hear, hear!"

K'vin stifled a groan. The man was half drunk, if not all drunk, his face flushed red.

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

Chalkin made a rude noise.

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

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

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

"Chalkin!" Paulin said, his voice steely.

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

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

"Three independent calculations were made, and there's no doubt that the Red Planet is getting closer ... spatially speaking."

"Is there any chance of a collision?" asked Jamson of High Reaches.

"Fragit, Jamson," Paulin said, "let's not bring that up."

"Why not?" Chalkin said, brightening.

"Because that ... Improbability ... has already been discussed to the point of nausea," Paulin said. "There isn't a hint in any of the information collected by our forefathers that indicate there is any chance of a collision between the two planets. Or that they considered the ... Improbability ... for any reason."

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

“Absolutely not,” Paulin said simultaneously with Clisser, who was not only the College Head but the senior of the trained astronomers. Paulin gestured for Clisser to continue.

“Captains Keroon and Tillek,” and he paused in reverence, “both annotated the Aiv report, which included data from the *Yokohama’s* records. I have repeatedly reworked the relevant equations, and the rogue planet will Pass Pern on an elliptical orbit that *cannot* alter to a collision course with us. A matter of celestial mechanics and Rukbat’s gravitational pull. I’d’ve brought the diagram of the orbits involved if I’d had forewarning.” Clisser gave Chalkin a disgusted glare.

“Bad enough it brings in the Thread. Do you *want* to be blown to smithereens, Chalkin?” asked Kalvi, chief of the mechanical engineers. “And I checked the maths, too, so I concurred with Clisser and everyone else who’s done the equations. Why don’t you, if you’re so worried?”

Chalkin ignored the jibe since he had never been noted for scholarship in any field. He was also well pleased with the reaction to his remark. No matter what they said, there was no proof that they were really that safe.

“Now, calculations indicate early spring will bring the first Threadfall of this Pass. There are several falls that could be live, depending on the weather conditions, mainly the ambient temperature, at the time of Fall.” Paulin reached under his table then and hauled up a board on which Threadfall areas had been meticulously delineated. S’nan cleared his throat, moving restlessly, as if he felt Paulin should not have usurped a Fort prerogative. “The first two will be in Fort Weyr’s patrol area, the second two in High Reaches’, and the third two in Benden’s. These are due to occur in the first two weeks, about three days apart. The second Fall in Fort territory and the first one in High Reaches happen on the same day—different flows of the same Fall. Also, we know from the records that there will be live falls over the Southern Continent for about a week before they commence here in the North. S’nan,” and Paulin turned to the Fort Weyrleader, “may we have your progress report?”

S’nan stood, holding up his ubiquitous clipboard. (Rumor had it that that item had been passed down from the Connell himself.) He peered down at it a moment. The oldest Leader of the premier Weyr on Pern resembled his several-times-great-grandfather, though his silvery hair was more sandy than red. Privately, K’vin didn’t think Sean Connell had been such a martinet, even if he had promulgated the rules by which the Weyrs governed themselves. Most of these were common-sense, despite S’nan managing to pursue them into the ridiculous.

“The First Fall,” S’nan began, and there was a touch of pride in his voice, “will start over the sea east of Fort Hold and come ashore at the mouth of the river, passing diagonally across the peninsula and out into the sea in the west. The second two falls, which will occur three days later, will be over the southern tip of Southern Boll.” He used his stylus and, at his most condescending, touched Paulin’s chart. “This one may go south far enough to miss land entirely, and in any case will be over land for only a short while—and over the western tip of High Reaches, again proceeding out to sea, and so over land for only a short time. The third Fall will start on the south coast of the Tillek peninsula, east of the site of the hold, and proceed out to sea, again over land only for a short time.”

“Thread giving us all a chance to get accustomed to fighting it?” asked B’nurnn of Igen.

“Your levity is ill-placed,” S’nan said, but there were too many grins around the table for

his reprimand to affect the irrepressible young Weyrleader. S'nan cleared his throat and launched once more into his discourse. "The next two falls will be the most dangerous for unseasoned wings," and he shot a stern glance at B'nurnn as he found the proper Thread pattern. "The first will start over the sea in the east and proceed over Benden Weyr and Bitra Hold, ending almost at Igen Weyr. This would normally be flown jointly by Benden and Igen Weyrs. The second will start at the northern end of the Nerat peninsula and proceed across it over the east coast of Keroon and the east tip of Igen, and end just offshore from Igen. This also would normally be a joint Fall, flown by Ben-den over Nerat, Igen over the northern part of Keroon, and Ista over the southern part of Keroon ..."

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

"Yes, yes, of course," and S'nan cleared his throat again. "However," and his glance went to the Lord Holders seated around the table, "it was decided at the last meeting of the Weyrleaders that, since any of these would be the first Fall in our experience, every Weyr would supply a double-wing at the initial engagement. Thus each Weyr would have firsthand experience."

"I still think we could all get *that* by hitting those first southern falls," B'nurrin began. "If the dragons miss, it's not going to fall on anyone's head or ruin any farmland."

"B'nurrin!" M'shall said sternly before the startled S'nan could open his mouth.

K'vin privately thought B'nurrin had a good idea and had backed him, but they were overruled by the older Weyrleaders. K'vin suspected that if he were to take some wings down south for that first Fall there, he'd be likely to find B'nurrin "practicing" there, too.

"I still think it's a good idea," the Istan said, shrugging. Pretending such an interruption hadn't even occurred, S'nan went on. "As was customary in the First Pass, Lord Holders will supply adequate groundcrews and have them assembled as directed by the Weyrleaders. In this case, Weyrleader M'shall." He inclined slightly toward the Benden bronze rider. "Master Kalvi," and he bowed courteously to the head engineer, "has assured me that his foundry has turned out sufficient HNO₃ cylinders to equip the groundcrews but the HNO₃ must be made up on site. As in the First Pass, the labor and material are supplied by the engineer corps as part of their public duty. You all should have received your full allotment of tanks by Year's End." S'nan, as always, was precise in his language, scorning the new word "Turn," which the younger generation had begun to use instead of "year."

Kalvi rose to his feet. "I've scheduled every major hold with three days of training in the maintenance and repair of the flamethrowers and a practice session, which, I think," and Kalvi grinned, "you will find comprehensive as well as interesting." He shifted his stance and would have gone on but S'nan held up his hand and gestured Kalvi to sit.

With a bit of a snort and a grin, Kalvi complied.

Now the Fort Weyrleader turned his glance to Corey. "I believe you also plan a three-day seminar to instruct major and minor hold personnel in burn control and Thread ... ah ... first aid."

Corey did not rise but nodded.

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

"Now," and he flipped over the top sheet, "I have done pre-Pass inspections of all Weyr

and find them well up to strength, with sufficient cadet riders to supply the wings with phosphine rock during the Pass. I have discussed all aspects of flight tactics and Weyr maintenance with the respective Weyrleaders ...”

K’vin writhed a bit on his chair, remembering the exhaustive inspection carried out by S’nan and Sarai: they’d even inspected the recycling plant! Then he noticed that G’don, the oldest Weyrleader, was also squirming. So, the Fort pair had spared no one in their official search for perfection. Well, they *were* heading into a Pass, and the Fort Weyrleaders were correct to want every aspect of dragon-riding at the highest possible standard and readiness. In the propagation of dragons, the pair had found no fault with Telgar Weyr: it had had the largest clutches of all the Weyrs in the last three years as the dragons themselves answered the tide of preparations for the coming struggle. K’vin was hoping that Charanth’s first clutch would be larger than any that B’ner’s Miginth had sired: maybe then Zulaya would warm to him. The two junior queens had done well in their latest clutches, producing more of the useful greens and blues. Telgar Weyr would soon be full! They might have to shift out some of the excess population to other Weyrs, but that could wait until the yearly review.

“And, in conclusion, let me state that we are as ready as we can be.”

“Far more ready than the First Riders were,” G’don remarked in his dry fashion.

“Indeed,” said Irene of Benden.

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

And you ride me, Charanth said firmly. I shall be formidable in the air. Thread will fly in the other direction when it sees my flame. And that was not all draconic boast, for Charanth had racked up the Weyr record for the length he achieved in flaming practice. *Together we meet Thread, not just you on your own. I shall be with you and we shall overcome.*

Thanks, Charrie.

You’re welcome, Key.

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

“He’s raring to go,” K’vin whispered back, and grinned.

Charanth was right to remind him that he did not fly alone. They were together, as they had been from the moment the bronze had broken his shell in half and stepped directly toward a fourteen-year-old K’vin of the Hanrahans waiting on the hot sands of the Hatching Ground. And K’vin had realized that that was the moment all his life had been aimed at: Impression. He’d seen his older brother Impress, and his second oldest sister, and three of the four cousins currently riders. From the moment he was Searched out, part of him had been sure-sure-sure, with all the fervor of an adolescent, that he would Impress favorably. The negative side of his personality had perversely suggested that he’d be left standing on the hot sands and he’d never live down such a humiliating experience.

“In conclusion,” S’nan said, “let me assure this gathering that the Weyrs are ready.” With that, S’nan sat down to an approving applause. “I hope that the holds are, too?” Not only did his voice end on an up note, but he raised his thick brows questioningly at the Fort Holder.

Paulin stood up again, shuffling until he found the right clipboard and cleared his throat. “I have readiness reports in from all but two major holds,” and he glanced first at Franco, Lord

Holder of Nerat, and then tilted his head toward Chalkin. “I know you received the forms for the film ...”

The tall, thin, bronze-skinned Neratian raised his hand. “I told you the problem we have with vegetation, Paulin, and we’re still *trying* to keep it under control ...” He grimaced. “Not easy with the excellent weather we’ve been having and the restriction against chemical deterrents. But I can assure you that we’ll keep at it. Otherwise, we have emergency roofing for the seedling nurseries and sufficient stores of viable seeds to replant when that’s feasible. We’re also continuing our research into dwarfing plants for indoor propagation. All mine Holders are fully aware of the problems and are complying. Everyone’s signed up for the groundcrew course.”

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

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

Then Paulin turned to Chalkin, who had been polishing his rings with every evidence of boredom. “I’ve had nothing at all from you, Lord Chalkin of Bitra,” Paulin said.

“Oh, there’s plenty of time ...”

“A report was required by this date, Chalkin,” Paulin said, pushing the issue.

Chalkin shrugged. “You all can play that game if you wish, but I do not believe that Thread is going to fall next spring, so why should I bother my people with unnecessary tasks—”

He wasn’t able to finish his sentence for the acrimonious reactions from everyone at the table.

“Now see here, Chaikin ...”

“Hey, wait a bleeding minute ...”

“Just where do you get off ...” Bastom was on his feet with indignation.

Chalkin pointed one thick, beringed finger at the Tillek Holder.

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

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

“This Thread of yours coming. So you say, but there’s no proof,” Chalkin said, grinning smugly.

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

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

“You can’t so easily dismiss the fact that the planet is becoming more visible.”

“Pooh. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“So,” and Paulin first had to quell angry murmurs to be heard, “you discount entirely the advice of our forebears? The massive evidence that they left for our guidance?”

“They left hysterical—”

“*They were scarcely hysterical!*” Tashvi bellowed. “And they coped with the emergency, and gave us specific guidelines to follow when the planet came back. And how to calculate the Pass.”

“Hold it, hold it!” Paulin shouted, raising both arms to restore order. “I’m Chair, I’ll remind you,” and he glared at Tashvi until the Telgar Lord resumed his seat and the others had

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

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

"Well, Chalkin?" Paulin said.

"Some proof that Thread will fall. A report from this Aivas we've all heard about. .

"Landing is under tons of volcanic ash," Paulin said, and then recognized S'nan's urgent signal to speak.

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

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

"We have not been able to locate the administration building in which the Aivas was located."

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

"Then you will appreciate the size of the task," S'nan said. "Especially since the blanket of volcanic ash covers the entire plateau and we have not been able to locate any landmark by which we could judge the position of the administration building. And since the housing was similar, it's difficult to establish where we are when we have dug one out of twenty feet of ash and debris. Therefore we have not been able to establish the location of the administration building."

"Try again," Chalkin said, turning his back to S'nan.

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

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

"And money ..." murmured the same heckler.

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

"*Off chance?*" Tashvi erupted out of his chair. "You'll have a revolt on your hands."

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

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

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

Chalkin's grin was patronizing. "A spaceborne organism? That drops on a large planet and eats everything it touches? Why wasn't Pern totally destroyed during previous visitations? Why is it every two hundred years? How come the Exploration Team that did a survey of the planet before it was released to our ancestors to colonize ... how come they didn't see any evidence? Ah, no," Chalkin said, flicking the notion away from him with his beringed hand. "ridiculous!"

"My calculations were confirmed by—" Clisser said, feeling that he was being maligned.

"There was evidence of Threadfall," Tashvi said, bouncing once more to his feet. "I've read the report. There were hundreds of circles where vegetation was just starting to grow ..."

"Inconclusive," Chalkin said with another flap of a hand. "Could have been caused by one of the many fungus growths."

“Well, then, when this inconclusive evidence comes dropping out of the skies onto your hold, don’t bother us,” Bastom said.

“Or come crying to my hold for help,” added Bridgely, completely disgusted by Chalkin’s attitude.

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

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

“There is provision in the Charter,” Paulin began.

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

“Only if he believes in the Charter ...” Bastom said.

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

“Who trusts Chalkin?” G’don asked.

“... the trust that holders rest in the Lord of their hold in return for their labor.”

“Ha!” said Bridgely. “I don’t think much of his holders either. Useless lot on the whole. Most of ’em kicked out of other holds for poor management or plain laziness.”

“Bitra’s badly managed, too. Generally we have to return a full half of his tithings,” M’shall said. “Half the grain is moldy, the timber unseasoned, and hides improperly cured and often rancid. It’s a struggle every quarter to receive decent supplies from him.”

“Really?” Paulin said, jotting notes down. “I hadn’t realized he shorted you on tithes.”

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

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

“So what is the penalty for what Chalkin’s doing? Or, rather, not doing?” Franco asked.

“Impeachment,” Paulin said flatly. “Impeachment!” Jamson was aghast. “I didn’t know—” “Article Fourteen, Jamson,” Paulin said. “Dereliction of Duty by Lord Holder. Can you give me a printout on that, Clisser? Perhaps we all should have our memory refreshed on the point.”

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

“So your system’s still working?” Tashvi asked. “Copies of the most important official documents were made in quantity by my predecessor,” Clisser replied with a relieved smile. “I’ve a list if you need any handwritten but legible.”

Paulin cleared his throat, calling them to order. “So, my Lord Holders, should we proceed against Chalkin?”

“You’ve heard him. What option do we have?” M’shall wanted to know, glancing about the table.

“Now, wait a minute,” Jamson began, scowling. “I’d want to have incontrovertible proof of his inefficiency as a Lord Holder as well as his failure to respond to this emergency. I mean impeachment’s an extreme step.”

“Yes, and Chalkin’ll do everything he can to slide out of it,” Bastom said cynically.

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

“In the matter of impeachment I believe that a unanimous agreement of all major holders and leaders is sufficient to deprive him of his position,” Paulin said.

“Are you sure?” Jamson asked.

“If he isn’t, I am,” Bridgely said, bringing one fist down firmly on the table. His spouse Lady Jane, nodded her head emphatically. “I haven’t wanted to bring it up in a Council before—” Bridgely began.

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

Bridgely nodded sharply in her direction and continued. “He’s come as near to bending, or breaking for that matter, what few laws we do have on Pern. Shady dealings, punitive contracts, unusual harsh conditions for his holders ...”

“We’ve had some refugees from Bitra with stories that would curl your hair,” Jane Benden’s Lady Holder, said, wringing her hands in distress. “I’ve kept records ...”

“Have you?” Paulin said. “I’d very much like to see them. Autonomy is a privilege and responsibility, but not a license for authoritarianism or despotic rule. Certainly autonomy does not give anyone the right to deprive his constituents of basic needs. Such as protection from Threadfall.”

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

“Possibl ...” Paulin said.

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

Paulin held up his hand as he turned to M’shall. “Please give me specific instances in which Bitra Hold has failed to supply the Weyr. Jane, I’d like to look at the records you’ve kept.”

“I’ve some, too,” Irene added.

Paulin nodded and looked around the table. “Since his dereliction of primary duty in regard to preparation against Threadfall could jeopardize not only his own hold but those of his neighbors, I feel we must examine the problem as quickly as possible and indict him—” Jamson jammed an arm up in protest, but Paulin held up a placatory hand. “If, that is, we can find just cause to do so. Just now, he was acting as if he’d had too much of Hegmon’s new wine.”

“Ha!” was Irene’s immediate response, a cynical response echoed by others around the table.

“We cannot allow personal feelings to color this matter,” Paulin said firmly.

“Wait till you read my notes,” was her wry answer.

“And mine,” said Bridgely.

“But who could take his place?” Jamson asked, now querulous with anxiety.

“Not a task I’d like so soon to Thread,” Bastom admitted.

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