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CHAPTER TEN



Fifteen minutes after the first alarm had been raised, T'kamen's Wing was aloft.

He glanced back to see eighteen dragonpairs fall in behind Epherineth, taking their places in the close diamond pattern usually reserved for exhibition flying. Useless as a fighting formation, it nonetheless looked impressive, and the beleaguered Kellad holders would need something to inspire them. The three bronzes defined the three forward corners, with L'stev holding down the centre of the formation, A'len and his brown bringing up the rear, and the blues and greens filling in the gaps. Every dragon had supplies or a litter fastened securely to his harness, and every rider was clad in full fighting leathers. Under the relentless sun T'kamen knew they would all be sweating already, but the light made every dragon gleam with strength and health.

Does everyone know where we're going? he asked Epherineth, as the last dragon slid into position.

All have the visual.

Take us to Kellad.

Epherineth plunged them into darkness, and cold, and a silence so profound that T'kamen could hear his own heart racing.

They emerged high above Kellad Hold, into a sky already thick with smoke. Not a single dragon had broken formation, but T'kamen signalled to the Wing to drop beneath the pall of ash that was drifting sluggishly from the east.

Morrianth says much has burned already, Epherineth reported, as they descended into clearer air and sighted the solitary green dragon on the heights of Kellad.

T'kamen looked down at the people cramming the courtyard of the Hold, most of them dressed in their Turn's End finery, all of them staring skywards in awe at the mighty formation of dragons. He let them gaze in wonder for a moment, then issued curt orders through his bronze. *L'stev, sweep around to the north of the blaze. T'rello, take your riders south. I want to know how big this thing is and how many settlements are in danger. C'mine, with me. Everyone else: forward V, and stay airborne. You're on point, Fr'ton.*

Dragons detached from the formation on both sides to join Vanzanth and Santinoth. Epherineth dropped away from the pattern with Darshanth beside him, and T'kamen glanced up to see the remaining dragons reform behind Peteorth. The dragonpairs couldn't have reacted more smoothly to the changes had they been drilled in them. The bronze rider's heart clenched with such fierce pride in them that it hurt.

The courtyard cleared abruptly as the bronze and blue came in to land side by side. T'kamen released his straps and dismounted, signalling C'mine to do the same as the tall figure of Meturvian, Lord Kellad, came forward with T'sten at his side.

"Wingleader!" Meturvian greeted him, inaccurately but with tangible relief. "I didn't know if my message would get through."

"What happened?" T'kamen asked shortly.

The tall Lord, so arrogant the last time T'kamen had seen him, appeared genuinely scared as he outlined the situation. "About five hours ago a thunderstorm passed over the eastern forest, and a lightning strike set it alight."

"Why didn't you alert the Weyr before now?"

"Summer blazes aren't uncommon," said Meturvian. "Usually they're extinguished by the very storms that started them, but this was a dry storm, and the foresters who'd usually be detailed to keep watch were celebrating Turn's End, like everyone else."

T'kamen looked to T'sten. "How bad it is?"

The young rider looked uncharacteristically grim as he replied. "I didn't sweep properly, sir, but it's bad. The slopes face south, so the blaze is spreading uphill, fast. It keeps generating spot fires ahead of itself. There were at least two lodges at risk from the spread when Morrianth and I swept over, but I'd need a better look..."

T'kamen cut him off. "The sweepriders are already there, green rider." The bronze rider fixed Meturvian with a piercing gaze. "How many foresters do you have here now?"

The Lord shook his head. "Several hundred, and most of them are out there now trying to establish a fireline, but they can't clear the trees fast enough to keep ahead."

"Dragons can," said C'mine. "With some of them soaking down the edges of the blaze from above, and others levelling trees, we might be able to get it under control."

As before, everything came together in T'kamen's mind at once. "First priority is the people," he said curtly. "We get them to safety, then we see about halting the spread. Meturvian, I'm going to need empty barrels for dragons to fill with water." The bronze rider nodded southwards. "Get them ready in the Gather meadow; there's not the space here. Have your Healers on standby for casualties. I'll post a dragon here to relay. C'mine, T'sten, we need to get back up there and see what's going on." T'kamen nodded briefly to Meturvian and turned to remount Epherineth.

"Wingleader!"

T'kamen snapped the tethers on his belt to Epherineth's harness, glancing down at Meturvian. "What?"

The Lord glanced up at the hovering Wing. "Are these all you've brought?"

T'kamen wiped his flight goggles clean of the specks of ash already obscuring his vision. "I'll call more if we need them. Stand clear."

Santinoth says the fire is being blown north-west, Epherineth told his rider as he sprang aloft. Vanzanth reports that the smoke is very dense ahead of the blaze; he's making a lower sweep.

The bronze rider signalled C'mine and T'sten to flank Epherineth. *Tell V'gyat and Egrath to take watch here, and get a visual from Vanzanth.*

I have. We go.

They came out of *between* into a thick cloud of grey smoke, and T'kamen started to cough as he inhaled a lungful of resinous ash. *Sear it! Tell the others not to breathe this stuff in, Epherineth! And hold your breath!*

Epherineth veered sharply away from the plume of smoke. *I am. Vanzanth's rider says to breathe through damp cloth.*

T'kamen felt in the inside pocket of his jacket for the flying scarf he occasionally wore on high, cold sweeps. It was made of thin cotton, light enough to breathe through. The bronze rider unstopped the water skin strapped onto Epherineth's harness and wetted the cloth before tying it over his nose and mouth.

Only then did he look down at the ground. Even through the heavy pall of ash, the devastation being wrought by the flames was clear. The fire had cut a terrible swathe through the rich coniferous forest. As far as T'kamen could see, trees

were burning like enormous torches, their flaming crowns spitting sparks into the air and igniting nearby snags and saplings. Even two hundred feet above the blaze T'kamen could feel waves of intense heat rolling skywards from the burning wood, and Epherineth had to work hard against the abnormal thermals just to hold his position.

The hulking form of L'stev's Vanzanth appeared out of the thick smoke, his hide already dull with soot, and his eyes yellow-white with alarm beneath two sets of protective lids. Epherineth banked to follow the brown. *We go with Vanzanth to the fireline.*

As the bronze followed after Vanzanth, T'kamen glanced down to see the unmistakable shells of three buildings at right angles to each other, burnt to blackened timbers, still smouldering. *Faranth's shards, Epherineth!*

Vanzanth says the people escaped before the fire reached them.

T'kamen was relieved, but the sight of those burned-out skeletons had filled him with momentary panic. What would he have done if there had been people still alive in there? What *could* he have done?

The heat from below decreased suddenly, and the smoke thinned. Epherineth followed as Vanzanth dropped lower, beneath the veil of ash, and then T'kamen saw the leading edge of the fire. It seemed to stretch for miles, and as far as he could see, a line of men toiled to hold back the flames, but as fast as they felled trees to break the fire, sparks leapt ahead of the main blaze to ignite them. Levelled trunks rolled downhill into the blaze, feeding the awful inferno. T'kamen counted four spot fires ahead of the leading edge, each surrounded by a ring of men working in vain to contain it. As he watched, embers exploded from a pile of burning material and set a worker alight. Men either side of him instantly turned from the main blaze to help him, but even as they brought the afflicted forester to the ground, to smother the flames in his clothes and hair, T'kamen could hear him screaming.

I can't land, T'kamen!

The anguish in Epherineth's voice broke T'kamen out of his horrified fascination. The bronze rider glanced down at the ground: there were clearings, but none large enough for a full-sized brown or bronze dragon. He made a snap decision. *Epherineth, tell C'mine that he's in charge here, Darshanth will be able to land. Call in Santinoth's detail and the rest of the Wing. Get all the blues and greens working on this firebreak, browns and bronzes with us. Find out from Vanzanth what settlements need evacuating.*

Darshanth understands. Then the urgency of Epherineth's tone increased. *Vanzanth says a hold has been surrounded by flames. Men are trying to help but there aren't enough. We have to go!*

T'kamen's desire to help was as urgent as his dragon's, but he stayed long enough to see twelve more dragons come out of *between*. He signalled good luck to C'mine, then concentrated with his dragon on the reference passed along by Vanzanth. The stark image of a log-built hold ringed with flames was awful, but T'kamen put his horror aside and glanced back to check that there were two browns and two bronzes hovering in the ash-choked air behind him.

Then the bronze rider took a deep breath through the scarf over his face, and gave the command to go *between*.



Darshanth landed cautiously between the trees up the slope from the edge of the fire, taking care not to foul his wings on the branches, and turned his anxiously whirling gaze on his rider.

What should I do?

C'mine dismounted to make a rapid assessment of the closest trees. Space was tight even for a dragon of Darshanth's size. *I think you'll have to clear some space. Send all but the four smallest greens back to the Hold for water.*

"Dragonrider!"

"Thank Faranth!"

"Dragonrider!"

A chorus of shouts went up all along the line, and foresters turned from their work to look. Others yelled at them to concentrate on the fire, and after a brief debate, one was sent to meet the blue rider.

The big man who slogged up the slope towards C'mine was black with soot, and his eyes, the only part of his face not covered by the kerchief protecting his mouth and nose, were red and bloodshot. He carried an axe as if it was weightless, but he looked exhausted. "Dragonrider," he said hoarsely. "Thank the Egg you're here."

"I've got fourteen dragons ready and willing, but no space for them to land." C'mine gestured to his own dragon, crouching uncomfortably between the trees. "With some space to work they can move trees much faster than your men."

As he spoke, Darshanth clasped his front paws around the base of a tree. The trunk was no more than six inches through, and as the blue applied his strength,

its roots tore free of the soil. Darshanth hopped backwards as the thirty foot trunk fell heavily sideways, taking several smaller saplings with it.

“Faranth!” the forester swore, stepping back reflexively.

Good work, Darshanth, good job, C’mine praised his blue.

Darshanth raised his head, and C’mine heard him call to the smallest of the hovering greens. *Freanth, land beside me and help to knock over the trees.*

The blue rider glanced back down the slope at the men toiling to move the trunks they had felled with hand axes. “Once these dragons are all on the ground they can start hauling those logs away from the fireline.” He called to the rider of the green who had just alighted delicately beside Darshanth. “Keva! Make sure these trunks can’t roll down into the fire!” Then he looked at the forester. “Need another pair of hands?”

“You’ve fought wildfire before?” asked the Kellad holder.

C’mine gazed downhill at the blaze, feeling the smoke stinging his eyes, the heat making him sweat under his wherhides, the resin-sweet scent of burning conifers cloying in his nose even through the bandanna he had tied across his face. “This was home, once.”

The forester nodded and led the way back down the slope, towards the fireline. “Name’s Ogharn.”

The name sent a jolt of recognition through the blue rider. He hadn’t thought of him in Turns: even without the sweat and grime, C’mine would not have remembered the face, but he had never forgotten the name. He had grown up with this man. Ogharn, the Hold steward’s son, a tall and powerful boy who had once cornered Cairmine, attacked him, beaten him to the ground, laid into him with kicks until he could not move, spat on him, and left him there, curled up around his own agony, all for the crime of loving Carellos of the Harperhall. It had been a summer nearly as hot as this one – their last summer at Kellad, before that late autumn day when a blue dragon of Madellon Weyr had Searched Cairmine and Carellos and Taskamen, and freed them all from the prejudice and fears of the Hold.

There, in the burning forest of his home Hold, C’mine remembered Cairmine’s pain, and couldn’t bring himself to face it again.

“Darshanth’s rider,” he replied, and followed Ogharn to the edge of the inferno.



T’kamen and Epherineth brought their command out of *between* into the smoke-thick air high above the lodge Vanzanth had

visualised, and signalled the others dragons to stand by while they assessed the situation.

T'kamen shared the use of his dragon's long sight again. The scene refracted a hundred times in Epherineth's faceted eyes showed one of the sprawling Kellad lodges, built up against the side of a cliff, surrounded on all the other sides by burning trees. Men and women worked feverishly to keep the one narrow corridor of escape open, wielding burlap sacks in a desperate attempt to smother the spot fires and sparks that leapt ahead of the encroaching flames. The frightened faces of more women and children that showed at the upper windows of the lodge made T'kamen curse under his breath: what kind of fool took refuge in a wooden building when fire burned all around?

We have to get those people out, he told his riders, through Epherineth. The bronze rider took a coil of rope from Epherineth's harness and started to knot a safety rig at one end.

The sweep of bronze wings past them almost yanked the rope out of T'kamen's hands. "What...?"

Peteorth, no! Epherineth bellowed.

Fr'ton's bronze checked his rapid descent towards the lodge, bugling uncertainly to Epherineth, but the damage was already done. The wind of the smaller bronze's great wings as he fought to hold position above the skeletons of blazing trees fanned the flames. The burning trunks of the trees directly beneath Peteorth glowed with a blinding new intensity, and the downdraft of the bronze's wingbeats was enough to topple one trunk, already little more than charcoal wrapped in fire, directly onto the lodge, and another across the slender escape route that the holders had been working so hard to keep clear.

Horrified by the fire that now licked hungrily along the eaves of the wooden hold, and by the other bronze rider's incredible stupidity at letting his dragon get so close, T'kamen roared, *Fr'ton, get away from there!*

Peteorth vanished abruptly *between*, but T'kamen could spare neither the time nor the patience to see the bronze reappear. Fr'ton's idiocy had made the situation much worse. As he tested the knots on the harness he had rigged, he forced himself to be calm. *L'stev, what's your estimate of that cliff?*

The gruff voice of the brown rider's dragon came back. *Sixty, seventy feet.*

T'kamen nodded: his rope was long enough. *Land on the edge. A'len, T'rello, you too. We'll have to scale down and bring them up that way.*

The four dragons alighted on the edge of the escarpment, where the trees were sparse. As T'kamen scrambled down from his bronze's neck to secure the end

of his rope to one of the thick, stunted scrub bushes, he glanced out across the lower slopes of Kellad and felt sick. The fire stretched for miles, and smoke billowed on the hot winds that preceded it. Twenty dragons weren't going to make much difference.

L'stev came along the line from Vanzanth with his face protected by the bandanna he usually wore on his head and long ratty strands of greying dark hair whipping behind him. "I'll watch your rope, Kamen. A'len's looking after T'rello."

T'kamen nodded and ran the climbing rope through the rings on his riding belt. It had been a long time since he'd done any cliff work, but all Madellon weyrlings trained for emergency situations. "I swear I'll flay Fr'ton alive when we get back to the Weyr."

"He's up there now," said L'stev, jerking his head skywards.

T'kamen shook his head. "Put him on watch back at the Hold. V'gyat has more sense; send him to help C'mine. Epherineth, take up the slack here and be ready to pull back up when I tell you."

L'stev checked to see that the harness was secure, then clapped T'kamen on the shoulder. "Good luck."

The bronze rider nodded, and eased backwards, off the edge of the cliff.



The excitement of the rescue mission had faded in the heat, and most of the Weyr had retreated back under cover, to escape the afternoon sun. It was as if all the energy had been sucked out of Weyrfolk and dragons alike, drained by the frenzy of activity surrounding the departure of T'kamen's Wing. Dragons slept or sunned: even Shimpath was sprawled fast asleep on her ledge. Up on the Rim, an irate Sejanth had replaced Epherineth on watch duty.

Sarenya had ordered her apprentices to strip out of their usual protective working clothes. The job of filling up the water troughs in each pen was hot and heavy enough work without them, and few beasts had the energy to be dangerous. The journeyman emptied her bucket into a trough and pushed back the strands of hair straggling free from her braid before starting back towards the lake.

A glowing blur of green arrowed across the Bowl, shattering the languid stillness, and Sarenya paused by the edge of the lake. Indioth screamed out a raucous challenge to the males of the Weyr, and suddenly half a dozen blues and browns were awake and alert and crouching around the green, ready to give chase.

The low-level agitation that Indioth had been broadcasting all day, obvious even to Sarenya's limited senses, turned suddenly into a powerful wash of lust/desire

that briefly fogged the journeyman's mind, and without any warning she was struck by an almost painful need to be with T'kamen.

Sarenya took a step back, reeling from the powerful effects of Indioth's mating lust. It was hardly the first green flight she had ever witnessed, but the intensity of the broadcast staggered Sarenya. Perhaps it was because she knew the green's rider so well. Or perhaps it was because, having resented the memory of her time with T'kamen for so long, she was finally coming to cherish it instead.

"Poor Mine," she said aloud, trying in vain to take her mind off Epherineth's rider. The journeyman scanned the waiting males, recognising several: Kimdanth, Gresath, Ivorth, all dragons with riders friendly to C'los. She wondered if any of their riders coveted the green rider, with C'mine out of the running.

Indioth hurled herself aloft and was half the length of the Bowl away before the first of the males had even taken off. Sarenya smiled sadly to herself: whoever won would have a thankless task afterwards. For all their differences, C'los and C'mine were as close a partnership as Sarenya had ever known. She doubted that C'los would be gracious about C'mine's absence.

As the dragons vanished into the distance, and across the Bowl their riders staggered towards C'los' weyr, another blue appeared in the sky over the Star Stones. For a moment Sarenya thought it was Darshanth, but the dragon was slightly larger than C'mine's blue, and slightly paler in hue. Tarnish flitted to her shoulder, chirping curiously, and then provided an image of the Wing T'kamen had taken *between* to Kellad.

The blue called out a query to Sejanth, but the bronze roared what could only have been a negative almost immediately. The smaller dragon backed off, his voice simultaneously apologetic and pleading, but Sejanth only bellowed with more force.

Sarenya watched, perplexed, as the blue warbled unhappily and then disappeared. She couldn't remember ever having seen discord of that nature between two dragons, nor a plaintive request so vehemently denied. Even judging Sejanth by D'feng's nature, Sarenya was surprised that the bronze had responded so angrily. L'dro's right-hand man didn't strike her as particularly belligerent.

The journeyman shrugged mentally and picked up her bucket again, wondering who would win Indioth's flight, and how much she could tease C'los about it afterwards, when C'mine was back.



T'kamen couldn't be sure if the intense heat on his back was coming from the sun above or the flames below or both, but as he

hung from the side of the cliff in full riding leathers, he could feel it sweating all the strength from his body.

The bronze rider made himself focus, touching the solid reassurance of Epherineth's mind to steady himself through the pounding in his head and the slickness of his hands inside his gloves, and let the rope run through the rings on his belt another six feet or so. The cliff face was rough, punctuated by scrubby bushes that meant scaling down was not as easy as T'kamen had initially hoped. He braced himself against the coarse stone for a moment to snap off a branch that was tangling his rope, and spared a glance down at the flat roof of the lodge thirty feet below.

The fire had spread along one side of the building, licking hungrily along the debris-clogged gutters, but the logs themselves were slow to catch. The lodge was structurally sound, for now, but once the blaze got into the pitchy boards of the roof it would spread the length and breadth of the building in seconds. T'kamen didn't like to think how many people he and T'rello would need to get up the cliff to safety before the whole lodge went up in flames.

He looked up at the young rider, twenty feet across from him and ten feet higher, and called, "You all right, T'rello?"

"Yes sir," the other bronze rider called back. "A little hot."

T'kamen kicked at a protruding shrub just below him, breaking off the brittle limbs that would slow his progress. "It's going to get hotter before the end of it. Go steady, you're almost past the worst."

As he spoke, T'kamen felt the profile of the cliff curving inwards below him, and he let his rope out more rapidly. The overhang was slight, but as he descended the last few feet towards the roof of the lodge he recognised why it had been built here: the cliff afforded the wooden hold symbolic protection from the skies. T'kamen supposed that the fear of Thread was instinctive in even these forest-dwelling people.

The feel of boards under his feet was only momentarily reassuring. T'kamen unclipped himself from the rope and left it hanging. He pulled down his flying goggles to wipe away the sweat that was fogging them. *I'm down, Epherineth. Tell L'stev to be ready.*

A flight of steps ran up to the roof from the ground below – mercifully, at the end furthest from the fire. T'kamen started down them, and then through the drifting smoke and ash he saw the people of the lodge, huddled together fearfully in the ever-shrinking clearing, surrounded by the encroaching flames. "Over here!"

The terrified holders turned their eyes upwards, and a look of disbelief mingled with relief and desperation spread through the group. "Dragonrider!" one of the men roared.

“Get your people up on the roof,” T’kamen called down.

The dozen holders, mostly women and children, and only three men, swarmed up the steps towards the roof. T’kamen seized the arm of the man who had spoken as he hurried past. “Where are the rest? The men who were fighting the fire?”

The holder shook his head. “Escaped ahead of the fire, lost...I don’t know, I don’t care!” There was a note of hysteria in his voice. “You have to get us out of here!

The very idea of so many lives potentially lost staggered T’kamen, but when he heard T’rello’s raised voice a more immediate problem became apparent. “Wait, you have to get back, you can’t all go up at once!”

The frightened holders were crowding around the ropes, actually fighting amongst themselves to be the first up. One man pushed a woman aside in order to secure his control of the only escape route, and T’kamen’s temper flared. “That’s enough! Get away from there, or by Faranth I’ll throw you to the fire myself!”

The pandemonium ceased momentarily. T’kamen strode in amongst the holders, yanking the rope he had climbed down out of the covetous grasp of the man who had seized it. “All right, young ones first, you and you.” He pointed out a boy and a girl, neither more than ten Turns old, their eyes huge and terrified in their soot-smearred faces. “T’rello, rig the lad up.” As he spoke T’kamen was already tightening the safety harness he had tied at the end of the rope around the girl with quick, sure movements. When he was satisfied he gripped the shaking child firmly by the shoulders. “Kiddo, you’re going to be fine. My dragon will pull you up, but you have to keep yourself from knocking into the cliff. Can you do that?”

The girl nodded miserably, and T’kamen squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. “Brave girl.” *Epherineth, be careful, this first one’s a child.*

The bronze rider watched with concern at first as the rope hauled the little girl up the cliff at a considerable speed, but the child proved tougher than she looked, pushing herself away from the rock face with hands and feet. T’kamen looked across to see how T’rello was doing, and was satisfied to see the other bronze rider reassuring the young lad he had secured to the rope. Clad in full riding gear, T’rello’s youth was disguised: his behaviour was a credit to his dragon and his Weyr.

We have her, Epherineth reported from above, and a moment later the rope came snaking down the cliff again.

“You’re next,” T’kamen told one of the women, letting out the knots on the harness.

“What about me?” demanded the man who had been pushing women aside.

The bronze rider spared him the shortest of scathing glances. "You're last."



"On three...one, two, *three!*"

C'mine and Ogharn heaved the unconscious form of another fallen worker onto a litter, then signalled the two riders serving as stretcher-bearers to carry him away. C'mine paused to retie the bandanna around his face. *Tell B'frea and J'kel we need them back from the Hold the moment they've taken in those last two men, Darshanth: they're dropping faster than we can pull them out.*

The blue rider dragged a hand across his brow, not seeing the ashy sweat that came away on his sleeve. Behind him, men fought to hold back the fire long enough for the dragons to clear the ground ahead. Ten blues and greens, ranging out in a line running parallel to the fire, worked tirelessly: felling trees, dragging away the trunks, and digging with incredible speed and power to clear the layer of flammable needles and leaf litter on the ground. Where they had been, a swathe of bare earth, dotted with occasional stumps, was all that remained: a firebreak that had already saved one dwelling from the blaze. Overhead, three more dragons hauled water from the river, putting out spot fires before they could burn out of hand and wetting down the combustible material that had yet to be cleared by the dragons on the ground. The last two dragons worked to airlift injured and exhausted men from the scene. There just weren't enough of them. C'mine had sent G'pellas and Derthauth back to the Weyr for reinforcements, but extra dragons had been denied.

C'mine stood still for a moment, concentrating exclusively on his link with Darshanth. His blue was not naturally a leader, no more so than C'mine himself, but since T'kamen and Epherineth had put them in charge, both rider and dragon had been forced to adapt. Darshanth had risen magnificently to the occasion, directing and encouraging the others, and never flagging himself. The blue's normally bright hide had turned a ghastly shade of grey from the ash, but he seemed indefatigable. C'mine expressed all the pride and praise and gratitude he felt for his dragon without words, drawing on Darshanth's strength to supplement his own.

Ogharn strode out of the haze with a waterskin. "Here, rider."

C'mine accepted the flask gratefully and took a long drink. In the face of a common enemy his old enmity with the Kellad forester was forgotten. Whatever Ogharn's past offences, he had worked fearlessly and selflessly beside C'mine at the very edge of the blaze. They helped where they could, evacuating men who had

succumbed to the heat and smoke, beating back the flames, offering encouragement to foresters fearing for their lives and homes. The broader issue of what the fire would do to Kellad's economy could not have been further from C'mine's mind: the blue rider had focused completely on the survival of these people and their dwellings from one moment to the next.

A change in the wind alerted C'mine to a new danger even before a distant shout for help further down the line spurred him and Ogharn into motion. Rider and holder sprinted towards the source of the cry, their breathing harsh and ragged and their movements jerky with weariness.

The wind had changed direction and one powerful gust had blown the leading edge of the blaze north-east, forcing the flames onto the men trying to quell them. Through the brightly-dancing tongues of fire C'mine could see the outlines of men searching in vain for a way out of the ring of flame coming towards them from all directions. *Darshanth! We need some water here right now!*

Siviath and Izalonth are on their way back to refill now. They'll be there as soon as they can.

Not soon enough! The blue rider caught sight of a glimmer of silver just beyond the flames. "Ogharn, is that the river?"

The holder nodded, his bloodshot eyes stark with horror. "Burning or drowning; it's no choice."

"*Between* with that!" And shielding his face with one arm, C'mine dashed into the flames.

It was further than he had thought, and the heat was unbearable. The blue rider felt his riding leathers catch fire, and pain streaked through every nerve in his body, but he clamped down on it with the old instinct of a rider blocking discomfort from his dragon. He refused to feel the shocking agony, closed his eyes to deny the incandescent flames that surrounded him, ignored the crackle and roar, and then finally he was through. Almost before he could throw himself to the ground there were men around him, pushing him down and beating out the flames with sacks or clothes or their bare hands. An instant later, with a bellowed curse, Ogharn staggered heavily through the blaze, also on fire.

"You're crazy!" one of the men who had helped save C'mine cried as the others urged Ogharn to drop and roll. "Do you *want* to die?"

The blue rider pulled himself to his feet, hurting, and trying to keep the pain from Darshanth. "There's two ways out of here," he said raggedly, and then coughed. His bandanna was gone, and every breath sucked smoke into his lungs. It hurt. "Through the flames, or in the river."

There were six men in the clearing, or maybe twelve: C'mine couldn't tell, his vision was blurring so much, but as their leader glanced back over his shoulder at the river, visible through the thin sheet of flame that had licked along the dry bushes on its bank, the blue rider could see the fear. "I can't swim in that!"

"Yes you can," the blue rider said doggedly. "Dragons are on their way."

"Shards, rider! You're half burnt to death, and we don't know how to swim!"

C'mine concentrated hard, and then remembered: he himself hadn't learned to swim until Impressing Darshanth. The fast-flowing river would seem as deadly a force to these men as the fire. "You can take your chances in the water, or stay here and burn to death." His voice sounded slow, even to his own ears.

Mine?

The blue rider sent his dragon reassurance, but it was a feeble effort. His concentration was failing. He looked down at his hands and wondered what had happened to his gloves: there was little more on his hands than scraps of charred leather and ash. The pain came and went. "You have to get in the water," he said carefully, trying not to slur the words. His head felt thick and heavy: maybe that was affecting his hearing.

C'mine?

"Shard it, does anyone have any numbweed?"

C'mine heard Darshanth's tremulous query, and the vehement mutter of the forester who had spoken. "It's all right, I'm all right," he said aloud to both, and stumbled towards the river, sinking to a crouch on the bank, just inside the wall of fire. Flakes of blackened leather showered onto the ground from his clothes.

It seemed like an age before the first of the men screwed up his courage, and the fire closed in with every passing moment. One of the holders made a desperate charge through the fire, splashing into the river. Water splattered on the burning bank, damping the flames just enough for C'mine to see the speed of the current. The water flowed white and fast and cool. "Go on," he said thickly. "Dragons'll be here soon."

C'mine, I'm coming.

One by one the foresters dived through the fire into the river. The current swept them away in moments, but a distant bugle overhead reassured C'mine that they would be all right. The blue rider dragged himself painfully to his feet, preparing to jump through himself.

"...Rider?"

The voice was weak, but C'mine turned around. Ogharn was still on the ground, an appalling sight: his clothes charred to threads, his flesh burnt red and black. The fire pressed close on all sides now. "How can you...move...like that..."

C'mine crouched by the forester and grabbed his arm, to pull him up, but Ogharn groaned with the pain. "Can't swim...can't move...go, go..."

"You're coming with me if I have to drag you, Ogharn," C'mine rasped.

The forester shook his head, his eyes closing. "Go...jump...in the river...Cairmine..."

A sapling crashed down across what little of the clearing was left, exploding into embers. The blue rider seized Ogharn's arm again and crawled towards the river, dragging the holder's motionless form with him, but the bank seemed miles away, the flames and smoke thicker than ever. Fear broke through the shock that had been dulling C'mine's perceptions. This time there was no way out.

C'MINE!

Darshanth plummeted out of the sky, his eyes yellow and white with terror, his wings folded tight to his back so as not to impede his impossible nosedive. The blue screamed as he crashed through the canopies of burning trees, and C'mine could do nothing but close his eyes as his dragon dropped towards him on a collision course.

At the last possible instant, Darshanth's powerful talons snatched C'mine off the ground, and they went *between*.