

---

# Between the Marshes & the Plains

by Maggie Traylor  
2860.09.16

Printed in FTA #25 (2008)

*This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr ([www.kadanzer.org](http://www.kadanzer.org)), a fan club approved by Anne McCaffrey in 1995. Kadanzer Weyr is a non-profit group – all materials pertaining to Ms. McCaffrey's works displayed on this website may only be accessed for personal, non-commercial purposes. Please do not reproduce without permission. All references to worlds and characters based on Anne McCaffrey's fiction are copyright© Anne McCaffrey 1967, 2005, all rights reserved, and used by permission of the author. The Dragonriders of Pern® is registered U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, by Anne McCaffrey, used here with permission. Use or reproduction without a license is strictly prohibited.*

---

## 2860.09.02 - In the bounds of Khagren Hold of Dorado

"A man of reason-"

"-and a reasonable man," Paryn finished gruffly.

Both men spat in their palms and clasped hands, Paryn's thick, blunt-fingered grip firm.

"Good business, as ever," Sonnd said with hearty cheer, his cart behind him laden high with the remaining fruits of Paryn's labor. Sonnd's small son was already tugging an oilcloth over the bundles of reed, switches, and cane, scrambling over the mountain of it quick as a little wherry to tie the cloth down. "I always come to you first, Paryn. Why, when your little flitter pops in, I know by the time I rumble on down here your rattan will be fresh and dry, and not a chance of spoiling. You're a fair bargainer."

"Aye," Paryn agreed. "And we thank you for the woolbearers, Sonnd. They'll keep real nice up on the tableland, Seb'll make sure of that." Sonnd nodded, tipping his hat.

"My boy Shoren will be down with that coracle as you asked in another five sevendays or so. No one makes 'em tighter against water than my son, I'll tell you that." He tipped his hat again. "Paryn. And good day to you, Seffeon," Sonnd raised a hand to Paryn's stout wife as he turned to leave, and she waved back, her other hand resting on the huge swell of her belly where dwelled their seventh child. This one would be strong, too. She hadn't had nearly the trouble she'd had with the two she'd lost.

They watched Sonnd climb up onto the driving seat of the cart, where his bit of a son was already perched. Slapping the reins, Sonnd urged the burdenbeasts into an amble along the wheel ruts through waves of golden grass toward the wooded horizon. The spare reed crop that Paryn had bartered him for would go to Khagren Hold where Sonnd's whole family did wickerwork, like they had for five proud generations.

Having seen the man off, Paryn nodded permission to Seffeon to return to the cot, and she made her ungainly, careful way back over the soft ground. Paryn stared after her. Yes, she would have no trouble with the child this time. His business done, he went about his work.

He found his eldest girl squatting in the muddy waters at the mouth of the reed bed, her skirt bunched around her knees to keep dry.

"Where's the flitter?"

"Hunting," Samma said. "There's a new nest. I don't think the 'snake's birthed though."

"You be sure he is hunting. I don't want him flittering off on his own business. You be sure keep him at work, girl."

"Yes, Papa," Samma replied with easy acceptance.

Considering her properly admonished, Paryn left the girl to her task, climbing up the gentle soggy slope to the cot. She was a good girl, despite everything. Clever hands, sharp eyes and a willing state of mind. Cleverer than her mother, good stout-hearted woman though she was, and more than he could have asked for in a daughter. Reaching the crest of the slope, Paryn called his eldest boy out from the drying shed to discuss the figures of his barter.



Samma pushed her thoughts toward Rum.

*Nests*snake, she reminded him, and he obediently stopped herding brightwings and turned back to circle over the marsh. It had only been a little fib, and she didn't feel badly for it. Rum had been hunting all morning and had already killed two young nestsnakes not old enough to mate, and he'd taken a momentary diversion. He was a good flitter, and he headed her.

Behind her eyes Samma caught little flashes of reed and mud, then a lithe dark form paddling in the water, black tongue flicking in and out, tasting for danger. Rum stayed high, well out of the nestsnake's range of sight as she cautiously emerged from her carefully constructed nest in the reeds. She tested the air again.

Then silent as cloud, Rum dove.

His needle teeth ripped through the nestsnake's shoulder, and before she could turn to swipe at him with her razor claws, he was flying upward again, turning to swoop at her head. She hissed as his talons raked her face, nearly scoring her big gold eye, and the nestsnake reared up to claw at him. Spinning around, Rum sank his teeth into her exposed throat and hung on as she fell and spasmed and her blood drained into the water around her. Samma was already in the coracle and padding fast toward where she knew Rum was.

Hot with victory, Rum snapped his teeth into the tough, supple scales and whipped his head back and forth, trying to tear away a chunk of flesh.

"No, Rum!" Samma called, climbing out of the coracle and wading out to him between thick clumps of cane with her skirt bunched in one hand, almost to her hips. She tucked the slack into her waistband as she reached Rum, who pressed her with thoughts of righteous annoyance and sorrow. Taking out her knife, Samma grabbed the long nestsnake's foreclaw and sawed through the wrist, tossing the paw to Rum. His long brown neck shot up and he snapped the morsel out of the air. Holding it in his talons, he began delicately picking meat out from between toes and joints, sending grumbly acceptance at Samma.

Grabbing the huge nestsnake by the tail, Samma glanced over and carefully marked the nest's location in her memory, to tell Rynche and Papa where to find it. She

swung the nestsnake into the coracle and waited for Rum to climb in with his reward in his teeth.

She paddled back leisurely and Rum had picked the claw clean when she emerged from the reed bed and let her skirt fall back around her wet legs. Samma saw the tall, broad figure of her elder brother just about to leave the drying shed.

"Rynche!" she called, hoisting the nestsnake. He disappeared inside the drying shed and emerged again with a chopping stand and cloth. Her little brother Seb appeared from around the corner of the cot, a bag of peat for the fire on his wiry shoulder, and he drew up with them.

"She's so big," he said disbelievingly, dropping the peat sack.

"And full'f eggs," Samma said. The nestsnake was over half as long as she was tall, with a fat, distended belly.

Considering the wicked curved claws on the nestsnake's remaining five legs, Seb asked as Rynche returned again with a bucket of water, "How d'the babies not rip her open inside?" Nestsnakes had eggs, but they hatched inside the mother and birthed live. Rynche dumped the bucket out over the nestsnake, dropped a clean cloth over the chopping board for the meat, and pulled out his long, wide knife from his belt.

"Here, look," Rynche said, slitting open the nestsnake's belly and into her womb, peeling back white layers, and green and gray. With his knife he scooped out the wet, soft eggs onto the board. Pricking one, he dug his thumbs into the cut and peeled the shell back, revealing a little black-blue body with tiny claws and a big head tucked to its chest. "See, the claws are still soft," he said, spreading a little forearm and holding it close for Seb to see. Samma touched the eggs, feeling how pliant they were.

"Can I look'tt?" Rynche handed the unborn nestsnake to him, and Seb's deft, grubby fingers explored. Taking another egg, Samma pressed her thumbnail into the shell until it split and carefully pulled the egg apart, keeping the whites from spilling onto her blouse. She didn't take the nestsnake out, but just studied it in its shell. She kept her balance as Rum landed on her shoulder and looped his tail around her arm, peering around her neck, his little flecks of thought curious.

Samma heard the dogs whine and scratch, and Rynche grabbed two of the eggs and tossed them on the ground. "Here boys!" They rushed forward and began licking their prizes furiously, trying to dig an eyetooth into them to break them open. Big dog opened his first and slurped up its contents, and spun around with a snarl to bully Runt out of his. Runt backed away with his tail between his legs while Big gnawed the egg, and whined. Laughing, Rynche tossed him another and with a yap, Runt gulped it down, shell and all. Rum's interest turned sharp and spicy.

*Hunger-tasty-bright.*

"Here, Rum." Samma launched the broken egg into the air and Rum sprang from her shoulder and snatched it from the sky with a delighted chitter. Shredded bits of shell rained down as he devoured the treat, and Samma took the last egg off the board and threw it in the opposite direction. Rum gave a squeal and dove *between*, then popped back into existence and clutched the egg in his talons. Ripping it open he buried his muzzle in the shell.

Rynche was busy cutting the rest of the nestsnake open as Rum landed on Samma's shoulder again and rubbed his slimy face against her cheek, and warm affection bubbled against her mind.

"Oh, Rum, egh!" Samma laughed, pushing his head away and wiping the egg slime off her cheek with the back of her hand. Dropping the heart, liver, and kidneys onto the cloth, Rynche lifted his knife and hacked off the nestsnake's tail, adding it to the pile. He flipped the corners of the cloth over the meat.

"Samma, take that to Mama." Shooing Rum off her shoulder, Samma obeyed while Rum landed on Rynche and gazed greedily down at the offal in the nestsnake's belly.

"You'll make yourself sick is what you'll do," Rynche said with casual affection. Rum made an inquiring chirp and Rynche laughed and began dressing the rest of the meat, and Samma smiled as she ran up to the cot and jogged up the steps.

"Mama, there's giblets for the pot tonight."

"Alright then, drop them in the brine," Mama said, leaning back in her hammock, her swollen hands spread across her belly. Samma did, along with the liver, and lifted the lid off the vinegar barrel and pushed the nestsnake tail inside.

"You want some water, Mama?"

"Yes, girl, that'd be good," she replied, not opening her eyes. Samma scurried over to the cistern where the rain poured off the roof and scooped the green scum off the surface, then ladled water into a bowl. To be quiet, Samma walked carefully over the floor slats, looking down through the cracks to see the ground three feet below. She caught a glimpse of Pryn playing under the shade of the house, digging and piling in the dirt.

Pressing the bowl into Mama's hands, Samma squeezed into the hammock beside her, curled against her great belly while Mama drank. Outside she heard Rum chirp and Seb run, laughing. All the outside sounds faded into the rhythm of her doze.



That night, to celebrate the barter and the last of the harvest, Papa gave each of them two fingers of the golden-brown rum he made from sweetcane in beakers made of the nodes of grass trees. He even gave some to Seb and Pryn, though little Pryn couldn't finish hers, her thin face bright red with fire. Mama jounced her on a knee, patting her back while she coughed and Rynche tossed back her portion with a flick of his wrist.

The next day Seb was to herd the woollies up on the tableland where they could graze on the good grass until next Threadfall, to grow fine coats for Mama to knit, and grow fat for table come the winter. Seb glowed with rum and new responsibility in the hearth light.

Flameflies were already peeking out of the night, winking green sparkles through the windows as Samma nestled between Pryn and Seb in the big hammock. Pryn squirmed to find a more comfortable position in the thick, wet night, while Samma lay awake waiting for Rum.

With a breeze of wings, Rum settled into the pretty padded basket she'd woven him, hanging from the rafters. It

swung gently, making for the moment an illusion of rocking lantern that only let out two small disks of blue light, pools that languidly spiraled in and out and into green. Rum closed his eyes, and all went dark, leaving red and yellow patches dancing across Samma's eyes. A flamefly's glow briefly lit a corner, then extinguished. Samma shut her eyes.



### 2860.09.03

Seb was safe under a good sound tent on the tableland with the six woollies when the storm hit, rain lashing the roof and sending water cascading into the cistern. Samma unplugged the overflow outlet and watched the algae swirl away under the force of the new water. Even the flameflies couldn't withstand the torrent, except for the few who had escaped inside the house to flicker in corners like tiny glows.

Rynche and Papa played a game of sticks at the table while Mama cooked grasstree shoots with liver and tubers, filling the cot with a woody-meaty smell that mixed with the heavy wet scent of the rain. Pryn napped in a hammock, the pattern of the knots pressed into the side of her face. The dogs were cowering under the house, muzzles pressed against the ground in bored misery. Rum hadn't come inside, and Samma got the fleeting impression of being curled up against someone warm and blue and slightly smaller than herself, with other blue, brown, green and bronze people under a fat broad leaf, watching the sun smash down on white sand.

"The flitter not coming out of the rain?" Papa asked, not looking up from the sticks spread across the table.

"He's with a bunch'f wild ones somewhere sunny," Samma told him. "He goes t'them sometimes. Only when he's not working," she added, to be careful. Papa only nodded. Rynche didn't say anything, which could just mean that he was hard set on winning the match, but Samma turned away from him quickly.

The egg had been meant for Rynche. Rynche who knew his numbers and some of his letters and was so strong and would carry on after Papa. His eyes had sparkled like Timor on the waters of the reed bed when he looked on that flitter egg, and caressed it with his calloused palms in front of the hearth. Sometimes he would even let one of the sibs touch it, and let them help him think of names, though their choices changed every day.

The egg had hatched a seven-day early, though, when Rynche and Papa were hours away in the marshes, Seb had been away on an errand to Haw's cothold and Mama wouldn't go near it as it stumbled about creeling, stuck with bits of eggmuck and shell. Samma had gone out on the rickety stoop and shouted her lungs out for Rynche anyway, just in case, but the baby flitter was *screaming*. All she could remember was what the Harper had said to a solemnly nodding Rynche, that the firelizard had to be fed right after hatching or it would go *between* to find food and never come back.

Trembling, Samma had hacked up the fatty tail of a nestsnake pickled in vinegar, and crept toward the wailing brown flitter, offering it a tiny morsel which it had snapped

up with a feral ferocity. It had torn her fingers in its eagerness to sate its starvation, chunk by chunk. But then its jeweled eyes had stared straight into hers, colors melting into each other, like it knew who she was, and she felt a bright little spark of a consciousness just touching hers, like a finger on her forehead.

She'd been terrified of what Papa would do, and almost worse, Rynche. She'd as good as stolen from him, and though there'd been no other choice, what had happened left her desperately afraid.

When Rynche and Papa had come home, rank from a day's work and swiping away biters from the air, she hadn't had to say anything. Rynche took one long stare at the wrecked egg in the sand bucket near the peat fire and the tiny flitter in her arms, and stormed out of the cot. Papa didn't look at the sand bucket or the flitter, just her.

He hadn't shouted, or cuffed her, just drawn up a stool to where she sat in a corner with the tiny brown draped in her arms and spoken very gravely.

"Chance has seen that you have this thing, a thing that was intended for Rynche. A very valuable thing it is. Worth more than our whole harvest, and all our reeds and the dogs. It's an honor that Lord Kairo and Holder Warler should bestow this on the likes of us. An honor and a privilege. And though you have not earned it, you'll earn it yet. It'll be no girlchild's lap-pet. You'll train it well, like a man would, and it'll serve us like it was intended to do. Do you understand?"

She'd shyly murmured a, "Yes, Papa," and she'd been excused from her other duties to put all her efforts into training and caring for Rum. Rynche had been sore with her for what seemed like forever, though he'd never yelled nor bullied her, just wouldn't look her in the eye and found other things to do when she was about. But eventually he'd warmed to her again, and Samma had made extra-sure to make Rum liked him and always go to Rynche for a scratch.

Mama had been pleased though, in her own way. She said that a flitter was a better dowry than they could have ever hoped for Samma, especially at only fourteen Turns, that boys would flock to her now. Papa had gotten angry at that; if Rum had gone to Rynche like he was supposed to, then the flitter would have stayed with the cothold when he took a girl to wife. But since Samma had Impressed him, if she were married away, they'd lose the firelizard with no hope of ever being given another. Papa had made it clear that any young man to marry Samma would come to work at his cothold, or she'd become a spinster and assist her brother and his wife. Now at an unwed sixteen, Samma already felt like a spinster, but she couldn't argue with Papa. Besides, Rum made her happy.



### 2860.09.04

The rain dried up the next morning, but the air was thrice as wet so you could almost swim out the door. The marshes smelled ripe, and trails of slender redspikes had carpeted the cleared earth around the cot overnight.

"Come on, Rum. Time to hunt," Samma said as he appeared outside, rubbing his eyes against his forearm. His

little brown head snapped up, eyes swirling green with a hint of red.

*Eggs-tasty-salty?*

"Yes, if you can find'm."

Rum launched himself high in the thick air and *popped* out of sight to somewhere deep in the reed bed where he thought he would find another nest.

Samma spent the cool morning keeping an eye on Rum, and led Papa and Rynche out to the mother nestsnake's den. She'd cleared a patch as big as their cot to build it, about which Papa was none too happy, and when he and Rynche began smashing it in, two young nestsnakes streaked out, disappearing into the cane.

When they paddled back and Samma climbed the slope back to the cot, Rum came out of *between* almost right in front of her, making her take a step back. He landed on the stairs heavily, and seemed tired, but still pranced and preened for praise for a hard morning's work. As she squatted down to rub his tiny eye ridges, he leaned into her caress, scratching himself against her hand vigorously.

Suddenly, Rum gave a little flutter sneeze, and a strand of wet glistened on his nose. He rubbed his head against a leaf to wipe it off. Surprised, Samma looked at him. He'd never taken sick before, though the Harper had said he might. But there had been that storm, and anybody could get a runny nose after being out in that. Inside Samma put a little dab of the cool, minty oil she used when she had a stuffy head on the tip of his snout, careful not to get it in his nose. Then she told him to go take a nap out of sight so no one could say he was being lazy, and with a little chirp of agreement, he hopped *between*.

She knew she was supposed to tell Papa if Rum was ever unwell, but it was just a little sneeze. Papa was a good man, but there were some things Papa simply did not need to be told. Like the time Rum had shot after that length of glittering green one afternoon in a faraway place and made her lose herself when he had tumbled through the sky wrapped around it and she'd kissed Bels' son Immy amid the reeds in spite of herself. Papa most definitely did not need to know about that.

Gazing out southward, Samma thought she saw the big skybroom high up on the tableland where she'd helped pitch Seb's tent, and wondered how he was faring. Rynche sent her off in the coracle to make a round of the reed bed, looking for any disease or pests among the cane and reeds. Little Pryn begged to go, stomping wildly in her excitement. After asking Mama, Samma scooped her up and settled her in the coracle so she wouldn't tip it over scabbling in, and sank the paddle into the water to pull them into the marsh. She wished Rum were flying overhead, chirruping and darting this way and that. But the day was still fine, and the noon heat beginning to fade. Pryn perched at the prow of the coracle, clutching one side with wide, excited eyes while Samma gave herself into the rhythm of the paddle digging into the water and the rich aroma of healthy rot.



### 2860.09.13

She and Rynche left together in the cool, moist morning and fetched Seb, brown and springy and full of chatter, herding the woollies down the narrow switchbacks into the flat land before the marshes. On the way up they'd spotted a blue dragon against the gray morning sky, and Samma had waved furiously though Rynche said the dragon obviously couldn't see her. She had thought Rum might have liked to come to hunt on the tableland, but he had seemed tired and dull-eyed, curled up in his basket. He still had his snuffle, and he hadn't even left to hunt yesterday. She checked on him as soon as the woollies were penned, saw that his nose was dripping and his color too yellow, and decided now was the time to tell Papa.

"Papa, Rum's finally caught sick." Papa looked up from his account knots.

"What's he have, then?"

"Just's nose is dribbling, and he's real tired." Without even having to look, Papa deftly picked up where he'd left off, tying another double knot.

"All right then. Let him rest and make sure he gets enough to eat. No use in making him sicker. You be sure you look after him."

"Yes, Papa."

Rum sent her uncomfortable, itchy feelings, and she spent some time oiling his hide with fish oil, which he always enjoyed, and he seemed soothed. She made sure he had some kidney to eat even though he seemed off his food.

Samma spent the noon hours with Mama, mashing marsh berries, last season's woolie marrow and ground liver into a hearty paste for soups and long treks through the marshes or up onto the tablelands.

Haw's third boy paddled up to the mouth of the reed bed and hollered a greeting, and Runt yapped manically, growling and posturing while Big dog stared on lazily, then dropped his head onto his paws. Mama called the visitor in to have a drink and a bit to eat. Sucking a sample of the liver paste off his finger, he said his papa had sent him to ask if they had any charcoal to spare; they were still drying the last of their harvest, but some of the cane was still green and Haw didn't want it to rot. Staring at Rum asleep in his basket, the boy tried hard to pay attention to Mama's reply while he gawked. Mama sent him back with a sack of the crumbly stuff they mixed with the good charcoal when they were low, with a message for his mama about some diving wherry feathers for a Gather hat for Samma.

She felt giddily pleased at the unexpected gift, and fancies of hats, Gathers, and dances kept her occupied all through the afternoon.



### 2860.09.16

Day's labors finished, Paryn stepped into the cot, his nostrils flaring at the sour, penetrating smell of the manure of something that ate meat. One of the dogs must have shit under the house. He'd have Seb crawl under and scoop it out. Turning to the wash bucket to scrape the day's grime off his neck, Paryn pulled up short when he heard a wet,

wracking gurgle fill the cot. Swinging his eyes around, he saw nothing, until he noticed the flutter in its basket, and the color of the thing glued his eyes there. Normally a rich gold-brown, the flutter was practically gray, all the way to its glittery eyes. It sneezed and tried to swallow the phlegm back down to breathe, and Paryn realized the smell of filth wasn't from under the house.

Samma's soft tread came up behind him.

"Papa, Mama asks-"

"Samma, girl, was the flutter this ill yesterday?" He heard her surprised pause.

"No, Papa, no he wasn't. It's just a bad snuffle, though," she said, sounding worried and defensive. "See, watch. Rum, come." The flutter tried to lift its head, but it drooped pathetically, and awkwardly tried to pull its wings out. It hopped from its perch and snapped its wings out, but its back talon caught on the weave of basket and it plummeted to the floor with a splat.

They stared, dumb with shock as the flutter's eyes swirled in a muddy daze, and it coughed hard. Not a bout of the sniffles, bad or no, Paryn realized. Something much worse. Samma took a step to rush toward the thing, but Paryn put a firm hand on her arm and pushed her back.

Dragons only rarely ever took sick, he'd always heard, and firelizards too. But there it was, a thick cough rattling between its ribs, unable to even control its bowels. Anything that could fell a dragon invoked a terror deep inside him that his mind refused to acknowledge, a terror that every Pernese must have shared since Thread first devoured the land. And flitters were but little dragons. The swirl in its eyes was weak as it lay there, laboring for breath. Strains of *The Fall of the Pride of Benden* and *Moreta's Ride* ghosted through his mind down into his heart. Moreta's plague had taken man and beast alone, but it had still taken dragons just as surely as Thread. But the dragon-plague of the last Interval... If there was another plague, would the Weyr still send out the wings? he wondered distractedly. Would they send word if they didn't? He shook the thoughts from his mind. There was no time for that now.

He took his machete off the wall.

"Papa, what're you doing?" Her voice was small.

"Samma, keep everyone back."

She had stopped behind him at the door, and he heard Rynche tromp in after her, and then the lighter sound of Seb's boots.

He heard Samma's breath stick in her throat. He thought she might wail, or weep, or run and snatch the flutter up in her arms. But Paryn was not a man to be swayed by wailing and tears. A man of reason, a reasonable man.

Audibly working to keep her voice steady, Samma said

quickly, "No, Papa. You said it yourself. He's valuable. Worth more'n our whole reed harvest, and the cane, and the rattan. We'll never get another, you know that. Let me take care of him, you know I will. It's my *responsibility*. I understand that. I'll make'm better."

"Rynche, hold your sister."

Her voice turned desperate. The floor slats creaked and in his mind's eye he saw her straining forward against Rynche's strong, solid hands.

"He'll get better. It's just a little cough, it's from the freak storm t'other sevenday." It coughed again, and it spat up a gob of phlegm from its throat and its nose. "Flitters're *strong*, strong like dragons. They're- they're resil- *resilient*, that was the word the Harper used, and they don't hardly never get sick-"

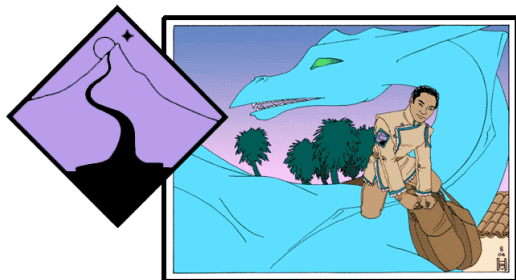
The little brown was worth more than his cot, his reeds, his cane. But not more than his family. Not more than his blood, grown and growing in Seffy's belly. The flutter dragged itself across the floor, not even able to keep its head up, leaving a line of mucus strung across the floor. Paryn lifted the machete as its talons scrabbled weakly against the floor. Behind him, he heard tears choke Samma's voice.

"No Papa, please, he's mine, he's *mine*..."

Paryn swung the machete down.

Samma didn't scream; he was proud of her for not screaming. She just went real quiet. Paryn looked down at the green stain spreading outward.

"Rynche, go build a fire. And Seb, fetch me a shovel."



# Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub

[www.kadanzer.org](http://www.kadanzer.org)