



CHAPTER ONE



Valonna was careful to keep her eyes down and her attention focused solely on the lukewarm bowl of porridge before her as L'dro entered the lower caverns.

She had heard him come in – accustomed, conditioned even, to listening for her Weyrleader's voice and the confident rhythm of his boots against the stone floor – and so, too, had she seen his companion, before hastily averting her gaze. The woman's name was Jayena, the green rider who'd been on maternity leave from active practice until five months into her pregnancy, when she had abruptly vanished from the lists. The Headwoman had refused Valonna any details, of course, but she'd guessed. She kept the familiar surge of hurt down by forcing herself to be surprised at Jayena's reappearance on L'dro's arm. The green rider must really have wanted to reclaim her place in the Weyrleader's affections to risk aborting so late. L'dro had little time for child-heavy females.

But Valonna knew better than to notice, and so it was with her usual careful deference that she greeted the Weyrleader. "Good morning, L'dro."

He sprawled in his heavily padded chair and rubbed at the dark circles ringing his eyes before feeling the klah pitcher on the table and then pushing it away. "This is cold."

"I'll get another one," Valonna heard herself reply, rising automatically to her feet. She struggled to push back her heavy chair. Even after almost five Turns, she didn't have the knack of manhandling the bulky piece of furniture with her predecessor's ostentatious ease.

Valonna didn't mind standing in line at the service hatch, but she knew L'dro considered it beneath his dignity as leader of Madellon's fighting Wings. He was more than within his rights to call a drudge to serve him, but L'dro was notoriously impatient in the mornings, and Valonna had soon learned that it was best to respond to his needs herself. If the Headwoman would only assign a serving woman to the top table at breakfast...but she never had, and she never would, while Valonna was capable of walking and carrying. Sometimes she could almost forget that Adrissa was L'dro's birth mother, but it was difficult to ignore the Headwoman's overt disrespect for her.

But if standing with the common riders of the Weyr was intended as an ignominy, it was not an ordeal. Riders and Weyrfolk alike gave way for her to be served first, often with a smile or respectful nod. Valonna found it very easy to smile back. She wished it could be as easy to join in with the informal conversation, but keeping L'dro waiting was never wise, and besides, she hardly knew most of Madellon's complement of dragonriders.

"Good morning, Weyrwoman!"

The cheerful greeting brightened Valonna's day. C'los' broad grin, brilliant white in his brown face, was always so friendly and open that Valonna had almost gathered the courage to reply on more than one occasion, but this morning, like all the others, she could only offer a tentative smile in return.

Even in the heat of summer, Madellon's riders drank enough klah to fill the Weyr's great primary lake, and the big kettle from which a kitchen woman had been filling klah pitchers was empty. Two sturdy drudges were bringing another kettle from the hearth, but the delay made Valonna tense. She looked back over her shoulder. L'dro had sunk even lower in his chair as D'feng, his towering, thin-faced Second, made his morning report.

"Fantastic day, isn't it?"

The Weyrwoman jerked her eyes back to the rider standing beside her. "Sorry?"

"It's a fantastic day," C'los repeated. "Sun's out, sky's blue. Great day to be a dragonrider, don't you think?"

Valonna smiled again, beginning to feel nervous. "I suppose it is."

"Indioth and I were flying sweep yesterday," C'los continued. "I almost wish I'd drawn today. It's really cleared up. That thunder we had last sevenday..." He shook his head in sage denouement. "No, I'm glad we have time off on a day like this."

The Weyrwoman willed the drudges to hurry. It wasn't that she objected to the green rider's conversation – she just didn't know what to say.

Apparently oblivious to her dilemma, C'los went on as if he hadn't stopped. "My daughter's at the Harperhall, so we might go and visit her, but that all depends on if her mother's free or not. And the weather might not be so good up there – you know what Kellad can be like."

The fresh klah kettle arrived, and Valonna laid her hands upon the first pitcher. "Well..." She floundered for something to say in parting, but speech eluded her.

"Say, why don't you come sit with my weyrmate and me?"

Valonna froze. "With your...?"

"Yeah, I know C'mine isn't everyone's idea of the perfect breakfast partner, but he complains if I abandon him." C'los grinned, presumably to show that he was joking.

"I didn't mean...! But...I..." Valonna looked mutely at the klah pitcher, and then over at L'dro. D'feng was still talking to him, but the Weyrleader never let his Second talk for very long in the mornings, and he would soon be wondering where his klah was.

C'los followed her gaze. "No problem." He turned to the lanky young man next to him in line. "Hey, T'rello, take the Weyrleader his klah, would you?"

"You're still treating me like a weyring, Los," said the young rider, but he deftly relieved Valonna of the heavy pitcher with a quick smile.

"You'll always be a weyring to me," C'los replied good-naturedly.

The exchange was almost lost on Valonna. She could only watch with dismay as T'rello delivered the klah to L'dro.

"Don't worry about *him*," said C'los, picking up his own jug. "The sun don't shine so bright out his...ah, come on, before this goes cold."

Valonna couldn't think of a way to turn the green rider down, and C'los' hand on her shoulder was quite firm. Unresisting, but anxious about what L'dro would say, Valonna found herself guided through the dining tables to where C'los and his weyrmate had claimed a space amongst the morning chaos.

The rider with blue cords twisted through his shoulder-knot shook his head as they approached. "I send you out for klah and you come back with the Weyrwoman. What are you trying to do to me, C'los?"

The green rider's grin widened still further. "Mine, you know I always deliver more than I promise."

C'mine smiled tolerantly at his weyrmate, and then looked up at Valonna. "Good morning, Weyrwoman. Will you sit down?"

C'los pulled a chair out from the table with a flourish. "See, he's so humble he even lets people sit down in his presence."

"You still need to work on the subtlety, Los," C'mine said mildly. He was pouring klah as he spoke, adding sugar to one, and sugar and milk to a second. "Weyrwoman?"

It took Valonna a moment to realise that he was asking her how she took her klah. "Oh...only milk, thank you."

C'mine added some to the third steaming mug – not too much, not too little – and pushed it in her direction.

They all drank, and then C'los asked, "Did you have plans for the day, Weyrwoman?"

Valonna was settling a little into her responses, taking an obscure courage from being far enough across the dining cavern to be out of L'dro's sight. "I thought I might do some work on the hangings in my weyr," she said. Then, because it sounded so inane, she added, "I think they've been there since the Pass."

"Are you doing anything tonight?" asked C'mine.

"Tonight? Well, I'm..."

"We're providing the credibility for one of Jenavally's musical evenings," said C'los. "You know, the 'come along and sing even though you're tone-deaf and you're liable to set half the dragons howling' things."

"Did you speak to A'len about our set?" C'mine asked his weyrmate.

C'los shrugged. "Indioth put the message through to Chyilth. They've been at Southern. I'm not worried, he's never let us down before."

"A'len's our drummer," C'mine explained to Valonna. "He was a real Harper before he was Searched."

"Harper!" C'los snorted. "He just likes to hit things."

Valonna seldom stayed in the dining hall long after the evening meal. "Do you play?"

"We try," said C'mine. "A'len's the only one with formal training, but we muddle through."

"I never wanted to be a Harper," C'los added, "but you can't live at the Hall and not pick up the music."

"You should come along," said C'mine. "It's not as painful as Los makes out."

Kind as their invitation was, the situation sounded intimidating. "Thank you, but I think I'll be busy tonight."

“You will. Your weyr need cleaning, doesn’t it.”

L’dro’s voice, flat with displeasure, almost made Valonna jump out of her skin. It was with trepidation that she turned to the handsome Weyrleader, forcing a nervous smile. “I was just saying...”

“You know, L’dro, rest days apply to everyone in the Weyr,” said C’los, with a hint of force in his voice that startled Valonna. “Including the Weyrwoman.”

L’dro’s grey eyes narrowed. “You’d do well to remember your place, green rider,” he said, placing unnecessary emphasis on that title. “And mine.”

“No need for formality with us, L’dro,” C’los said lightly, although there was a hard look in his eyes that belied his easy tone.

“We’ve known each other too long,” C’mine added.

The Weyrleader looked sharply at the blue rider, as if to reprimand him, but if there had been any hint of menace or disdain in C’mine’s tone, Valonna hadn’t noticed it.

L’dro focused on the Weyrwoman instead, gripping the back of her chair with one big hand. “You shouldn’t be associating with this sort, Valonna. Stick to bronze riders.”

“I’m a bronze rider.”

The new voice from over L’dro’s shoulder took Weyrwoman and Weyrleader by surprise. L’dro turned to confront the newcomer, and immediately the blackest of looks crossed his face.

The rider facing him, bare arms folded, displayed no discernible expression at all.

The Weyrleader laughed shortly. “Hardly a bronze rider, T’kamen. Not even a Wingleader.”

Valonna wasn’t personally acquainted with the bronze rider, but she knew *of* him. There were fewer than two dozen bronze riders at Madellon, and this man was one of only three who didn’t hold rank of any kind. The cord he wore on his shoulder was a plain double strand of Madellon indigo and bronze, and she knew that the epaulettes on his riding jacket bore only the single stripe of a wingrider.

T’kamen regarded the Weyrleader in silence a moment longer. Not taking his eyes off L’dro, he said quietly, “C’los, C’mine. Weyrwoman.”

“T’kamen,” C’los acknowledged the greeting, and C’mine nodded.

“I’m still your Weyrleader, T’kamen,” said L’dro, in the threatening tone that chilled Valonna to the bone.

“I’m still a bronze rider,” T’kamen replied evenly, and finally removing his steady gaze from L’dro, he stepped past the Weyrleader and took the seat next to C’mine.

“Don’t turn your back on me, rider!”

L’dro’s bark silenced the idle chatter of the dining hall as riders and Weyrfolk all around turned to look at their Weyrleader.

Valonna wanted to shrink away from her weyrmate. L’dro’s rage had ever been swift and visible. But T’kamen appeared unfazed. “Look to yourself, Weyrleader,” he said, over his shoulder.

Valonna knew she should do something. She should go with L’dro, distance him from the rider raising his ire – anything to defuse the situation. People were watching.

Then, outside, Shimpath roared, and immediately dozens of draconic voices responded. Flustered, Valonna reached for her dragon’s mind. *Shimpath, what is it?*

Tell Pierdeth’s rider I’m upset, the queen replied, quite calmly.

Valonna swallowed hard, but Shimpath’s direct intervention gave her courage. “Weyrleader, Shimpath’s upset. Please calm down.”

L’dro shot her a look of frank surprise. “I won’t have my queen disturbed, T’kamen!”

The lean bronze rider gazed at Valonna for a long moment. Then he inclined his head to the Weyrwoman. “My apologies to you and your queen, Weyrwoman.” He placed slight emphasis on *your*.

“Weyrleader?”

The new voice belonged to D’feng. Valonna could see the older bronze rider’s distasteful expression as he stared at T’kamen. “Weyrleader, might I suggest you rejoin the *Council* bronze riders in discussion of the Weyr?”

Valonna saw the ghost of an ironic smile touch T’kamen’s face.

“See to your dragon, Valonna,” L’dro ordered her, and with a final glower at T’kamen’s uncaring back, the Weyrleader turned and strode back to the head table.

C’los let out his breath. “You’re living dangerously, Kamen.”

“He can’t demote me any further,” the bronze rider shrugged.

“You say that as if it’s a good thing.”

“No,” T’kamen conceded. “But there’s no point in pushing for a promotion with the Council the way it is now. There’s only one way I’ll ever be able to make a difference.”

Valonna suddenly became very conscious of C’mine’s perceptive gaze, and with a start she realised what T’kamen was talking about.

“Kamen,” the blue rider said quietly, still looking at Valonna, “mind your manners.”

T’kamen looked at C’mine for a moment, and then turned his fiercely brown gaze on Valonna. “I’m sorry, Weyrwoman. I meant no offence.”

Valonna heard herself speak. “None was taken, bronze rider.”

T’kamen’s stare lasted a moment longer, and then he rose from the bench with lithe grace. “My duty,” he said curtly, and stalked off.

The Weyrwoman watched him leave, and then heard herself say, “He didn’t have any breakfast.”

C’mine sighed, and C’los grinned. “T’kamen never has any breakfast,” the green rider said. “You think the man could stay that skinny on three square meals a day?”



Epherineth looked up, and although the bronze made no sound, T’kamen knew that two dragons had just appeared in the sky above. Their greeting bugles cut across the air a moment later, scaring the beasts in the field below into a stampede. The bronze rider eased himself to his feet from where he had been resting against his dragon’s powerful fore-claw.

Darshanth and Indioth landed side by side, both dragons dwarfed but not intimidated by their larger brother. T’kamen allowed himself a small smile as their riders dismounted. He had known C’los and C’mine since long before any of them had Impressed. As long as twenty Turns ago, Taskamen, Carellos, and Cairmine had been inseparable, and their dragons reflected the bond.

C’los, the elder of the pair, loosened his riding jacket against the hot sun as he dismounted, revealing the gaudy green and yellow shirt he wore underneath. The green rider was colourful in most respects. Unapologetically loud and flamboyant, C’los loved to be the centre of attention, and his talkative, open nature made him many friends, but the colour of his dragon blinded many to the complexity of the man behind the garrulous, garish front. C’los was as sharp and devious a man as T’kamen had ever known. The green rider had never been entirely candid about the exact nature of the training he had received at the Harperhall as a youth, even to his closest friends, but T’kamen had his suspicions. C’los had an uncanny instinct for reading method and motive, for sensing trends of opinion and, where necessary, manipulating them to his benefit. There was irony in the colour of his dragon. Indioth was as simple and sincere a dragon as her rider was brilliant and cagey. But C’los

had never been prepared to accept a life of quiet anonymity as a mere green rider, and he wasn't above causing a scene to make his voice heard.

By contrast, C'mine cut a subdued figure. Shorter and more conservatively dressed than his weyrmate, Darshanth's rider tended to fade unobtrusively into the background. His brown skin and black hair could have made for a striking appearance, but C'mine's features were pleasant rather than handsome, and his hair had been retreating rapidly backwards for Turns. A casual observer might have dismissed him as less intelligent, less forceful, less influential than his weyrmate. T'kamen knew better. The blue rider was his most steadfast and reliable friend: loyal, compassionate, and not nearly so aggravating as C'los. If he had a fault, it was that he rarely took a side on any matter, and it was sometimes hard to know if he had an opinion of his own at all. It was only natural that the blue rider's extreme empathic sensitivity was reflected in his dragon. Darshanth was more daring and flirtatious than his rider, a devoted chaser of greens, but the badge on C'mine's riding jacket bore an embroidered gold S: the mark of a Search rider.

The two riders had been a fixture in T'kamen's life for so long that he could hardly remember what it had been like without them. They had played together as children, stood together as candidates, trained together as weyrings. They were the brothers he had never had, and they had shaped his beliefs about dragons and dragonriders. Class consciousness was heightened among the Weyrbred and all but forced upon those who Impressed, but T'kamen had resisted the pressure. He'd known C'mine and C'los long before Epherineth, Darshanth, and Indioth had labelled each of them with the colours of their hides, and he'd had no intention of treating them any differently because he'd Impressed a bronze and they hadn't.

"You're late," he remarked tolerantly as the two riders approached.

"Leah didn't want to let him go," said C'los, nodding at his weyrmate. "I don't know why I went to the trouble of having a daughter. She acts like she's his."

"How's Robyn?" T'kamen asked.

"Well. Asked after you." C'los gave him a hard look. "I told her you've been flirting with disaster again."

"No need to speak of our Weyrwoman that way," said C'mine.

T'kamen reached up to rub Epherineth's neck in response to a subliminal request as his friends leaned against Darshanth's side. "She doesn't have any idea of how to behave."

"I don't know what Fianine was thinking when she stepped down," said C'los

"Fianine was dying when she stepped down," C'mine reminded him.

C'los shrugged. "Senior Weyrwomen generally are, or they wouldn't be retiring. But Valonna's hardly who we were hoping for in the next Weyrwoman."

The indirect reference made T'kamen stiffen, and he saw C'mine throw C'los a reproachful look. "Fianine never had much time for her," he said shortly. "Especially not in the last few months. Too busy dying." The words sounded harsh, but he knew they understood. He had respected the formidable Weyrwoman, and sincerely mourned her loss.

"You think she's a totally lost cause?" asked C'los.

"I don't know. Maybe." T'kamen thumped Epherineth's neck, half in emphasis, half to express his discontent. "I can't see her ever being a strong Weyrwoman in her own right."

"Being treated like a drudge by L'dro isn't helping," C'mine pointed out.

"Since when has L'dro helped anyone besides himself?" T'kamen shook his head in disgust. "Scaling down tithes in return for personal favours? Exchanging a decent standard of living for all riders in favour of luxury for himself and his lackeys?"

"He's taking that too far, now," said C'los. "Mine, tell him."

"I need to replace Darshanth's harness," said the blue rider. "I went down to the Tannery for the hide yesterday. Mannis doesn't have anything. The hide tithes have been cut by two thirds in the last two Turns. I'm going to have to stop by the Tannerhall on the way back to the Weyr and trade for what I need."

"Faranth...I didn't think he'd compromise rider safety like that." T'kamen made himself unclench his fists. "What would he do if we had weyrlings needing to practise making straps? Tell them to get it right the first time or suffer the consequences?"

"It's lucky there hasn't been a clutch since '94, or we might have found out," said C'los. The green rider paused, looking at Epherineth. "But then, if you're reading *him* right, it might not be much longer till the next one."

T'kamen looked up at his dragon. Epherineth cocked his head slightly, his eye gleaming half-sapphire, half-emerald. "If he feels it, so does Pierdeth."

"But Pierdeth hasn't necessarily impressed that upon L'dro," said C'los, slowly and carefully, as if he was explaining it to a small child. "That's why it was so stupid of you to draw attention to yourself this morning."

Ignoring the exaggerated condescension, T'kamen looked at C'mine. "Think he'd accuse me of immaturity if I said he started it?"

"Almost certainly," said C'mine.

"He started it."

C'los rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Everything *I* did this morning was part of the bigger plan. What *you* did wasn't."

“I’m sure you’ll forgive me.” T’kamen shook his head, becoming serious again. “If Shimpath would just rise...”

“You don’t want that yet, Kamen,” said C’los. “Trust me, you don’t. For a start, the entire Council is against you...”

“Only by default,” said T’kamen. “Some of them don’t like L’dro much more than we do.”

“...the queen chose based on rider preference last time...”

“Pierdeth caught her early. Epherineth’s the better dragon, and we know Pierdeth’s tricks now.”

“It’s still the Interval, Kamen,” said C’los. “If Thread was falling you’d have a chance on Epherineth’s merit alone, but the criteria are different for us. Pern doesn’t want strong clutches. The Holds aren’t going to increase tithes to indulge over-productive dragons. A long flight means a bigger clutch, and a bigger clutch means less to go around.”

“There was always enough to go around when Fianine was Weyrwoman,” said T’kamen.

C’los shrugged. “She tyrannised the Holds as well as the Weyr. And she limited the Council’s power by instigating a change of Weyrleader every time Cherganth rose. The bronze riders were always so busy competing for her favour they never had a chance to unite against her. The current Council’s authority is a recent institution, T’kamen, but it relies on letting L’dro treat Valonna the way he does. They don’t want another strong Weyrwoman. And L’dro has them balanced just right – he looks after his supporters well enough that it’s in their interests to keep him where he is.”

T’kamen frowned, running a reflexive hand through his hair. “Then if the key to winning Shimpath’s next flight is Council endorsement, you’re saying we haven’t got a chance?”

“You can’t offer the senior members of the Council anything that they don’t already have under L’dro,” said C’los.

The bronze rider laughed, shortly and without humour. “How about a Weyrleader with some integrity?”

“To limit their powers?” C’los shook his head. “L’dro’s a tail-fork, Kamen, but he knows how to keep his people loyal. I can only think of three bronze riders who would speak out against him openly. T’rello’s still a kid, R’hren was ineffective even when he was Weyrleader...”

“And the third?”

“That’s you, T’kamen,” said C’los, with a long-suffering sigh.

“So don’t target the bronze riders.”

T’kamen and C’los turned to look at C’mine. True to form, the blue rider had kept out of the debate, and it was easy to forget he was there, but he invariably listened to every word.

“There are ten other dragons for every Madellon bronze,” C’mine continued unhurriedly.

“Did you have a point, or were you just going to state the obvious?” C’los asked impatiently.

C’mine looked at his weyrmate with no change in expression. “Indioth’s green, you know. Have you ever noticed how many greens there are?”

“Mine...”

“Let him finish, Los,” T’kamen interrupted.

The blue rider’s expression still didn’t change, but his eyes were laughing. “You can’t win over the Council riders because they already have everything they want. So look to those who aren’t happy with the Weyrleadership. I’m not the only one who’s going to have to barter for harness leather because L’dro’s renegotiated the tithes.”

T’kamen regarded C’mine keenly. “You think I should be looking for support amongst the unranked riders?”

“None of us are ranked,” C’mine replied. “And that’s never stopped Los from getting involved in Weyr politics.”

“Of course,” C’los muttered. His eyes had narrowed as he considered the possibilities of his weyrmate’s suggestion. “If we can just convince enough of the other wingriders that their opinion counts...”

“You’re not the only rider in the Weyr who has issues with L’dro’s leadership, Kamen,” said C’mine. “You’re just the one who’s best placed to do something about it.”

“And if Valonna can be brought round too...” C’los slapped his hands suddenly together. “We get L’dro from both sides, above and below. He won’t know what’s hit him.”

T’kamen frowned. “She’s the one who chose him in the first place.”

“Yes, but don’t you think she regrets it?”

“If she had an ounce of sense, she would, but that’s debatable.”

“It’s not as if she’d have to face up to L’dro directly,” said C’los. “Just influence Shimpeth against Pierdeth.”

T’kamen shook his head. “She doesn’t have the confidence, and no queen is going to be influenced by half measures in flight.”

“Confidence can be strengthened over time,” C’mine said thoughtfully. “Valonna’s never been given a chance to assert herself. A queen wouldn’t choose a rider without the potential to be strong. She just needs a chance. She’s very young, Kamen. Very young.”

“You’d take her in hand, C’mine?” T’kamen asked intently.

“I’ll do what I can, Kamen.” The blue rider fixed him with a steady look. “But she wouldn’t welcome another Weyrleader who only cares about because of the colour of her dragon.”

“I’m not going to say I love her because of the colour of her dragon either, C’mine,” T’kamen replied flatly.

“I didn’t say anything about love,” said C’mine. “But you can’t use her to gain the Weyrleadership without giving something back.” The blue rider paused, and added, “I’ll talk to her.”

“There are a few brown riders who’d be worth approaching,” C’los mused aloud, apparently oblivious to what they had been saying. “The ones that L’dro and the Council have overlooked for promotion when they’re well qualified.”

T’kamen nodded. “I’ll speak to T’rello and R’hren.”

“And Fr’ton.”

The bronze rider winced at the name. “I can’t argue with L’dro on him. I wouldn’t put him in a position of responsibility, either.”

“I know, but he rides a bronze, and he has no strong ties to L’dro. You don’t have to trust him with anything; just have him stand around with Peteorth, being supportive.”

“You’re assuming he can follow that complex an instruction, Los.”

“Leave him alone,” C’mine said mildly. “There are worse riders in the Weyr. Should we be getting on?”

C’los glanced up at the sun. “You’re probably right, Mine, or the Tannerhall will have closed up for the night. Coming to Blue Shale, Kamen?”

“C’los,” said C’mine.

T’kamen had tensed automatically at the name of the Hold, as he always did. Then, gently, he placed a hand on his dragon’s neck. “No, I think I’d better let Epherineth digest a little longer.”

The green rider heaved a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes. “You’re so predictable, Kamen. Fine. Be like that.” He started towards Indioth, then stopped and turned back to call, “But be late for tonight at your own risk!”

C’mine chuckled as he turned to mount Darshanth, and T’kamen settled himself between Epherineth’s forearms, muttering, “Go *between*, C’los.”