



XVII

A Day Of Glory



When the dragons informed their riders that Shimpath's clutch would Hatch that evening, the first marks of what would be a busy day for Madellon's bet-takers changed hands, and L'stev was rumoured to have cracked a smile on the basis that his prediction had been accurate almost to the hour.

The Weyr's lower caverns had been preparing for several days, and confirmation of the Hatching saw the kitchen staff mobilise. Every spare pair of hands was enlisted to help, and the wiser riders made a point of staying out of the dining hall, lest they be dragged into the fray. Supplies that had been hoarded for months came out from locked storerooms and cupboards. Food shortage or not, Madellon had no intention of staging anything but a hearty celebration of its first new dragonpairs in five Turns.

The forty-four candidates, exhibiting varying degrees of nervousness, excitement, and hysteria, found themselves rounded up, and sequestered in a teaching room. The riders L'stev had recruited to help the brand-new weyrlings with their dragonets took it in turns to mind the class while the Weyrlingmaster made his final preparations for the Impression ceremony. Madellon policy stipulated that candidates who'd been in contact with the eggs shouldn't have the opportunity to go astray at the last minute. Nobody really knew if prior contact actually influenced dragons' choice, but if it did, and a particular youngster wasn't there when the dragonets Hatched, there could be tragic consequences. The supervising rider took a regular register, and trips to necessary facilities were permitted only in pairs, that the one could make sure the other didn't vanish. L'stev stopped in at intervals to check on them, recapping his lectures on Hatching etiquette, but the candidates were otherwise totally cut off from the rest of the Weyr. The Weyrlingmaster insisted that the isolation was for their own benefit, giving them a chance to meditate on the coming ceremony and prepare themselves for the hatchlings' scrutiny, but there were those who suspected that L'stev just liked making his charges sweat.

The killing enclosure was a hive of bloody activity as, under Master Arrense's watchful eye, Madellon's Beast journeymen and apprentices slaughtered the animals chosen to become the hatchlings' first meals, and butchered the carcasses into manageable pieces. The timing of the Hatching meant that twice the usual quantity had to be prepared – the dragonets would wake after no more than eight hours, ravenous for a second feed, and that would place the meal in the middle of the night. It was too much to expect new weyrlings to have the wherewithal to prepare meat so soon after Impression and at such an hour, although by the next morning and the next feed they would be responsible for satisfying their own dragons' appetites.

Weyr children too young to Stand and too quick for the kitchen staff had been assigned the task of preparing the Hatching cavern. They doubled the number of glow baskets, and reserved

certain areas of the stands for the most important guests, placing cushions to soften the hard stone of the seats. They swept the stands and raked the sand, although no one had the nerve to approach the doubly-vigilant Shimpath too closely.

Crafters in the Healer and Dragon-healer infirmaries made their own preparations for the inevitable mishaps that accompanied a Hatching. Buckets of oil, tubs of numbweed, and tins of warming liniment for strained or pulled muscles cluttered the waiting room of the infirmary until, inevitably, someone knocked a pail over, and Master Isnan demanded that the whole lot be removed to the Hatching ground. In the dragon infirmary, Vhion briefed his assistants, including the Healer and Beast journeymen seconded to him, on likely emergencies.

Riders of all colours had started bringing in their personal guests early in the day, and by lunchtime the Weyr had begun to fill in earnest. The most important visitors – Lords, Craftmasters, Weyrleaders – wouldn't arrive until much later. The first few tentative requests for food from the kitchens were rebuffed with a ferocity that rivalled Shimpath's, but most of the early arrivals had had the wit to bring their own midday repasts. The day had stayed fine, and if not warm then at least not cold, and the Bowl was soon covered with groups of people.

Wingleaders H'ned and R'yeno had volunteered to organise transport for the family and friends of candidates, and riders with nothing better to do were sent off to a dozen different holds, halls, and cotholds with the names of those who had been invited. More conscripts were assigned as guides and ushers, charged with the often difficult task of directing gaping holders to the areas assigned to them, keeping them away from others, and ultimately herding them into the Hatching cavern when the time came.

As the afternoon wore on, the general level of excitement in the Weyr increased, and on the sands, Shimpath watched and waited, knowing that her long vigil was almost at an end.



Sarenya felt glad of the foresight that had made her bring her good clothes to the dragon infirmary. Even given the time to go back to her own quarters to change, she'd never have made it through the hordes of guests. She pushed back the loose tendrils of hair that had escaped her braid to straggle over her face, glancing around the neat infirmary.

Everything seemed to be in order, but then Vhion had been working the entire team non-stop since dawn. The Dragon-healer staff stood ready to treat the entire clutch of twenty-five, if need be.

Movement at the edge of her vision made the Beastcrafter look round, but it was just Sejanth, shifting in his sleep. The crippled dragon's condition had improved since the beginning of Saren's tenure with Master Vhion; some of the colour had returned to Sejanth's hide, a fraction of the sparkle to his eyes. The Healers had contrived to bring D'feng to see his bronze on a litter, and although the visit had been brief, it seemed to have benefited both dragon and rider.

Sarenya had had precious little time for the pedantic rider before the flaming accident that had maimed him and his bronze, but in helping with Sejanth's recovery she had developed an affection for the dragon that no one had thought would survive. She made a point of talking to him when he was awake, much as she would to any sick animal. The bronze seldom responded, but it would have been impolite to behave as if the dragon couldn't hear or understand. Someone had mucked out Sejanth's bay recently, but Sarenya inspected his tail for signs of any problems before topping up his drinking trough. Enforced inactivity did nothing for a dragon's digestion.

As she was returning the bucket to the stack beside the big water tank, Master Vhion hurried in, looking harassed. "Ah, Saren," he puffed, "I'm glad you're here. Are any of the others about?"

"Here, Master," Rymon, the Dragon-healer's assistant, called, and Katel stuck his head out from the farthest bay.

"We have another problem, on top of our unscheduled visitors." Vhion rolled his eyes expressively, and Sarenya grinned. Because the dragon infirmary was equidistant between the main entrance to the lower caverns and the Hatching sands, the arrival point for invited guests had been set up just outside, and they'd already had to shepherd out a number of lost, disoriented, or simply stupid holders. "It seems the Healerhall has sent a tithe cargo back with the dragons conveying the Kellad crowd. Skies know why – it's not due until the end of the month – but the riders didn't have the sense to take it to Isnan's people. We've got a stack of tribute outside, and it's getting in the way."

"Should we take it straight over to the Healers?" Rymon asked.

Vhion sighed. "You'll never make it through the crowds. No, just bring it in here and stack it against the wall. Try to keep it tidy. Isnan's apprentices can come and pick it up when things are back to normal."

Sarenya used the few moments it took to leave the dragon infirmary to rebraid her hair, tying the loose bits back out of her eyes. She wondered if she'd have time for a quick bath before the Hatching began. The day's work had been hard, and she didn't want to attend the celebrations covered with sand and sweat.

The Bowl overflowed with people in their Gather day best and dragons showing off the glowing sheen of recent oiling. The lake had been in such demand that half of Madellon's beasts had been forced to go out-Weyr to bathe. Up by the Star Stones, two bronzes stood watch, ready to challenge intruders, and Epherineth himself guarded the entrance to the Hatching cavern.

A brown was taking off as Sarenya and the rest of the Dragon-healer team emerged, and two greens hovered above, waiting to land. A older rider wearing the two bars of a Wingsecond and a badge depicting a brown dragon on his jacket stood checking names against a list, and assigning guides to groups of smiling but visibly awestruck holders.

The Healerhall's delivery, made conspicuous by the purple mark stamped on each item, had been piled haphazardly to one side of the landing zone. Master Vhion tutted at the careless handling, and waved his staff forward.

"It's a good thing Fetheran knows how to pack for transit, D'jalin," Sarenya heard the Dragon-healer comment to the Wingsecond as she picked up a crate bearing the legend *FRAGILE* – *handle with care*.

The Beastcrafter deposited her burden on the far side of the infirmary, and stepped out of the way as Rymon and Katel rolled a big barrel of something between them. Then it was back outside for more, and by that time Vhion had recruited several idle riders to help. The heap of sacks, bales, boxes and kegs shrank rapidly with the additional pairs of hand to help, and by Sarenya's third trip the whole load had been ferried into the dragon infirmary and out of the way.

A blue came in to land, the downdraft of his wings whipping Sarenya's braid wildly. The journeyman stuffed her hair down the back of her infirmary smock, watching the dragon's landing. His passengers disembarked on the other side, but Sarenya was more concerned with the blue himself. His hide showed dull and lustreless, and his eyes lacked even the sparkle of crippled Sejanth's. "Master..." she began, turning to Vhion.

"Hush a moment," Vhion told her, and nodded at the man and woman dismounting stiffly from the blue. "That's Lord Winstone and Lady Sadwe of Jessaf."

Sarenya watched as D'jalin greeted the ruling pair and then introduced them to the younger brown rider who would escort them to meet with the Weyrleaders. Winstone had the kind of stony, sour face that put her hackles up, and Sarenya pitied his elegant Lady.

"That blue isn't healthy, Master," she murmured.

"I know, Saren," the Dragon-healer replied. "I know."

But Vhion waited until the Jessaf pair had moved well out of earshot before striding forward to challenge the blue's rider. "K'ston, what in Faranth's name have you been doing to your dragon?"

Sarenya blinked, looking at the blue rider for the first time. So *this* was K'ston, for whom C'los had walked out on C'mine. She didn't quite glare at the blue rider, but she did look over his dishevelled appearance with a judgmental eye. She didn't like his sort – especially when it looked very much like he had been neglecting his dragon.

She wasn't close enough to hear K'ston's mumbled response to Vhion's challenge, but she did see how slowly the blue dragon's neck hide recovered when the Dragon-healer pulled at a fold of it. "Dehydrated," Vhion said, "and he's not eaten recently, or I miss my mark. I don't care how miserable you've been at Jessaf, blue rider, that's no reason to let your dragon get in this sort of state! I want him to stay in the infirmary overnight." He glanced around. "Sarenya, Bronth here can go in bay seven, so he doesn't disturb Sejanth. Make sure he empties his trough at least twice, and I'll have someone bring him something to eat. As for *you*, K'ston..."

"Shards, what's wrong with him?"

Sarenya hadn't heard Katel come out from the infirmary behind her. "He hasn't been eating or drinking," she said, not bothering to hide the disgust in her voice at the rider who had so mistreated his dragon. "We're having him in the infirmary overnight to get some sustenance into him. Faranth knows what his rider was thinking."

"K'ston's my brother," said Katel, with a defensive edge in his voice. "It's probably not his fault."

"Fault or not, I've seen healthier-looking watchwhers," Sarenya said.

The Healer journeyman shook his head. "I'll see if I can help."

Sarenya shrugged mentally and went inside to start preparing a bay.

Zafandrie, the younger of the two Healer journeymen who had been assigned to help with the dragonets, came across Sarenya as she shovelled fresh rushes into the wallow. "Vhion told me about our new patient," he said, picking up a rake.

Sarenya grinned her thanks for the help. "His rider's Katel's brother, apparently. I hope that means *he* gets to miss the feast to check up on him."

"If only life were that fair," Zafandrie sighed. "Have you got plans?"

"I'm double booked," said Sarenya. "C'mine has three or four candidates on the sands today, and I promised sevendays ago that I'd go and help him shout for them, but M'ric's asked me as well."

The Healer gave her a knowing look. "The mystery brown rider, eh? So what are you doing?"

Sarenya shrugged cheerfully. "Going with both of them."

Zafandrie laughed. "I thought as much, from you."

Sarenya set down her shovel, picked up a second rake, and helped Zafandrie finish the job. "So what about you, Zaf? Going with Bellian?"

The other journeyman nodded. "Her little sister was Searched, but Bel's not sure if that's good or bad, especially with the queen. Imagine your baby sister ending up Weyrwoman!"

Sarenya shook her head. "I can't – I only have brothers."

Zafandrie grinned. "It shows."

Between them, it didn't take long to ready the bay for Bronth, and in short order the blue was installed in his temporary wallow, encouraged to drink, and presented with a freshly killed and still kicking herdbeast, courtesy of D'jalin's brown Kyrinth.

It was fortunate that the blue dragon made so little fuss. Vhion steamed into the infirmary, calling for everyone to have their first aid kits to hand, and not to drink so much that they forgot their schedule for checking up on Sejanth throughout the evening. It was several moments before the Dragon-healer's agitation made sense, but when Vhion told them all to shut up and just listen, the reason became apparent, and the hairs on the back of Sarenya's neck stood up as she recognised the low reverberation.

"Even Sejanth," Zafandrie said softly. "Even him."

And indeed, the maimed bronze was awake, his eyes glowing an unusual shade of violet, and his soft hum building to add to the expectant chorus of hundreds, heralding that Shimpath's clutch was about to Hatch.



The latecomers who kept trying to hurry into the Hatching cavern through the ground access tunnel were getting on Leah's nerves. The Weyrlingmaster and his helpers turned them all back, of course, pointing them in the direction of the stands entrances, but the fascinated scrutiny of ignorant Holdbred gawkers, identifying the candidates by their white robes, was off-putting. A few of them even whispered *good luck* as they passed, and that annoyed Leah too. Luck had *nothing* to do with it.

L'stev and his team stood close together near the entrance, talking quietly. All but the Weyrlingmaster himself wore old clothes suitable for the messy business of helping to feed hatchling dragons, and even the long, sleeveless, open-fronted robe that L'stev wore would be easily discarded when the time came. The fine garment, in Madellon's indigo worked with silver embroidery, distinguished him from the other riders on the sands, and emphasised his importance to the ceremony.

As the light started to fade, Leah wondered if the Weyrlingmaster ever felt nervous before a Hatching. There were always things that could go wrong. A candidate who didn't step lively enough risked being mauled by a single-minded dragonet. The heat of the sand, and the stress of the occasion, had been known to cause candidates to faint in the past. And there was always the chance, however slim, that a hatchling wouldn't find anyone suitable. That was the worst thought of them all, even if it had never happened, as far as anyone knew. Well: Leah had no intention of getting in any dragonet's way; she was sure she'd rather die than faint on the sands; and with nearly four dozen candidates for two dozen eggs, there should be no chance of a hatchling remaining unpaired.

"Positive thoughts," she said aloud. "Positive, welcoming thoughts."

"All right for you to say," said Sinterlion.

Leah sighed and patted him on the back. "You'll be fine, Sinter." He looked pale, but not as sheet-white as some of the others – boys and girls both. Some of their classmates looked like they were about to be physically sick. Leah was certain *that* wouldn't help. "Just remember not to be scared."

Sinterlion swallowed hard, but nodded, his expression turning resolute. Leah patted him on the back again.

Several riders appeared from the direction of the stands entrance, all in their finest clothes, with the dragon badges few normally displayed worn proudly in the colours of their mounts. Each had been embroidered with a glittering gold S. Leah grinned in nervous relief when she

recognised C'mine among the Search riders. "I'm so glad you're here," she whispered, hugging him tightly.

"You don't need me," he told her in a soft voice that was full of pride and affection. "You're fine all by yourself." C'mine tousled her hair, and then turned to meet his other candidates. Sinterlion and Murrany stood up straight as they clasped wrists with the rider of the dragon who had Searched them, and some of their tension visibly eased with C'mine's quietly spoken words of encouragement.

"Tarshe," he greeted the girl who had been waiting a pace or two behind the others.

"C'mine," the Peninsula girl responded. The slight smile on her lips belied her reserved attitude, and even she could not help but accept when the blue rider extended his hand to her.

Leah felt a pang of jealousy: she couldn't have expected C'mine to hold off Searching any girl other than herself, but he was *her* almost-father, *her* indulgent and understanding confidant, *her* champion. Knowing that Tarshe was one of Darshanth's selections had encouraged Leah to make an effort to welcome the Peninsula girl, but Tarshe had all but rebuffed the advances of friendship. She had a way of summing up a person with a glance, and dismissing them just as rapidly. Leah didn't like being considered beneath anyone's note.

Positive thoughts, Leah told herself furiously. All the other Search riders were standing with their candidates, giving advice and encouragement, and L'stev was talking to the Weyrbred – Leah supposed, so as not to leave them out.

"How is it in there?" she asked C'mine intently.

"Full," the blue rider told her, with a smile that eclipsed the scars on his face. "I think about half of Pern's there. Don't worry," he said, as Sinterlion moaned at the thought of the crowd, "it'll all be over before you know it. Just keep your chins up, and remember, Darshanth's choices always do well." He glanced over his shoulder at L'stev, who was gesturing for the Search riders to leave. "I'll see you all afterwards. Good luck."

Somehow, coming from C'mine, luck seemed like a good thing to have on one's side. But as C'mine left, Leah ran after him. "Mine!"

The blue rider turned back. "What is it?"

Leah gripped his hands. "Da's being an idiot," she told him fiercely. "Don't forget."

C'mine's smile was momentarily sad, but he quickly banished the expression. "He and Robyn are on the far side, about halfway down, right in the middle. And I'll be with Saren, right opposite the clutch. Now go on. Your dragon's waiting for you." He squeezed her hands, then let them go.

Leah found tears in her eyes as Darshanth's rider increased his stride to catch up with his fellows.

"Positive thoughts, remember?" Sinterlion said helpfully, beside her.

She grabbed his hand, gripping it tight, and composed herself enough to smile. "Right, Sinter."

Bronze and brown dragons were beginning to congregate just beyond the group of candidates as L'stev called for all of them to gather round. By tradition, bronze riders delivered their sponsored candidates for a queen egg onto the Hatching sands. It was more custom than rule now, but Leah thought it rather silly, as most of the girls who had been chosen by bronze riders had been selected on looks rather than suitability. L'stev had informed them all, with a straight face, that any girl who wanted to be brought in by a rider could do so, with the rider's consent. Leah could have asked her father, or C'mine – she could even have asked the Weyrleader himself – but she'd decided not to take part in the silly tradition. She'd go in to face the eggs on her own two feet. One or two girls had found riders willing to take an active part in the ceremony, and to Leah's certain knowledge, at least three riders had been fighting over the privilege of delivering Ivaryo. Six bronzes and three browns waited with their riders, gazing at the candidates with purple eyes.

The Weyrleader was taking the register again. When he reached, "Carleah," Leah replied without thinking, as she had so many times already that day. As L'stev called out the names of some of the male candidates, Leah realised it might be the last time she ever heard some of them. She squeezed Sinterlion's fingers again, and wondered how he would shorten his name.

The register complete, all forty-four candidates present and accounted for, L'stev stuffed the rolled hide into an inside pocket of his robe, and surveyed the group. "Well," he said finally, "here you all are. In a moment, those of you with escorts are going to go and find them. I want the rest of you lined up in single file. I'm going to lead you in and make sure you're all evenly spaced around the eggs, so I don't want to see any shoving to get to the front of the line. You'll walk quietly, without talking, and without waving at anyone you might know in the stands." He cast a withering glance around the group, as if to show them what he thought of that sort of behaviour. "As we approach the clutch you will each bow to Shimpath, then turn to your left and bow to Epherineth. You can be assured that they will be watching each one of you very closely. These are their children, children. Be worthy.

"When the eggs start to Hatch, *stay where you are*. Don't crowd around the dragonets. That's how candidates get hurt. If they want you, they'll come to you, and bearing down on them won't do anything but frighten them. Don't run away if a dragonet's coming towards you, either – but be prepared to step aside.

"If you Impress, then the first order of business is to get yourself and your dragon out of the way of the hatchlings still looking. You won't suddenly become invulnerable just because you've Impressed: a dragonet will still plough right into you if you're between him and the one he wants. So get your dragon moving – if you need help, we'll be there – and straight over to feed them.

"If you don't Impress, A'len and Petra here –" he indicated two of his assistants, "– will take you back to where you can get changed, wash your faces, and compose yourselves. I don't want anyone running off by themselves. You can be alone later, but you all have guests, and none of

you – none of you – are to be the least bit ashamed for not Impressing. There will be other days and other clutches.

“Those of you with new dragons will probably want to show them off to your family and friends. You’ll have a chance – a *brief* chance – to do so after you leave the Hatching ground, and before you reach the weyrling barracks. Once your dragonets are bedded down and asleep, they’re off-limits to spectators. Your possessions will be in the open lockers on your immediate left as you enter the barracks; it’s up to you to retrieve them. You may then change into your good clothes, and when every last one of you is ready, I’ll lead you into the dining cavern – so you girls had better not take too long, or the feast will be over before you’ve even got there.”

It helped to laugh, and Leah, like almost everyone else, did. L’stev was only repeating lectures he’d made before, but it was reassuring – grounding – to listen to his familiar gruff voice. It settled the fair of fire-lizards that seemed to have made its home in Leah’s stomach.

“You won’t be staying up late, and I’ll advise you now against drinking too much, because those dragons are going to wake up about four hours before dawn wanting to be fed again,” L’stev continued. “But I’ll be introducing each of you to the Weyrleaders, and we’ll drink a small toast in your honour.” He paused. “I’m looking forward to being proud of all of you at that moment.”

There was almost a catch in the Weyrleader’s voice with the last, and Leah felt a lump in her throat to go with the fire-lizards in her belly.

“Now, you miserable lot,” and L’stev was his normal brusque self again, “those of you getting rides go and get them; the rest of you line up here. Quickly! Those dragonets won’t wait for you!”

In the rush to get in line, Leah let go of Sinterlion’s hand, and when the candidates had organised themselves into a single file she found she’d lost him. Little Branvalt was in front of her, and Martouf behind. Well, Branvalt was all right, she thought, but she’d rather Sinter had stayed close. More than half the girls had started off towards the waiting dragons. Jenafa and Shenaz, Arina, Hana, Ivaryo – someone must have won the fight – Lisette, Adzai, Chenda, and Tarshe. Two back in the line, Soleigh caught Leah’s attention and rolled her eyes.

L’stev walked briskly down the file, muttering the occasionally caustic comment – “stop chewing your nails”; “stand up straight”; “get your hands out of your pockets; you look like you’re playing with yourself”. Then he walked back to the head of the line. “Right, kids. Time to go.”

Leah was halfway down the line, and it felt like ages before the Weyrbred lad in front of her moved, but then they were all walking. Perhaps unconsciously and perhaps not, she matched her stride to Branvalt’s, and then wondered if anyone else was doing the same, marching in time. The ground was hard beneath her bare feet, and the cooling breeze of evening blew around her ankles and tugged at the simple white robe that fell to her knees. As they approached the yawning mouth of the tunnel the dragons’ hum became audible and tangible, a deep vibration through the very rock of the Weyr that sent a thrill through Leah’s body. The voices of hundreds of people became louder too, a mass murmur of excited anticipation. Then they were in the warm tunnel, lit by glows,

and the irregular opening into the cavern itself was ahead, bathed in the brighter light of glows and torches combined, and walking the path that so many candidates had trodden on their way to finding their dragons, the thought came to Leah that she would not see the sky again before she had Impressed a dragon or tried and failed.

And then they were out in the Hatching cavern, with hot sand under their feet, and for a moment all Leah could see was people, rows upon rows of people, crammed into the stands, in Gather clothes of every shade and hue of every colour she could have named. The excited murmurs of hundreds of people swelled: some pointed at the candidates, some broke into scattered applause before being hushed by their neighbours, but all of them looked, and all the eye could see was eyes. In the darkness high above the mass of humans, perched on the shelf that ran almost the circumference of the cavern, dragons watched, with eyes like glittering violet jewels, and their rising hum seemed to reverberate through every fibre of Leah's body. She couldn't look for her parents, or her friends; she couldn't have picked out a face from that crowd if her life had depended on it.

L'stev led them across the broad expanse of sand at an angle, and as the clutch came into view, glowing and beautiful against the awesome backdrop of its protective parents, Leah forgot about the crowd. The eggs she'd seen so often, that she had touched, and stroked, and admired, were *moving*. They twitched, they shook; they almost seemed to pulse with vitality, with the life so close to bursting from them. Twenty-five glorious eggs, arranged with their mother's care and wisdom for the last time, and in the centre, throbbing like molten gold, the largest of them all: the queen egg.

Leah almost walked into Branvalt as the lad stopped in front of her. He made his bows, his normal awkwardness forgotten, and then started out towards the far side of the clutch, skirting around the eggs rather than stepping through them.

"Shimpath first, Carleah," L'stev said softly.

She hadn't even noticed the Weyrlingmaster, so entranced by the eggs. L'stev was standing straight for once, his hands folded behind his back, angled to face the queen and her mate. Leah bowed to Shimpath – fiercely golden, her eyes more red than purple as she prepared to relinquish the care of her offspring – and then to Epherineth – lithely gold-green and watchful.

"Over there, between Naijen and Gidra," the Weyrlingmaster told her as she straightened up.

Leah made her way to her appointed place, almost sidestepping at one point, not wanting to be so disrespectful as to turn her back on the two dragons. Gidra shot her a quick nervous smile, but Naijen's gaze was fixed on the shuddering eggs, and his fists were clenched so tightly that his knuckles were as white as his robe.



The heat of the sands was uncomfortable, but bearable. Leah looked at the restless clutch, looked at the hairline fractures beginning to appear on some shells as their occupants determinedly tapped their way out, looked at the blazing queen egg, and waited.