

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Skies Of Pern

Anne McCaffrey

About the Book

A new age is dawning on Pern, for since the dragons have changed the orbit of the Red Star, the horrors of Threadfall will soon be a thing of the past. But even as the dragon riders are trying to decide what their future role will be, further dangers are beginning to emerge, as those calling themselves the Abominators plot together to destroy all the learning that has been discovered from the records of the Old Ones.

Their first vicious assault is on the Healer Halls - irrevocable damage is done and it is obvious that this is a worldwide movement with a dangerous mind leading those who would destroy all of the new knowledge.

And now comes a fresh and terrible catastrophe - a large cometary fragment is hurtling towards Pern and cannot be deflected. Everyone - dragons, riders, holders and craftsmen - must stand by to perform a giant rescue operation.

As F'lessan, son of Lessa and F'lar, plays his heroic part in the events that follow, he is helped by Tai, his new weyrmate. But it is the dragons, bronze Golanth and the brilliant green Zaranth, who will provide the solution to the dangers of the skies.

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

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About the Author

THE SKIES OF PERN

Anne McCraffrey

This book is respectfully dedicated to Steven M. Beard
Ph.D. for putting my world in my hands

Acknowledgements

The longer I write in the Pern Series the more unusual the circumstances become and the more I need the help of special friends and even more special experts in various fields.

In this book, my cry for astronomical help went out again to Dr Steven M. Beard and Elizabeth Kerner. Necessity required me to add a cosmic impact consultant in the person of Scott Manley of Armagh Observatory, which I also visited to see telescopes and learn how to arrange for a cosmic impact on exactly the site required, with digital embellishments and proper read-outs. In Armagh, on a lovely April evening, I had the pleasure of dining at the home of Dr Bill and Mrs Nancy Napier and meeting some of their colleagues.

Marilyn and Harry Alm - with the exceptional oceanographic help of P. Burr Loomis - provided me with splendid maps and diagrams so that I would know where I was on Pern.

I owe a particular debt to Georgeanne Kennedy, who urged me to keep to the 'real' storyline when I had a tendency to go off on tangents because there are so many people on Pern. Thanks also to Lea Day, Elizabeth Kerner and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough who kindly read original draft material and gave me invaluable support. Last but scarcely least is my appreciation for my editors, Shelly Shapiro and Diane Pearson, who helped me refine this latest adventure on Pern. I am deeply grateful for their input.

I would also like to thank <http://science.nasa.gov/headlines/y2000> for their excellent updates on what is happening in and about this world.

List of Characters

Adrea – Beljeth	Weyrwoman	Southern Weyr
Aramina	spouse Jayge	Benini Hold/ Paradise River Hold
Arminet	stationmaster	Wide Bay Runner Station
Arnor	old archivist	Harper Hall
Asgenar	Lord Holder	Lemos Hold
Bagalla	Abominator	Igen Wehr
Ballora	MasterBeastman	Keroon Hold
Bargen	Lord Holder	High Reaches Hold
Bassage	Mastersmith	Telgar Weyr
Batim	Abominator	Crom
Bedella – Solth	ex-Weyrwoman	Telgar Weyr
Bendarek	MasterWoodSmith	Lemos Hold
Benelek	Master	Computer Hall
Benini	journeyman herder	Benini Hold
Besic	son Toric	Southern Hold
Binness	fishman	Sunrise Cliff Seahold
Brand	steward	Ruatha Hold
Brekke	spouse F'nor	Benden Weyr
C'reel – Galuth	brown rider	Monaco Bay Weyr
Chenoa	Pinch's bunch	Keroon
Chesmic	stationmaster	Circle Runner Station
Ciparis	Lord Holder	Nerat Hold
Colmin	journeyman weaver	Keroon Hold
Cona	spouse Binness	Sunrise Cliff Seahold
Cosira	Weyrwoman	Ista Weyr
Crivellan	Master Healer	Fort Hold
Curella	queen rider	High Reaches Weyr

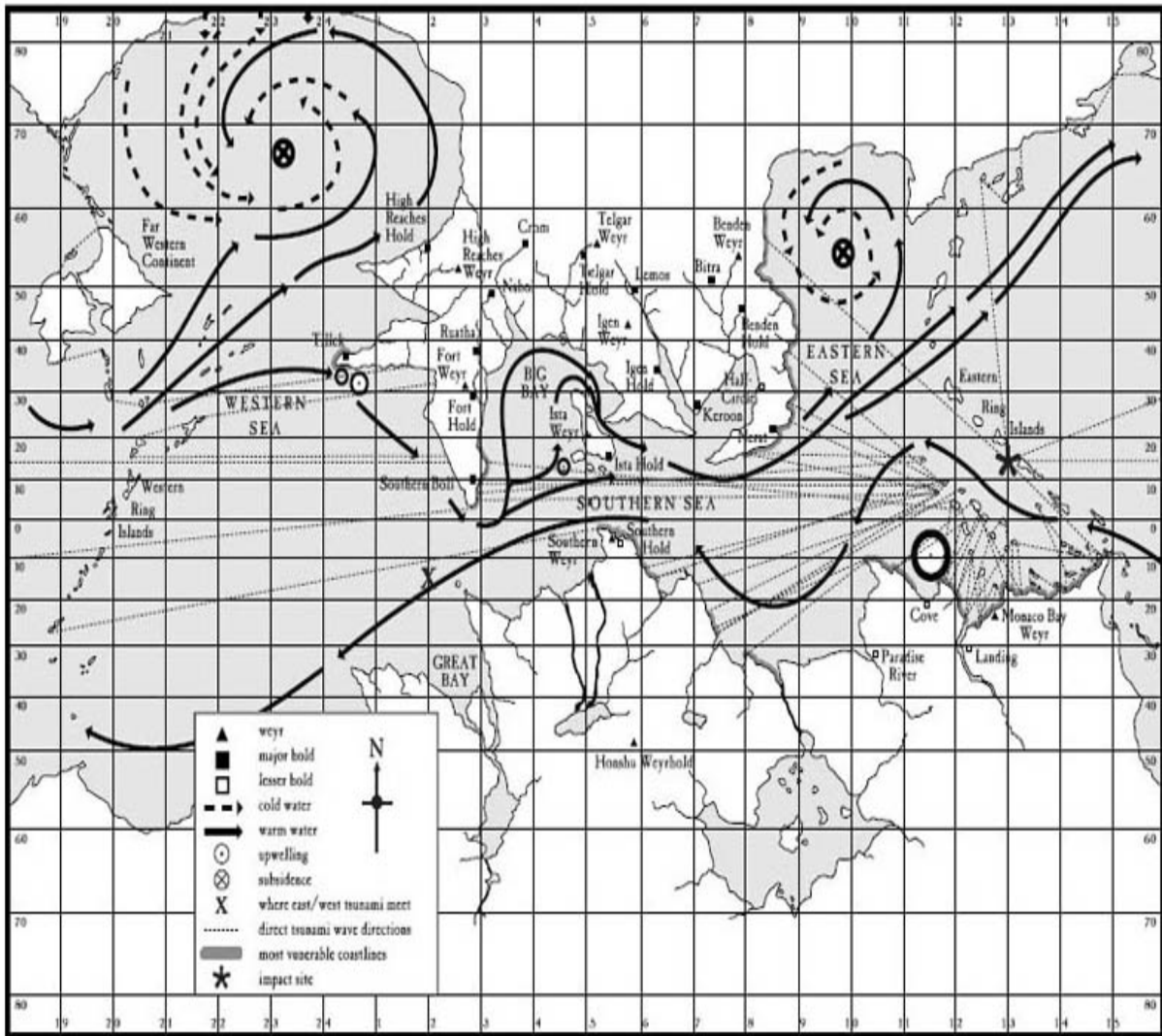
Curran	MasterFishman	Fort Hold
D'ram – Tiroth	bronze rider	Cove Hold
Danegga – Ptath	green rider	Monaco Bay Weyr
Deckter	Lord Holder	Nabol Hold
Delart	apprentice printer	Keroon Hold
Denol	rebel	Ierne Island
Dilla	weyrfolk	Monaco Bay Weyr
Dorse	brother Sharra	Ruatha Hold
Dulsay	spouse Larad	Telgar Hold
Egara	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
Erragon	Master Starman	Cove Hold
Esselin	Master Archivist	Landing
F'lar – Mnementh	Weyrleader	Benden Weyr
F'lessan – Golanth	wingleader	Benden Weyr/ Honshu
F'nor – Canth	brother F'lar	Benden Weyr
Fandarel	MasterSmith	Telgar Hold
Fortune	Holder	Ista Hold
Frawly	beastmaster	Keroon Hold
Fromelin	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
G'bear – Winlath	Weyrleader	High Reaches Weyr
G'bol – Mirreth	wingleader	Benden Weyr
G'dened – Baranth	Weyrleader	Ista Weyr
G'narish – Gyamath	Weyrleader	Igen Weyr
Galter	Abominator	Bitra Hold
Garrel	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
Geger	wineman	Landing
Gellim	son Mirrim	Monaco Bay Weyr
Grainger	steward	Fort Hold
Groghe	Lord Holder	Fort Hold
H'nor – Ranneth	brown rider	Telgar Weyr
H'redan	wingleader	Southern Weyr
Haligon	son Groghe	Fort Hold
Hamian	Master Smith	Drake's Lake

Hillegel	brother Sangel	South Boll Hold
Horon	son Groghe	Ford Hold
Hosbon	Holder	Largo Hold/ Seminole Hold
Idarolan	ex-MasterFishman	Tillek Hold
J'fery – Willerth	Weyrleader	Telgar Weyr
Jancis	Master Smith	Telgarth Smith Hall
Janissian	Lady Holder	South Boll Head
Jaxom – Ruth	Lord Holder	Ruatha Hold
Jayge	spouse Aramina	Benini Hold/ Paradise River Hold
Joella	beastmaster	Keroon Hold
Joetta	MasterWeaver	Weaver Hall
Jubb	holdmate Sagassy	Honshu Hold
K'drin – Buleth	brother T'lion	Monaco Bay Weyr
K'van – Heth	Weyrleader	Southern Weyr
Kashman	Lord Holder	Keroon Hold
Keita	journeywoman	
	healer	Healer Hall
Langrell	Lord Holder	Igen Hold
Larad	Lord Holder	Telgar Hold
Laradian	son Larad	Telgar Hold
Lechi	Abominator	Bitra Hold
Lessa – Ramoth	Weyrwoman	Benden Weyr
Lias	seaman	Sunrise Cliff Seahold
Lofton	journeyman	
	starsmith	Cove Hold
Lytol	Lord Warder/ ex-dragonrider	Cove Hold
M'ling	wingleader	Southern Weyr
M'rand – Branth	ex-Weyrleader	High Reaches Weyr
Macy	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
Magalia	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
Manora	headwoman, Lomer	Benden Weyr
	Caverns	
Marella	grandmother	
	Janissian	South Boll Hold

Margatta – Ludeth	Weyrwoman	Fort Weyr
Marley	apprentice printer	Keroon Hold
Medda	Lady Seaholder	Sunrise Cliff Seahold
Mekelroy (aka Pinch)	harper-spy	Harper Hall
Menolly	Master Harper	Harper Hall
Mickulin	guard	Ruatha Hold
Minsom	Abominator	Bitra Hold
Mirrim – Path-green	exbenden, green rider	Monaco Bay Weyr
Morilton	MasterGlassSmith	Crom
Murolin	MasterSmith	South Boll Hold
N'bil	wingleader	Southern Weyr
N'ton – Lioth	Weyrleader	Fort Weyr
Nadira – Baylith	Weyrwoman	Igen Weyr
Neldama – Yasith	Weyrwoman	High Reaches Weyr
Niness	Pinch's bunch	Keroon
Nip	harper-spy	Harper Hall
Norist	ex-MasterGlassSmith	Exiled
Oldive	MasterHealer	Healer Hall
Palla – Talmanth	Weyrwoman	Telgar Weyr
Palol	Abominator	Igen Hold
Persellan	healer	Monaco Bay Hold
Petan	seaman	Sunrise Cliff Seahold
Piemur	Masterharper-spy	Harper Hall
Pilgra – Selgrith	ex-Weyrwoman	High Reaches Weyr
Possil	journeyman weaver	Ruatha Hold
Prilla	runner	Circle Runner Station
R'mart	ex-Weyrleader	Telgar Weyr
Ramala	spouse Toric	Southern Hold
Ranrel	Lord Holder	Tillek Hold
Readis	DolphinMaster	Dolphin Hall
Rency	Holder	Cardiff Hold
Riller	workmate Jubb	Honshu Hold
Robse	son Sebell	Harper Hall

Ronchin	apprentice	Harper Hall
Rosheen	spouse Tagetarl	Keroon Hold
S'dra	wingleader	Southern Weyr
S'lan – Norenth	son F'lessan	Benden Weyr
Sagassy	holdmate Jubb	Honshu Hold
Samvel	Master Harper/Teacher	Landing
Sangel	Lord Holder	South Boll Hold
Sebell	MasterHarper	Harper Hall
Serubil	Master Harper	Crom Hold
Sev	trader	Lilcamp
Shankolin	Abominator	Crom
Sharra	Master Healer	Ruatha Hold
Sintary	Master Harper	Southern Hold
Sousmal	Lord Holder	Bitra Hold
Sparling	workmate Jubb	Honshu Hold
St'ven – Mealth	brown rider	Monaco Bay Weyr
Stinar	Master Starman	Landing
T'gellan – Monarth	Weyrleader	Monaco Bay Weyr
T'lion – Gadareth	brother K'drin	Monaco Bay Weyr
Tagetarl	MasterPrinter	Keroon Hold
Tai – Zaranth	green rider	Monaco Bay Weyr
Talina – Arwith	Weyrwoman	Monaco Bay Weyr
Tawer	Abominator	Keroon Hold
Tenna	runner	Fort Hold Runner Station
Tippel	MasterSmith	Crom Hold
Toric	Lord Holder	Southern Hold
Torjus	Pinch's bunch	Keroon Hold
Torlo	stationmaster	Fort Hold Runner Station
Toronas	Lord Holder	Benden Hold
Tuck	harper-spy	Harper Hall
Tunge	guard	Landing
Venabil	sea captain	Keroon Hold
Vessa	child	Monaco Bay Weyr

Vickling	Abominator	Igen Hold
Viscula	Abominator	Crom Hold
Vormital	nephew Sangel	South Boll Hold
Wansor	MasterStarSmith	Cove Hold
Warlow	nephew Sangel	South Boll Hold
Welliner	MasterVintner	Southern Hold
Wil	apprentice printer	Keroon Hold
Worla	apprentice harper	Ford Hold
Wyzall	Master Weyrhealer	Healer Hall
Zalla	Abominator	Igen Caverns
Zewe	portmaster	Monaco Bay



NINTH PASS PERN

Authorized by Anne McCaffrey.
 Redrawn and updated by Julia Lloyd from an original by Niels Erickson.
 Oceanography information by P. Burr Loomis.
 Ocean current information by Marilyn Alm.

*Ours not to ponder what were fair in Life,
But, finding what may be,
Make it fair up to our means.*

INTRODUCTION

When mankind first discovered Pern, third planet of the sun Rukbat, in the Sagittarian Sector, they paid little attention to the eccentric orbit of another satellite in the system.

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

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

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

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

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

After one such long interval, when Thread renewed its violence, the dragonriders were down to one single Weyr - Benden. Its courageous leaders, F'lar, rider of bronze Mnementh, and Lessa, rider of the only gold queen, Ramoth, brought forward in time the other five Weyrs, and all their inhabitants, to renew the defence of Pern.

Circumstances encouraged exploration of the southern continent, and there Lord Jaxom, rider of white Ruth, his friend F'lessan, rider of bronze Golanth, Journeywoman Jancis from the MasterSmithCraftHall, and Piemur, harper at large, discover the most important artefact in the settlers' original Landing: AIVAS - Artificial Intelligence Voice Address System.

With myriad files of information, which the colonists had brought with them, Aivas is able to restore lost pieces of information for all the CraftHalls. He is also able to tell them, and instruct them how to rid their world, of the cyclical dangers of the erratic satellite inaccurately called the Red Star.

F'lar and Lessa, Benden's courageous and farseeing Weyrleaders, are the first to encourage Lord Holders and CraftMasters to end the domination and start a new era on Pern. Almost all Lord Holders and CraftMasters agree, especially since Aivas can provide them with new methods and technologies to improve life and health.

Those who consider Aivas an 'abomination' attempt to stop the splendid project but are defeated. Instructed and

trained by Aivas, the young riders and technicians are able to transport, by means of the dragons, the antimatter engines of the three colony ships, still in orbit above Landing, and place them in a massive fault on the Red Planet. The subsequent explosion is visible from much of the planet, and people rejoice to think they will finally be rid of Thread.

However, Thread continues to fall because the swarm brought in by the Red Planet has not yet completely passed by Pern. Dragonriders and harpers explain to those who will listen that the erratic orbit of the Red Planet takes it through the Oort cloud that surrounds the Rukbat system – on its way into the system and again on its way out – attracting to itself the mycorrhizoid spores that fall on Pern as Thread. Now that the Red Planet's orbit has been irreversibly altered, it will no longer come close enough to affect Pern. This Pass is the last one Pern will have to endure.

They must now start planning for a Threadfree future, making use of the Aivas files, full of useful, but not highly sophisticated, technology that will improve life for everyone on Pern. Even the dragonriders, for centuries the defenders of Pern, must fit themselves for new occupations. The questions are: which technology is proper to use without disrupting the culture of the planet, and how will the dragonriders integrate themselves and their splendid friends?

PROLOGUE

Crom Mines 5.27.30 Present Pass
Aivas Adjusted Turn 2552

The journeyman on duty in the prisoners' quarters at Mine 23 in the western foothills was the first one to see the bright, almost bluish streak in the sky. It was coming from a southwesterly direction. It also appeared to be coming straight at him, so he shouted a warning as he scrambled down the steps of the guard tower.

His yells attracted the attention of other miners, just coming up from the shafts, tired and dirty from their long day digging iron ore. They, too, saw the light - coming straight at the hold. They scattered, yelling, diving for the nearest shelter under ore carts, behind the raw mounds of the day's tips, behind the gantry, back into the shaft. There was a rushing noise of thunder, rumbling from the sky itself, and not a cloud in sight. Some insisted that they heard a high-pitched shriek. Everyone agreed on the direction from which the object came: southwest.

Suddenly the high stone wall that surrounded the prison yard was breached, showering pieces of rock down on the other sections of the minehold and causing miners to fall flat, covering their heads against the fragments. A second explosive noise followed the first, punctuated by screams of terror from those in the prison quarters. There was the stink of very hot metal - a familiar enough smell in a place where iron ore was smelted into ingots before being shipped to SmithCraftHalls. Only this stink had an unusual acidity that no-one could later accurately describe.

In fact, from the moment the journeyman shouted his warning, only one man of the several hundred in the minehold kept his head. Shankolin, imprisoned in the Crom Mines for the past thirteen Turns, had waited for just such an opportunity: a chance for him to escape. He heard the wall shatter, of course, and saw a moment's reflection of the blue-white light in the small window of the heavy door that was the only entrance to the building. He threw himself to the left, diving under a wooden bunk just as something large, hot and reeking pierced the wall where his head would have been. It hissed as it ploughed down the main aisle and buried itself in the far corner, dropping through the wood planks, smashing the corner pillar, buckling the wall and causing part of the roof to collapse. Someone was screaming in pain, pleading for help. Everyone else was howling with fear.

Wriggling out from under the bunk, Shankolin took just one look at the opening the meteorite had made - for that was the only thing that could have caused the damage just done - saw straight across the yard to the shattered wall and reacted. He dived out of his prison, sprinted to the broken wall. On his way, he made certain that there was no one on the guard walkway or in the end turrets. They must all have abandoned their posts as the meteor streamed towards the minehold.

He heaved himself up and over the broken wall and ran down the hill as fast as he could to the nearest cover of straggly bushes. Crouching behind them, he caught his breath while he listened to the continued sounds of confusion from the minehold. The injured man was still howling, and the guards would have to tend to him before they did a head-count. They'd probably want to have as close a look at the meteorite as possible. The metal types were valuable. Or so he'd heard - when his deafness had lifted. He didn't hear everything, but at least caught most of what was said. He had never let on that he had

recovered from the skull-ripping sound that that abominable Aivas voice had emitted when Shankolin had led men picked by his father, Master Norist, to destroy the Aivas and its evil influence on the people of Pern.

Having caught his breath, Shankolin rolled down the slight incline until he felt it safe to rise to a crouch and make his way to the sparse forest. He kept turning his head this way and that, listening for any sound of men coming after him. Keeping low, he ran as fast as he could down the dangerous inclines. He could even hear the pebbles and stones rattling and bouncing ahead of him.

One thought dominated: this time he would make good his escape. This time he had to be free; to halt the progress that the Aivas Abomination was inexorably making, as his father had told him in a hushed and fearful voice, destroying the Pern that had survived so long. Master Norist had been horrified to learn that the Weyrleaders of Pern believed that this disembodied voice could actually instruct them on how to turn the Red Star from its orbit and prevent it from ever again swinging close enough to Pern to drop the avaricious and hungry Thread. Thread could eat anything - herd-beasts, humans, vegetation - it could consume huge trees in the time it took a man to blink. He knew. He'd seen it happen once when he'd been part of the ground crews assembled by the Glass Hall. Thread truly was a menace to bodies and growing things, but the Aivas Abomination had been a more insidious menace to the very minds and hearts of men and women. From its disembodied words a perfidious treachery had been spread. His father had been amazed and disheartened by all the impossible things the Aivas Abomination had told the Lord Holders and CraftMasters: the machines and methods that their ancestors had had; equipment and processes - even ways to improve glass - all of which would make living on Pern much easier.

At that time, when everyone was extolling the miracle of this Aivas thing, his father and a few other men of importance had seen the dangers inherent in many of these smooth and tempting promises. As if a mere voice could alter the way a star moved. Shankolin was firmly of his father's mind. Stars did not change their courses. He agreed that the Weyrleaders were fools, inexplicably eager to destroy the very reason why the great dragons were essential to the preservation of the planet! He agreed because he was so close to the end of his journeyman's time; eager to prove acceptable to his father, to be the one of his sons to receive the secret skills of colouring glass in the glorious shades that only a Master of the Craft could produce: which sand would make molten glass blue; which powder caused the brilliant deep crimson.

So he volunteered to be one of those to attack the Aivas Abomination and end its domination over the minds of otherwise intelligent men and women.

He was into the stream before he realized it. His right boot hit a slippery stone and he fell, striking his face across another rock. Dazed by the blow, it took him some minutes to push to his hands and knees. The chill of the water on his wrists and legs helped to revive him. Then he saw the drops of blood landing on the stream and floating pinkly away. He explored the cut on his face, wincing as he realized the slash started at his forehead, continued down one side of his nose to a gouge in his cheek. As jagged a cut as the rock which had made it. Blood dripped off his chin. Holding his breath, he buried his face in the cold water. He repeated the process until the cold water had somewhat stemmed the flow of blood. Even so, he had to tear off the tail end of his shirt to tie a rude bandage to stop the blood running from his forehead. Once he cocked his head, listening for any sounds of pursuit. He couldn't hear avians or the slithering of snakes. His running might have startled

them away. With water still dripping from his soaked clothes, he got to his feet and sniffed at the slight breeze.

During his long Turns of deafness, his other senses had intensified. His sense of smell had once saved his life, even if he had lost the tip of his finger. He'd caught the rank odour of escaping gas just before the mine wall had collapsed. Two miners had been buried alive in that fall.

Blood continued to drip from his cheek. He took another patch from his shirt-tail and held it to the gouge. He looked this way and that, wondering how to proceed.

There were men in the minehold who boasted about their success in tracking escaped prisoners. Bloodstains would make their job easier. He looked anxiously about him, but the stream had swept the blood away. There'd be no stains to be found.

Perhaps the meteorite had delayed pursuit. There'd been many injured and no prisoner count had been made. Maybe the meteorite itself was of more importance to the miners than one escapee. He'd heard that the SmithCraftHall paid well for such pieces falling from the sky. Let them waste time sending a message to the nearest CraftHall. Let them give him enough time to reach the river.

If he kept to the water, he'd leave no bloodstains to be tracked. Eventually this stream would reach the river and then the Southern Sea. He'd have to keep holding the bandage on his cheek until the blood clotted. He was still a bit woozy from his fall. He'd find a stick to help him keep his balance and to check the water's depths. He spotted one further down the bank, sturdy and long enough to be useful. A few cautious steps forward in the stream and he reached for it. He gave it a pound or two to be sure it wasn't rotten. It would do.

He walked through a moonless night, slipping occasionally in muddy spots or dropping into unexpectedly deep pools, despite using the stick to avoid them. When his

cheek stopped bleeding, he shoved that bandage in a pocket. The one on his forehead had adhered to the dried blood and he left it in place.

By dawn, his feet were so cold and clumsy in the soaked heavy mining boots that he stumbled more frequently and his teeth had begun to chatter with the chill. When the stream broadened and he was more often up to his waist than his knees, he could go no further. Seizing hold of shrubs that lined the stream, he clambered out of the water and hid himself in the thick vegetation, curled up to preserve what warmth remained in his body.

Nothing disturbed him until the ache of an empty belly finally roused him. It was well into the morning for the sun was high. He had come much farther than he had thought possible. His rough work clothing had partially dried, but the minehold emblem woven into shirt and pants would mark him as a fugitive. He needed food and new clothing in whichever order he could get them.

Carefully he emerged from the bushes and, to his utter astonishment, saw a small cothold directly across the stream which was now as wide as a river. He watched the cothold a long time before he decided that there was no one working inside or nearby. He waded across the river, his bruised feet feeling every rock, and hid again in the bushes until he was sure he heard no human sounds.

The cothold was empty, but someone lived here. A herder, perhaps, for pushed back on the rough sleeping platform were wherhides made supple by long usage. Food first! He didn't even wash the tubers he found in a basket by the hearth. Then he saw cold grey grease in the iron skillet, set a-tilt on the hearth. He dipped the raw vegetables into it, relishing the salt in the grease as flavouring. The worst of his hunger momentarily assuaged, he searched for more to eat and a change of clothing. As a younger man he would never have filched so much as a berry or an apple from a neighbour's yard. His

circumstances were as much altered now as the tenets of conduct his father had beaten into him. He had a duty to perform, a right to wrong, and a theory he must confirm or forget.

His stomach churned with the raw, greasy food he had eaten. He had to eat more slowly or lose everything. Vomit was a hard smell to hide. In a tightly covered container that would save its contents from vermin, he found three-quarters of a wheel of cheese. He thought how long such food would sustain him in his escape. The fewer noticeable traces of his passing, the better. While the cotholder might not notice the loss of a few tubers and grease in a pan, the disappearance of too much cheese was a different matter. So he found a thin old knife blade in the back of a drawer and sliced off a section of cheese, enough to provide him with a small meal but, he hoped, not enough to be instantly noticed. Almost as if his restraint was rewarded, he found a dozen rolls of travel rations in another tin box and took two. He would surely find more food if he was not greedy now. He believed in that sort of justice.

He did remove the bandage on his forehead, a painful task, even when he had soaked his face in the cold stream water. One or two spots bled a little, but no blood trailed down his face, and he left the wound open to the clean mountain air.

He went back to the cothold to look for clothing but found none. He did take one of the older hides. This was the fifth month and, while the nights were not quite so chill, he could not count on finding shelter. He counted seven hides on the sleeping platform and took the oldest, less likely to be missed.

As he left the cothold, he investigated the tracks that led off in several directions. A flash of sunlight on something metallic caught his eyes and he whirled towards the river, afraid that he had been discovered. It took him much longer to locate the source of the reflection - the oarlocks

of a small boat. Under the thick shrubbery along the bank, it was almost invisible, tethered to a branch with a rope that was so worn by constant rubbing against a half-submerged stone that the slightest pull would part the last strands.

He provided the pull and, stepping carefully into the boat, used his stick to push himself out into the current. Perhaps he should have tried to find the oars but he felt an urgency to be away from this cothold and as far down the river as possible. Very little water had seeped into the bottom of the little craft, so he could expect it to serve his immediate need. It was also just long enough, if he cocked his knees, to enable him to lie flat and be unseen from the shore.

That night, when he saw the glowbaskets of a sizeable smallholding - not a large enough one to have a watchwher on guard - he propelled himself to the bank and tied up the boat by the tether he had mended with strips of his tattered shirt during his long day afloat.

Luck was with him now, for he found a basket of avian eggs left on a hook outside a side door to the beasthold. He sucked the contents of three, carefully depositing three more in his shirt, tucked into his waistband. Then his eye caught the shirts and pants drying on bushes by the flat river stones where women would have washed them. He found clothes to fit him well enough and corrected the position of others to make it appear that what he had chosen might very well have fallen into the river and drifted away.

In the beasthold for a second look, though the animals moved restlessly in the presence of a stranger, he found bran. And an old battered scoop. Tomorrow he would boil the bran and add the eggs for a good hot meal. Suddenly he heard voices and immediately returned to his boat, pushing it carefully out into the current and lying down, lest he be seen.

The night swallowed the voices and all he heard was the gurgle of the river in which the boat moved so silently. Above him were the stars. The old harper who had taught all the youngsters at the Glass Hall had told him the names of some of them. Indeed, the old man had mentioned meteorites and the Ghosts that appeared in bright arcs in TurnOver skies. Shankolin had never believed that those bright sparks were the ghosts of dead dragons, but some of the younger children had.

The brightest stars never changed. He recognized the bright sparkle of Vega. Or was it Canopus? He couldn't remember the names of the other stars in the spring sky. In trying to recall those names and when he had learned them, his mind inexorably returned to Aivas and all that - that *thing* - had done to him. He'd only recently heard - in a repetition of very old news - that his father had been exiled on an island in the Eastern Sea with the Lord Holders and other craftsmen who had tried to stop the Abomination.

Once the source was silenced, they could talk men and women into returning to their senses. The Red Star brought Thread. The dragonriders fought Thread in the skies and people lived comfortably enough between Passes. That had been the order of life for centuries. That order should be preserved. When he had heard that the MasterHarper of Pern, a personage Shankolin had admired, had been abducted, he had been deeply disturbed. But his ears had been blocked for Turns before he gradually recovered some hearing and learned that part of the incident. He had never clearly heard why the MasterHarper had been found dead in the Abomination's chamber. But it, too, had been dead - 'terminated', one of the miners said. Had Master Robinton come to his senses and turned off the Abomination? Or had the Abomination killed Master Robinton? He must discover the truth.

Once he got down Crom's river - perhaps Keogh Hold would be far enough - he could make plans and see just how badly the Abomination had interfered with Pern's traditions and way of life.

Gathers began in springtime, when the roads dried of winter snow and mud, and he could simply blend into the crowds, and perhaps find more answers. He was hearing more and more these days: even the shrill song of avians. Once he caught up on current news, he would be able to plan his next move.

Surely not everyone on Pern would want tradition degraded or would believe the lies that the Abomination had spouted. He called to mind those whom he knew had been seriously disturbed by the Aivas so-called improvements. By now, eleven Turns on, some right-minded thinking folk would realize that the Red Star had not changed course simply because three old engines had blown up in a crack on its surface! Especially as Thread continued to fall on the planet. As indeed it should to be sure that all Pern was united against the menace of its return, century after century.

At a Gather 6.15.30 Present Pass

'I don't know why it had to mess up time,' said the first man, morosely fingering a pattern in the spilled gravy in front of him.

'You're messing up the table,' the second man said, pointing.

'He had no call to mess up our time,' the first man insisted, rather more vehemently.

'Who?' Second was confused. 'He? It?'

'Aivas, that's who or it.'

'Whaddy mean?'

'Well, he did, didn't he? Back in '16 - or 2538, I *should* say.' And the holder scowled, his thick black brows coming

together across the wide bridge of his thick nose. 'Made us add some fourteen Turns allasudden.'

'He was *regulating* time,' Second corrected, surprised at his companion's vehemence. The holder had seemed a pleasant enough companion, knowledgeable about music and knowing all the words to even the latest songs the harpers were playing. With his third skin of nine, his temper had deteriorated. And possibly his wits if time or how folk numbered Turns was bothering him.

'Made me older 'n I was.'

'Didn't make you smarter,' Second said with a rude snort. "Sides, MasterHarper himself said it was all right on account there were dis— ah, disk—" He paused and used a belch as an excuse while he recalled the exact phrasing. 'There'd been inaccurate time-keeping because of Thread falling only forty Turns once instead of fifty, like it usually did, and people forgetting to account for the disk—'

'Discrepancies,' the third man put in, regarding them superciliously.

Second gave a snap of his fingers and beamed at Third for finding the word he couldn't recall.

'The problem is not what it did,' First went on. 'It's what it's continuing to do. To all of us.' He made a flourish that included everyone at the Gather, laughing and singing and comportsing themselves, oblivious of the dangers in this continuation.

'Continuing to do?' A woman who had been standing nearby slipped into a seat several places down the long gather table, on the opposite side from First and Second.

'Pushing things on us whether we want "improvements" or not,' First said slowly, eyeing her in what illumination dimly reached their side table. He saw a thin woman, with an unattractive face, a pinched mouth, recessive lower jaw, and huge eyes that glowed with an inner anger or resentment.

'Like the lights?' Second asked, gesturing towards the nearest one. 'Very useful. Much more convenient than messing with glowbaskets.'

'Glowbaskets are traditional,' the woman said and her petulant tone carried into the shadows beyond the table. 'Glows were put here for us to cultivate and protect.'

'Glows are natural, and have lighted our holds and halls for centuries,' said a deep censorious voice that startled the woman, who gasped and put her hand protectively to her throat.

Certainly First and Second, who had thought they were having a private discussion, were annoyed by the intrusion until the big man stepped out of the shadows. Slowly he walked to the table, the others watching his deliberate advance, noting the size of him as he sat down by Third. He wore a strangely shaped leathern cap that hid most of his forehead but did not cover the scar on the side of his nose and cheek. He was also missing the top joint of the first finger on his left hand. Something about his scarred face and his purposeful manner compelled the others to silence.

'Pern has lost much lately and gained little.' His unmaimed hand lifted to point to the light. 'And all because a voice', this fifth person paused contemptuously, 'said to do so.'

'Got rid of the Red Star,' Second said, shifting uneasily.

Fifth turned his head towards Second, regarding him so unwinkingly that his scorn was nearly palpable.

'Thread still falls,' Fifth said in that deep, disturbing voice that seemed to use no inflection.

'Well, yes, but that was explained,' Second said.

'Perhaps to *your* satisfaction, but not to *mine*.'

Two men seated at a table opposite the group looked over in interest, and gestured at First to let them join the table. First nodded his head, and Sixth and Seventh hastily climbed into vacant spaces among the others.