

THE RENEGADES OF PERN

ANNE MCCAFFREY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE
RENEGADES
OF PERN

Anne McCaffrey

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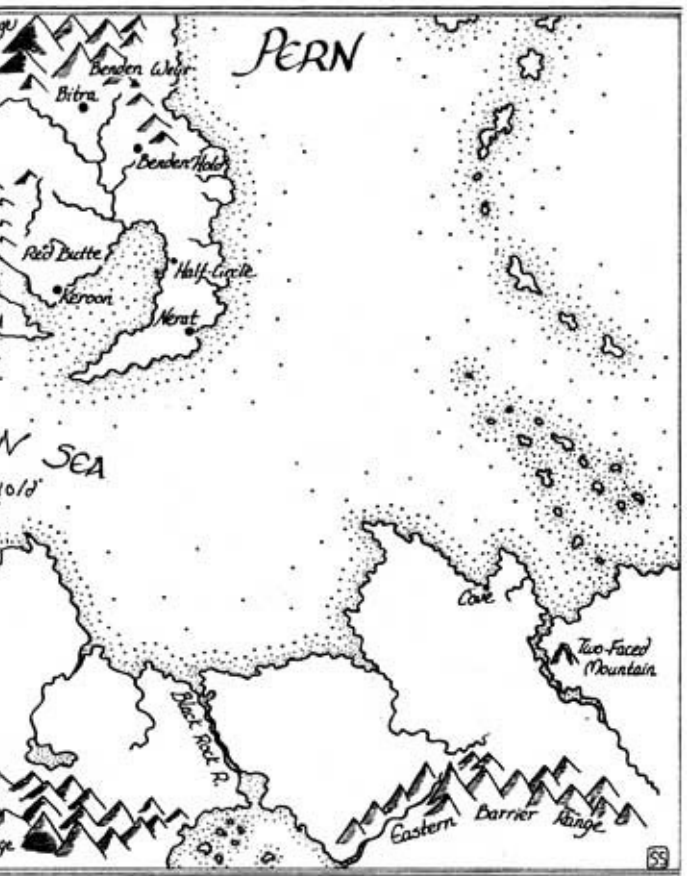
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JOHN GREENE

Maréchal de logis

1958–1988

“O, Johnny, why did they do ye?”



WHEN MANKIND FIRST discovered Pern, third planet of the sun Rukbat in the Sagittarian Sector, they paid little attention to the eccentric orbit of the Red Star, another satellite in the system.

Settling the new planet, adjusting to its differences, the colonists spread out across the southern, more hospitable continent. Then disaster struck in the form of a rain of mycorrhizoid organisms, which voraciously devoured all but stone, metal, and water. The initial losses were staggering. But fortunately for the young colony, “Thread,” as the settlers called the devastating showers, was not entirely invincible: Both water and fire would destroy the menace on contact.

Using their old-world ingenuity and genetic engineering, the settlers altered an indigenous life form that resembled the dragons of legend. Bonded with a human at birth, these enormous creatures became Pern’s most effective weapon against Thread. Able to chew and digest a phosphine-bearing rock, the dragons could literally breathe fire and sear the airborne Thread before it could reach the ground. Able not only to fly but to teleport, as well, the dragons could maneuver quickly to avoid injury during their battles with Thread. And their telepathic communication enabled them to work with their riders and with each other to form extremely efficient fighting units.

Being a dragonrider required special talents and complete dedication. Thus the dragonriders became a separate group—set apart from those who held the land against the depredations of Thread, or those whose craft skills produced other necessities of life in their crafthalls.

Over the centuries, the settlers forgot their origins in their struggle to survive against Thread, which fell across the land whenever the Red Star’s eccentric orbit coincided with Pern’s.

There were long intervals, too, when no Thread ravaged the land, when the dragonriders in their Weyrs kept faith with their mighty friends until they would be needed once more to protect the people they were pledged to serve.

One such long interval is coming to a close at the opening of our story; though with a decade to go before another Pass of the Red Star, few are yet aware of its ominous approach. Indeed, few believe Thread will ever fall again. And in the false comfort of that belief, people have grown complacent. With that complacency, discord has arisen in Hold and Hall, setting in motion a chain of events that results in renegades on Pern!

IN THE NORTHWESTERN province of High Reaches, an ambitious man has just begun a campaign of territorial acquisition that will make him the single most powerful Lord Holder on all of Pern. His name is Fax—and he will become legend.

Meanwhile, in the hills of Lemos Hold, in the eastern mountains of Pern . . .

“He’s here again,” the woman said, peering out the dust-grimed window slit when she heard the clatter of hooves on the cobbles in front of the cothold. “I tol’ ya he’d come back. You’re for it now.” There was a certain note of sly anticipation in her voice.

The slovenly man at the table glanced contemptuously in her direction. His belly was full, though he had grumbled with every mouthful that porridge was no dish to serve a grown man, and he had just decided to do a little fishing.

The metal door of the hold was vigorously pushed in, and before the cotholder could get to his feet, the room was full of determined men, shortswords prominently at their belts. Uttering little shrieks of dismay, the woman flattened herself in the corner of the inner wall, oblivious to the clatter of pans and cups that spilled from the hanging cabinet.

“Felleck, you’re out!” Lord Gedenase said in a cold, harsh voice. He stood, fists on his belt, his dark leather riding cloak fanned by his arms, making him appear much larger than life.

“Out? Out, Lord Gedenase?” Felleck stammered, staggering to his feet. “I was just going out, Lord, to fish for our evening meal—” His voice changed to a plaintive whine. “For we’ve naught to eat but boiled grains.”

“Your hunger no longer concerns me,” Lord Gedenase replied, swiveling to examine the filthy room with its rickety furnishings. His nostrils flared briefly in disgust at the musty smell of accumulated damp and dirt. “Four times you have failed to tithe, despite generous help from my steward to replace your moldy seed grain, your broken, misused tools, and even a draft animal when yours developed foot rot. Now, out! Gather your belongings and get out!”

Felleck was stunned. “Out?”

“Out?” the woman’s voice quavered.

“Out!” Lord Gedenase stepped aside and gestured sternly toward the door. “You have exactly one half hour in which to gather your possessions”—the Lord Holder’s eyebrows twitched with scorn as he glanced about the sordid dwelling—“and leave!”

“But—but—where will we go?” the woman cried despairingly, but she was already gathering up pots and pans.

“Wherever you wish,” the Lord Holder said. Turning on one heel, he strode out of the place, kicking aside a pot lid. He motioned to the steward to oversee the eviction, mounted his runnerbeast, and rode off.

“But we have always been beholden to Lemos,” Felleck said, sniveling and twisting his face into a piteous expression.

“Every hold supports itself and tithes to the Lord Holder,” the steward said impassively, folding his arms. “Yours doesn’t! Twenty-five minutes left!”

Sobbing loudly, the woman dropped her apron-load of pots and covered her ears to block out the implacable verdict. Felleck cuffed her, snarling in bitter rage. “Get the packsack, you stupid pig. Go roll up the bedding. Get moving!”

The eviction was accomplished on time, and Felleck and his woman were driven, staggering under their burdens, down the narrow track, away from their cothold. Felleck turned back once, before the bend hid his former home from sight. He saw the wagon then, drawn up near his empty beasthold; saw a woman holding a babe, an older child beside her on the seat; saw the neatly packed belongings, the sturdy burden beasts yoked to the trace, the milk animal tied to the wagon gate, and he cursed fluidly and fiercely as he pushed the stumbling woman before him.

Under his breath he vowed vengeance on Lord Gedenase—and on all at Lemos Hold—for his humiliation. They would be sorry, they would! He would make every man jack of them sorry!

Fax’s lightning campaign has been successful: He has made himself Lord Holder of High Reaches, Crom, Nabol, Keogh, Balen, Riverbend, and Ruatha, having gained possession by dint of marriage or murder or the ferocity of his marauders. Tillek, Fort, and Boll have called in every able-bodied man, aimed them, and drilled them in defensive skills. Beacon fires have been placed on hilltops, and fleet-mounted messengers recruited to bring word of any incursion into their borders. But news of those calamitous events has seeped slowly to the more isolated holdings . . .

Dowell always knew when visitors were on their way up the wagon track to his mountainhold: shod hooves echoed as noisy clatters from the next valley down.

“A messenger comes, Barla,” he called to his wife as he laid down the plane with which he had been smoothing a fine piece of fellis wood, destined to be part of a ladder-back chair he was making for Lord Kale at Ruatha Hold. He frowned as his ears told him that more than one rider was on the way—and at speed. Then he shrugged, for guests were infrequent, and Barla loved visitors. Though she never complained, he often thought he had been unfair to take her so far up the mountains during spring and summer.

“I’ve fresh bread and a bowl of berries,” she said, coming to the entrance of their hold. At least he had given her a right smart and commodious dwelling, he often assured himself, with three large

rooms cut into the rockface on ground level, and five above. There was a good beasthold for their runners and the two burden animals he used to haul timber from the woods, and a drying loft for the timber he had seasoning.

The visitors, ten or more men, brought their animals roughly to a halt in the clearing. One look at the unfamiliar sweaty faces and Barla stepped instinctively behind Dowell, wishing that her face was smudged with flour or soot.

The leader's eyes narrowed, and his smile turned ugly. "You're Dowell?" The leader did not wait for a reply as he dismounted. "Search the place," he snapped over his shoulder.

Dowell's fingers curled, wishing he had the plane still in his right hand, but he straightened his shoulders and sought his wife's hand with his left. "I am Dowell. And you?"

"I'm from Ruatha Hold. Fax is now your Lord Holder."

Dowell heard Barla's swift intake of breath, and he squeezed her hand hard. "I had not heard that Lord Kale had died. Surely—"

"Nothing's sure in this world, carpenter." The man strolled casually up to the pair, his eyes all the time on Barla. She wanted to bury her face in Dowell's shoulder to escape the look in those lewd eyes.

Suddenly the troop leader hauled her away from Dowell's side, cackling as he forced her to turn and turn and turn until she was dizzy and had to grasp the nearest thing—him—to stay upright. To her horror, he pulled her against him. She could feel the gritty dust of his sleeve and shoulder, and saw the dried blood on his collar. Then his stubbled, coarse-skinned face was far too close and a blast of his foul breath hit her before she could seal her eyelids shut and avert her head.

"I wouldn't, were I you, Tragger," someone said in a low voice. "You know Fax's orders, and she's already plowed for this year."

"No one's hiding, Tragger," another man said, pulling a weary runner behind him. "They're here alone."

Barla was spun free, and with a stifled cry, she lost her balance and fell heavily to the ground.

"I wouldn't, were I you, woodman," said the same low voice that had cautioned Tragger.

Fearfully, Barla looked up to see Dowell straining to reach Tragger. "No, oh no!" she cried, staggering to her feet. Those men would think nothing of killing Dowell, and then what protection would she have, with her kinsman, Lord Kale, dead?

She clung to Dowell as Tragger ordered his men to mount. He wheeled his beast, glaring at her through narrowed eyes, an evil smile drawing his lips across his teeth. Then he gestured with his arm and the troop sped down the track from the mountainhold, leaving Dowell and Barla shattered by the brief encounter.

"Are you all right, Barla?" Dowell asked, embracing her tenderly, a gentle hand on her waist.

“I’ve come to no harm, Dowell,” Barla replied, patting his hand over her gravid womb. Echoing in the silence was the next word: “yet.”

“Fax is Lord Holder of Ruatha?” Dowell muttered. “Lord Kale was in excellent health when . . . He trailed off shaking his head.

“They murdered him. I know it. That Fax! I heard about that jumped-up High Reacher. He married Lady Gemma, and it was an unpopular hurried wedding. That much the harpers said . . . quietly. They called him ambitious, ruthless.” Barla shuddered at the thought. “Could he have murdered all in Ruatha Hold? His lady? Lessa and her brothers?” She turned scared eyes on him, her expression bleak.

“If he has massacred those at Ruatha . . .” Dowell hesitated, and his fingers flexed over his wife’s stomach. “And you’re second cousin but once removed in that line.”

“Oh, Dowell, what shall we do?” Barla was truly terrified—for herself, for her babe, for Dowell and for those who had died in blood.

“What we can, wife, what we can. I’ve skill enough to see us well settled anywhere. We’ll go to Tillek. We’re not that far from its borders even now. Come, Barla. We’ll go have some fresh bread and berries, and make plans. I will not be beholden to a lord who kills to take another’s rightful place.”

Five Turns after Fax’s astounding coup, Tillek still maintains a full compliment of men-at-arms, though the novelty has long since worn thin and boredom is a fierce problem in the barracks. Wrestling contests are frequent, keeping the participants fit and offering entertainment at Gathers, when the champions of the different barracks are pitted against one another . . .

The moment the man’s head cracked ominously on the cobbles, Dushik sobered. Then, with his next breath, he was on his knees beside the body, feeling the neck vein for a pulse.

“I didn’t mean it. I swear I didn’t mean to hurt him!” Dushik cried, glancing at the ring of men around him and noting the sudden hostility of their expressions. Hadn’t they been encouraging him? Taking bets against his strength? Hadn’t he been taunted enough at this Gather? There had been plenty to hand him wineskins and flagons!

A burly Gather steward elbowed his way into the clear space of the circle. “Is he dead?”

Dushik stood up, bile rising in his throat. All he could do was nod his head. This was the third time, his wine-dulled brain reminded him. The third time.

“This is the third time, Dushik,” the steward said, tugging on his sleeve. “You’ve been warned often enough about your sort of brawling. . . .”

“I’d too much wine.” Desperately Dushik tried to assemble a defense. “The third time” meant that he would be denied the Hold, his cot, and the work he was trained to do. Three deaths from brawls, no matter how they occurred, also meant he would have no luck applying to any other Holder

He would be banned—holdless. “They—they put me up to it!” He tried to lay blame to those in the circle, the ones who had bet on his prowess as a wrestler. “They—they made me!”

Suddenly Lord Oterel himself pushed into the circle. “Now, what’s this?” He looked from Dushik to the motionless body on the cobbles. “You again, Dushik? The man’s dead? Then, off with you, Dushik. The Hold is closed against you. All Holds are closed against you. Pay him off, steward, and escort him to the High Reaches border. Fax uses men of his sort!” Oterel snorted with contempt. “Clear this up. I don’t want an unpleasantness to spoil the Gather!” He turned on his heel, and the circle respectfully parted to let him pass.

“He didn’t listen to me,” Dushik cried, turning vainly to the steward. “He didn’t understand.”

“Three men dead because you won’t hold your punches, Dushik, is one too many. You heard Lord Oterel.”

Suddenly three more strong stewards bracketed Dushik. He was marched to the barracks, allowed to collect his gear, then locked for the night in the small holding cell situated at the back of the beasthold. Even Lord Oterel would not force men to forego a Gather to escort an unwanted man to the border. But the next morning, those who escorted him were neither talkative nor forgiving for the journey.

“Don’t come back to Tillek, Dushik,” the leader said in farewell. But at the last moment he handed over Dushik’s sword and long knife and a sack of journey rations.

After seven Turns, Fax’s usurpation has become more or less accepted—except by the Harper Hall. The Masterharper, Robinton, has been hearing unsettling reports from his harpers that make him mistrust this uneasy peace. Fax is ambitious, and with all but Ruatha Hold prospering under his harsh management, it is entirely possible that he will look eastward, to the broad and fertile plains and the mines of Telgar. As if aware of Harper Hall scrutiny, Fax has begun to turn harpers out of his Holds and Halls for the most spurious reasons. Whatever teaching the harpers have provided, Fax says, the young will learn from his deputies. He has challenged authority—and succeeded. What will he challenge next?

As if there is an infection in the very winds that sweep the Northern Continent, others are challenging long-established ways. In Ista Hold, certainly one of the most conservative, a young man defies parental authority . . .

“I don’t care if everyone else in the family have been happy on High Palisades Island for every generation since the First Record—I want to see what the mainland is like!” Toric separated the last five words with emphatic thumps on the long kitchen table. His father, a Masterfisher, regarded him with shocked amazement that gradually turned to frozen anger as his second son openly—and in front of the younger children and the four apprentices—defied him. “There’s a lot more to Pern than this island and Ista!”

“Oh, Toric,” his mother began, appalled. She had argued with him, trying to soothe him, and had even tried to placate her angry husband.

“And how, might I ask,” his father began, holding up his hand to stem his wife’s interference, “do you think you’re going to support yourself away from this hall?”

“I don’t know, Father, and I don’t care, and never fear, it won’t cause you any embarrassment because I’m not staying around this place for the rest of my life!” Toric stepped over the bench on which he had been seated for yet another unendurable meal. “There’s a whole continent out there, and I’ll see what else I’m able for. I’ve asked you fair for my journeyman’s badge. You won’t give it, so I’ll leave on the trader.”

“Leave on that filthy trader, Toric—” His father rose as his eighteen-year-old son strode to the hall door, scooping his weather-gear off its peg. “Leave,” he bellowed, “and you will have neither harbor nor hold, and all men’s hands will be turned against you. I’ll have the harpers read it!”

The door slammed shut so hard that the latch bounced up, and it swung open again on squeaky hinges. The others at the dining table simply sat, stunned at such an unexpected drama at the end of a tiring day. The Masterfisher waited, hearing the progress of steel-tipped bootheels departing across the exterior flagstones. When all sound had died away, he sat down again. Looking across to his oldest son, who was still gape-mouthed, he said in a tight, bitter voice, “That hinge wants oil, Brevier. See to it after your meal.”

His wife could not completely choke back a sob of dismay, but her husband paid her no attention. He never mentioned Toric’s name again, not even when five of his remaining nine children followed their brother, irrevocably, off High Palisades Island.

Keroon Hold—Winter—two Turns later . . .

“Light-fingered she is, and I’ve told you that time and again, husband. She’s not to work in this hold ever again.”

“But it’s winter, wife.”

“Keita should have thought of that when she filched a whole loaf of bread. What does she think we are? Stupid? Rich enough to stuff her guts with more than she needs to do her work? Out she goes tonight. She’s holdless as of this moment. Let her remember that, as well. She’ll have no recommendation from Greystones if there is anyone fool enough to hire the slut.”

At Keroon, on the first high spring tides in that eighth Turn after Fax’s rise to prominence, a battered ship finally makes safe harbor, her rigging torn, mainmast snapped, bowsprit broken; and several of the crew vow to find a less hazardous occupation. The third mate cannot look forward to employment of any kind . . .

“Now, Brare, I’ve added a few credits to what’s yours by rights, but a footless man’s no good in the rigging, nor on the nets, and that’s a fact. I’ve asked my brother who’s Portmaster to see you healed and healthy. Talk it over with him, see what work’s available in the port holds. You were

always a good man with your hands. I've a good word for you, too, in this recommendation. Any Lord Holder will see you're an honest man who's had a trade taken from him by injury. You'll find a place I'm sorry to have to beach you, Brare, real sorry."

"But you're doing it anyway, aren't you, Master?"

"Now, let's not be bitter, fisherman. I'm doing my best for you. It's a tough enough life for an able-bodied man, let alone . . ."

"Say it, Masterfisherman, say it. Let alone for a cripple!"

"I wish you wouldn't be so bitter!"

"Leave it to me then, Master, and get back to your able-bodied fisherfolk! You'll be missing the tide if you wait too long!"

All through the summer, rumors of impending Threadfall are spreading. Someone suggests that Benden's lone Weyr is circulating the rumors, but that idea is scoffed at: The precious dragonriders Benden never show their faces outside the old mountain. And yet the possibility of Thread's return begins to dominate all conversations . . .

As the harvest in Southern Boll was particularly heavy that year, Lady Marella and her steward were constantly in the groves and fields, overseeing the pickers who were prone to slack off if given any opportunity.

"We must be thrifty with the earth's products," Lady Marella kept repeating, urging the pickers to increase their efforts despite the heat of the waning summer days. "Lord Sangel expects a fair day's labor for the marks he pays."

"Aye, he's wise to be storing the plenty while the skies are clear," one of the foremen remarked, picking hand over hand at a rate that astonished Lady Marella.

"Now I want no talk of that nature here . . ."

"Denol, Lady Marella," the man filled in courteously enough. "And it would settle our minds some, lady, if you could assure us that sort of talk is nothing but sundream."

"Of course it is!" she said in her most decisive tone. "Lord Sangel has looked into the matter thoroughly, and you can rest assured that Thread will not return."

"Lord Sangel's a good and provident man, Lady Marella. You ease my mind. Pardon me for mentioning it, lady, but iffen someone, say like some of the children, could bring us empty sacks, and iffen the cart could come between the rows to pick up the full ones, we could move much faster down these rows."

"Now, Denol," the steward began in an admonitory tone.

“No, no, that’s not a bad idea,” Lady Marella replied, noting the numbers of men and women plodding to the top row with full sacks. ~~“Only children above ten Turns,” she added, “for the younger ones must attend the harper and learn their traditional ballads.”~~

“And we appreciate their opportunity, Lady Marella,” Denol said, his hands darting with incredible speed from the fruit to the sack in front of him. “Moving about as we has to means they don’t get their learning. Tradition means a lot to me, lady. It’s the backbone of our world.”

His sack was full, and he respectfully bowed as he trotted down the row to deposit it on the cart and pick up an empty sack. He was back and picking again within seconds, moving with diligent energy.

She went on down the rows, noting how often pickers had to leave their rows, the steward silent behind her. When they were out of earshot, she turned to him. “Implement the change tomorrow. It would speed things up. And give that man an extra mark for his suggestion.”

The steward kept his eye on Denol throughout the harvesting, somewhat annoyed that he had not had the idea himself. But he could never catch Denol slacking the pace he set, either among the bushes, or in the groves, or when they started the backbreaking labor of digging the tubers. Denol still logged in more sacks than any other picker. The steward had to concede that the man was an excellent worker.

When the harvest was done, Denol approached the steward. “If my work has been satisfactory, steward, is it possible that me and my kin could stay on here over the winter? There’s still a lot to be done with the pruning and wintering of the land.”

The steward was startled. “But you’re a picker. You’ll be needed next at Ruatha.”

“Oh, I won’t go back there, not no way, steward,” Denol said, looking apprehensive. “Ruatha’s no place to go anymore since Lord Fax took it.”

“But there’s Keroon . . .”

“Aye, and the new lord’s a fair Holder. But I’ve a mind to settle.” He glanced up at the sky. “I know what the lady said, steward, that we wasn’t to pay any mind to the gossip, but, steward, I can’t get it out of my mind now. What with my nippers coming home and practicing their Harper Ballads and reminding me of what can happen does Thread fall.”

The steward was frankly contemptuous. “Harper ballads are for teaching children their duty to hall and hold . . .”

“And Weyr. And they’re smart ones, my nippers, steward, to be brought up in a trade, not wandering where Thread could fall out of the skies on them and eat them up like they was no better than ripe fruit.”

The steward felt a shiver go down his spine. “Now, then, you heard Lady Marella tell you to stop such gossip.”

“Would you speak to the lady for me, please, steward?” Denol slipped the bonus mark into the

steward's hand, his look imploring, his manner suitably self-effacing. "You know I'm a hard worker. So's my woman and my oldest son. We'd work harder still for a chance to stay in such a fine hold as this. Finest one this side of the world."

"Well, I don't suppose there'd be any harm in your staying the winter . . . provided—" The steward swung a warning finger on the man. "—you do work hard and show no disrespect. And stop that nonsense about Thread."

By the autumn of the ninth Turn, the rumors are well spread: whispered in Gathers, on back roads, in wine cellars, in kitchens and lofts. Trouble is coming, and not just that this Turn's harvest is unaccountably poor after last Turn's bounty. But then, Keroon has experienced grave drought, and Nerat terrible torrents, and two mines in Telgar have collapsed—so the pessimists are certain that this is only the start of some tremendous calamity . . .

"There'll be a Pass?" Ketrin first stared at the carter, then frowned. "They said Thread would never come again. I don't believe you." He knew Borgald as a pragmatic, unimaginative sort, and a responsible carter, worried only about his precious burden beasts, the great horned bullocks that pulled his wagons. But the trader sounded convinced.

"I don't *like* to believe it," Borgald replied, looking dolefully at the line of carts as the drivers urged them into Telgar Hold. He nodded, absently counting, as each passed. "But with so many people sure it will come, I believe in taking precautions."

"Precautions?" Ketrin repeated, giving Borgald a startled look. "What precautions could you take against Thread? Do you *know* what Thread can do? Drop out of a clear bright sky on a man and eat him, boots, balls, and all. It'd devour your biggest herdbeast quick as you could snap your fingers. Start at one end of a prime field of wheat and roll across it, leaving not so much as a straw!" Ketrin shuddered. He was scaring himself with that old harper description of Thread devastations.

Borgald gave a snort. "Like I said, I'd take precautions. Just like my great-greats when they were hauling. The Amhold train has serviced holds since the very first Pass, and Thread didn't stop my ancestors. It won't stop me."

"But . . . Thread kills . . ." Ketrin was becoming worked up over the mere thought of its return to Pern's skies.

"Only if you get a direct hit; and no fool stays *out* in it."

"It eats through trees and flesh and anything not stone or metal . . ." Then Ketrin made a dismissive gesture. "Nah, can't be true. You've been too long on the track, Borgald, to listen to fool's talk. And I don't take it kindly that you're spilling such tripe at me."

"'Tain't tripe!" Borgald replied, sticking his chin out defensively. "You'll see. But don't worry. I'll still haul your supplies up from Keroon and Igen. I'll be safe with my precautions. I'll put thin metal sheets over our carts and shelter the animals in caves. Thread won't score man nor beast in the Amhold train."

Ketrin shuddered as if he felt the hot score of Thread down his back.

“You holders,” Borgald added with good-natured scorn, “you have it too easy. Thick walls and deep passages”—he gestured to the mighty prow of Telgar Hold—“make you soft and easily scared.”

“Who’s scared?” Ketrin drew himself up. “But you wouldn’t have any place to shelter if Thread caught you out across the plains.”

“There’s mountain routes to take—longer, you understand, but never so far from caves. Look you, though.” Borgald rubbed his chin. “It’s going to raise the cost of hauling. Extra time, change of relay stations, the expense of converting the carts—all that adds up.”

“Raise the carting costs?” Ketrin burst out laughing. “So that’s what it’s all about, my friend. Naturally you’d have to raise your charges, with all this *rumor* of Thread coming again.” He slapped Borgald affectionately. “I’ll lay you odds to evens, Borgald, that this is no interval, that Thread is gone. Ended.”

Borgald stuck out his big fist. “Done. Always knew you had some Bitran blood in you.”

They were interrupted by the hearty voice of Ketrin’s Master. “Ho there, Borgald! Had you a good trip?” He did not wait for a reply. “Are you bringing me those supplies? Here, Ketrin, bring Carter Borgald up to the Hall. Where are your manners, man?”

“I’ll trade you, Borgald,” Ketrin muttered.

In the spring of the next Turn, Fax meets his death in a duel at the hands of F’lar, rider of bronze Mnementh, and Benden Weyr goes on Search for a woman to partner the last queen egg, hardening on the Hatching Grounds. While every Lord Holder heaves a sigh of relief for the death of the tyrant, they find themselves uneasy at this resurgence of the dragonriders. For though the rumors about the return of Thread died down during the winter, the Search has revived them, reminding folk of all they once owed to the dragonriders. In some folk, Fax’s death and the impression of the new queen have awakened old longings and dreams . . .

“And you will not reconsider, Perschar?” Lord Vincet demanded, amazed, almost infuriated by the artisan’s continued refusal. Vincet bore in mind that the man was an absolute genius with brush and color—Perschar had faithfully touched up all the fading murals and produced perfectly splendid portraits of all his family members—but there was only so much he could, in conscience, offer the fellow. “I thought the terms of the new contract were most generous.” Vincet permitted his chagrin to border on the irritated.

“You have indeed been extremely generous,” Perschar replied with the mournful smile that one of Vincet’s daughters found affecting but which, at the moment, annoyed the Lord Holder. “I do not fault the terms of the contract or wish to haggle over incidentals, Lord Vincet. It is merely time for me to travel on.”

“But you’ve been here three Turns . . .”

“Exactly, Lord Vincet.” Perschar’s usually long face crinkled in a happy smile. “Actually the longest I have stayed in any major Hold.”

“Really?” Vincet was easily flattered.

“So it is time and a half for me to be off to a different clime, to explore more of this marvelous continent. I need stimulation, Lord Vincet, far more than I need security.” The artist bowed in a self-deprecating apology.

“Well, if travel is all you wish, take this summer off. Good season for getting about. I’ll have my Fishingmaster arrange passage for you. You wouldn’t need to be back here until—”

“Good Lord Holder, I will return when it is time to return,” Perschar said ambiguously. With a second graceful half-bow, he turned on his heel and left Vincet’s office.

It took a full hour for Vincet to realize that Perschar’s deft rejoinder had been a firm good-bye. No one had observed which of the many trails leading from Nerat’s main Hold the painter had taken. Lord Vincet was quite upset for the rest of the day. He really could not understand the fellow. Here he had a full set of rooms; a workshop where he had, it was true, trained several talented holders to his craft over the past three Turns; a seat at the high table; plenty of marks in his pocket—and three new suits of clothing, shoes and boots as required, and the use of a sturdy runnerbeast.

Eventually, having heard the artisan’s parting phrase repeated by her affronted spouse for the twentieth time in an evening, the Lady Holder of Nerat said, “He did say he’ll return when it is time, Vincet. Cease fretting. He’s gone for now. He’ll be back.”

In Telgar Hold, two Turns later, when the Lord Holders are becoming increasingly aware of and annoyed by the Weyr’s ascendance, Lord Larad is trying to make a suitable disposition of his rebellious sister . . .

“Larad, I’m your sister—your *older* sister!” Thella shouted while Larad signalled vigorously for her to lower her voice. With his eyes, he appealed to his mother to support him, but Thella raged on. “You will *not* marry me off to some niggardly, foulmouthed, snaggle-toothed senile old man, just because Father agreed to such a travesty in his dotage.”

“Derabal is not senile or snaggle-toothed, and at thirty-four he is scarcely old,” Larad replied behind clenched teeth. Being a brother, even half-brother, he did not appreciate the defiant stance of her magnificently proportioned body, athletic and fit in her riding gear. To him, the high color in her cheeks, the flash of the hazel eyes, and the contemptuous curve of her sensuous mouth meant merely another stormy session with her. It did not help that she was within a half span of his own height, so that in the high-heeled long riding boots she preferred she was eye-to-eye with him. At that moment he would have liked to throttle her challenge and reduce her to compliance with the good beating that was long overdue. But Lord Holders did not thrash dependent kinswomen.

Thella had always been the most contentious of his sisters, both half- and full-blooded: argumentative, arrogant, willful, and stubborn, making far too much use of the freedom their father

had granted his adventurous and daring daughter. Larad had sometimes suspected that their father had almost preferred Thella, with her aggressive high-handed manner, to his son's more considerate, reflective ways. Lord Tarathel had even looked the other way when Thella had beaten a young drudge to death. He had, however, taken her to task for riding a promising young runner into the ground. Valuable animals could not be wasted.

Or perhaps as Larad's mother had suggested, Lord Tarathel had given the girl special consideration since her mother had died giving birth to her. No matter the reason, the old lord had encouraged his first-born child in her hunting, riding, and exploring pursuits; it had amused Tarathel to encourage her to defy convention. Thella was also eleven months Larad's senior, and she made as much of that seniority as she, a daughter, could. She had even challenged Larad at the Conclave of Lord Holders, demanding that she, Tarathel's first born, be considered first for the Holdership. She had been politely, in most cases, and dismissively, in others, told to take her "rightful" place with her stepmother, sisters, and aunts. Telgar Hold had rung for weeks with her complaints at such injustice. The drudges bore new lash marks daily as she vented her frustration, and some fled the main Hold on any pretext they could invent.

"Derabal is a minor holder, not even a lord . . ."

"Derabal holds an impressive spread from river to mountain, my girl, and you'll have more than enough to occupy you if you would *deign*"—Larad allowed some of his feeling to color that word—"to marry the man. His offer is in good faith, you know. . . ."

"So you keep telling me."

"The jewels he offered as a bridal present are magnificent," Lady Fira put in with some envy. She had nothing half as good in her own coffers, and Tarathel had not been a stingy man.

"Have them!" Thella swept that consideration aside with a contemptuous flick of one hand. "But I will not accompany his guard of honor—" She sneered openly. "—back to Hilltop Hold as a meekly submissive bride. And that, my dear Lord Holder,"—for emphasis she slapped her riding stick against her high leather boot—"is my final word on the subject."

"Yours, perhaps," Larad replied in such a harsh tone of voice that Thella looked at him in surprise. "But not mine." Before she could guess his purpose, he grabbed her by the arm and marched her to her sleeping room. Giving her a hard push inside, he closed the door and locked it.

"You are a right fool, Larad!" Thella called through the thick panel. Son and mother heard the thud of something heavy being thrown against the door, and then there was silence, not even broken by the curses with which Thella usually answered confinement.

The following morning, when Larad relented enough to allow food and drink to be brought to Thella, there was no sign of the recalcitrant girl. Thella's gowns remained neatly folded in their chest but all of her rough-wear gear was gone, along with the bed fur. On investigation, four runnerbeasts—three good mares already in foal and Thella's strong and willful gelding—were missing from the beasthold, as well as a variety of gear and sacks of journey food. Two days later Larad found that several bags of marks were missing from the safe-hold in his office.

Discreet inquiries by Larad revealed that Thella had been seen leading a string of horses, heading southeast to the dividing range between Telgar and Bitra. There was no further report of her after that.

To Derabal, Larad sent a younger half-sister, a rather sweet and certainly biddable girl who was quite happy to have a decent hold of her own, and a husband who would give her such beautiful gems. Certainly Derabal would later thank him for a remission from the tempers and terrors of Thella.

When Thread did, indeed, begin to fall on Pern, and the Lord Holders threw all support behind the Benden Weyrleaders, Lady Fira worried about Thella.

When she first heard reports of rather peculiar thefts occurring along the eastern mountain trails and the Igen River track that carters had been forced by Threadfall to use, she nursed very private suspicions about Thella. For a long while, Larad never once connected the thefts with his half-sister. He persisted in blaming the holdless, the dissenters, those turned out of hold and hall for violent acts or robberies: the renegades of Pern.

Eastern Telgar Hold,
Present (Ninth) Pass, First Turn,
Third Month, Fourth Day

JAYGE HAD HOPED his father would stay longer at Kimmage Hold. He did not want to leave as long as he and his shaggy mare were doing so well in races against the holder boys' runners. Fairex looked so clumsy with her winter hair that it had been easy to fool the other lads into wagering against her. And to give the Kimmage boys their due, they had not warned off any of the outholders who came in with their fathers to visit the main Hold. So Jayge now had a most satisfactory collection of credit bits, almost enough to trade for a saddle when next their wagons encountered those of the Plater clan. He needed only another race or two—just a seven day more.

The Lilcamps had been at Kimmage all through the wet spring. Why did his father want to move out now? No one argued with Crenden. He was fair but tough, and although he was not a very big man, anyone who had experienced his fist—and Jayge still did at times—knew that he was far stronger than he looked. Just as a holder, major or minor, was the final authority on his property, so Crenden was obeyed by his kin. A shrewd trader, a hard worker, and honest in all his dealings, he was welcome in those smaller, less accessible holds that were unable to get to the main Gathers on a regular basis. To be sure, some Crafts sent travelers on regular routes to take orders for their Halls, but they rarely ventured up the narrow tracks into the mountains or across broad plains too far from water. Not all of Crenden's goods bore a Crafhall stamp but they were well-made, and cheaper than Crafhall products. Crenden also had a fine memory for what his clients might need and carried a varied stock, limited only by the space of the wagons.

So, early that morning, bright and clear, Crenden gave the order to break camp, and by the time hot breakfast had been eaten and everything was once again neatly stored in the wagons, the teams were harnessed and all the Lilcamps stood ready to move out.

Jayge took his position by the lead wagon; now that he was ten, he rode courier for his father on the nimble Fairex.

"I admit it's a fine day, Crenden," the holder was saying, "and the weather looks to hold fair

awhile, but the roads are hub deep in mud yet. Stay until they've dried out enough to make travel easier."

"And let other traders make it to the Plains Hold before me?" Crenden laughed as he swung up onto his rangy mount. "Thanks to your good fodder and hospitality, my beasts—and my folk—are well fed and rested. That lumber's going to fetch a fine price at Plains, and we'd best be on our way with it. The track is downhill most of the way from here, so the mud won't be a problem. A little gentle exercise will work the winter fat off all of us, get us in shape for the hills again! You've been a good host, Childon. I'll have those new clamps for you when we're back this way in a Turn or two, as usual. Be in good health and heart in our absence." He stood in the stirrups, looking back over the train, and Jayge, seeing the look of pride on his father's face as he surveyed his clan, drew himself straighter in the saddle.

"Move 'em out!" Crenden cried, his deep voice reaching to the last of the seven wagons. As the beasts leaned into their yokes and harnesses and the wheels began to turn, there was waving and cheering from the holders lining the flagged apron in front of the entrance. Some of the holder boys raced up and down the line, yelling and snapping their drive-whips, showing off the proper *pop!* they had learned managing the Kimmage herdbeasts. Jayge, who had long since proved his prowess with the lash, kept his long whip neatly tied to his saddle horn.

Above Kimmage Hold, the hills were covered with fine stands of the timber that, lovingly nurtured and wisely logged, brought Kimmage holders their income. Once every five years they made the long journey to Keroon Hold to sell the timber that had seasoned in their work cavern. The Lilcamp clan had traded labor with Kimmage Hold for many generations, chopping and hauling timber, or, in the worst of the winter season, helping to enlarge Kimmage Hold into its rock fastness. Now the trees that the Lilcamps had felled five Turns before were loaded on the wagons. A good profit would be made of that lumber.

As Jayge leaned back to check his bedroll, a lash whistled past his ear. Startled, he swiveled to catch sight of the rider going past him and recognized the holder boy he had bested in wrestling the night before.

"You missed," Jayge called cheerfully. Gardrow would have bruises today, for Jayge had given him some hard falls, but maybe the boy would not be so eager in the future to bully the little kids into doing his chores for him. Jayge hated a bully, almost as much as he hated someone who abused animals. And it had been a fair fight: the lad was two Turns older than Jayge and two kilos heavier.

"I'll match ye again when we come back, Gardrow," Jayge cried, and managed to duck out of the saddle as the other boy wheeled his pony, lash swinging above his head for another attempt.

"Unfair, unfair!" two holder boys yelled.

That caught Crenden's attention. He hauled his spirited mount back to his son. "You been fighting again, Jayge?" Crenden did not approve of any of the Lilcamp folk brawling.

"Me, Father? Do I look like I've been fighting?" Jayge concentrated on looking surprised at the question. He had never mastered the air of genuine innocence that his sister could turn on.

His father gave him one long, undeceived look and held up a scarred, thickened forefinger. “No racing now, Jayge. We’re on the move, and that’s no time for foolery. Steady in the saddle. We’ve a long day ahead of us.” Then Creden let the runner have his head and moved forward to lead.

Jayge had to fight down temptation when the holder boys begged him for one last race. “Just down to the ford? No? Then up over the spur trail? You’d be back before your father could miss you. Even the stakes mentioned were good, but Jayge knew when to obey. He smiled and, with a sigh, turned a deaf ear, even though winning would have ensured him the coveted saddle. Then one of the wagons caught a wheel in the side ditch, and he and Fairex were called to help get it back on the track. When he looked over his shoulder to ask the boys to help, they had already scattered.

Good-naturedly Jayge looped his towrope through the haul bar on the side of the wagon and urged his sturdy runnerbeast forward. The wheel came free all of a sudden, and clever Fairex danced out of the wagon’s way. Recoiling his rope and knotting it on the worn nub of his saddle horn, Jayge glanced back at Kimmage Hold, impressive in its bluff that overlooked the energetic Keroon River. On the other side the home herds grazed eagerly on the new grass. Sun warmed Jayge’s back, and the familiar creak and rumble of the wagons reminded him that they were moving on to Plains Hold where, he consoled himself, there surely would be someone who would underestimate Fairex. He would have that new saddle the very next time they passed the Platers.

Ahead of him strode his father’s big mount, leading the way along the track by the riverbank. Jayge settled himself deeper into the saddle, stretching his legs in the stirrups and only then realizing that he would need to lengthen the leathers. He must have grown a half-hand since they pulled into Kimmage Hold. Shards, if he had grown too tall, his father might switch him off Fairex, and Jayge was not sure what his father would have him up on next. Not that any of the Lilcamp runners were slugs, but they would not fool other kids the way Fairex had.

They had been several hours on the trail and were nearly ready for a nooning stop when the cry went up: “Rider coming fast!” Creden raised his arm to signal a halt, then swung his big mount around and looked back the way they had come. The messenger, racing after them, was plainly visible.

“Creden,” the eldest Kimmage son cried, yanking his runner to a stop. His message came out in gasps. “My father says—come back—all speed. Harper message.” Hauling a scroll out of his belt and thrusting it at Creden, the boy gulped, his face blanching, eyes wide with fright. “It’s Thread, Creden. Thread’s falling again!”

“Harper message? Harper tale!” Creden began dismissively until he noticed the blue harper seal on the roll.

“No, really, it’s not a tale, Creden, it’s truth. Read it yourself! Father said you’d need to believe it. I can’t. I mean, we’ve always been told that there’d never be more Thread. That’s why we didn’t even need Benden Weyr anymore, though Father’s always tithed because he’s beholden to Lemos and we’ve more than enough to do it out of charity since the dragonriders *did* protect us when we needed ___”

Creden cut the boy’s babbling off with another gesture. “Quiet, while I read.”

All Jayge could see was the black-inked words bold on the white surface, and the distinctive

yellow, white, and green shield of Keroon Hold.

“You can see it’s real, Crenden,” the boy rattled on. “It’s got Lord Corman’s seal and all. Message has been on the way for days because the runner popped a tendon and the messenger got lost trying for a shortcut. He said Thread’s fallen over Nerat, and Benden Weyr saved the forests, and there were thousands of dragonriders over Telgar for the next Fall. And we’re next.” The boy gulped again. “We’re going to have Thread right down on us and you’ve got to be inside stone walls ’cause only stone, metal, and water protect from Thread.”

Again Crenden laughed, not at all dismayed, although Jayge felt a spasm of cold uncertainty shiver down his spine. Crenden rolled the message up again and thrust it back at the boy. “Thank you, father, lad. The warning is well meant, but I’m not falling for it.” He winked at the boy good-naturedly. “I know your father’d like us to help finish that new level in the hold. Thread, indeed! There hasn’t been Thread in these skies for generations. Hundreds of Turns. Like the legends told us, it’s gone now. And we’d best be going now, too.” With a cheerful salute to the astonished boy, Crenden stood in his stirrups and roared out, “Roll ’em!”

There was such a look of total dismay and fear on the lad’s face that Jayge wondered if his father could possibly have misread the message. Thread! The very word caused Jayge to squirm in his saddle, and Fairex danced under him in response. He soothed her and argued with himself. His father would never let anything happen to the Lilcamp train. He was a good leader, and they had wintered profitably. Jayge’s pouch was not the only one that was reassuringly plump. Still, it was hard not to be scared. His father’s response had surprised him. Holder Cheldon was not the sort to play jokes; a straight man, he said what he meant and meant what he said. Crenden had often described him so. Cheldon was a good deal straighter than some holders who looked down on trains as feckless folk little better than thieves, too lazy to carve out a hold for themselves and too arrogant to be beholden to a lord.

Once, when Jayge had been in a fearful brawl and his father had given him a thorough hiding, he had justified the fight by saying that he had been defending his Blood honor.

“That’s still not a reason to fight,” his father had said. “Your Blood is as good as the next man’s.”

“But we’re holdless!”

“And what’s that to mean?” Crenden had demanded. “There’s no law on Pern that has ever said a man and his family *had* to have a hold and live in one place. We can’t invade another man’s property but there’s land no one’s even set foot on all around us. Let those who are weak or scared shiver in their four walls . . . not that we’ve to worry about Thread anymore. But, lad, we’ve been holders in our time in Southern Boll, and there’re Bloodkin living in it still who’re glad to claim us as relatives, if that’s all you need to keep from brawling, take no taunt on that score.”

“But—but Irtine said we were only one step above thieves and pandlers.”

His father had given him a little shake. “We’re honest traders, bringing good wares and news to the isolated holds that can’t always get to a Gather. We travel from inclination and choice. This is a broad and beautiful world we live in, Jayge, and we’ll see as much of it as we can. We spend long enough in one place to make friends and understand different ways of doing things. That’s far better, to my

mind, than never moving out of one valley all your born days, and never hearing a new way of speaking or a new way of doing. Keeps the brain blood circulating; shifts ideas and opens eyes and hearts.

“You’re old enough to know how welcome we are at every hold the train stops at. You worked along with us at Vesta River Hold, extending their upper story, so you know we’re not lazy folk. Now hold your head up proud. You’ve a good Bloodright. And don’t let me catch you scrapping again because someone teases you into it. Fight for a good reason, not such a damfool prideful reason. Now you’ve taken your punishment. Get to your bedroll.”

He had been only a kid then, but now he was nearly a man and had learned to ignore silly taunts. That had not stopped him from using his fists and his naturally agile body, but he had learned which fights to get into, and how to protect himself well enough to avoid the too visible marks of a brawl. And pride in his Bloodline gave him an air of confidence that only a real fool would challenge. Jayge liked the kind of life his family led: never staying long enough in one place to grow weary of it. There was always something new to see, new, friends to make, old ones to reencounter, and, for the time being, races to be won on Fairex.

The trail turned abruptly south, skirting a granite outcropping and affording a wide view of the other shore and the low foothills that would culminate in the immense Red Butte. Suddenly Jayge was conscious of the odd sky to the east, a lowering, threatening gray. He had seen plenty of bad weather in his ten Turns, but never something like that. Glancing toward his father, he saw that Creden had also noted the strange sky, slowing his mount’s walk to study the grayness.

Suddenly Readis, Jayge’s youngest uncle, came tearing up from the rear, shouting at Creden and pointing to the cloud. “That came up sudden, Cren. It’s like no weather I’ve ever seen before,” Readis cried. His mount circled Creden’s as both men scanned the horizon.

“Looks like a local storm,” Creden said, marking the discernible edges of the cloud.

Jayge had joined his father by then, and the first wagon was slowing, but Creden waved them on down the track.

“Lookit!” Jayge’s arm shot up, but Creden and Readis had also seen the flashes of fire that proceeded in bursts along the edge of the cloud. “Lightning?” He was unsure himself, for he had never seen sparks that flared and remained airborne like that. Lightning always connected with the surface!

“That’s not lightning,” Creden said. Jayge saw the color drain out of his father’s face, and his runner began jiggling under him, snorting with fear. “And it’s been awful still. Not a single wherry or snake around.”

“What is it, Cren?” His brother’s uncertainty was making Readis nervous.

“They warned us. They did warn us!” Creden hauled his runner up on its hindquarters, yelling at the top of his lungs and gesturing with his head for Readis to get to the rear. “*Get moving! Get ’em rolling! Challer, whip ’em up. Get that rig moving!*” He kept turning his mount, his eyes scanning the wooded hillside. “Jayge, get down the track. See if there’re any ledges we can shelter under. We’ve got to find some shelter. If even half of what they say about Thread is really true . . . we sure the

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