
Gathering Momentum

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Cibola Hold

2858.05.27 (day before Harvest Gather at Cibola Hold)

Skeen grunted as he and Sussen took the strain of the rope used to hoist the herdbeast carcass up. His father, Layvis, tied the rope off and the pair relaxed. Skeen flexed his wiry shoulders, feeling stiffness in the muscles. Third beast slaughtered today – pre-Gather preparations were hard work.

On the rafters above them a veritable fair of the Hold's firelizards watched the proceedings, hoping to snatch a stolen mouthful. Skeen watched them sourly. Pesky things. At least if felines came nosing about the meat you could throw something at them. Firelizards tended to dart *between* before you could hit them. And if you did manage to swat them a good blow, their owners were usually less than pleased, no matter that their little darlings were thieving brigands.

"Here." Sussen tossed a knife across to him and Skeen nimbly caught it. Layvis gave the young men a warning frown over their carefree attitude to the blade. Sussen flashed Skeen an unrepentant grin.

Skeen gave him a quick smile back and then turned to the work in hand, before he attracted his father's ire. It also removed him from the distraction of Sussen's body. In the muck and heat of the butchery area, Sussen had abandoned his tunic and wore only a leather apron to keep the worst of the blood and fat from his trous. Unlike Skeen's own wiry frame, his friend's shoulders were broad and his arms well muscled, and Skeen wanted...

Wanted Sussen in ways which were likely to fill his friend and his father with horror.

Sussen was his best friend. Skeen oh-so hungered to touch him and share his blankets with him... and at the same time was terrified that someone would figure that out.

It was an irony that the fact that his father had *not* figured it out was evidenced by the way that he was well on his way to arranging a bride for his son. Griva, one of the kitchen girls, was to be matched to Skeen. Neither of the intended pair was particularly happy with the idea, but the social pressure was not letting up just because neither Griva nor Skeen were the boy of the other's dreams. Their respective parents had set a date for the wedding five

sevendays after tomorrow's Harvest Gather. Skeen's only hope was that Griva would catch herself an unattached crafter or holder of higher than drudge rank at the Gather.

But that would be reprieve, not rescue. His Da would only find some other girl in a month or two... The best he could hope for was to get a girl who was as disinterested in him as he was in her, and that no-one would notice when his eyes strayed to the bullfighters or the dockworkers or Sussen.

Skeen quashed those thoughts hurriedly and gave himself over to the rhythm of skinning and gutting the herdbeast. A scrawny one this one – not likely to give great cuts of meat. And the beef would be on the tough side if it weren't left to hang. But then again, this one was not for Lord Morgav's table. After the choice cuts were taken, most of it would go for pies and soup to feed those who arrived with the tithe trains at tomorrow's Harvest Gather. The hearths in the Hold kitchens would be kept stoked all night while various pieces of this herdbeast simmered and rendered.

His father and Sussen were by now well underway with butchering one of the beasts that had been gutted earlier. Skeen pulled the last of the intestines free of the scrawny beast and set them aside for later cleaning. The heart, kidneys and liver went onto a big tray and a shrill whistle brought his youngest sibling, Lanim, scurrying over to carry the prize to the kitchens.

The whistle had also been taken as a signal by a brown and a green firelizard, who both swooped down onto the offal. At eleven Turns old, tray and contents were a heavy burden for the boy, and his task was not made any the easier by the flapping interlopers. Skeen made a gesture as if to throw the knife at them, and the two took off and blinked *between* with a shriek. Lanim grinned and staggered onwards toward the kitchens. The pair of would-be thieves reappeared and circled out of reach above Skeen, scolding.

"Sharding nuisances," Skeen growled.

"Aye, well, don't you be throwing anything at them," said his father. "That's the green that looks to Harper Tolavar."

"Doesn't make it any less of a nuisance."

"So you'd turn down a firelizard egg if it were offered, eh Skeen?" Sussen asked. Skeen risked a swift glance at his friend. Sussen had paused to wipe his knife clean and now ran it over a whetstone.

"Wouldn't have to turn it down. Steward Garald or Headwoman Cathren would have it off me like a shot."

Sussen persisted. "But what if they *gave* you one?"

He gave a disparaging snort. "Would that be the day before or the day after Lord Morgav gifts me his finest runner and makes me his Heir?"

Even his father chuckled at that idea. The three settled back to work, speculating about how much free time they might get on the morrow, and whether there would be opportunity to go and watch the bullfights.

Gather day. The kitchen staff were up at the crack of dawn, a hundred and one things still to be done for the gather preparations, as well as the normal schedule of providing breakfast for the Hold.

In the corridor just outside the main kitchens, Headwoman Cathren and Lord Morgav's son Esthevan were bickering about the allocation of labour to haul wine and waterskins to the bullring. From what Skeen could overhear – while being careful to appear disinterested and too dim-witted to care – Understeward Riodel, the gather organizer, had told both of them that the other had already made arrangements. Now it was apparent that nothing of the sort was true, and there was some strategic grumbling going on over where the drudges could best be spared.

The Headwoman came striding back into the kitchens, her frown a warning to everyone to appear diligent and industrious. Skeen focussed his attention onto the tubers he was scrubbing.

Cathren's gaze passed over him and the various others involved in washing and chopping tubers, and settled on where Griva was just finishing off the breakfast meatrolls ready for the oven. "Griva, get the dough for the pastries started. And use less sweetener than you did last time – we can't afford to waste the Hold's stocks on all those bottomless bellies that will come to the Gather."

Griva chirped a quick "Yes, ma'am," and ran to wash her hands of mutton grease before she started on the sweet pastry dough. She grimaced at Skeen as she wiped her hands dry on her apron. "I'll be worn to a frazzle if she keeps up this way. Are we expecting all Pern at this Gather, then?"

He smiled back. "Could be. Looks like we're to make enough food to feed 'em." He gestured at the trays and trays of meat pies now being pulled from the main ovens by his elder sisters Jayva and Lervissa and two other girls. Some of the older drudges were putting the finishing touches to the next four tray loads of pies that were waiting to be cooked. And there was already a stack of pies cooling by the open shutters. Griva's youngest brother stood by them, ready to flick off crawlers and fend off any firelizards that dared to try to sample the food. Not that many firelizards dared the kitchens – Lerryne the head cook would have them chopped up for stew if they ventured too close to her creations.

Griva gave an exaggerated sigh of long suffering. "At this rate I'll be too tired to dance at the Gather. And then how will I impress my handsome journeyman?" She pretended to wipe away a tear.

"Griva!" Cathren's shout could have startled a dragon *between*.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry ma'am." The girl scurried off to fetch flour and sweetener for the pastry.

The Headwoman turned her irritable frown onto Skeen. "This is a gather day, in case you hadn't noticed. You can find time to flirt and gossip *after* the work is done."

He flushed, more with the idea that he'd been flirting with Griva than due to the scolding. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now, hurry up and finish those tubers and go fetch a couple of cheese wheels from the cold room. Then we'll need a barrel of salt fish from the stores. And where's Sussen? He and Grennar can start filling waterskins for the bullring..." Cathren continued to give out orders, chivvying everyone to greater and faster efforts.

Gather days were hard work indeed.

There was a flash of bronze and blue down by the Hold gate. Skeen caught the colour and motion out of one of the Fortress' windows, as three dragons launched themselves skywards and began to angle towards the crags on the other side of the harbour. In the sky above the gate a couple of greens blinked into existence and began a slow glide in to land.

More distracting than the dragons, however, was the thought of their riders. All the rumour and scandal he'd ever heard about greenriders flooded through his mind. Skeen bit his lip and set the barrel he was carrying carefully down onto the wide stone window ledge, flexing his shoulder as if it was stiff and he had only paused with the intention to shift the burden to the other side.

The road from the gate to the Gather ground and Fortress was dotted with people in their bright and gaudy gather-best, dragonriders included. Skeen stared at them with confused longing.

When he'd been younger, he and other boys used to torment the girls with tales that a dragonman might steal them away to the Weyr. If you wanted to frighten the really little 'uns, then you said that the dragonman would feed them to the queen dragon – that a gold needed to eat a child for every egg it laid. The older girls knew enough not to believe any of this, but you could still set 'em to shrieking by telling them that dragonriders stole young women to ravish them. There were far fewer tales that dragonriders stole young men, despite all the tales of what greenriders supposedly spent all their time doing...

He couldn't make out rank cords and colours from here. The youth licked at dry lips as he continued to stare. Some of those men down there bedded other men. However, man-lovers or not, people who had the rank and status of dragonriders would likely pay as little attention to drudges like him as Lord Morgav did. But Skeen could watch and imagine one of those riders noticing him... wanting him... touching him...

"What are you doing, boy?"

He jumped at the sound of Understeward Riodel's voice. All lustful thoughts vanished at the sudden fright. He flushed guiltily. "Nothing, sir," he mumbled. "I was jus' looking at the dragons..."

A snort of exasperation from Riodel. "A few dragons arrive and all the drudges turn into witless flutterbys! You can stare at our watchdragon any day of a seven-day, boy. Today there's work to do."

"Yessir." When was there not work to do? He nodded vigorously and hastily picked up the barrel again. Shouldering his burden, Skeen obediently plodded off, not daring to snatch another look at the dragonmen whilst Riodel might be watching.



Skeen returned to the kitchens to find that there was some sort of last minute hitch with the provision of food for Lord Morgav's guests that had Headwoman Cathren and Understeward Riodel spitting fire at each other. With Lady Saliba bedridden, Lady Salidomara customarily took over the duties of hostess for the Hold. Riodel had promised some particular pastry treats to Lady Salidomara and somehow that message had never reached Cathren and the kitchens. Sweet pastries had been made by the dragonload, but not the cheese pastries that the Lady liked for tempting the less sweet-toothed of Cibola's high ranking visitors. Recriminations were flying.

The kitchen staff hung around the edges of this argument nervously. Most of them had been promised time off to go to the Gather, and this didn't bode well for the future of that particular activity. Skeen sidled up to Sussen and Griva. "How long they been at it?" he muttered in a low voice.

"Bout half a candlemark," replied Sussen.

"Yes, Headwoman'll figure out that *doing* will solve the problem better than *yelling* soon," remarked Griva with a grimace. "Then we're all on pastry making for the rest of the morning..." She gave a loud sigh that attracted a brief frown from Riodel. "An' I was thinking I could go dance with a handsome journeyman or two at the gather..."

"Maybe we could sneak off before they notice," Sussen ventured, but his tone indicated that he didn't really give the idea much credence.

The argument climaxed in Cathren admitting that she daren't disappoint Lady Salidomara, regardless of whose fault it was. The yelling mutated into furious but silent glares then both parties abruptly ignored each other's presence, and turned to bark orders at the various drudges loitering nearby. Cathren began chivvying people into stoking up the ovens again and gathering the ingredients for a batch of cheesy pastries. Skeen and Sussen scurried back and forth with the others, fetching mixing bowls, pastry cutters and the like. Griva had begun greasing baking trays, ready for the final product.

Cathren paused suddenly in the midst of all this activity. Her frown had gone from one of fury to one of concentration. She clapped her hands to attract everyone's attention. "Five people will be plenty to do this task. Everyone else will just get underfoot if this pandemonium continues. Lerryne, I'd like you to supervise, of course. So

four more..." She swept her gaze over the crowd of suddenly very hopeful faces.

At head cook Lerryne's suggestion they drew lots for who could go to the Gather and who would remain in the kitchens for a few hours longer. A handful of dried beans in a pot – some pale brown, some dark red. Skeen and Sussen both drew one of the winning pale beans. Sussen gave a whoop that earned him a frown from Cathren, and was out the door before the last few drudges had even drawn their beans. Skeen settled for a more sedate grin.

Griva drew a dark bean and bit her lip in frustration. "It's not fair," she complained. "This is my last chance to..." She looked up at Skeen and then flushed and glanced away in embarrassment. Her last chance to tempt whichever journeyman she had been chasing into proposing to her. Her last chance to avoid marrying Skeen.

The wiry youth glanced down at the pale brown bean resting in the palm of his hand. It might be remote, but at least Griva had some sort of chance, if she went to the Gather. A crafter *might* like the look and wit of a kitchen lass enough to pick her out of the crowd. What chance did *he* have of a bullfighter or a dragonrider or Sussen ever claiming him that way?

"Here." Skeen held out the hand with the pale bean in it. "Swap. You take this one. I'll do kitchens this time round."

Griva stared at the offered bean as if it were made of solid gold. "You're sure?"

He nodded.

Griva leant forward to plant a kiss on his cheek as she took the bean. "Thank you!" She shoved the bean in her apron pocket and ran to the sinks to wash the flour and grease of the kitchens off her hands and face before racing off to get changed into gather clothes.

Skeen watched his maybe-wife-to-be depart. "Good hunting," he whispered.



They made three batches of the cheese pastries, two batches of which were now ready to take up to the waiting guests. More than enough to feed every Lord Holder in Pern, Skeen thought morosely. He scrubbed down the flour and cheese-splattered table where the preparation work had been done, hoping that it would be the final task of the day. Around him, the other unlucky workers were also scrubbing and cleaning – all with half an eye cast towards the ovens, where the final batch of pastries were cooking.

Head Cook Lerryne was poised there, ready to fend off anyone bold enough to open the oven without her permission. No-one was going to take *these* pastries out a heartbeat before she had declared them ready. If they weren't to her and Cathren's satisfaction, they would have to do another batch.

Skeen gave the worktop one last scrub and turned away to throw out his bucket of water and rinse out the scrubbing brush. Behind him he heard the scrape of baking trays being

withdrawn from the oven and a satisfied grunt from Lerryne. He glanced back to see the cook break off a piece of the hot pastry and blow on it to cool it before popping it in her mouth. She nodded and broke off a second piece to pass to Cathren to sample.

"Well up to your usual standards, Lerryne," said Cathren with an approving nod. "I'll leave you to finish here while I go and check on the wine." She swept out of the kitchens in a swirl of skirts.

In mimicry of Cathren's favourite affectation, Lerryne clapped her hands to get everyone's attention – hardly necessary, as all eyes were now on her and the newest pastries. "You two—" She pointed at the two girls who were washing the baking utensils. "—finish the washing up, then you can go. You boys—" That was addressed to Skeen and the other male drudge, more man than boy. "—put on clean aprons and take the pastries up to Lady Salidomara's guests, then you're free."

Skeen obediently stripped off his water and flour splattered apron and retrieved a more respectable one from the chest where such were kept. Lerryne was deftly transferring pastries to one of a series of elegant enameled trays, only used at Lord Morgav's table. She gave a grunt of approval at the sight of the clean aprons and handed Skeen not the tray that he was expecting, but a still hot pastry.

"Here. Those are yours." Lerryne dished out a pastry to each of the other drudges. "Now eat them quick," she warned Skeen and his companion. "So your mouths aren't full when you take those trays in." Then scooping up one for herself, she bustled off.

Skeen eagerly tucked into the cheese-and-pastry, taking time to savour it, for all Lerryne's warning of haste. The upside of kitchen work was that there were treats like this to be had every now and then. Headwoman Cathren didn't want drudges with rumbling stomachs serving up the food to Lord Morgav's table, so kitchen workers never wanted for a bite to eat during meal preparations.

The tasty treat gone, he deftly picked up two of the trays and led the way to the upper dining room where they were needed. Once the pastries were safely delivered into the hands of those unlucky drudges stuck with the duty of waiting on Lady Salidomara and Lord Morgav today, Skeen bolted back to the kitchens to shed his apron and splash some clean water over his face. The two girls had already departed.

Gather time! He headed outdoors into the sunshine with a grin.



Skeen wandered the Harvest Gather stalls, admiring items that he could not possibly afford to buy, but always being carefully not to hang around too long and irritate the stallholder. Admiring too the people that thronged around him – dragonmen, seacrafters and holders alike in their finery. And as careful there not to let his interested gaze linger too long on a handsome holder or the greenrider rank

cords of a dragonrider. He could find some hideaway later to lurk in and secretly stare and want and long.

The youth paused to listen to some intense haggling between a Ranger and a tanner over the price of a fine looking pair of saddlebags, then drifted on. Shrieking children raced between the stalls, and the air above the hold was alive with firelizards darting to and fro in elegant fairs or airborne squabbles.

After a pleasant while of this wandering, he found Sussen and two lads from the stables sitting in the shade by the edge of the Gather Square, sipping at mugs of a light beer and watching the dancing. Skeen flopped down beside them, and scrounged a mouthful of Sussen's drink. His friend brought him up to date on the events of the gather so far, telling of some incident with a pickpocket, but the guilty girl had been caught and it was said there would be a branding up at the bullring later. The stable lads were looking forward to the spectacle. Skeen grimaced – it wasn't exactly his idea of entertainment.

"Hah – look!" Sussen nudged Skeen with his elbow. "Griva's making her move!" He nodded in the direction of the dancers forming up for the next set.

Griva had just sidled up to a lanky, blond man with journeyman rank cords. From her gestures it was clear she was asking if he would like to dance with her.

The stable lads also took an interest. "That's Gabern," said one. "Smithcrafter. Does a lot of our farrier work. Just been made journeyman, he has."

The lanky smith offered Griva his arm, and the pair joined those waiting to begin the next dance. Skeen grinned. "Go get him, Griva," he muttered.

The stable lad frowned. "Heard tell that you and she were gettin' married," he said in a questioning tone.

Skeen shrugged. "Aye, well, that's what her Da and my Da want. Griva has other ideas."

"What about you?"

Sussen butted in: "Skeen's saving himself for Lady Salidomara!"

Skeen responded to this by giving Sussen a friendly clout, and a tussle began that had the stable lads scrambling to rescue their beer from danger, and nearby onlookers peering to see if the fight was anything serious. Skeen was struggling to avoid being pinned down by the heavier Sussen, when a female voice interrupted their wrestling: "Well, I was going to ask you to dance, but if you'd rather roll in the hay with my brother..."

Sussen rolled abruptly off him and Skeen looked up to see his younger sister, Shaleen. The stable lads chortled and made a few even cruder variants on Shaleen's original implication. Those were a little too close to the bone and Skeen flushed. Sussen, indignant at the slur on his manhood, grabbed Shaleen by the arm hard enough to make her squeal and whirled her into the dancers.

The pair were energetic if not elegant dancers and Skeen smiled as he watched them cavort about the dance square. Griva and her smith also went by at a lively pace. Griva was chatting away breathlessly as they skipped past.

The youth picked up Sussen's abandoned mug. "Beer at the usual place?" he asked the stable lads. There were tents and stalls selling the good stuff and the powerful stuff, but the Hold also provided a plentiful supply of a weaker beverage for free.

One nodded and held out his own mug. "Get us a refill if you're going."

Skeen amiably collected the other two mugs and skirted round the dance floor as he set off. The harpers brought the music to a crescendo and there was a smattering of applause from dancers and audience alike. He glanced back to see Griva clinging to the arm of Smith Gabern as if trying to persuade him to stay for another dance.

A short while later and he was making his way carefully back to the dance floor, bearing a tray with the three mugs – and a fourth and fifth in anticipation of Sussen and Shaleen's thirst after dancing. At least, the youth mused, working in the kitchens and serving in the Main Hall gave him plenty of practice at carrying burdens in jostling crowds.

"Ah, you should earn healer knots for that errand of mercy!" The eldest of the stable lads reached for the beer with a grin.

"Aye," said the other. "You should tell that Griva you're a journeyman healer in disguise. She's not having much luck with the smithcraft, so maybe she should try the healers."

"Huh?" Putting down the tray, Skeen turned his attention to the dancers. The lanky smith was still on the square, but his dancing partner was now a plump girl with an excess of ribbons in her hair. The youth cast about for Griva, and spotted her sitting on her own, disconsolately watching Smith Gabern.

He picked up two of the beer mugs and made his way around the edge of the dance floor to where Griva sat. "Here," he said, offering her one. "Drink up. Then dance with me. Maybe we'll make him jealous, huh?"



By the time twilight set in, Griva had managed to beg two more dances off her smith. But the man was clearly being polite rather than interested, and Skeen could see that his eyes were really for the plump girl with the ribbons.

"I thought he liked me," said Griva downheartedly. "I really thought he liked me."

"He does like you," said Skeen. "It's just..." He stopped, wanting to be honest, but not wanting to upset her

further.

"It's just that she has ribbons and a dress that isn't a hand-me-down, and now that he's a journeyman he can set his sights higher than a kitchen girl." Griva gave a little snuffle.

The two sat in silence for a while, as gaiety and celebration continued around them.

Eventually Griva stood up and brushed down her skirts. "I'll go help Ma," she said. "She's on dishwashing duty tonight." She made a move to leave, and then turned and looked down to where he sat. "I'll be a good wife to you, Skeen," she said. He nodded and she turned and made her way through the still thronging gather crowds and back towards the kitchen entrance.

She would. More the pity that he'd never make a good husband.



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