

Dragons Kin

Anne & Tom McCaffery

Chapter 1

In early morning light I see,

A distant dragon come to me.

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

"They're here! They're here!" Zenor shouted down at him. Needing no further urging, Kindan put on an extra burst of speed.

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

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

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

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

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

Hidden from the watch point by the bend of the hill was a much larger and sturdier dwelling-the full stone hold of Natalon, the head Miner in the Camp. North of it, separated by a walled-in herb garden, was a smaller but almost as well-built dwelling, the home of the Camp's Harper.

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

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

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

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

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

Zenor laughed. "Well, he'd better be, or your Sis will kill him." Kindan favored this comment with a glare. "Hadn't you better get back on down and tell Natalon?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kindan grinned. "Exactly!"

"You would?" Zenor repeated hopefully. "Your dad won't mind?" Kindan shook his head. "Not if he doesn't find out, he won't." The added enticement of doing something unsanctioned brought a gleam to Zenor's eyes. "All right, I'll do it."

"Great."

"Of course, washing a watch-wher's not the same as oiling a dragon," Zenor went on. The thought of Impressing a dragon, of becoming telepathically linked with one of Pern's great firebreathing defenders, was the secret wish of every child on Pern. But

dragons seemed to prefer the children of the Weyr: Only a few riders were chosen from the Holds and Crafts. And no dragon had ever visited Camp Natalon.

"You know," Zenor continued, "I saw them."

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

"They were so beautiful! A perfect V formation. Way up high.

You could see them: bronze, brown, blue, green . . ." Zenor's voice faded as he recalled the memory. "And they looked so soft-

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

"Well, they did! Not like your father's watch-wher."

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

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

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

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