

DRAGON'S KIN

ANNE MCCAFFREY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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KIN

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BALLANTINE BOOKS ♦ NEW YORK

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To my brother, Kevin McCaffrey,
aka “The Smallest Dragonboy”

Anne McCaffrey

To Ceara Rose McCaffrey—of course!

Todd McCaffrey

PROLOGUE



When men first came to Rukbat, a G-type star in the Sagittarian Sector, they settled upon its third planet and named it Pern. They had set out to create an idyllic, low-tech farmers' paradise, escaping the ravages of the late Nathi Wars. They paid little attention to Pern's neighbors, as the entire solar system had been previously surveyed and declared safe for colonization.

Less than eight years—or “Turns” as the Pernese began calling them—after their arrival, Pern's erratic sister planet, the Red Star, came wheeling in from the outer edges of the solar system.

And then Thread fell from the sky. The thin, silvery wisps looked like no threat at all—until they touched flesh, or foliage, or anything living, including the bare earth. Then the Thread would grow, sucking the nutrients out of anything it could, turning soil into lifeless dirt, searing through flesh and leave nothing more than charred bone. Only metal, bare rock, and water—where Thread drowned—were safe.

The first Threadfall, catching the colonists by complete surprise, was devastating. Thousands died, many more were maimed, and countless herds of imported animals were lost.

Worse, the near approach of the Red Star not only brought Thread but also increased the stress on Pern's tectonic plates, producing earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes.

The surviving colonists reorganized. They abandoned the richer but seismically active Southern Continent in favor of the more stable Northern Continent. There they built a “fort” out of an east-facing cliffside in which they could “hold” all the remaining colonists.

It was not enough. With their technology failing, they could not hope to get the ground clear of Thread long enough to harvest the food they needed for their survival. They needed another solution, a Pern-based system to rid the skies of Thread.

The colonists' biologists, led by the Eridani-trained Kitti Ping, turned to the indigenous fire lizard, small flying creatures that looked like miniature dragons. Using genetic engineering, the Pernese bred the fire-lizards into huge “dragons” that, by chewing a phosphene-bearing rock, could breathe fire and burn Thread, charring it right out of the sky before it could touch the ground.

These dragons, linked telepathically with their human riders, would form the mainstay of the colonists' defense against Thread.

In what was regarded as a mistake, Kitti Ping's daughter, Wind Blossom, created smaller, overmuscled, ugly creatures with great photosensitive eyes. Called watch-whers, they were useless fighting Thread in the daylight. But the resourceful Pernese discovered that the watch-whers were ideal for seeing in dark places, like the caves that became the Holds for the Holders and mines for the miners.

As the colonists quickly outgrew their Fort Hold, the dragonriders found a new living space in an old volcanic basin. This, they called Fort Weyr.

The population continued to grow, and the colonists spread out across the Northern Continent. The dragonriders formed new Weyrs in the high mountains; the farmers and herders settled in new Holds on the plains below.

Under the leadership of the Lord Holders and the Weyrleaders, a new society developed, based on specialties and skills. Some specialties, particularly those requiring many years of training, became recognized as separate Crafts: Smith, Miner, Farmer, Fisher, Healer, and Harper. Levels of skill in each craft were recognized with the old guild appellations: Apprentice, Journeyman, and Master. Each Craft had one Master elected to preside over all Craft affairs: MasterSmith, MasterMiner, MasterFarmer, MasterFisher, MasterHealer, and MasterHarper.

Given the nature of celestial mechanics, after fifty Turns the Red Star moved too far from Pern for Thread to fall, and the threat faded away—until two hundred Turns later when the Red Star repeated its orbit, beginning a second Pass.

Again the dragons and their dragonriders rose into the sky to flame the Thread into harmless chaff. And again, as the Red Star receded fifty Turns later, the colonists returned to easier times and spread out to explore the abundance of Pern.

After another "Interval" of two hundred Turns, the pattern repeated and Thread fell again.

Toward the end of the Second Interval, with only sixteen Turns before the return of the Red Star and Thread, and the beginning of the Third Pass, a problem arose for the miners. The people relied on coal. Without coal, particularly the hot-burning anthracite, the Mastersmith would not be able to forge the steel that made the plows the farmers used, rimmed the wheels the traders used, and joined the leather riding gear the dragonriders used to fly against Thread. But by now, the easily acquired coal—the coal that came to the surface in huge, open seams—was nearly all mined out.

MasterMiner Britell in his CraftHall at Crom Hold realized that in order to dig deep into the mountains to get new coal, his miners would have to learn anew the old ways of tunneling and shaft mining. Working from ancient survey maps, the MasterMiner identified several promising subterranean coal seams, selected his most promising journeymen, and set them to the task of "proving" new mines. Those that succeeded would be made Masters and their Camps would become permanent Mines—with all the rank and prosperity associated with a minor Holder.

Although he admitted it to no one, Master Miner Britell held his highest hopes for Journeyman Natalon and the group of hardworking miners he had inspired to join him.

Natalon had shown a willingness to experiment, which would be required to successfully master the new art of deep shaft mining.

He had enlisted watch-whers, hoping to use their abilities to detect tunnel-snakes and bad air—both the explosive gases and the odorless, deadly carbon monoxide which could suffocate the unwary.

From what Britell had heard, the watch-whers were something of a mystery—their abilities ignored as commonplace.

Britell planned on watching that Camp carefully, particularly keeping an eye on the work of the watch-whers and their bonded wherhandlers.

CHAPTER I



*In early morning light I see,
A distant dragon come to me.*

Kindan was so excited that he practically bounced as he ran up to the heights where Camp Natal kept its drum, fire beacon, and watch.

“They’re here! They’re here!” Zenor shouted down at him. Needing no further urging, Kindan pushed on an extra burst of speed.

Breathless, he joined his friend on the peak where they kept the watch. Looking down at the valley he could plainly see the large drays rolling ponderously up toward the main Camp. Leading them were the smaller, but bright and cheerfully painted domicile wagons owned by the caravanners.

From the watch-heights, not only could he see all the way across the lake to the bend where the trail turned out of sight, but he could also see the fields on the far side of the lake, which had just been cleared, ready for their first planting of crops. Closer in, he could see where the trail forked, the more heavily traveled way heading up to the depot where the mined and bagged coal was stored, the lighter way leading toward the miners’ houses on the near side of the lake.

Most of the houses were in three rows arranged in a U shape around a central square. The open northern end of the U faced the road. It was there that smaller spice gardens had been planted. And in front of those, closer to the main square, that wedding preparations were in progress—for Kindan’s own sister’s wedding.

None of those houses were “proper” houses, built to withstand Threadfall. But Threadfall was a long way off—another sixteen Turns—and the miners were glad to have the temporary comfort of their own housing, convenient to the new mine.

Midway from the square to the hill was a separate house and a large shed. The house was Kindan’s home and the shed housed Dask, the camp’s sole remaining watch-wher. Dask was bonded to Kindan’s father, Danil.

Hidden from the watch point by the bend of the hill was a much larger and sturdier dwelling—the

full stone hold of Natalon, the head Miner in the Camp. North of it, separated by a walled-in herb garden, was a smaller but almost as well-built dwelling, the home of the Camp's Harper.

Just beyond the Harper's dwelling—the edge of which was visible from the lookout—the hillside, spur from the western mountain, turned abruptly and the plain in front of it rose toward the peak of the mountain, with another spur about two kilometers distant forming a valley. Two hundred meters from the bend and a hundred meters west of the lookout was the entrance to the mine.

The boys knew the valley like the backs of their hands, even though it was changing daily and Kindan had been there only six months himself. They paid no attention to the view. Today, not even the novelty of the wedding preparations interested them: The two boys had eyes only for the trade caravan winding its way around the lake below them.

“Where's Terregar?” Zenor asked. “Can you see him?”

Kindan squinted and shaded his eyes against the sun with his hand, but mostly for show. The distance was far too great to make out one person in the whole caravan.

“I don't know,” he answered irritably. “I'm sure he's down there somewhere.”

Zenor laughed. “Well, he'd better be, or your Sis will kill him.”

Kindan favored this comment with a glare. “Hadn't you better get back on down and tell Natalon?” he asked.

“Me?” Zenor replied. “I'm on watch, not a runner.”

“Shards!” Kindan groaned. “I'm all out of breath, Zenor.” He added in a lower tone, “And besides, you know how much Natalon wants to hear this news.”

Zenor's eyes widened. “Oh, yeah, I do! Everyone knows that he was hoping your Sis would stay at the Camp.”

“Right,” Kindan agreed. “So just imagine how mad he'll be at hearing about it from me.”

“Ah, come on, Kindan,” Zenor replied. “There's good news with the bad—that's a whole caravan approaching, not just a wedding.”

“Which he has to host,” Kindan snapped back. He sighed. “Well, if you insist, I'll go back down.” He paused dramatically, eyeing his smaller friend. “But Sis said that I've got to wash Dask tonight.”

Zenor's eyes narrowed as he considered this. “You mean, if I do the running, you'll let me help wash the watch-wher?”

Kindan grinned. “Exactly!”

“You would?” Zenor repeated hopefully. “Your dad won't mind?”

Kindan shook his head. “Not if he doesn’t find out, he won’t.”

The added enticement of doing something unsanctioned brought a gleam to Zenor’s eyes. “All right, I’ll do it.”

“Great.”

“Of course, washing a watch-wher’s not the same as oiling a dragon,” Zenor went on. The thought of impressing a dragon, of becoming telepathically linked with one of Pern’s great fire-breathing defenders, was the secret wish of every child on Pern. But dragons seemed to prefer the children of the Weyr: Only a few riders were chosen from the Holds and Crafts. And no dragon had ever visited Camp Natalon.

“You know,” Zenor continued, “I saw them.”

Everyone in Camp Natalon knew that Zenor had seen dragons; it was his favorite tale. Kindan suppressed a groan. Instead, he made encouraging noises while hoping that Zenor wouldn’t dawdle too much longer or Natalon would be wondering at the speed of his runner—and might remember who he was.

“They were so beautiful! A perfect V formation. Way up high. You could see them: bronze, brown, blue, green . . .” Zenor’s voice faded as he recalled the memory. “And they looked so soft—”

“Soft?” Kindan interrupted, his tone full of disbelief. “How could they look soft?”

“Well, they did! Not like your father’s watch-wher.”

Kindan, feeling anger on Dask’s behalf, stomped firmly on his emotion, remembering that he still wanted Zenor to run for him.

“Is the caravan getting closer?” he asked, hinting broadly.

Zenor looked, nodded, and sprinted away from the watch point. “You won’t forget, will you?” he called back over his shoulder.

“Never!” Kindan replied. He was delighted at the thought of help with what he was certain was going to be a particularly thorough bathing of the coal mine’s only watch-wher, the night before the major wedding.

At the bottom of the hillside, after his long, warm scramble down, Zenor paused and looked back up where Kindan was now standing watch. It was warmer in the valley and the air was thicker, partly from the moisture in the fields, and partly from the smoke already beginning to rise from the Camp fires. Catching his breath, he turned to search for Miner Natalon. He steered for the largest knot

people he could find, figuring that the Camp's leader would be there. He was right.

Natalon was a rangy sort of a man who stood taller than the average man. Zenor's father, Talmari, had called Natalon a "youngster" once, but only in a low voice. After hearing that, Zenor had tried to imagine Natalon as young but couldn't. Even though Talmari was five Turns older than Natalon, Natalon's twenty-six Turns might have been a full hundred when compared to Zenor's meager ten.

Zenor considered calling out, but there was still a lot of confusion over the right title for Natalon. He'd be "Lord Natalon" if the Camp proved itself and became a proper Mine but that was still to happen and no one quite knew how to address him now. Zenor opted for worming through the crowd and grabbing at Natalon's sleeve.

Miner Natalon was not pleased to have someone yank on his sleeve in the middle of an argument. He looked down and saw the sweat-stained face of Talmari's son but couldn't remember the child's name. It had been so much easier six months earlier, when there'd only been himself and a few other miners seeking out a new seam of coal. But finding that seam, and still others after it, had been exactly what Natalon had hoped for—to start a Camp and prove it into a Mine.

Talmari's son yanked again. "Yes?" Natalon said.

"The caravan's approaching, sir," Zenor said, hoping that "sir" would not affront the Camp's head miner.

"How soon, lad? Don't you know how to make a proper report?" a querulous voice barked above Zenor's ears. He turned and saw that the speaker was Tarik, Natalon's uncle. Zenor had had several encounters with Tarik's son, Cristov, and still bore bruises from the last meeting.

Rumor had it that Tarik was furious that Crom Hold's MasterMiner hadn't put him in charge of seeking out new coal. Another rumor, whispered quietly among only a few of the Camp's boys, was that Tarik was doing everything in his power to prove that Natalon was unsuited to run the Camp and that he, Tarik, should be placed in charge. The last set of bruises Zenor had gotten from Cristov were the result of an ill-placed comment about Cristov's father.

"How long until they arrive, Zenor?" a kinder voice asked. It was Danil, Kindan's father, and the partner of the Camp's only surviving watch-wher.

"I spotted them at the head of the valley," Zenor replied. "I imagine it'll be four, maybe six hours until they reach the Camp."

"They'd get here faster if the roadway were properly lined," Tarik growled, casting a reprovving glare at Natalon.

"We must use our labor wisely, Uncle," Natalon answered soothingly. "I decided that it made more sense to fell more trees to use in the mines for shorings."

"We can't afford any more accidents," Danil agreed.

“Nor lose any more watch-whers,” Natalon added. Zenor hid a grin as he saw Kindan’s father nod in a fierce agreement.

“Watch-whers aren’t much use,” Tarik growled. “We’ve made do without them before. And now we’ve lost two, and what’ve we got to show for it?”

“As I recall, watch-wher Wensk saved your life, Tarik,” Danil answered, his voice edged with bitterness. “Even after you refused to heed his warnings. And I believe that your abusive behavior is what decided Wenser to leave with his watch-wher.”

Tarik snorted. “If we had enough shoring, the tunnel wouldn’t have collapsed.”

“Ah!” Natalon interrupted. “I’m glad to hear that you agree with my reasoning, then, Uncle.”

Tarik glowered. Then, to change the subject, he snapped at Zenor: “How many drays were there, boy?”

Zenor screwed his eyes shut in concentration. He opened them again when he had his answer. “There were six—and four wagons.”

“Hmmp!” Tarik snarled. “Well, Natalon, if the boy’s right, then those Traders have two drays less than we’ve got coal to trade.” He fell to muttering darkly. “And all the time we’ve been spending working ourselves to the bone to get out that coal when we should have been building a proper Hold. What’ll happen when Thread comes?”

“Miner Tarik,” a new voice chimed in, “Thread’s not due to fall for another sixteen Turns. I imagine we’ll have time to correct the problem before then.”

Zenor looked behind him as a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder. It was Jofri, the Camp’s Harper. Zenor smiled up at the young man who had taught him every morning for the last six months. Harpers were the teachers on Pern—as well as the archivists, news sources, and, sometimes, judges—and Jofri was as good a teacher as he was a musician.

Jofri was a journeyman Harper. He was due to return soon to the Harper Hall to complete his Mastery. When he did, he’d probably be too senior to return to a small Camp like this one. Instead, Zenor was sure that he’d be posted to a great Hold—perhaps even Crom—there to supervise not just the major Hold’s children but all the journeyman Harpers dispatched to the small cots and Camps that spread out from the large Hold as its inhabitants expanded their territory.

Of course, maybe a new Harper would know more about Healing than Jofri, who had come to accept that in matters of Healing, Kindan’s eldest sister, Silstra, was the Master and not he. Zenor swallowed when he remembered that the caravan approaching bore Silstra’s future husband. And that, as a wife of a Smith, Silstra would leave Camp Natalon forever.

“Time or not,” Tarik replied with a sneer, “you won’t be here.”

“Uncle,” Natalon said, breaking up what he feared would be another nasty exchange of words.

“whatever the result, it was my decision.”

Natalon turned his attention back to Zenor. “Run down to the women at the cookfires and inform them that our guests are approaching.”

Zenor nodded and took off gladly, not wanting to listen to more of Tarik’s snippery. As he left, he heard Danil’s voice above the others, “Do you suppose your replacement is also in the caravan, Jofri?”

Oh, no! Zenor wailed to himself. Not a replacement for Harper Jofri so soon!

Back up in the watch-heights, Kindan followed Zenor’s movements until he was lost in the crowd of elders. Nervously he waited until his friend exited the crowd and then he heaved a sigh of relief. Zenor wasn’t in trouble and neither was he. He watched Zenor head down from the plateau toward the buildings and fields below and guessed that he had been ordered to let the rest of the Camp know that the caravan had been sighted. Tonight there would be a welcoming feast.

Kindan saw Zenor slow down as he approached the Harper’s cottage. He was surprised to see Zenor stop and then dart around to the front of the cottage—out of Kindan’s sight—and, presumably, inside. What was Zenor doing? Kindan guessed that he had stopped because someone inside the cottage had called to him. Kindan made a mental note to find out.

Then the first sounds of the arriving caravan distracted him and he turned his attention to it.

The faint smell of pine sap came into the Harper’s cottage on the breeze. Pine sap and something else—some subtle smells that made Nuella think instantly of—“Zenor, is that you?” she hissed.

The sounds of a runner stopping suddenly and skidding came through the window, followed by Zenor’s voice in a whisper, “What are you doing here?”

Nuella frowned, irritated at his tone. “Come inside and I’ll tell you,” she answered testily.

“Oh, all right,” Zenor grumbled. “But I can’t be long, I’m Running.” Nuella heard the capital “R” in his voice and knew that he was using kid-shorthand for “I’ve got the job of runner.”

She held her next question until she heard his feet on the front steps. She made her way from the kitchen in the back down the hallway to the front door. A breeze, scented with the lake’s moisture, wafted in as Zenor entered.

“I thought Kindan was the runner and you had watch,” Nuella said.

Zenor sighed. “We switched,” he said. Then, his tone brightening, he added in a rush, “He’s going to let me help wash the watch-wher!”

“When?”

“Tonight,” Zenor answered. “The caravan’s arrived—”

“I heard,” Nuella said with a frown. “Do you know if the new Harper’s come? I wanted to meet him.”

“Meet him? What will your father say?” Zenor demanded.

“I don’t care,” Nuella answered frankly. “If I’ve got to be cooped up all the time, at least I can learn something from the Harper. Work on my pipes some more—”

“But what if people find out?”

“The caravan’s coming, right? There’ll be a feast tonight, won’t there? You’re going down to meet them at the square, right?” Nuella asked, and then continued immediately, “So tonight, I’ll dress up in bright and dark colors—trader clothes—and no one will know.”

“The traders will,” Zenor protested.

“No, they won’t,” Nuella said. “They’ll think I’m just a miner dressing up to flatter them.”

“What about your parents, or Dalor?”

Nuella shrugged. “You’ll have to keep me away from them, that shouldn’t be hard. Especially since they won’t be expecting me.”

“But—”

Nuella reached out, caught his arm, turned him around, and pushed him toward the door. “Go now, or someone will be asking why you’re so slow.”

By the time Kindan’s relief arrived hours later, he had forgotten about Zenor’s detour, his stomach rumbling with anticipation at the great smells of spice-roasted wherry rising up from the huge outdoor cooking fires below.

Usually, every family at Camp Natalon ate in their own quarters. Tonight, there were huge fires burning in the pits placed at the center of the square, and long wooden tables with benches had been drawn around them to provide seating for everyone, camper and caravanner alike.

Harper Jofri and several other musicians were playing lively music while the crowd ate happily.

Kindan managed to find food and a quiet seat far away from any further chores. Munching happily on the spiced wherry meat—his favorite of his sister’s excellent recipes—and drinking fresh berry juice, Kindan nevertheless kept his eyes and ears roaming, both to avoid any interruptions, like work, and to strain for any interesting gossip.

At the head table, in the center of all the tables, Kindan spied the head of the caravan and his leader, but his eyes fixed most on his own sister and her fiancé, Terregar. The smith was of medium height but well-muscled. He wore a short, close-trimmed, dark beard that always seemed to be split by a smile made all the brighter by his twinkling blue eyes. Kindan had liked him from the first moment he’d met him.

Terregar and Silstra—their names had a good ring to them. But to him, and indeed all of Camp Natalon, his sister would always be Sis. Kindan wondered if there was a “Sis” in the Telg Smithcraft already. Perhaps *she* was marrying someone from out of the Smithcraft and they were looking for a replacement. He wondered if Camp Natalon would ever find a replacement for his Sis.

Kindan found his eyes watering and decided that the wind must have changed and blown some of the ash from the fire toward him. He ignored the lump in his heart. He knew how happy Sis would be; he’d heard her say it so many times. And he couldn’t deny that Terregar was a nice man. Still . . . it would be a lonelier place without his big sister, the sister who’d watched over all the family since their mother had died.

The wind changed, and the freshening breeze brought a new smell—bubbly pies! Kindan’s stomach rumbled as he sought the source of the smell. He started to get up, but a hand pushed him down.

“Don’t think about it,” a voice growled in his ear. It belonged to the youngest of his older brothers, Kaylek. “Dad sent me to find you. You’re to wash Dask now.”

“Now?”

“Of course!”

“But all the pies’ll be eaten!” Kindan protested.

Kaylek was unimpressed. “You’ll get some tomorrow at the wedding,” he said with a shrug. “Mind you clean him properly, or Dad’ll have your hide.”

“But it’s not dark yet!” Kindan protested. Dask, like all watch-whers, had been born with huge eyes that found the light of day hideously painful. Dask’s eyes worked best at night. At night, there wasn’t anything a watch-wher couldn’t see. Many were the miners who owed their lives to the ability of a watch-wher to see a human body under the rocks and rubble of a cave-in.

A larger figure loomed over the both of them. Kindan could tell immediately who it was by the way that Kaylek shied away; Kaylek was always more frightened of their father than Kindan.

“You two are disturbing the meal,” Danil said in a deep voice roughened by an age in the mines. He laid one large hand on Kaylek’s shoulder.

“I told him to go wash Dask,” Kaylek said.

Kindan looked up and met his father’s eyes squarely. Danil returned the look with a slight nod.

“Well, it can wait until after the bubbly pies,” he said. He shook a huge finger at Kindan. “I’m trusting that you’ll do us all proud and make my watch-wher the envy of Crom Hold tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir!” Kindan responded enthusiastically. The dreaded chore suddenly seemed a mark of great trust and respect. “I will.”

Danil kept his hand on Kaylek, saying, “Come along, son, there’s a craft girl you might like to meet.”

Even in the failing light, Kindan could see Kaylek turn beet red. Kaylek, just turned fourteen and still very wary of his new-found voice and manhood, was quite shy around girls his own age. Kindan managed not to laugh out loud, but Kaylek caught the look in his eyes and glared at his younger brother. Immediately Kindan sobered—for the look threatened retribution.

The smell of bubbly pies teased Kindan’s nose, and he turned to hunt them out. Kaylek’s retribution was sometime in the future—the bubbly pies were right now.

The evening meal in the Camp’s square was still going strong when Kindan started up toward the shelter that was Dask’s home. As he walked slowly and deliberately away from the bonfire and the crowd, a small shadow detached itself and followed him.

“Are you going to wash the watch-wher now?” Zenor whispered, panting as he struggled to catch up.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you get me, then?” Zenor asked, his voice full of perceived betrayal.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Kindan replied. “If I went through the crowd looking for you, Kaylek would have noticed and done something to stop us.”

“Oh.” Zenor didn’t have any older brothers and was completely unused to using guile to get his own way. But because he wanted an older brother just as much as Kindan wanted a younger brother, they got along famously—even if there was no more than two months’ difference in their ages.

They were about halfway there when Kindan noticed another shadow trailing beside them.

“What’s that?” he asked, stopping and pointing.

“What?” Zenor answered promptly. “I don’t see anything.”

One of the things that Kindan really appreciated in Zenor was that his friend was a truly terrible liar.

“Maybe it was a trick of the moons,” Zenor suggested, gesturing up to Pern’s two moons, Timor and Belior.

Kindan shrugged and continued onward. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the shadow was still following. He thought for a moment and came up with an interesting notion.

“Who did you talk to, today, at the Harper’s?” he asked Zenor.

Zenor stopped dead in his tracks. So, Kindan noticed with satisfaction, did the shadow. “When?” Zenor asked, his eyes wide.

“When you went from Natalon down to the square,” Kindan said. “I saw you stop and talk to someone—and I’d already seen Jofri in the group when you talked to Natalon, so it couldn’t have been him.”

“Me? When?” Zenor repeated.

Kindan waited silently for him to answer.

“Oh!” Zenor said suddenly as though actually remembering and not rapidly concocting a lie. “That was Dalor.”

Dalor was Natalon’s son, nearly the same age as Zenor and Kindan. Kindan didn’t like the way Dalor took on airs about being the son of the Camp’s founder, but he couldn’t fault the boy otherwise. Dalor was often honest and had stood up for Kindan more than once when Kaylek had been picking on him. Kindan, for his part, had stuck up for Dalor when Cristov, Tarik’s only son, picked fights.

Kindan gave Zenor a measuring look, but before he could ask his next question, Zenor said, “Would your Dad be mad if he finds out that I helped wash Dask?”

“So we’d better make sure he doesn’t find out,” Kindan said.

Zenor gestured for Kindan to get moving again. “In that case, we’d better get done before our parents start wondering where I am.”

Kindan considered teasing Zenor more about their shadow, but the look on his friend’s face made him reconsider.

“Okay,” was all Kindan said, starting up the slope toward the shed where Dask was quartered, next to the cothold his father had built.

Dask's shed was large enough for the watch-wher to lie on his side with plenty of distance from the walls. Straw was piled on the floor. Kindan opened the double doors carefully and chirped a quiet note.

"Dask?" Kindan called softly. "It's me, Kindan. Dad asked me to get you washed for the wedding tomorrow."

The watch-wher uncoiled from his sleeping position, his head emerging from underneath his small wings and his bright eyes, like huge jeweled lanterns, reflecting the last of the twilight brightly back at the two boys.

"*Mrmph?*" the watch-wher muttered. Kindan crossed the distance between them quickly but cautiously, murmuring softly, reaching out slowly to scratch the ugly watch-wher on the ridge just above his eye.

"*Mrmph,*" Dask murmured with growing pleasure. Kindan blew a breath toward the watch-wher's nose so that Dask would get a good smell of him and recognize him. Dask snorted and blew back at Kindan. Kindan reached above the eyes for Dask's ears and stroked them.

"Good boy!" he said. Dask arched his neck and pulled his head out of Kindan's grasp to look down at him haughtily at the boy.

"We're here to wash you," Kindan repeated. Dask leaned down toward Kindan and blew another breath at him, then raised his head up and looked out past the curtain that had been hung inside the double doors. Kindan realized that Dask had seen Zenor. "That's right, me and Zenor," he said soothingly. "Come on in, Zenor."

"It's awfully dark in there," Zenor said, still standing outside the doors.

"'Course it is," Kindan replied. "Dask likes the dark, don't you, big fellow?"

Dask blew an agreeing breath over Kindan's head and then swiveled his neck to peer curiously toward Zenor.

"The sun's down now," Kindan said to the watch-wher, pointing toward the lake. "Why don't you go for a quick dip and Zenor and I will freshen up your bed?"

Dask nodded and started out of the shed. Wide-eyed, Zenor backed out of the way as the watch-wher pushed by him. Then Dask gave a little happy chirp, flapped his wings once, and vanished. A cool breeze blew over Zenor from where Dask had been.

"Kindan, he vanished!"

"He went *between*," Kindan corrected. "Come on and help me tidy his bed. There should be some fresh straw near you."

"*Between?* You mean just like dragons?" Zenor looked from the spot where the watch-wher had

been to the lake.

Kindan glanced consideringly at his friend and shrugged. "I suppose so. I've never seen a dragon go *between*. I heard their riders tell them where to go—but Dask does it on his own. He doesn't like a crowd. He likes the bright fires in the square, so he's always going the faster way.

"Come on," he continued. "Give me a hand. He'll be back soon and then the work really starts."

Kindan was serious. They had just gotten fresh straw spread about in a satisfactory bed when another blast of chill air announced Dask's return. The watch-wher's brown skin was glistening with drops of water, and, with a happy noise, he shook himself.

"No!" Kindan bellowed. "Don't shake! We've got to get the dirt off you first."

Grabbing a long-handled brush and a bar of hard soap, Kindan directed Zenor to a bucket of water and a bucket of sand. Between them, they scrubbed the watch-wher from top to bottom, snout to tail. Both boys were wet and sweating by the time the watch-wher was clean and dry.

"There you are, Dask," Kindan said, pleased. "All clean and handsome. Just don't roll before the ceremony tomorrow."

Even in the low light, Kindan could see Dask's multifaceted eyes whirling with the green and blue of happiness.

"Whew!" Zenor breathed, sinking down to the floor by the doors. "Washing watch-whers is hard work! I wonder what it's like with dragons?"

"Harder," Kindan said. At Zenor's questioning look, he explained, "Well, dragons are bigger, aren't they? And their skin flakes and has to be oiled, too."

Kindan rose to his feet and gave Dask a hug and a pat on the neck. "Dask here doesn't need to worry about such things. He's tough!"

"I'm tired," Zenor said. "I can't imagine what it would be like to wash him all by yourself."

"We'd've been faster if your friend had helped," Kindan said.

Zenor jumped up. "I don't know what you're talking about! There's no one here but us."

"Who are you talking to?" a voice called loudly from outside the shed. It was Kaylek. "Kindan, you've got someone helping you, Dad'll skin you alive!"

Zenor vanished into the shadows as Kaylek entered, looking suspicious.

"What are you talking about, Kaylek?" Kindan demanded coyly. "Can't you see I'm just finishing?"

"In about half the time I'd've expected of you," Kaylek muttered, peering into the corners of the shed. Behind him, Kindan could see Zenor carefully move the brush he had been using out of sight.

“I’m a fast worker,” Kindan said.

“Since when?” Kaylek retorted. “I’m sure you had help. Dad’ll lynch you—you know how he feels about people spooking his watch-wher.” Kindan noticed that Kaylek never called Dask by his name.

“Whoever it is has to be nearby,” Kaylek said, eyes darting this way and that in the dark shed. “I’ll find him and then—”

A loud rattle of stones outside interrupted him.

“Aha!” Kaylek yelled and charged off in the direction of the sound.

Kindan waited until Kaylek’s steps had faded into the distance before speaking again. “I think it’s all right now,” he said to Zenor at last. “But you’d better leave.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d better,” Zenor agreed.

“And thank your friend for making that diversion. I was sure that Kaylek was going to find you.”

Zenor drew a breath as if to argue but let it out again in a sigh and left, shaking his head. Kindan listened to Zenor’s footsteps as they faded in the distance, heading back toward the square. Then Kindan bowed to Dask, said good-bye, and closed the shed.

Outside he paused. He turned his head in the direction he had heard the rattle come from. It was from a spot just a bit off the regular track between the mines and the square. For a long while he stood trying to pierce the dark with his eyes. If he were bonded with a watch-wher, like his father was with Dask, he could have asked his watch-wher to see who was out there. Finally, Kindan gave up and made a guess.

“Thank you, Dalor,” he said toward the darkness, as he headed back toward his bed.

Not long after he had left, a soft voice giggled.

CHAPTER II



*Its skin is bronze, its eyes are green;
It's the loveliest dragon I've ever seen.*

“Wake up, sleepyhead!” Sis shouted at Kindan. Kindan squirmed further into the warm blanket. Abruptly his pillow was pulled out from under his head. He groaned, startled by the sudden movement.

“You heard Sis, get up!” Kaylek said, roughly turning his youngest brother out of the bed.

“I’m up! I’m up!” Kindan snarled. He wished he had just a bit more time to remember his dream. Momma was in it, he was sure.

Kindan never told anyone about his dreams of his mother, not after the first time. He knew that his mother had died giving birth to him; he couldn’t help knowing, because his brothers and sisters practically blamed him for it. But Sis—and his father, who spoke so rarely—both said that it wasn’t his fault. Sis told Kindan how big a smile his mother had had when she held him in her arms. “He’s beautiful!” his mother had said to his father. And then she had died.

“Your mother wanted you,” Danil had told him once after Kindan had come home crying because his big brothers had told him that no one had wanted him. “She knew the risks, but she said you’d be worth it.”

“Ma said you wouldn’t need much looking after,” Sis had said another time, “but you’d be worth it.”

This morning Kindan didn’t feel worth much of anything. He scrambled to get his clothes on, washed his face in cold water in the basin, and rushed to the breakfast table.

“Throw the water out and clean the basin,” Jakris growled, grabbing him by the ear and spinning him back toward their room. “You’re the last one who used it.”

“I’ll get it later!” Kindan yelped.

Jakris turned and blocked the exit. “You will not—you’ll get it now or Sis’ll give it to you later.”

Kindan frowned and turned back to the washbasin. With his back to Jakris he stuck out his tongue. His bigger brother would have decked him if he had seen him.

Taking care of the washbasin ensured that Kindan was the last in to breakfast. He looked around for something to eat. There was *klah* to drink—cold. Some cereal, but not much, and no milk to go with it. The others hurried away, but Sis turned them back with either a growl or a frown, so they couldn’t get away with leaving their dishes for him.

“You’ll eat well tonight, Kindan,” Sis said to him as he mournfully spooned his breakfast. Her eyes were particularly bright.

Kindan was confused for a moment, but then he remembered—there was a wedding tonight. Sis had a wedding.

“Now, get out of here, you’ve chores to do,” she said, shoving him affectionately out of the kitchen.

First thing out the door, Kindan stopped. Sis hadn’t assigned chores like she usually did. He turned back just as she came charging out.

“Go ask Jenella,” Sis said scoldingly before Kindan could even open his mouth.

Jenella was Natalon’s wife. As she was very pregnant, Sis had stood in for her ever since the two families had moved up to the Camp, six months ago.

Kindan knew that there was no one worse than his own sister in a temper so he scuttled off immediately. He concentrated so hard on avoiding his sister’s temper that his legs took him up to the mine entrance before he realized it. Rather than turning straight back, Kindan paused, eyeing the mine entrance thoughtfully.

Usually, one of the first tasks of the day for the Camp’s youngsters was to change the glowbaskets in the mines. Today, because of the wedding, the mines were closed—except for those unlucky enough to have the job of working the pumps—so Kindan found himself in front of the mine shaft wondering whether the task had been canceled for the day. Even though no one would be mining that day and the night, Kindan decided that surely it made sense to change the glows so that the miners wouldn’t have to go down into a dark mine the next day.

Kindan heard voices coming from inside the mine. He couldn’t make out what was being said, but he could tell that one was a man’s deep voice and the other a young girl’s voice.

“Hello!” he called into the mine, thinking that perhaps some of the caravanners had gone for a look at the mine.

The voices stopped. Kindan cupped an ear with his hand, straining to hear any sounds. Late at night when the Camp's cook fire had burned down to mere embers and the chill winds from the mountain howled through the Camp's square, the older boys told all sorts of scary stories about ghosts in the mine. Kindan was *sure* that these weren't ghosts, but all the same, he wasn't too interested in going into a dark cave by himself.

"Hello?" he called again, hesitantly. He certainly wouldn't want to invite any ghosts to him.

There was no answer. Presently Kindan heard the steady sound of one pair of boots on the dirt floor of the cave. He stepped back from the entrance. A darker shadow appeared, then resolved itself into human form.

It was an old, silver-haired man whom Kindan had never seen before. The man looked haggard and his eyes were bleak, as though all the laughter had been leached from them and all the life had seeped away. Kindan took another step back and prepared to run. The child in the mine—the one with the girl's voice. Had this specter eaten it?

"You there!" the man called out.

As soon as he heard the deep, rich voice, Kindan knew that the man was no ghost. The accent was clearly from Fort Hold, and it held the cultured overtones of the Harper Hall.

"Yes, Master?" Kindan answered, not knowing what rank the man held and guessing that it was better to err on the side of caution. Was this Harper Crom's Master Harper come to check on Journeymen Jofri? Or was he a Harper with the traders?

"What are you doing here?" the old man barked.

"I was here to see if the glows needed changing," Kindan said.

The old man frowned, brows furrowed tightly. His head swung around to look over his shoulder, but he stopped the movement almost immediately. "I was told," he said, "that no one was going to be up here today."

"Yes, there's a wedding," Kindan told him. "But I wasn't sure if Natalon wanted the glows changed."

"Well, they certainly could do with it," the old man said. The sound of a small rock falling behind him made him turn around and back again. "It can be quite dangerous down there. But I think—wait a minute!—are you Kindan?"

"Yes, sir," Kindan replied, wondering why the old man knew his name. He couldn't have known about . . . Kindan compiled a far too lengthy list of possible misdeeds before the old man made his next response.

"You are supposed to be at the Harper's quarters in about fifteen minutes, young man," the old man said. As Kindan turned to run back down to Jofri's cottage, the old man added, "Ready to sing and n

breathless!”

“I will be!” Kindan shouted back over his shoulder, running as fast as his feet could carry him.

As soon as Kindan was out of earshot, the old man turned back to the mine entrance. “You can come out now, he’s gone.”

He heard the sound of light feet approaching the cave’s entrance, but they stopped before the owner came into view.

“I know a shortcut, if you’d like.”

“Through the mountain?” he asked.

“Of course.” After a moment’s silence, sensing the old man’s reticence, the girl added, “I’ve used loads of times. I’ll show you.”

The old man smiled and started back into the cave. “Well, with your guidance, I’ll be happy to take your shortcut,” he said, making a short bow to the figure in the dark. “Would I be right in guessing that it will get us there before the lad?”

The girl’s answer was a mischievous giggle.

Kindan arrived outside the Harper’s cottage completely breathless. Zenor was already waiting.

“Kindan, you’re just in time,” Zenor said. “If you’d’ve been a few more minutes late—” He broiled off, his eyes full of dark foreboding.

“What is it?”

“The Master wants to hear us sing,” Zenor said. “He’s already told Kaylek that he can’t sing at the wedding.”

Kindan’s face lit up at the thought of Kaylek’s reaction. Kindan wasn’t surprised: Kaylek’s singing voice sounded like a gravel slide, and he had no ability whatsoever to stay in tune. Whenever pressed about it by his friends, Kaylek would swear that he didn’t like singing and that, anyway, he’d been a perfect singer until his voice had changed. But Kindan knew from tales he heard from his other brothers and Sis that neither of those statements were true; Kaylek loved to sing but had not one jot of musical ability.

Silstra had tried to figure ways to get all her siblings involved in her wedding, and her choice of Kaylek to sing was probably no more than a combination of nerves and running out of ideas.

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