

Dragonflight
"Pilot"

written by

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based on Anne McCaffrey's "Dragonriders of Pern".

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COLD OPEN

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - DAY

Spring sunlight shines on the bucolic lands of Ruatha Hold. Sheep and cows graze the pasture; horses pull ploughs in the fields; blossom blows in the orchards. Slate-roofed stone cottages dot the landscape. A mill's sails spin in the wind.

SUPER: "Ruatha Hold".

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

The HOLD itself is built into the cliff face, a stone settlement of towers and ramparts with deep, narrow arrowslit windows. Its main gates look curiously out of place -- huge, seamless metal doors more appropriate to a spaceship than a medieval castle. A brown-and-red banner flies from the walls.

LORD KALE (40s), a richly dressed, black-bearded nobleman, strolls through cheerful peasant HOLDFOLK at their work -- making arrows, carding wool, weaving baskets.

Kale smiles approval of each humble task, receiving respectful nods and tugs of forelocks from his people in return. He wears a modern-looking WRISTWATCH with a big face and metal strap -- another peculiar anachronism in this pre-industrial setting.

YOUNG LESSA (O.S.)

You get away from there!

The shout makes Kale frown. He turns, seeking its source.

THE WATCHER'S DEN

is a stone-built kennel in a corner of the courtyard. A stake outside its entrance tethers a heavy steel chain that runs inside the dark lair. The chain RATTLES against the stake.

The creature inside groans and gibbers as several HOLD BOYS (10-12 years old) take it in turns to dash up to the mouth of the den and throw in GLOWS -- luminous green spores the size of marbles. Each one lights the den a little more, revealing glimpses of warty skin, gnarled claws, ragged wings.

LEAD BOY

Don't like the light, do ya?

YOUNG LESSA (9) is a fierce, diminutive little girl with Kale's curly black hair and flashing eyes. She wears a fine belted tunic, though her knees are skinned and grubby. She blocks the mouth of the den with her body.

YOUNG LESSA
Leave him alone!

LEAD BOY
It's just the stupid old watcher!

SECOND BOY
Stupid smelly old watcher!

YOUNG LESSA
Leave. Him. Alone.

She glares at a boy with each word. They recoil in turn, as if pushed, swaying with confusion. Young Lessa relishes her power over the older children.

KALE
What's all this?

The boys snap out of their stupor.

LEAD BOY
L-Lord Kale! We were just -- um --

He and the others flee.

KALE
Lessa.

YOUNG LESSA
They were hurting him, Father! His eyes can't bear the light! He told me so!

KALE
And you were right to defend it -- but not like that.

Young Lessa shoots him a wilful look -- but stops short of a 'push'.

KALE
One day you'll be Lady Holder of Ruatha. A good Lord or Lady rules through love, not force.

Young Lessa ducks into the den, fearless. She gathers the scattered glows. The WATCHER, still hidden, GROANS in relief.

YOUNG LESSA
If I were Lady Holder I'd have them staked out to be eaten by Thread!

KALE
Thread hasn't fallen for hundreds of years, Lessa!

YOUNG LESSA

Pity.

Kale laughs and swings her up onto his shoulders.

KALE

My little ruffian.

Young Lessa's expression softens into a giggle as he tickles her.

ON THE RAMPARTS

a SHIFTY MAN (30s) watches the scene before turning and slinking away -- his concealed sword revealed by the sweep of his cloak.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - YOUNG LESSA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

In near darkness, Young Lessa starts awake, panting.

YOUNG LESSA

No...no...something's
coming...something's wrong!

In a FLASH of prescience she sees a sword slash down -- blood spurting -- her father's shocked face -- a woman screaming.

YOUNG LESSA

No -- no!

She runs headlong from her room, passing a vivid TAPESTRY depicting dragons above the hold as she goes.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - NIGHT

It's still dark as Young Lessa runs barefoot down the steps from the glow-lit hold. The Watcher patrols the courtyard -- heard, but still not fully seen -- grunting and slobbering, tail and wings slithering against the flagstones, chain clanking.

Young Lessa skids to a stop with a gasp. It's too late. The Watcher turns its head in her direction. Glowing eyes fix on her.

And then it sits back on its haunches, crooning. Young Lessa runs to it, hugging its ugly head. The Watcher rubs against her, a four-legged brownish-green creature the size of a small horse with a stubby forked tail and mutilated wings. It's like a dragon gone wrong, twisted into a squat, misshapen gargoye.

ON THE RAMPARTS

A dozen ARMED MEN rise from hidden positions. They lower rope ladders down the inner walls of the courtyard.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - OUTSIDE THE WALLS - NIGHT/DAY

Several companies of soldiers armed with spears and swords wait in ragged ranks. At their head is MERON (35) -- a burly, powerful warlord, charismatic if not handsome, with ruthless eyes and a hand never far from his sword-hilt.

A SOLDIER approaches.

SOLDIER

The guards we bribed have left their posts, Lord Meron. Ruatha is yours for the taking. Should I give the signal?

MERON

Not yet.

His eyes flick from the ramparts of Ruatha to the lightening eastern sky. When the rising sun breaches the horizon, flooding Ruatha with light, Meron smiles and draws his sword.

MERON

Now.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - NIGHT/DAY

The Watcher raises its head from Young Lessa's shoulder. Young Lessa wipes tears from her face.

YOUNG LESSA

Do you feel it too?

The Watcher looks up at the sky. Its over-large eyes widen in surprise, reflecting something bright -- something golden.

Dawn breaks over the ramparts. The Watcher howls in agony, squeezes its sensitive eyes shut, and scrambles for its lair.

Young Lessa freezes in horror as the light pouring into Ruatha reveals the Armed Men opening the main gates from the inside. She turns and flees after the Watcher, into its den.

IN THE WATCHER'S DEN

As the Watcher moans and whines in the darkness, Young Lessa curls up beside it, wrapping her arms around herself.

Her whimpers are drowned by Ruatha's screams.

END COLD OPEN

ACT ONE

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - NIGHT/DAY

The sun rising over Ruatha reveals a dismal shadow of the valley's former prosperity. Weeds choke the fields. The mill lies derelict. A cow's skull grins from the sparse grass. The red-and-brown banner, threadbare now, hangs like a dishrag.

In the eastern sky, the scarlet RED STAR pulses and winks with a bright malevolent radiance.

SUPER: "Ruatha Hold".

SUPER: "Ten years later".

INT. RUATHA HOLD - SERVANT SLEEPING ROOM - NIGHT/DAY

Half a dozen SERVANTS, of different ages and genders but all thin and ragged, sleep on the dirty straw-covered floor.

Apart from the others, one servant starts awake, panting.

It's LESSA. She's 19 now, ten years older than the terrified child who hid from slaughter in the watcher's lair. Filth and rags conceal her slender youth, but not the resolve in her eyes.

She controls her breathing and rises from the floor without waking the other servants. She brushes straw from her smock and twists her matted hair into a knot off her face.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - NIGHT/DAY

It's just still dark as Lessa, shivering, crosses the courtyard.

The Watcher crawls towards her on its chain, making a happy sound. Lessa caresses its head.

LESSA
Hello, old friend.

The Watcher's croons turn piteous. Lessa follows its gaze to the eastern sky.

LESSA
Do you feel it too?

The Watcher whines.

LESSA
Like last time...no. Not like last time. But something's coming.

She looks at the Red Star.

LESSA
Something bad.

A cockerel CROWS. The Watcher whimpers as dawn creeps across the courtyard.

LESSA
Shush.

The Watcher's whines stop. She gives its head a final pat.

LESSA
Go inside.

As the Watcher retreats into its lair, Lessa stands a moment longer in the courtyard, straight and defiant as she gazes around at the ruin of her family's hold.

Then she releases her hair from its knot, pulling it forward to hide her face. Slouching into an almost hunchbacked posture, an unrecognisable Lessa re-enters the hold.

EXT. BENDEN WEYR - DAY

A huge oval crater -- the remains of a blown-out volcano, home to the dragons of Pern -- perches among the mountains.

SUPER: "BENDEN WEYR".

EXT. BENDEN WEYR - CORRAL - DAY

Down in the bowl of the crater, a few bony STEERS wander about, grazing on dry hay.

FROM ABOVE

they're being watched -- stalked -- hunted.

One steer raises its head. Then another. Then --

An enormous winged creature DIVES on the herd from above in a blur of greenish-gold.

The steers panic and stampede in all directions, bawling.

The first steer gallops in blind terror. It's not fast enough. Wicked silver claws swipe down. Blood spurts. In moments it's over. The steer lies mauled and dead.

The bronze dragon MNEMENTH settles over the corpse, fifty majestic feet of smooth hide, wings, tail and claws. Where the Watcher was stunted and ugly, Mnementh is straight and beautiful and perfect. The jewelled blue-green facets of his pupil-less compound eyes are tinged red with his hunger.

NEARBY

WINGLEADER F'LAR (30), Mnementh's rider, leans on the corral fence: tall, with black hair, unusual amber-flecked eyes, and an intense, martial bearing. He wears the dragonrider's uniform of leather pants, leather boots, and a fleece-lined flying jacket.

His shoulder bears an elaborate braided cord, the SHOULDER KNOT every rider wears to show off his dragon's colour and rank.

F'LAR

Good catch, Mnementh.

Mnementh's voice -- always in silent telepathy that only F'lar can hear -- is a deeper, resonant echo of his rider's.

MNEMENTH

It is not much of a meal.

F'LAR

It's the best Benden has these days.

Mnementh flips the stringy steer over with the swipe of a forepaw. He bends to eat, his cavernous jaws yawning open.

And freezes. Cocks his head. Listening.

The bronze dragon rises to his haunches, lifts his head and KEENS a long, hair-raising ululation of sorrow.

His voice is joined by a chorus of many others.

AROUND THE WEYRBOWL

on ledges and in caves, other dragons raise their heads and keen too. They are green or blue or brown or bronze, beautiful and terrible like Mnementh.

F'lar winces and puts his hands over his ears. Then, as the keen dies away, he removes a hand.

F'LAR

Nemorth?

Mnementh lowers his head. His eyes whirl grey with sorrow.

MNEMENTH

The queen is dead.

INT. BENDEN WEYR - HATCHING GROUND - DAY

The Hatching Ground is a huge interior cavern, like a coliseum, with tiered seating rising around a sandy floor.

Its supporting pillars are carved with the recognisable helix of DNA strands -- a recurring design feature of the Weyr.

The faded yellow husk of NEMORTH, a golden queen dragon the size of Mnementh, lies on the sand, tongue lolling, eyes motionless.

WEYRLEADER R'GUL (54), a big man, hard-faced and domineering, gazes at the queen's corpse, his nostrils flaring with displeasure. His rank knot is much more elaborate than F'lar's.

He turns away as F'lar approaches with T'BOR (26 and outrageously handsome); K'NET (a boyish 21), and three older bronze riders -- all with the same shoulder knots as F'lar.

K'NET

(to T'bor)

Why didn't she go between when she died?

T'BOR

Nemorth never went between. Never flew at all except to mate. Jora was so fat --

R'GUL

Queen dragons don't need to fly. And you'll be civil about the late Weyrwoman, bronze riders.

Neither T'bor nor K'net looks cowed by the reprimand.

F'lar steps up to the edge of the sands, gazing out past Nemorth's corpse. Just visible in the curl of her tail are the cream-coloured shells of several enormous eggs.

F'LAR

Nemorth's final clutch.

R'GUL

Yes. And I was right. My Hath sired a gold egg. There'll be a new queen.

The shell of the queen egg, larger and more gold in colour, rises above its siblings.

F'LAR

She'll need a rider. A strong rider. When Thread returns --

R'GUL

It's always Thread with you, isn't it, F'lar? When will you realise that Thread's just a story to frighten children? It's gone. It's never coming back.

F'LAR
The Red Star --

R'GUL
Myth. Legend. The dragonrider's
time as saviour of Pern is over.
The sooner we accept that, the
better.

F'LAR
You're a fool, R'gul.

R'GUL
I'm the Weyrleader, F'lar, and
don't you forget it.

He heaves an immense reluctant sigh.

R'GUL
But we will ride a search to find
the new queen a Weyrwoman.

F'LAR
Outside the Weyr?

R'gul's expression betrays his distaste at the notion.

R'GUL
Tradition demands it.

He turns to a map of Pern.

R'GUL
T'bor, you'll take Telgar. K'net,
go to Keroon. I'll be going south.
And F'lar --

F'lar stabs a finger down onto the western half of the map.

F'LAR
I'm going here.

The name RUATHA is inscribed beneath his finger.

EXT. BENDEN WEYR - BOWL - DAY

F'lar strides out into the sunlight. The stone archway into the Hatching Ground bears a curious carved motto: "Arrhenius? Eureka! Mycorrhiza!" -- yet another mystifying sign that the pseudo-medieval appearance of Pern is not the full story.

WINGSECOND D'NOR (27), F'lar's younger, more upbeat and irreverent brother, waits with a cluster of lower-ranked riders including C'GAN (68), a balding, twinkle-eyed veteran.

D'NOR
There's a queen egg?

F'LAR
Word travels quickly.

D'NOR
You know how dragons gossip.

F'LAR
Your brown might, D'nor. Mnementh
doesn't.

D'NOR
Canth and I are crushed, oh mighty
bronze-riding brother.

F'LAR
We'll start the search for a new
Weyrwoman tomorrow. Outside Benden.

D'NOR
Maybe we'll find some decent food.
Have you seen the inedible muck --

F'LAR
Is the Wing ready?

D'nor drops the informality. This is now business.

D'NOR
Always, Wingleader. Where are we
bound?

F'LAR
Into trouble.

Beyond them, C'gan tilts his head with interest.

EXT. HARPER HALL - DAY

The Harper Hall is a two-storey building built, like Ruatha,
into a cliff face, flying a banner bearing the insignia of a
blue harp.

SUPER: "Harper Crafhall".

INT. HARPER HALL - ROBINTON'S STUDY - DAY

The office of a musician -- guitars and pipes hang on the
walls, sheets of notation sit open on stands. The voices of a
well-trained choir drift in from the open door.

CHOIR (O.S.)
Honor those the dragons heed,
In thought and favor, word and
deed.

ROBINTON

I'm sorry, C'gan. I know what a queen means to the Weyr.

C'GAN

We'll have a new one soon enough. But finding the right rider for her -- there's the rub.

ROBINTON

Benden rides search?

C'GAN

For all the good it'll do, with the useless creatures R'gul and the other bronze riders are likely to find.

ROBINTON

The other bronze riders...but what about F'lar?

C'gan cracks a grin.

C'GAN

F'lar has his sights set on Ruatha. He hopes to find the next Moreta.

ROBINTON

At Ruatha? In the old days, perhaps, but it's hardly the cradle of potential dragonriders it once was. And if F'lar wants to comb Ruatha...

C'GAN

He'll have to deal with Meron.

ROBINTON

The Lord of Seven Holds. Six of them by conquest. Meron isn't a man to tangle with lightly. Make sure F'lar knows that.

C'GAN

F'lar's the best Wingleader I've ever served under, and I've flown with a few. He's not a hothead.

ROBINTON

His father was and it got him killed. Meron has no love for dragonriders. Or Harpers, for that matter. He's expelled every man I've sent to his holds to teach or play.

C'GAN
Every man?

It's Robinton's turn to smile.

ROBINTON
The ones he knows about.

EXT. NABOL HOLD - DAY

The brown-and-white banner of Nabol flies above a rich, prosperous hold, not unlike Ruatha in its heyday.

SUPER: "Nabol Hold".

A WING of twelve dragons fills the sky. Their V-formation is headed by F'lar on Mnementh, the only bronze. Behind him, D'nor sits astride his brown Canth. C'gan and Tagath are among the smaller blues and greens who comprise the rest of the Wing.

As Mnementh spirals to land in the courtyard a party of ARMED MEN emerge from the hold to meet them, led by Meron.

He's gained weight since his invasion of Ruatha -- and wealth, by the chunky gold rings on his fingers. He observes as F'lar dismounts, taking in every detail. His hand still doesn't stray far from his dagger. Lord Kale's wristwatch gleams on his wrist.

After a moment, Meron makes a perfunctory salute.

MERON
Welcome to Nabol Hold, bronze rider...?

F'lar's eyebrows raise at the deliberate insult.

D'nor steps forward, stopping just behind Mnementh's head.

D'NOR
Wingleader F'lar, Lord Meron. But then I'm sure you know the names of all Pern's bronze riders.

Meron's eyes narrow. His mouth curls in an insolent smile.

MERON
To what do I owe the pleasure?

F'LAR
We come in search of a new Weyrwoman.

D'NOR
As is our right. I'm sure you know that, too.

Meron ignores D'nor, dismissing him as F'lar's inferior.

MERON

I'd heard that Nemorth was the last queen.

F'LAR

She laid a golden egg before her death.

MERON

What a shame.

F'lar and D'nor both tense at the implication. Mnementh's eyes shade angry orange, his lips slipping back from his teeth. That, more than the two riders, makes Meron back down.

MERON

That the old queen didn't live to see her successor, of course.

F'LAR

Of course.

He waits. Meron spins the moment out -- breaking it only when Mnementh rustles his wings with clear impatience.

MERON

Fine. You may inspect the women of my hold, as is your...right.

Meron gestures to a GUARD and speaks in his ear. The Guard nods and leaves, eyeing the dragonriders.

MERON

And perhaps your men would care to partake of Nabol's offerings.

F'LAR

Nabol's -- and your other holdings?

MERON

One hold at a time, dragonman.

INT. NABOL HOLD - WAGER HALL - DAY

Meron leads F'lar and the other riders into Nabol's great hall, lit by the green light of glows, and packed with game tables.

Unsavory-looking DEALERS preside, shuffling cards and rattling dice cups enticingly. SERVING WOMEN in low-cut dresses move among the games with trays of drinks, enduring the pawing of gamblers and dealers alike.

The poker chips look like pieces cut from circuit boards.

A PIPER, GUITARIST and DRUMMER honk and strum in an effort at festivity. And failing -- they're terrible, and nervous besides, glancing from Meron to the hard-eyed GUARDS standing at regular intervals, alert for trouble.

F'LAR

Nabol's infamous wager hall.

Meron's smile is the predatory grin of a shark.

MERON

How gratifying to know that tales
of my games of fortune have reached
even the high and mighty
Dragonweyr.

He stops at a table. A gold-toothed DEALER smirks up, riffing cards from one hand to another.

MERON

Care to try your luck?

F'lar tosses a coin onto the table. The Dealer grins more broadly and flips three cards face-up on the table. All bear crude pictures: two black soldiers with swords in their hands, and a nude woman with exaggerated assets drawn in red.

He turns the cards face down and then shuffles them about on the table, his hands like lightning. F'lar's keen eyes follow them.

DEALER

Find the lady.

F'lar taps a card. The Dealer flips it: soldier. Meron guffaws.

MERON

Bad luck, dragonman!

As the Dealer reaches for the coin, F'lar seizes his wrist in an iron grip. The Dealer cries out in pain. With the other hand, F'lar turns over the remaining two cards -- both soldiers.

F'LAR

You've misplaced your lady.

He twists the Dealer's wrist. The red card falls from his sleeve.

Meron's expression curdles.

MERON

Think you're clever, dragonman?

F'lar just looks at him, barely hiding his contempt, daring him to act -- but not yet provoked himself.

Meron sneers at F'lar's passivity.

MERON

This way.

As D'nor and C'gan pass the dismal musicians, D'nor pauses.

D'NOR

Those Harpers have seen better
days.

C'gan meets the Piper's eyes. Recognition passes between
them.

C'GAN

They aren't Harpers.

D'nor looks around the room.

D'NOR

Is it just me, or is there a sudden
dearth of the fairer sex in here?

C'gan looks around. All the women have disappeared.

A RAGGED BOY (12) pushes past as they stand there. C'gan
claps his hand to his belt -- suddenly absent its purse.

C'GAN

Damn it. Get back here, boy!

The Ragged Boy glances over his shoulder and puts on speed,
darting out through the main door.

C'GAN

I'm getting too old for this.
Permission to pursue, Wingsecond?

D'NOR

Granted. Just don't go dying on me,
old man.

C'GAN

I'm not promising anything.

As C'gan goes after the boy, D'nor motions to the other
riders.

D'NOR

Split up and see if you can find
out what's happened to all the
women.

He goes after Meron and F'lar.

INT. NABOL HOLD - MERON'S APARTMENTS - DAY

Meron's rooms are lavish: fine fabrics, sumptuous furniture, and oil paintings -- mostly of him -- on the walls.

A coterie of LADIES tug at their gowns and fuss with their hair as Meron, F'lar and D'nor enter. None of them are appealing -- dumpy, dirty, vapid, or all three.

Only LADY JEMMA (45) breaks the mould. Her hair is greying at the temples and her face is careworn, but she was clearly once very beautiful, and her tired eyes are intelligent. She rises from her chair to greet F'lar. She's heavily pregnant.

Meron regards her with thinly concealed disgust.

MERON

Jemma.

(with enormous sarcasm)

The mother of my heirs.

F'lar inclines his head.

F'LAR

My Lady Jemma. Thank you for your hospitality.

JEMMA

You are most welcome, bronze rider.

She attempts a curtsy. F'lar stops her.

F'LAR

Please.

Meron's lip curls at F'lar's courtesy. He gestures to the collection of women.

MERON

And here are the ladies of Nabol.

D'nor, out of Meron's eyesight, throws an incredulous look at F'lar. F'lar scans the line-up, keeping his expression bland.

F'LAR

And they are lovely.

The ladies twitter and simper.

F'LAR

But I fear we won't find Pern's next Weyrwoman here.

They deflate.

MERON

Not good enough for you, dragonman?

He's mocking rather than indignant -- he knows he's presented a roomful of unsuitable candidates.

F'LAR

On the contrary, Meron. I can see that they're all far too devoted to their Lord to ask such a sacrifice of them.

Meron subsides, but there's a mean, ugly look in his eyes at odds with his taunting smile.

MERON

You'll find these the pick of Nabol, F'lar.

F'LAR

I'm sure that's so. But duty compels me to be thorough. Maybe tomorrow we could visit one of your other holds?

MERON

And which of my fine holds would the bronze rider care to tour next? Crom? High Reaches? Keogh?

F'LAR

Ruatha.

Meron's smile drops away.

MERON

Ruatha.

He pronounces the word with distaste, flexing his fingers near his knife hilt. The motion draws F'lar's attention to the watch on Meron's wrist.

F'LAR

That's a very handsome bracelet, Lord Meron. May I see it?

Meron clenches his fist and thrusts it proudly at F'lar.

INSERT - the WRISTWATCH, which features a miniature orrery of Pern, its two moons, the sun, and the baleful Red Star behind its hands. F'lar studies it with interest.

F'LAR

The hands move with the hours...?

Meron snatches it away.

MERON

That's as close a look as you'll ever get, dragonman.

MERON (CONT'D)

You want to go to Ruatha? You can gorge yourself upon the bounty of that hold.

F'LAR

Thank you, my Lord. Which reminds me -- we must see to our dragons. They haven't eaten in several days, and --

He lets his eyes fall upon the plumpest of Meron's wretched selection of ladies.

F'LAR

-- they do have a fearsome appetite.

EXT. NABOL HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

Meron stands in the doorway, watching F'lar and D'nor leave with a foul look on his face.

D'NOR

You fed Mnementh just yesterday, brother.

F'LAR

Canth would have risen to the occasion.

D'NOR

Canth doesn't care for the taste of unwashed holder. Or any holder.

F'LAR

I know that. They didn't.

D'NOR

He'd have indigestion for a week. Now, if he ate Meron...that might be worth the bellyache.

F'lar doesn't reply, his attention caught by a figure watching from the window of a building across the courtyard. It flies a banner bearing a purple bolt of cloth. D'nor follows his gaze.

LYTOL (45) is a gaunt, haunted figure, older and greyer than his years. One side of his face bears dreadful burn scars. His eyes are sick with a terrible yearning.

D'NOR

Does he look familiar to you?

F'LAR

He should look familiar to you. I
heard he came this way after he
lost his dragon. You don't
recognise him?

D'NOR

Is that...no. L'tol?

F'LAR

It's what's left of him.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. NABOL HOLD - WEAVER HALL WORKSHOP - DAY

Looms bang and thump under the hands of multiple WEAVERS, creating intricate and beautiful fabrics in the orderly workshop. F'lar looks around, admiring the industry.

LYTOL

Over here.

INT. NABOL HOLD - WEAVER HALL OFFICE - DAY

F'lar and D'nor follow Lytol into a small office. He addresses them in a quick, breathless stream of words.

LYTOL

You must be F'lar. And D'nor. I knew your father. You both look like him. I'm Lytol now. Lytol.

F'lar looks at Lytol's shoulder knot, recognising his rank.

F'LAR

Master Weaver Lytol. You run a very fine workshop. Meron's lucky to have craftsmen like you.

LYTOL

You're here on search, aren't you? You won't find anyone. Not at Nabol. Even if Meron hadn't put the word out to hide all the decent women, you won't find anyone here worthy of...worthy of...

He flicks an agonised glance towards the window. F'lar and D'nor shift their feet, conscious of the awkwardness.

LYTOL

Meron beats the spirit from his women. Only Jemma still resists. But he needs her to legitimise his tyranny. He keeps her pregnant, though she's miscarried child after child. I suppose he hopes to kill her that way.

F'LAR

Then there are no candidates? Even in Ruatha?

LYTOL

Ruatha? Meron slaughtered every scion of that hold ten years ago. Men, women, babes in arms.

LYTOL (CONT'D)

The bloodline that gave Pern its finest dragonriders went extinct that day.

F'LAR

Then where will we find a Weyrwoman? I won't let R'gul install another Jora! Not with the Red Star in the sky!

LYTOL

You're a believer? You think Thread will return?

F'LAR

It will return. The holds and halls of Pern aren't ready. Nor is the Weyr. That's why we need a strong queen. There are so few dragons --

He catches himself too late, knowing that he's used the one word Lytol can't bear.

It makes Lytol shudder. He clamps his hands over his ears, squeezes his eyes shut, moaning.

LYTOL

Please, I can't...I can't... Go!
Please just go!

D'nor backs away, his expression torn between revulsion and pity. F'lar's only shows pity. He reaches for Lytol's shoulder, then stops. He inclines his head. He and D'nor retreat, leaving Lytol to his terrible grief.

EXT. NABOL HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

F'lar and D'nor emerge into the courtyard. D'nor shakes himself and looks up to where the dragons perch atop Nabol's towers. Canth peers down at him.

D'NOR

To be dragonless...

F'LAR

I was there the day he lost his green. Larth. She misjudged a jump between and came out into another dragon's fire. Larth never recovered.

D'NOR

Neither did her rider.

EXT. NABOL HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

C'gan comes out of the main doors, looking for the Ragged Boy.

C'GAN
Tagath, would you be so kind?

ON THE TOWER

Tagath stirs himself with a groan. He takes off with a great downsweep of his wings, rising to circle above Nabol.

From his aerial vantage, the Ragged Boy is clearly visible: head down, running between ramshackle hovels.

TAGATH
Him?

C'gan squints. For a moment his groundbound view of the courtyard is overlaid with Tagath's view from above.

C'GAN
That's the little bugger.

Tagath cocks his head, his blue-green eyes tingeing violet, as C'gan follows the boy's path through the hovels. There are no people in sight, but livestock -- goats, pigs, sheep -- bleat and cower in fear of the dragon overhead.

TAGATH
He went in there.

C'gan pauses outside a hovel, more ramshackle than most. Smoke rises from its chimney. He raps on the door.

C'GAN
Anyone home?

As he waits, he frowns at the thatched roof of the hut, picking at a straw and shaking his head.

Then the door opens. A MEAN HOLDER (35) fills the doorway.

MEAN HOLDER
What do you want?

C'GAN
I was looking for a boy.

MEAN HOLDER
What boy?

C'GAN
The one my dragon just watched run
inside your house.

The Mean Holder flicks a nervous glance skyward.

MEAN HOLDER

You're one of them dragonmen.

C'GAN

Blue rider C'gan. At your service.

MEAN HOLDER

Dragon up there's scaring folks.

C'gan cranes his neck and shouts.

C'GAN

Tagath!

Tagath spirals to land, squeezing himself into a small space between hovels. His wings scrape against the roofs of two cottages, sending thatch flying. More HOLDERS shrink back from the glassless windows of their hovels.

The Mean Holder pales as Tagath pokes his head towards him.

C'GAN

About the boy --

MEAN HOLDER

What you want with him?

C'GAN

Let's just say I dropped something.
I think he might have picked it up.

The Mean Holder turns and bellows into the hovel.

MEAN HOLDER

Tig! Get your arse out here!

The Ragged Boy (Tig) creeps from the hovel. Mottled bruises discolour his face. C'gan frowns as the Mean Holder shakes the boy by the shoulder.

MEAN HOLDER

Did you steal from the dragonman?
Eh? Did you?

Tig looks confused. Then he cottons on.

TIG

No, Father!

MEAN HOLDER

Because if you did --

He raises his fist. Tig cowers.

Tagath rumbles and the Mean Holder hesitates.

C'GAN

Why don't you let Tagath and me
have a talk with the lad, sir?

Tig looks terrified. The Mean Holder looks uncertain.

MEAN HOLDER

He won't...eat the boy?

C'GAN

I can assure you he won't.

The Mean Holder shoves Tig at C'gan.

MEAN HOLDER

You bring him back... I've no one
to tend the animals without him.

C'gan places a gentle hand on Tig's skinny shoulder and walks
him to Tagath. Tig stares, awestruck, at the blue dragon's
enormous face.

Tagath sneezes.

Tig recoils and sits down hard, covering his head with his
arms.

C'GAN

Tagath!

He puts a hand down to Tig. The boy lowers his arms.

TIG

I thought he'd breathe fire on me.

C'gan heaves him up.

C'GAN

He hasn't had any firestone
recently. Dragons need to chew
firestone, you know, before they
can breathe fire.

TIG

I never met a dragon before.

C'GAN

But you must know your duty
ballads?

TIG

What's a duty ballad?

C'GAN

Your duty ballads! You know!
(singing)
"Stones pile, fires burn

C'GAN (CONT'D)
 Green withers, arm Pern..."
 No?

Tig is mystified.

C'GAN
 You've never met a harper either,
 have you? To teach you about Pern's
 history? Your duty to dragonmen?

Tig shakes his head.

C'GAN
 Well, now you've met both. I used
 to do a bit of harping, and you
 won't find a finer fellow of a
 dragon than Tagath here. Say hello.

TIG
 He doesn't have any ears.

C'gan pats Tagath's closest headknob. Tagath shakes his head.

C'GAN
 He can still hear you.

TIG
 Hello, Tagath.

TAGATH
 Hello.

Tig recoils again, eyes wide.

TIG
 He spoke to me!

C'GAN
 Did he?
 (to Tagath)
 Did you?

Tagath gives C'gan an inscrutable look. The violet tinge of his eyes grows more pronounced.

C'GAN
 Oh, no no no.

TAGATH
 He could hear me.

C'GAN
 We're here for a Weyrwoman.

TAGATH
 There are other eggs.

C'GAN
And plenty of boys at Benden to
Impress them!

TAGATH
He would do better there than here.

C'GAN
You know how R'gul feels about
bringing outsiders into the Weyr.

Tig looks back and forth between dragon and rider, baffled.

C'gan looks at Tig's bruises.

C'GAN
Your father hits you?

TIG
Only when he loses in the wager
hall. Usually.

C'GAN
You gave him my purse, didn't you?

TIG
He'd hit me if I didn't.

C'gan sighs and massages his temples.

TIG
I'll...I'll get it back for you. At
least, I'll try.

C'GAN
No...keep it. Though, next time you
pickpocket a dragonman, aim higher
than a blue rider. My purse is
rather light these days.

INT. HARPER HALL - ROBINTON'S STUDY - NIGHT

Robinton sits with a guitar in his lap, his fingers shaping a
chord, but motionless, staring into space, lost in thought.

A knock at the door breaks his reverie.

ROBINTON
Come in!

The Piper from Nabol comes in, better dressed than before.

ROBINTON
You managed to extract yourself
from Nabol, then.

PIPER

To the despair of my bandmates. I'm playing like a tone-deaf watcher and I'm still carrying that ensemble.

ROBINTON

How goes F'lar's search?

PIPER

Poorly. And if Meron has his way, that bronze rider might never make it back from the Seven Holds, empty-handed or otherwise. They've taken a disliking to each other. Meron's dislikings tend to end in murder.

ROBINTON

The other Lords should never have given him so much licence.

PIPER

By the time they took him seriously he had half the continent under his thumb, and the other half afraid of being next.

ROBINTON

Where's F'lar bound next?

PIPER

Ruatha. If Meron means to kill F'lar, that's where he'll do it. The place makes him angry.

ROBINTON

To think that the Weyr's influence has waned so badly that a despot like Meron could contrive to kill a dragonrider.

PIPER

It's been five hundred years since the last Threadfall. Anything might decay over that span of time.

ROBINTON

Pern's debt to dragonmen shouldn't have.

They sit in grave silence for a moment. Then --

ROBINTON

Thank you, Kinsale.

The Piper lets himself out. Robinton sits a moment longer. Then he looks down at his guitar and plays at last the ominous minor chord he had been fingering.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - DAY

A MESSENGER ON HORSEBACK gallops at full speed down the road to the hold, leaving a tail of dust hanging in the air behind him.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - KITCHENS - DAY

Lessa scrapes ashes from the hearth, dumping them into a bucket. The kitchen is revolting -- grease encrusts every pot and pan, flea-infested spit dogs snap and snarl at each other, and a waste bucket overflows with rotting effluence.

The COOK (40s), a meaty man in a stained smock, slouches on a bench, picking his nose. SERVANTS chop withered vegetables and stir a murky pot of thin grey stew over the fire.

The door bangs open. Ruatha's WARDER (50) staggers in, panic written all over his sallow face.

WARDER
Meron is coming!

Lessa stiffens at the name.

COOK
What?

WARDER
Meron! With dragonmen!

COOK
What are you gabbling about? Meron hasn't visited Ruatha in years.

WARDER
He's coming now! And Ruatha in this state! For pity's sake, at least put some decent food on the table, or he'll have your head!

COOK
My head?

He thuds a heavy cleaver meaningfully into the chopping block.

WARDER
Just cook!

The Warder dashes out.

The Cook sniggers to himself -- not noticing the sly smile of pleasure that crosses Lessa's dirty face. Then he heaves a disgusted sigh and starts aiming kicks at servants.

COOK

Move, you lazy sluts, or you'll be going in the pot!

MONTAGE - LESSA SABOTAGES RUATHA'S PREPARATIONS

-- Lessa dumps her ash bucket in a bedroom hearth, sending soot flying all over the room

-- The Cook gazes into space as he shakes far too much pepper into the stew -- nearby, Lessa's intent stare indicates that she's 'pushing' him

-- Flames leap around singeing bread as Lessa piles more and more wood into the oven

-- She smiles beneath her matted hair as a haunch of meat blackens and smokes on one side, as the dogs meant to turn the spit snooze beside it

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

F'lar, D'nor, and the other riders walk through the gates into Ruatha's courtyard. Behind them, the dragons rise from dropping them off.

The crumbling, neglected ruin stands in stark contrast to Nabol's relative prosperity. F'lar eyes move across mangy dogs fighting over a gnawed bone, trash piled high in corners of the courtyard, shutters hanging off windowframes.

F'LAR

Faranth.

It's an oath, spoken under his breath. D'nor shakes his head in incredulous agreement. He sniffs the air, catching the scent of something unpleasant, and notices the Watcher's den.

D'NOR

Ugh. Watcher.

F'LAR

It won't trouble us.

D'NOR

It's troubling my nose right now.

Meron, Jemma, and their retinue ride through the gates. Meron wrenches his horse's head as it rolls its eyes in fear of the dragons above.

MERON

Behold, great Ruatha, of which you
had such hopes.

He laughs as he dismounts, offering no assistance to Jemma.
She clambers from her horse, holding her belly with one hand.

Several RUATHAN SERVANTS come to take the horses. Among them
is Robinton -- in a disguise barely less complete than
Lessa's.

F'LAR

I see it's prospered less than the
other holds you claim.

Meron's face darkens at the implication.

MERON

My claim to Ruatha went
unchallenged by any of the blood.

F'LAR

I wonder why.

Meron suddenly rounds on him, his hand going to his knife.
F'lar takes a step back, putting his hand on his own blade.
For an instant they face off --

And then Mnemeth, on the roof, bugles a deep fierce note.

Meron backs down. He smiles.

MERON

Ruatha has resisted my rule. I've
executed three Warders for
incompetence --

His gaze slides to the Warder, who has emerged from the hold.

MERON

-- so far.

He strides towards the hold. D'nor lets out a slow breath.

D'NOR

He nearly drew on you, brother.

F'LAR

Until he remembered I ride a
dragon.

D'NOR

That won't stop him the next time.

F'LAR

The next time, I'll kill him.

D'NOR
Are you sure? Here?

The Watcher continues to moan from its stinking den.

D'NOR
Maybe it's the Watcher.

MNEMENTH
The Watcher is hiding something.

F'LAR
Someone of the blood. It has to be.
No one else could influence
Ruatha's own Watcher.

D'NOR
The dragons could just as well be
sensing a male by-blow of the line.
And we need a female.

F'LAR
Ruatha couldn't have fallen so far
or so fast without someone working
to sabotage it. Meron said it
himself: Ruatha resists his rule.
She's been resisting it for years.

D'NOR
She?

F'LAR
Someone survived Meron's massacre.
And I mean to find her.

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. RUATHA HOLD - GREAT HALL - DAY

The frantic efforts to make Ruatha presentable are evident -- if not all successful -- in the great hall. Fresh rushes conceal the dirty floor, and the tables -- one on a raised dais, a second at right angles to it -- have been scrubbed.

But long streamers of cobweb still hang from the mould-blackened ceiling. Smoke from the hearth eddies into the room as two drudges attempt to dislodge a obstruction in the chimney. The dim glowlight fades in and out.

Meron's guards and ladies and the Benden wingmen mingle at the lower table as servants bring out wine jugs and goblets. Meron himself stands on the dais, fists on hips, surveying the room, displeasure ugly on his face.

AT THE HEAD TABLE

Jemma grips the back of a chair, her face drawn with the effort of suppressing her discomfort.

F'lar goes to her.

F'LAR

Lady Jemma. Allow me to assist you.

He pulls out a chair. The motheaten cushion atop it is thick with dust. F'lar brushes it away and helps Jemma to sit. She winces, her hand on her belly.

JEMMA

Thank you, bronze rider. You're more than kind.

F'LAR

Are you due soon?

JEMMA

Soon...he sits low. And kicks hard.

F'LAR

You're hoping for a son.

JEMMA

I hope for a living child.

She makes a face.

JEMMA

But my Lord Meron has many daughters. He craves the one thing he cannot take by force. A male heir.

JEMMA (CONT'D)

In that duty, I have disappointed him too many times. Please, bronze rider, could you pour me a drink?

F'lar lifts a dented wine jug from the table, and sniffs it dubiously. He pours a small amount into a goblet and slides the wine cup over to Jemma. As she sips, and sighs with relief, F'lar pours himself a heftier glass.

AT THE LOWER TABLE

D'nor wipes his sticky goblet on his sleeve. C'gan toys with his own wine cup, lost in thought.

D'NOR

What's on your mind, C'gan? You've been quiet since Nabol.

C'GAN

You know I wasn't born to the Weyr, don't you?

D'NOR

Is this going to be one of your old-timey stories?

C'GAN

I was a drum apprentice in the Harpercraft. Back then dragonriders were more frequent visitors to the holds and halls of Pern. More welcome visitors than we are now.

D'NOR

It's an old-timey story.

C'GAN

One day a couple of dragons turn up at the Harper Hall. My voice had just broken, and I was at that age when a young fellow starts having certain kinds of urges.

D'NOR

An old-timey story I don't want to hear...

C'GAN

Thing is, the particular type of urge I was having was the sort that my Master thought a hiding might -- well -- drum out of me.

D'nor stops teasing and just listens.

C'GAN

So there I am -- black eye, bloody nose, fingers all swollen from the hammer my Master used on the big message drums... And one of those dragons looks straight at me, and you know what she says?

D'NOR

What?

C'GAN

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Because like most sensible dragons, she doesn't talk to strange boys.

D'nor chuckles.

C'GAN

But she does talk to her rider. And the next thing I know, it's suggested that I might do better in the Weyr, before my Master's next lesson cracks more than just a few fingers.

D'nor whistles through his teeth.

C'GAN

In the Weyr. With the other deviants. My Master didn't say it in so many words. But it wasn't exactly a suggestion, either.

D'NOR

I'm sorry, C'gan.

C'GAN

Don't be. Sometimes it's worth taking a hiding. I got Tagath out of the deal.

D'NOR

Then you think R'gul's right? That dragonmen are best off keeping apart from the rest of Pern?

C'GAN

I think R'gul clings to tradition when it suits him and scorns it when it doesn't.

D'NOR

What, then?

C'GAN

You remember that lad at Nabol?

D'NOR

The one who stole your purse?

C'GAN

His father hits him. The boy was a mess of bruises. Couldn't have been more than twelve. Younger than I was when that green rider took pity on me at the Harper Hall. But not too young to Impress a dragon.

D'NOR

What does Tagath think?

C'GAN

You know how he is with charity cases. He chose me, didn't he?

D'NOR

R'gul will have your hide if you bring a hold boy to the Weyr.

C'GAN

I know. But...sometimes it's worth taking a hiding.

AT THE HIGH TABLE

F'lar and Jemma drink their wine.

JEMMA

This was once such a proud hall.

F'LAR

You were a friend of Ruatha?

Servants place plates and dishes on the table. One of them is Lessa. As before, she is ignored.

JEMMA

A distant cousin. Many times removed.

F'lar's eyes light up.

F'LAR

Could even one of the blood have escaped --

As he speaks, Meron walks up behind him.

Jemma gives a tiny shake of her head, flicking her eyes to Meron and back to F'lar to warn him.

MERON

You monopolise my lady, F'lar.
Surely you don't intend to offer
her big belly up to your new queen?

F'lar doesn't quite glance at Meron's paunch.

F'LAR

The Lady Jemma's condition is only
temporary, Meron.

Meron's face darkens. He throws himself into a seat, sending up a cloud of dust, and inspects his plate and goblet with a scowl. Ruatha's Warder approaches, wringing his hands.

WARDER

A roast, my lord, and fresh bread,
and such fruits as are left...

MERON

Left? You said nothing had been
harvested here!

WARDER

Nothing good enough to send on to
Nabol, my Lord! If I'd had notice
of your arrival, I could have sent
elsewhere --

Meron slams his plate so hard against the table that it bends.

MERON

Sent elsewhere?

WARDER

For decent foodstuffs --

MERON

The day one of my holds can't
support the visit of its rightful
lord, I'll renounce it!

Lessa, passing with a wine jug, freezes, slopping wine, her eyes bright and manic behind her tangled hair.

Jemma gasps at the same instant that, outside, the dragons ROAR.

F'lar grips the table. His eyes dart to D'nor at the lower table. D'nor's shocked expression reflects his brother's.

MNEMENTH

That power!

MERON

What's wrong, dragonman?

F'lar makes himself release the table. He pretends to be casual.

F'LAR

Wrong?

MERON

The dragons!

F'LAR

Oh, dragons often roar.

He casts covert glances around the room as he speaks, seeking the source of the dragons' excitement. His gaze shifts from face to unappealing face at the table --

F'LAR

At sunset.

-- rapidly -- even dismissively -- over the servants, including Lessa and Robinton, who has joined the serving staff --

F'LAR

And mealtimes.

-- he settles on Lady Jemma's contorted face.

MERON

You'll have your meal, F'lar!

He snaps his fingers at the trembling Warder.

MERON

Food!

The Warder quivers as he gestures to two servants bearing the roast. It looks awful -- incinerated on one side, weeping raw the other. Other servants bring forward trays of burnt bread and bowls of thin, lumpy stew.

Every face -- soldier, lady and dragonrider -- shows revulsion.

MERON

Bring that to me!

Jemma clutches the arms of her chair, nauseated by the dish of greasy stew plunked down in front of her. Beneath the table, F'lar places a concerned hand on her arm.

F'LAR

Lady Jemma -- perhaps some air...?

JEMMA

Meron is always dangerous at Ruatha. Leaving now would provoke him.

She convulses, gripping her stomach, gasping.

JEMMA

They're only false pangs...I think...

Meron pokes through the platter of sliced meat presented to him by the increasingly terrified Warder.

MERON

You call this food?

His roar shakes the hall, dislodging a bug from above. It lands beside his hand. With an exclamation, Meron smashes it under his fist, and then flings the plate of meat into the Warder's face.

The Warder gibbers through dripping bloody juices.

WARDER

It's all we had!

Across the hall -- unnoticed, with everyone watching Meron's outburst -- Lessa stands straight, her body a taut arc of intent. Her blazing eyes bore into the back of F'lar's head - pushing.

F'lar flinches, swaying a little in his seat. His lips move woodenly, the words forced out.

F'LAR

Obviously Ruatha cannot support the visit of its lord, Meron. You must renounce it.

The hall goes silent, broken by the drip of gravy from the Warder's face. F'lar's expression betrays his own shock.

MNEMENTH

F'lar...?

AT THE LOWER TABLE

D'nor and C'gan exchange startled glances.

C'GAN

What's he doing?

D'NOR

Has he lost his mind?

AT THE HIGH TABLE

Meron rises, his chair grating against the floor.

MERON

What did you say?

MNEMENTH

Those were not your words!

F'lar shakes himself, throwing off Lessa's invisible influence.

Lessa's shoulders slump. She drops to her knees to mop up the spilled wine -- and conceal her disappointment.

F'lar crosses his arms, knowing he needs to defuse the situation -- yet too stubborn to take back his own statement.

F'LAR

I only repeated your words, Lord Meron. You are a man of your word, are you not?

Jemma's groan interrupts the stand-off. The convulsions of her belly are unmistakable now -- she is in labour.

Meron looks down at her, his hands clenching into fists, his face reflecting revulsion at her womanly weakness.

And then he roars with laughter.

MERON

I'll renounce it in favour of her child -- if it's male -- if it lives!

F'lar springs to his feet, his eyes snapping.

F'LAR

Heard and witnessed!

D'NOR

Heard and witnessed!

C'GAN

Heard and witnessed!

The other dragonmen echo the obviously ritual words.

Meron continues to laugh. He kicks over his chair, ignoring Jemma, and strides down to the wretched roast, hacking off slices with his dagger and stuffing them into his mouth.

F'lar looks for help for Jemma. He gestures to the Warder.

F'LAR

Get help!

The Warder, wiping gravy from his face with his sleeve, casts about for a servant -- Lessa. He aims a kick at her.

WARDER

You! Get the midwife!

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

Safely alone, Lessa slams her fists against the stone wall with a cry of frustration.

LESSA

Why didn't they fight? The cowards!

But she's not really alone. On the roof above, the dragons shift. Mnementh spreads his wings, making a weird CROON.

LESSA

Shush!

Mnementh's croon breaks off. He sits back down, looking startled. Lessa shakes her head, surprised despite herself.

LESSA

Just a big watcher.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - BEDROOM - DAY

Jemma writhes and moans among twisted sheets on a dusty four-post bed. One of Meron's women mops her brow. Several others stand nearby, wringing their hands.

The doors bursts open to admit Lessa and the hatchet-faced MIDWIFE (40s).

The Midwife strides to Jemma's side, setting down her bag. She swiftly and brusquely examines the stricken lady.

MIDWIFE

The baby hasn't turned. You!
(gesturing to the ladies)
Bring hot water! Cloths! A blanket
for the child!

The ladies flee. Only Lessa remains.

The Midwife pauses to look hard at Jemma's face.

MIDWIFE

What was she thinking, letting
herself fall pregnant at her age?

LESSA

She's Meron's lady. If she bears a
son it will be Lord of Ruatha.

MIDWIFE

If.

MONTAGE - JEMMA'S LABOUR - TIME PASSING

- Jemma's face twists in pain from her contractions
- The Midwife wipes away blood, filling an overflowing bucket with stained rags
- The ladies cringe and wail
- Lessa winces as Jemma grips her hands
- The Midwife shakes her head
- Outside the window the light fades into night and then back to morning again

INT. RUATHA HOLD - BEDROOM - DAY

Jemma moves only weakly now, haggard and grey. The ladies have fallen asleep in a huddle. The Midwife snores in a chair. Even Lessa dozes on the floor, still holding Jemma's hand.

Jemma wakes. She squeezes Lessa's hand, rousing her. Lessa looks down at the labouring woman. Her face contorts into a snarl.

LESSA
It's your fault!

JEMMA
What did I...ever do...to you?

LESSA
You stopped the fight! I was so close!

Jemma's agonised eyes search Lessa's face -- and find something there. Her eyes widen.

JEMMA
Who are you?

Lessa scowls, refusing to answer.

Jemma clutches her hand in a grip that makes Lessa flinch.

JEMMA
Meron mustn't kill the dragonman!
There are so few bronze riders and
Pern needs them all!

LESSA
What do you mean?

Jemma's gaze goes past Lessa, to the window. In the blue morning sky, the Red Star pulses like an evil eye.

JEMMA

The star...the star...

Lessa looks at the star, haunted by her own premonition.

LESSA

What does it mean? Please. Please!
What does the Red Star mean?

JEMMA

It brings -- Oh!

Her body convulses -- heaving -- lifting off the bed in a rictus. The Midwife and ladies start awake.

Jemma's eyes open wide -- and then she collapses back onto the bed and lies still.

Lessa stares at Jemma's slack dead face, covering her mouth with her hand, horrified.

The Midwife pulls her away. Lessa steps backwards, watching as the Midwife checks for signs of life -- and finds none.

Then Lessa's expression hardens from remorse to calculation. She dashes from the room, Jemma's blood still on her hands.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - GREAT HALL - DAY

Soldiers and dragonmen snooze, heads on the table, or leaning back in chairs with their boots amidst the wreckage of the feast. A YOUNG WOMAN in a cheap dress sprawls in Meron's lap.

The BANG of a door thrown open rouses the whole room at once. Lessa stands in the doorway -- still filthy, still ragged, but her hair off her dirty face and her eyes blazing.

LESSA

The child lives.

Meron pushes the woman off his lap, rubbing his bleary eyes.

MERON

What?

Outside the dragons ROAR.

MNEMENTH

The girl!

F'lar jerks his legs off the table, blinking, looking around.

Lessa radiates triumph, her disguise dropped.

LESSA

It's a boy. Ruatha has a new Lord!

The dragons ROAR again.

Meron erupts, charging at Lessa.

MERON

You're lying! You devious little
slut, you're lying!

He backhands her across the face, knocking her off her feet.
Lessa crumples. Meron lifts his foot to kick her.

F'LAR

Stop!

Meron whirls. He leaps back onto the dais, dagger in hand.

F'LAR

You swore you'd renounce Ruatha in
favour of your son. It was heard
and witnessed by dragonmen!

MERON

Dragonmen?

He sneers, his gaze passing over the assembled dragonriders -
- pausing on C'gan, who stares back in unruffled defiance.

MERON

Dragon women!

F'lar draws his own knife, dropping into a fighting stance.

F'LAR

Think carefully before you insult
us, Meron.

MERON

Cowards! Deviants! Parasites on
Pern! Dragon women!

He lunges at F'lar. F'lar leaps back.

Meron's soldiers and F'lar's riders close in a circle around
the combatants and the motionless Lessa. Robinton watches
intently from just outside the circle.

F'lar glances from Meron to Lessa and back. He sidesteps,
circling Meron. Meron mirrors him. Despite his bulk he moves
with grace. A deadly opponent.

Meron strikes again. F'lar sways back. Meron's knife-tip
catches in his shirt, ripping it.

Meron grins. He attacks again. It forces F'lar backwards
towards the edge of the dais. F'lar staggers -- regains his
balance -- steps aside. Meron's charge takes him off the
dais.

F'lar has the advantage of height. But Lessa is on the floor. F'lar leaps down, catlike, moving to protect her with his body.

MERON

They say Weyrmen don't fight.

He slashes. F'lar dodges.

MERON

They hide behind their dragons.

He presses the attack again. They wrestle. F'lar ducks out of the grapple. He grunts as Meron's blade slices his shoulder.

MERON

Afraid of the sight of blood!

Meron is gasping -- his unfitness showing -- his face red with anger and exertion. F'lar breathes hard and fast, but he still moves with nimble grace. He touches his wounded shoulder and his hand comes away bloody.

F'LAR

You heard wrong.

He darts in, striking. Meron blocks the blow. The blades screech together. They break apart.

F'LAR

Weyrmen don't start fights.

He attacks again. Meron sidesteps. The table blocks his escape. F'lar's slice rips down Meron's left arm. Meron bellows, clutching the arm to himself, spurting blood.

F'LAR

But we end them!

He raises his blade.

Meron seizes a handful of scraps from a plate on the table. He flings them at F'lar. F'lar shields his face with his arm.

Meron charges like a bull, roaring. He catches F'lar around the waist. They stagger back. F'lar scrambles to avoid falling with Meron atop him. He ducks under Meron's outstretched arm. Meron's charge takes him past.

F'lar strikes, backhanded.

His blade sinks into Meron's back below the shoulder-blade.

Meron gurgles, wide-eyed. He coughs, stumbles, and falls. He lands so hard that F'lar's blade re-emerges from its point of entry.

Outside the dragons ROAR.

F'lar kneels beside the fallen Meron. He unbuckles the wristwatch from Meron's wrist. Blood smears the face. He wipes it clean on Meron's tunic.

F'LAR
Your time's up, Meron.

He tucks the watch into his pocket.

Meron's men crowd around their lord. F'lar stumbles away, panting, holding his wounded shoulder. D'nor rushes to him.

D'NOR
F'lar!

F'lar ignores him, heading for Lessa.

D'nor frowns. Then he gestures to the other dragonriders.

D'NOR
Protect the Wingleader!

The Weyrmen line up, hands on their knives, a solid defensive line in front of F'lar.

Robinton, still in his guise as a Ruatha servant, slips away from the confusion, towards the inner door.

C'gan, on one end of the line, sees him go -- and follows.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - CORRIDOR - DAY

Robinton moves with purpose along the corridor. He seizes a WEeping LADY.

ROBINTON
The Lady Jemma?

The Weeping Lady points.

As Robinton proceeds, C'gan steps into the corridor.

C'GAN
You -- stop!

He hurries to catch up, puffing.

C'GAN
Too damn old for this...
Where are you --

Robinton pushes back his hood with a rueful smile.

C'GAN
Robinton? What are you doing here?

ROBINTON

Someone had to keep an eye on
Meron.

C'GAN

So everything we witnessed --

ROBINTON

The Masterharper of Pern witnessed,
too. And I think it's time we met
the new Lord of Ruatha.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - BEDROOM - DAY

Robinton and C'gan slip inside -- and stop, shocked.

The Midwife pulls a bloody sheet up over Jemma's pale dead
face.

C'GAN

She didn't survive the birth...

The Midwife turns to them, placing a finger on her lips.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - GREAT HALL - DAY

F'lar kneels beside Lessa's limp figure. The filth gives him
momentary pause -- but he overcomes his revulsion and turns
her over. He feels for a pulse.

F'LAR

Alive!

He lifts the matted hair off her face. The fresh bruise from
Meron's fist discolours her cheekbone but, unconscious, her
dirty features are clearly young -- and beautiful.

F'LAR

You're no servant, are you?

He strokes her face, enchanted by the unexpected nobility.

Lessa's eyes snap open.

She takes him in with a glance, and then twists her features
into the feral ugliness of her disguise.

F'LAR

Trying to confuse me? Who are you?

LESSA

Meron?

F'lar looks over to the knot of men around Meron's fallen
body.

F'LAR
 Defeated. Who are you?

Triumph floods Lessa's face.

LESSA
 Then Ruatha is mine!

F'lar looks her up and down, mocking her rags.

F'LAR
 And who are you to claim her?

LESSA
 I am Lessa of Ruatha. The last
 daughter of the blood!

F'lar laughs.

F'LAR
 Shall I challenge the child for
 you, too? Strangle him with his
 swaddling clothes?

Lessa's smile is fierce and manic.

LESSA
 There is no child. Jemma died
 before it was born.

F'LAR
 What?

Lessa laughs at his shocked indignation.

LESSA
 I had to be sure you would
 challenge Meron!

F'LAR
 You provoked me to fight? A
 dragonman? On search?

LESSA
 I don't care about your search!
 Only Ruatha! My hold!

F'lar seizes her arm, twisting it, furious.

F'LAR
 You dare --

But Lessa pulls free of his grip. She rolls to her feet and
 flees -- dodging D'nor as she goes.

D'nor looks askance at the running servant.

D'NOR
That creature's your source of
power?

F'lar climbs painfully to his feet, favouring his shoulder.

F'LAR
Not a creature. She says she's of
the Ruathan bloodline.

D'NOR
And you believe her?

F'LAR
I do. She's claiming the hold.

D'NOR
Does she plan to depose the baby,
then?

F'LAR
What baby?

D'NOR
The Lady Jemma's.

F'lar blinks.

F'LAR
It lives?

D'nor gestures to two of their riders to move aside. Beyond them, Robinton cradles a wrapped infant in his arms.

D'NOR
The woman died. The midwife had to
cut the child out. And it is a boy.

F'lar starts to laugh.

F'LAR
Find that servant!

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

INT. RUATHA HOLD - CORRIDORS/STAIRS - DAY

Lessa flees through the corridors, looking back over her shoulder at intervals as the sound of pursuit reaches her.

She dashes up several flights of stairs. She looks back again. Her pursuers close in.

She focuses on an arrowslit window on the landing.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - UPPER LEVEL - DAY

The wind blows in blustery gusts as Lessa squeezes through the narrow window onto the ledge outside.

Promontories and gutters afford a route back down -- but a dangerous one.

As Lessa inches along the ledge, a dark shadow falls over her.

She looks up.

And meets Mnementh's immense, fully violet eyes.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - CORRIDORS - DAY

F'lar flings open door after door, in search of Lessa.

MNEMENTH

I have caught her.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

As F'lar comes out of the main doors, Mnementh spirals down from above -- holding Lessa with great care in his forepaws.

His hind feet settle to the ground, and he places her down, keeping her caged in his claws.

The Watcher goes berserk -- snapping and snarling, hitting the end of its chain again and again, heedless of the light.

F'lar strides to Lessa, who regards him with fury, not fear.

F'LAR

You didn't lie. Jemma's son lived.

Lessa cannot conceal her dismay.

LESSA

It doesn't matter! Ruatha is mine!
By blood, by birthright! I've
waited ten years! Suffered and
schemed and bided my time! All for
Ruatha!

F'LAR

And that's the limit of your
ambition? This ruin? When you could
be Weyrwoman?

Lessa regards him with a mixture of incomprehension and
disbelief.

LESSA

Weyrwoman?

F'LAR

I told you I rode in search. And
the object of that search...was
you. You have power, when you can
manipulate a dragonman -- and
silence his dragon.

Mnementh snorts.

F'LAR

But we're wise to that trick now.

Lessa turns her glare on Mnementh.

F'LAR

Pern needs a Weyrwoman to ride the
new queen. The Red Star --

Lessa recoils, her eyes going to where the Red Star still
glows.

LESSA

Jemma said all the riders were
needed... What does it mean?

F'LAR

It means Thread will return.

LESSA

Thread?

F'LAR

Mortal danger for all of Pern, not
just Ruatha. We're doomed without a
strong Weyrwoman. Leave Ruatha to
Meron's -- to Jemma's son. As
Weyrwoman you'll have power over
all the holds of Pern.

Lessa wavers, looking up at Ruatha's crumbling towers, down at its broken flagstones, indecisive.

F'LAR

Or is the last daughter of Ruatha afraid?

Lessa's head snaps up. She glowers.

LESSA

I fear nothing!

Mnementh bugles a shattering note of triumph.

INT. RUATHA HOLD - GREAT HALL - DAY

D'nor, Robinton and C'gan watch as two soldiers lift Meron -- unconscious but not dead -- onto a stretcher, under the curt instructions of a HEALER.

D'NOR

After all that, my brother didn't even manage to kill him.

ROBINTON

As good as. Even if he recovers, he'll slink back to Nabol with his tail between his legs. That's the only hold of his seven he ever truly had a right to rule. The other Lords will be glad of an excuse to relieve him of the others.

D'NOR

What about Ruatha?

ROBINTON

It'll need a new Warder until the child comes of age. I don't think the current incumbent is quite up to the task of restoring Ruatha. Someone older. Steady. Competent.

D'NOR

And sympathetic to the Weyr. Benden could use a few more friendly holds.

He smiles.

D'NOR

I know just the man.

EXT. RUATHA HOLD - COURTYARD - DAY

D'nor, C'gan and the other wingmen wait by the main door as their dragons spiral down into the courtyard. F'lar approaches.

D'nor nods in the direction of Lessa -- kneeling at the mouth of the Watcher's den.

D'NOR

So she was responsible for Ruatha's deterioration?

F'LAR

Almost ours, too.

D'NOR

And you want to bring her to the Weyr?

F'lar gives his brother an enigmatic smile.

Robinton strolls out from the hold. He nods to F'lar.

F'LAR

Masterharper? What are you doing here?

ROBINTON

Oh, meddling. As Harpers are apt to do. Your brother has suggested a candidate for Ruathan Warder.

D'NOR

I thought Lytol...

F'lar raises his eyebrows. Then he nods.

F'LAR

Lytol will do well.

ROBINTON

Perhaps if the brown rider would be so kind as to transport me to Nabol... The holders there might accept a neutral party's account of events here more readily than they would a dragonrider's.

C'GAN

Wingleader. Permission to return to Nabol with the Wingsecond and Masterharper?

F'LAR

C'gan?

C'GAN

There's something there I need to retrieve.

He catches D'nor's eye.

C'GAN

I'm long overdue a hiding.

D'nor grins.

AT THE WATCHER'S DEN

the Watcher lies panting from its exertions. Lessa cradles its head, scratching behind its stunted headknobs.

LESSA

Good boy...good boy...

F'lar observes the scene with barely concealed distaste.

MNEMENTH

It is very old. It will sleep itself to death soon.

F'LAR

It's time to go, Lessa.

Lessa shoots him an irate look.

LESSA

It saved me, ten years ago.

F'lar reaches down to pull her to her feet.

F'LAR

Then it --

Before he can finish the sentence the Watcher surges at him with a GROWL, knocking him flat.

Mnementh bugles with alarm.

F'lar lies dazed, unable to move, watching the ugly creature bunch itself to leap atop him.

Mnementh swings his head around -- not fast enough.

The Watcher springs --

LESSA

Don't kill! Don't kill!

The Watcher's snarl turns into a whimper. It twists itself away from the supine F'lar mid-air, turning an impossible somersault. It hits the flagstones -- its tail and hindquarters flip over its head -- with a terrible CRACK its back breaks.

LESSA

No!

She hugs the grotesque head to her chest, stricken.

F'lar staggers to his feet. Mnementh lowers his head to touch the Watcher's broken body.

MNEMENTH

It thought she was in danger.

LESSA

He was protecting me. He was my friend. My only friend.

F'lar lowers his head, chastened by his own impatience.

F'LAR

I'm sorry.

Lessa strokes and pats the Watcher's head as its laboured breathing ceases and the light in its eyes goes out.

Mnementh lifts his muzzle from the Watcher's body. Then he raises his head in the high wailing KEEN of dragon mourning. Around him, the other dragons join their voices to the dirge.

Lessa looks around in wonder. F'lar is barely less astonished.

LESSA

He was only a Watcher.

F'LAR

Dragons confer honour where they will.

The keen dies away. Lessa kneels and unbuckles the collar from around the Watcher's neck -- struggling where the heavy circlet has dug into the skin of its throat. She hurls the collar aside.

Then she walks, without another backward glance, towards Mnementh.

F'LAR

You're really not afraid, are you?

LESSA

Of him?

(indicating Mnementh)

Why should I be? He's just a big Watcher.

F'lar looks up at Mnementh. Silently --

F'LAR

Are we making a mistake?

MNEMENTH

She is why you came to Ruatha.

F'LAR

Yes. She is.

He walks to Mnementh's shoulder. Mnementh crouches and F'lar vaults onto his neck with fluid ease. He snaps a pair of safety straps to his belt with carabiners and reaches down to Lessa.

Lessa hesitates, looking at his hand with suspicion.

F'LAR

You'll have to take my hand sooner
or later, Lessa of Ruatha.

Lessa scowls. She shakes her head.

LESSA

Lessa of Pern.

She scrambles up Mnementh's neck unaided -- seating herself in front of F'lar.

F'lar shakes his head at her self-possession.

F'LAR

You'd better hold on tight.

With a massive thrust of his hind legs Mnementh lifts off. He beats his wings once, twice, three times to gain height, and then they are above Ruatha, looking down on the ruined hold. The other dragons of F'lar's Wing rise around them.

Lessa laughs with fierce delight at the sensation.

LESSA

Is it far to Benden Weyr?

F'lar grins.

F'LAR

The blink of an eye.

Lessa looks puzzled.

F'LAR

Mnementh. Take us between.

And without further warning, all the dragons VANISH into thin air, leaving empty sky behind them.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

THE END