



CHAPTER ELEVEN



When the climbing rope slithered back down the cliff for the last time, T'kamen was quick to secure himself to it, pulling the knots tight on the rings of his riding belt. It had taken much longer to get twelve frightened holders up the cliff than it should have, what with hysterical women, ropes snagging on bushes, and the necessity of T'rello's line being completely replaced when a weakness had developed in it. All the while the flames had burned closer and hotter, spreading in fits and starts across the roof. By the time T'kamen had sent the last holder up his rope, and T'rello up his own, his situation had become moderately uncomfortable.

T'kamen checked a final time to see that the line was secure. *All right, Epherineth.*

The bronze rider gripped the rope above his head as his dragon started to pull in the line, pushing off against the cliff face every few moments. He was relieved that he and T'rello had succeeded in getting the forest holders to safety without significant incident, but now that the immediate crisis had been resolved his thoughts turned to the wider issue. *Any word from Darshanth?*

He sent Derthauth back to the Weyr for help. Sejanth refused permission for any more dragons to come.

T'kamen swore. *D'feng. I'll kill him.*

You said you would kill Peteorth's rider, too, Epherineth reminded him ironically.

I know I did. Easy now, let me...

The bronze rider broke off as a final tug hauled him over the edge of the cliff. Epherineth's great forepaw swiped out to scoop him in, and the bronze rumbled with something like relief. *I was worried.*

T'kamen thumped his dragon's forearm with a mixture of annoyance and affection. *Not a scratch on me, only the bruises you just made.*

Epherineth blew out a breath that ruffled T'kamen's hair..

L'stev walked around the bronze's forearm. "A'len's taken most of them..." The brown rider looked askance at T'kamen for a moment, then continued, "...*between* to the Hold; T'rello's just taking the last two now. You all right?"

T'kamen picked himself up and stepped out of the protective clasp of his dragon's claws. "Fine. You heard C'mine sent for more help?"

The brown rider nodded and tossed T'kamen the other end of the rope that was still secured to his belt. "D'feng would deny a blue, though. Sejanth couldn't have intimidated Vanzanth like that. Do you want us to go?"

"I want to make a pass over the fireline and see how they're doing before I take that step." T'kamen rapidly coiled the rope and lashed it to his dragon's harness, then swung up to Epherineth's neck.

The bronze launched off the edge of the cliff when T'kamen was in place, and banked north and east over the devastation left by the blaze. T'kamen couldn't begin to imagine how many acres of land and thousands of trees had been incinerated. He glanced back to see Vanzanth get airborne, and bade Epherineth wait for the smaller dragon to catch up.

The wind has changed, Epherineth remarked suddenly.

T'kamen glanced across the expanse of his dragon's pinions to see how the bronze had altered their spread to accommodate the change. *What direction?*

From the south-west. It smells like....

Then Epherineth roared, and Vanzanth behind him too, and T'kamen grabbed the straps instinctively as his dragon's forward motion halted between one moment and the next. The shock and fear the bronze rider felt through his dragon was staggering, and yet it was not, could not be, Epherineth's own. *What is it?*

Darshanth is in pain! His rider too – he has him – Darshanth goes between...

T'kamen's grip clenched spasmodically on the riding harness, and his stomach knotted into a mass of sick fear as he dreaded the awful cry that would surely mark the death of another dragon. He felt Epherineth's stillness, every muscle of the bronze's body tensed in terrible anticipation, and hardly dared ask.

Epherineth?

Then they were abruptly *between*, but in the total absence of physical sensation T'kamen could still feel his dragon's jubilation. *They live!*

They remained *between* for what seemed like an age, long enough for the bronze rider to wonder at the extent of Epherineth's initiative, and then the dragon erupted into the air above Kellad Hold, calling out to his brother. *Darshanth, we hear you, we're here!*

Far above, dull blue against the suddenly ominous sky, Darshanth struggled to control a dive he must have begun long before his jump *between*. Borrowing the use of Epherineth's eyes without even thinking, T'kamen saw the blue dragon's unorthodox flight profile, and felt his heart lurch. Darshanth grasped C'mine in his forepaws, holding his rider desperately close to his body as he fought to open his wings against his enormous downwards velocity.

Epherineth jumped *between* again, this time so briefly that T'kamen was barely aware of the darkness before they were out, emerging this time to flank the stricken blue, matching his angle and speed. Vanzanth appeared on Darshanth's off side, bugling encouragement to the shocked and frightened dragon.

Maybe it was the presence of the other dragons, or maybe Darshanth finally found the strength himself, but the blue's velocity slowed enough for him to spread his wings, catch the air, and pull up from his headlong descent. Epherineth roared and angled away from the smaller dragon's new flight path, gliding towards the courtyard of the Hold below. *Darshanth is hurt and his rider is worse.*

What in Faranth's name happened?

Fire.

T'kamen leaned back against Epherineth's steep descent, feeling like he had aged ten Turns in five minutes. *Shard it, Epherineth. Shard it all between, we nearly lost them.*

We may still, Epherineth replied, his tone one of such blunt authority that T'kamen felt momentarily like an errant weyrling, but the effect was necessary. *Egrath asks for instructions.*

The bronze rider put his fear and concern for C'mine aside, concentrating on the greater responsibility of his role as leader. *They're without a commander now. We should go.*

Epherineth's response was instant. *Darshanth needs us. Vanzanth will go.*

Relieved that his dragon's command decision concurred with his own, T'kamen signalled an affirmative to L'stev to confirm his mission. *Tell him I want a running commentary.* Another thought occurred to T'kamen. *Send T'rello back to the Weyr to get the dragon-healers, Darshanth might need them.*

Epherineth swung his head over to bark an order at Santinoth, perching next to Peteorth on the fire-heights of Kellad. *I have. Vanzanth goes.* The last was spoken as L'stev's brown vanished *between*.

T'kamen put a hand on Epherineth's neck, as much to steady himself as to reassure his entirely independent and capable dragon. *Take us down.*



As Sarenya sat down at one of the long trestle tables that had been moved out into the Bowl, Sleek appeared from nowhere to dive-bomb the plate she had just filled.

“Get out of it!” the journeyman told her blue irritably, waving the fire-lizard away. “Tarnish!”

Her bronze lizard, perched in his normal place on her shoulder, whistled a sharp rebuke at his smaller sibling, but there was something distracted about Tarnish's demeanour. The bronze would usually have predicted Sleek's misbehaviour before it had begun.

Sarenya tossed Sleek a strip of meat to keep him quiet, then offered Tarnish another piece, stroking the little fellow's back as he accepted it with a soft chirp. “What is it, my lad? What's bothering you?”

Tarnish cocked his triangular head, gripping his scrap of meat in one forepaw. Sleek fluttered over to land on the back of Sarenya's chair, his eyes fixed on the forgotten treat in his brother's grasp. “Don't be greedy, Sleek,” Sarenya told the blue. She transferred Tarnish from her shoulder to her forearm so she could look at him properly.

Across the table, the dragonless man, Chuvone, was watching Sleek with hooded eyes. Sarenya glanced up at him with a wry smile. “I don't know what's got into them today.”

“It's not as if a fire-lizard has the sense to tell you,” Chuvone replied.

Overhead, a dragon appeared from *between*, bugling urgently. People jumped up from their places, voicing oaths as the bronze veered low above them. Sarenya tracked him across the sky, looking for Epherineth's identifying marks, but this dragon was more bulky than T'kamen's bronze, his hide brighter in hue.

“Santinoth,” said a green rider Sarenya didn't know. “He's calling for the dragon-healers.”

“Darshanth's been hurt!” another rider exclaimed.

Sick worry erupted in the pit of Sarenya's stomach. “What about C'mine, is C'mine all right?” she asked, but every rider seemed to be talking to his dragon. At the head table, the Weyrwoman had come to her feet, her expression stricken.

Sarenya pushed back her chair, dislodging both her fire-lizards, and started towards where Santinoth was landing, first at a quick walk and then at a run. All over the Bowl, dragons were bugling to each other, their concern at their sibling's distress evident in the glints of yellow in their eyes.

Santinoth's young rider was already being beleaguered from all directions by the time Sarenya got there. "C'mine was injured and Darshanth got hurt saving him," T'rello was explaining. "The Master Healer at Kellad is seeing to Mine, but Darshanth needs attention too."

L'dro was one of those crowding around the bronze, and the Weyrleader's expression was livid. "The careless idiot! How under the Red Star did he manage to put his dragon in danger!"

T'rello's eyes flashed with anger. "With respect, *sir*, he was saving men's lives!"

"You're out of line, rider!" L'dro snapped.

Santinoth growled, a deep and menacing sound, and turned his head towards the Weyrleader with eyes turning orange. Sarenya stepped back instinctively from the angry dragon, and almost collided with the Weyr's Master Dragon-healer. "Shards, Master Vhion, my apologies..."

"Not necessary, journeyman." The slightly rotund Master raised his voice. "Clear the way, here. Weyrleader, stand back." Vhion gestured to his assistants, struggling across the Bowl laden down with supplies, to hurry, and squinted up at T'rello. "You'll take us direct to Kellad, bronze rider?"

"Of course, sir," said T'rello, but the young rider was frowning down at his dragon.

"Well, T'rello, give me a hand up, we don't have all day!"

The bronze rider shook his head in visible confusion. "Sir, I'm sorry, but...Santinoth says he won't leave!"

"Shards of the Egg!" Vhion spun around and pointed at a rider standing nearby with her dragon. "You, green rider, take us to Kellad!"

The green rider blinked in surprise, then came to attention. "Right away, Master!"

As the Dragon-healer hastened towards the green, Sarenya raised a confused gaze to T'rello. What was wrong with the bronze rider? T'kamen had such a high opinion of the young man: what had caused this moment of unreliability when he was most needed?

Santinoth growled again, his voice rolling like thunder, and arched his neck threateningly. L'dro took several paces backwards from the young bronze, his

expression suddenly blank, and then without warning he turned and ran towards the beast pens.

“Shards! T’rello exclaimed, his voice full of puzzlement. “Santinoth, you want to blood?”

The young dragonrider’s words hung in the air for a moment, and then the mood of anxiety in the Weyr shifted palpably. Sarenya felt it, perhaps through her fire-lizards or perhaps not: a thrum of anticipation and excitement on a grand scale, the eager awe of lesser dragons, and an enormously powerful masculine need to prove dominance.

A bronze dragon launched himself down amongst the sluggish beasts in one of the stock pens; he was joined rapidly by a second and third, then three more. With a bestial roar, a seventh great male landed among the others to kill and blood, and in recognising the massive amber-eyed bronze as Pierdeth, Sarenya was jolted out of her fascinated reverie to face the facts.

Sarenya hadn’t lived with her own bronze lizard for five Turns without learning a thing or two about his mating patterns. The bronzes always knew first. Indeed: Tarnish’s odd mood suggested that even he, a mere fire-lizard, had been peripherally aware of the imminence of a dragon queen’s flight.

Madellon’s bronzes were blooding their kills. Soon, very soon, Shimpath would awaken, blood, and rise, and the mating flight every dragonrider in the Weyr had been anticipating for months would be underway.

And T’kamen wouldn’t be there.

“T’rello!” Sarenya wasn’t aware she had even moved until she found herself standing close to the agitated Santinoth, calling up to his rider. “T’rello, we have to call T’kamen back!”

“What?” The young rider slid down his dragon’s side, stripping off the riding harness with awkward, jerky motions. His leathers were smeared with soot, he stank of smoke, and when he glanced at her his eyes behind his riding goggles were oddly glazed. “I can’t, we’re too...” T’rello shook his head, clearly already affected by his dragon’s growing lust.

Sarenya backed away hurriedly as the powerful young bronze prepared to take off. “Shard it!”

The Beastcrafter looked around for someone else she knew was supporting T’kamen’s bid for the Weyrleadership, but riders already seemed to be scarce, and those she knew even more so. T’rello was useless, C’los would still be involved in the aftermath of his own dragon’s mating, and T’kamen had taken the rest of his closest supporters with him to Kellad.

Sarenya's desperate gaze fell upon Chuvone. The dragonless man was staring across at Shimpath's ledge, where the queen still slept, oblivious for now to the ferocity of her suitors. "Chuvone!"

The gaunt-faced former rider, little older than Sarenya herself, turned his dead gaze upon her. "What do you want?"

"We have to get word to T'kamen at Kellad!"

A flicker of self-loathing crossed Chuvone's face, and he spread his hands, savagely mocking. "I can't help you. I don't have a dragon."

Sarenya took a deep breath. "I know, I'm sorry, but you have to know a rider who'll send for Kamen."

Chuvone laughed bitterly. "And if I did, why would I?"

The journeyman looked at the former blue rider uncomprehendingly. "You support Kamen...don't you?"

"Let me explain it to you, my journeyman Beastcrafter." There was something very wrong in Chuvone's eyes as he spoke. "Thirteen Turns ago I learned what happens to wingriders who think they should have a say in the chain of command."

Sarenya eyed the dragonless man warily. "I don't understand."

"I disobeyed L'dro once, and lost Gommeshath!" Chuvone snarled. "What in the name of his sweet egg makes you think I'd ever make that mistake again?"

The dragonless man suddenly began to sob, and Sarenya stepped away from him, alarmed. How long had Chuvone been lying about his allegiance to T'kamen? Was the dragonless man a traitor to the campaign, or was he still so mentally scarred by the loss of his dragon that he simply didn't know what he thought? Either way, he was of no more use to Sarenya than T'rello, and time was running short.

Sarenya cursed her situation, cursed the lack of a dragon that made her so useless, cursed the terrible misfortune that C'mine was injured and T'kamen absent for this most pivotal event. She *had* to get a message to Kellad before it was too late.

Tarnish appeared from *between* directly overhead, warbling his willingness to help, and the journeyman swore aloud at her stupidity. "Sear it to ash! Come here, my boy!" Fumbling for writing materials in her belt pouch, Sarenya scrawled a brief message in charcoal on a thin slip of hide. *T'kamen, bronzes blood! S.* She had nothing with which to tie the message to her lizard's hind leg, so she bade the little bronze grip the thin roll of hide tightly in his claws.

As Sarenya prepared her fire-lizard to deliver the message, uncertainty suddenly hit her. Was this the right thing to do?

The journeyman looked up at Shimpath, beginning to stir restlessly in her sleep: the queen that could have been hers. But for Valonna... Sarenya clamped down on the old indignation, but the bitterness was fresh. Valonna had Impressed Shimpath, the queen that could have been Sarenya's. She had won over C'mine, the friend that Sarenya valued above all others. Now, Valonna stood to win T'kamen, too: the man Sarenya had loved and lost and wanted back, and now stood to lose again – but only if she acted now.

If she helped T'kamen to win the Weyrleadership, she would lose him – not only to the rider of Madellon's only queen dragon, but to the enormous gulf that would once more open between their ranks. If she didn't, Pierdeth would surely win Shimpath's flight, L'dro would remain Weyrleader, and conditions for the bulk of Madellon's riders would stay the same, but she would have a chance to rediscover the old passion she and T'kamen had once shared, on an equal footing.

Tarnish squirmed in Sarenya's grasp as she struggled with the decision, torn between her heart and her mind. Then Sleek appeared from somewhere, projecting his excitement, and suddenly the blue fire-lizard made her think of another blue, and of his most gentle rider.

"We need a new Weyrleader," C'mine had said seriously. *"Can you think of anyone better than Kamen?"*

Sarenya swallowed back the tears, not sure if they were for C'mine or T'kamen, or both. "Take it to Kellad, Tarnish," she whispered to the little bronze, picturing Epherineth on the heights of the Hold. "Take it to him."

She let him go.

Tarnish went *between*.



Fr'ton and Peteorth were still standing watch on the fire-heights of Kellad Hold when a fire-lizard winked in, dropped the message he was carrying onto the rider of the bronze he had been sent to find, and vanished again.

"Ow!" Fr'ton exclaimed, as something bounced off his head.

What is it? Peteorth asked.

The blonde bronze rider rubbed his head as he bent down to pick up what had dropped on him. "I don't know..."



T'kamen gritted his teeth against Darshanth's whimpers of pain and fear as he dismounted from Epherineth. The sound of any

dragon in distress cut right through him, but Darshanth's perhaps more so than any save that of his own bronze. C'mine's dragon was a hideous shade of grey from more than just soot. The hide of his legs and underside was scorched and blistered, oozing greenish fluid. The blue dragon's eyes were ashen with pain, but he still held the motionless form of his rider in the protective circle of his forepaws, allowing none near him. The man in Healer colours who had hurried out from the Hold was keeping a wary distance from the wounded dragon.

"Scorch it," T'kamen muttered. "Darshanth! Darshanth, listen to me!"

The blue's head whipped around, and he half-barked, half-choked an irrational warning, baring his great teeth, but T'kamen stood his ground and pulled down his flying goggles. "Darshanth, it's me, T'kamen. Let us help you."

He's my rider, I won't let him go, I can't!

The hysteria in the blue's voice made T'kamen swear under his breath.

Epherineth, talk to him!

The bronze lumbered closer, his movement restricted by the confines of the courtyard, and stretched out his neck to his smaller brother. *Darshanth, my rider speaks the truth, you must let the healer help your rider.*

I can't!

You must!

T'kamen felt the reluctance with which Epherineth exercised his authority over the smaller dragon, and Darshanth's piteous wail made him wince, but then the blue unclasped his claws from around C'mine and collapsed, defeated. *Help him, please help him.*

T'kamen was running even as he called out to Kellad's Healer. "Master! The dragon won't hurt you now."

"Bring numbweed for the dragon!" the Master Healer bellowed as he hastened to C'mine's side. "Shells and shards of shells..."

T'kamen made himself look down at his friend, and almost had to look away again. Under the scorched remains of his wherhides, C'mine was horribly injured. Patches of sticky red where skin should have been marked the worst of his burns, and the deep puncture wounds in his shoulders and back where Darshanth's desperate talons had penetrated the flesh bled freely. Dirt and soot had smeared into the burns and cuts. The riding goggles still in place had protected the blue rider's eyes, but other than Darshanth there was little to suggested C'mine was still alive.

“His pulse is weak but steady, and he’s breathing, but we have to stabilise his condition.” The healer motioned sharply to two men standing by with a stretcher. “Let’s get him to the infirmary.”

“You can’t take him out of his dragon’s sight,” T’kamen warned him. “Darshanth will berserk if you try to take him away.”

The Master Healer frowned. “Erect a pavilion here,” he told the stretcher-bearers. “I’ll need the burns kit from the infirmary.”

“What can I do?” T’kamen asked.

“Help the dragon,” the Healer told him. “We’ll do what we can with his rider.”

Four men set down a massive barrel beside Darshanth, and one of them levered off the lid with a crowbar. T’kamen went over to inspect the pale green substance inside. He would have preferred a thinner salve to treat Darshanth’s burns, and there were no brushes designed to apply it quickly to a beast the size of a dragon, but it would have to do. *Tell Darshanth we’re going to help him*, he told his dragon.

T’kamen scooped up a handful of numbweed, knowing it would take some time to penetrate through the leather of his gloves, and smeared it across the blistered hide of Darshanth’s belly. The blue dragon flinched at the contact, then stood still, shivering.

He says it hurts less, Epherineth reported.

T’kamen gestured to the men who had brought the cask of salve. “Here, you can help. Just get the stuff on him wherever it looks like he’s burned.”

“Can we help?”

The bronze rider had not been aware of the audience of holders, too focused on C’mine’s plight, but now he regarded the crowd as a commodity. “The faster we get him comfortable, the easier it will be. But for Faranth’s sake, be careful.”

Holders came forward, some with more trepidation than others as they eyed the injured dragon. T’kamen asked Epherineth to steady the blue, in case the swarm of holders frightened the tortured dragon, then set to the work of deadening Darshanth’s pain in earnest.

The bronze rider left the broad expanses of Darshanth’s belly and chest to the inexperienced holders, and tackled the more awkward areas himself. *Ask him to lift his left forepaw?*

Epherineth relayed the message, and Darshanth gingerly lifted the limb. “Thank you,” T’kamen told the blue, and started spreading numbweed over Darshanth’s burnt paw, in between each claw, around talons as long as T’kamen’s hand.

On the heights, Peteorth bugled a greeting. *What's he saying, Epherineth? Othanth brings the dragon-healers.*

T'kamen muttered thanks to Faranth as the green dragon landed nearby. Vhion and his team were far better qualified to treat Darshanth than he. His training in dragon first-aid went little further than an initial application of numbweed to ease the pain.

Master Vhion raced across the courtyard at a speed belying his portly frame, puffing, "What happened, T'kamen?"

T'kamen shook his head. "We're not totally sure – Epherineth and I caught up to him coming out of *between* in a nosedive."

The dragon-healer moved around to the forepaw not yet coated in numbweed, inspecting Darshanth's burns. "The damage to his hide will be painful, but not crippling. I'd rather you'd have had him douse himself in water, but you were right to get these people numbing him. His wings aren't injured?"

Ask him to open his wing, Epherineth?

A moment later the blue complied, spreading the translucent breadth of his right wing. Vhion made a rapid assessment, brushing ash from the blue's pinion, then shook his head. "They're intact. We'll need to get some aloe salve on his underside once he's numb, and somehow I'll need to contrive dressings to protect the burn until this ash has died down, but shock is the biggest danger right now. What's C'mine's condition?"

"Unconscious."

"Shards," Vhion muttered, and gestured that they should go and attend the wounded blue rider.

A canvas shelter had been contrived to shield C'mine from the worst of the ash in the air as well as from the watching eyes of the many holders in the courtyard. The Kellad healer glanced up as T'kamen and Vhion approached. "Keep back," he warned them curtly. "Conditions are bad enough without you stirring up more ash."

T'kamen set his jaw and made himself watch as the Master Healer stripped away the charred fragments of C'mine's leathers and swabbed his wounds with a briskness that made the bronze rider wince. It was just as well the blue rider was unconscious. Gauze pads had been placed over the wounds in C'mine's shoulders, and as fast as the healer cleaned the motionless blue rider's burns, his assistants salvaged and dressed them, but T'kamen felt sick, not only at the awful extent of his friend's injuries, but with the knowledge that he was to blame for them. He had let C'mine come. He had put him in charge. He should have known the blue rider was too selfless for his own good. C'mine's great heart made him a liability to himself in

so dangerous a situation, and T'kamen had put him in a position to risk his own safety. The bronze rider found he was clenching his fists to the point of pain, but he couldn't bring himself to relax.

T'kamen, you can't blame yourself.

I shouldn't have made him lead! T'kamen shook his head. *Shard it, he's only a blue rider!*

The bronze rumbled disagreement, making several nearby holders step back hurriedly. *Any dragon would be proud to call C'mine his rider.*

T'kamen sensed that Epherineth's fierce advocacy of C'mine was as much for Darshanth's comfort as his own, but it barely eased the bronze rider's sense of culpability. The contrast of C'mine's calm and compassionate personality to T'kamen's short temper, and indeed to C'los' erratic brilliance, sometimes made it easy to forget that the blue rider was the youngest of them all by a full Turn. Now, T'kamen felt keenly responsible for C'mine's injuries, not only as a rider under his command, but as a man the bronze rider had considered his brother for twenty Turns.

"T'kamen?"

The tentative query intruded on the bronze rider's focus, and T'kamen turned sharply to glare at the blonde man hovering behind him. He hadn't noticed Peteorth come down off the fire-heights. "What do you want, Fr'ton?"

"Well, this arrived," Fr'ton began, holding out a grubby strip of hide, "or actually it sort of...landed on me...Peteorth thinks it might have..."

Lacking the patience to listen to the other bronze rider ramble, T'kamen snatched the hide out of Fr'ton's hand and unfolded it.

"...been delivered by a fire-lizard," Fr'ton continued, "and I guess it's for you, but I didn't really understand..."

"*Bronzes blood'*," T'kamen murmured, his eyes tracing the hastily scribbled words, and a shock jolted through his body. Fr'ton was still talking, but T'kamen couldn't hear him for the sudden thunder of his own pulse, and the awareness of Epherineth reaching out to the distant Weyr with his mind.

Shimpath! the bronze hissed.

"Oh, Faranth," T'kamen said aloud, feeling Epherineth's mounting agitation channel into him through their abruptly heightened link. "Not now, why did she have to choose now..."

"Bronze rider?" Vhion asked, from beside him.

T'kamen tried to fix his eyes upon the dragon-healer, but Epherineth's awareness of the Madellon queen's imminent rising was demanding his attention, his focus, all of his mind. "The bronzes blood their kill at Madellon. Shimpath will rise..."

T'kamen! We have to go now!

Epherineth's mental roar was deafening. T'kamen stumbled back a pace, staggered, as his need to stay with C'mine warred with his dragon's urgency.

"Bronze rider. *Bronze rider!*"

A violent shake brought T'kamen out of the morass of crimson need and desire that was his dragon's mind. Vhion's grip on his shoulders was powerful, despite the dragon-healer's stature. "There's nothing you can do for C'mine," Vhion told him firmly. "We're doing everything we can. Take Epherineth and go."

"I can't leave him," the bronze rider said stubbornly, but he was losing his fight for control.

You must. Darshanth's voice penetrated weakly through the fierce hunger of Epherineth's consciousness. *You must, for C'mine. For all of us.*

The last of T'kamen's opposition to Epherineth's desire dissolved with the blue dragon's insistence. He was barely aware of the time it took to cross the courtyard to his own dragon, barely aware of mounting or securing the safety straps. Epherineth took off almost before T'kamen was in place.

There! The great bronze's cry was half mental, half animal, and he banked hard across the back of the Hold. The wind stung tears from T'kamen's unshielded eyes, but as his senses increasingly combined with Epherineth's, he became aware of his dragon's target.

The bronze dived towards the stampeding herd of beasts he had spied from the air. With no hint of his normal finesse, Epherineth clawed a cow to the ground. T'kamen held fast to the safety straps as his dragon hauled the herdbeast closer, and silenced its terrified screams with his jaws.

The taste of hot blood intoxicated the bronze rider. Barely aware of himself anymore, he drank and grew strong with his dragon as Epherineth tossed the limp body of his prey aside. The bronze tore off the head of his second victim and gulped down the gush of blood from its throat, glorying in the wild and primal energy it sent flowing through his own veins.

Primed and ready, Epherineth battered the second corpse aside. He leapt into the air, and the image he and T'kamen formed together as they went *between* was not of the peaceful Bowl of Madellon, but of the queen they knew was theirs, and of the many other bronzes who dared challenge their claim on her.



As a fiercely glowing Shimpath launched herself off her ledge to pounce on a terrified wherry hen, Sarenya scanned the sky in increasing desperation. Where was Epherineth?

Tarnish had returned shortly after she had sent him to Kellad, offering a vague image of dropping the message on the bronze on the fire-heights there, but the fire-lizard was too fascinated by Shimpath's imminent flight to be entirely coherent. Sarenya felt it too, the dragons' general broadcast amplified through her lizards. It was clear now why dragonriders had to live separately from holders: distraction on the scale of a queen's mating flight would have completely disrupted a working Hold. But the journeyman's growing fear that T'kamen was going to miss this most crucial of flights overrode even the building emotions of queen and bronzes.

The lesser dragons of Madellon watched avidly from their ledges, and their riders, obviously affected by Shimpath's mating lust to a far greater extent than any non-rider, stood transfixed in the Bowl. Sarenya scanned the bronzes waiting poised in a circle around the frenzied queen again, but there was no dragon there with the lean conformation of Epherineth, no hide gleaming with his unique colour.

Sarenya wouldn't even have noticed the pair of dragons gliding in over the south edge of the Rim but for the flash of familiar green she caught in the corner of her eye as Indioth and her victor, a blue smaller and less sleek than Darshanth, returned at last from their own mating. The green coasted towards her own weyr ledge, and turned a weary eye on the proceedings below, obviously too tired to react.

The journeyman made a dash for the cave. She hurried up the short flight of steps, giving thanks to Faranth that the ledge was so easily accessible. "Sorry Indioth, I really need to talk to Los," she panted to the green dragon, and without pausing for an answer, went inside.

The interior of the weyr was dim compared to the brightness of midsummer sun outside. Sarenya groped through the dragons' great chamber, almost walking into the edge of their couch, and found her way into the living area of the weyr. "C'los?"

The Beastcrafter strained to see through the darkness, but it was a faint sound from one of the sleeping alcoves that alerted her. "C'los, are you there?"

An arm appeared, hooking around the edge of the drape dividing living from sleeping area, and then abruptly the curtain was yanked back. C'los gazed out fuzzily from a tangle of arms and legs and sleeping furs. "Whaissit, Saren?"

Sarenya didn't know whether to be amused or embarrassed, whether she should look to see which rider had won Indioth's flight or look away entirely. She

settled for squinting at a point just above C'los' head. "Shimpath's rising, and T'kamen's still away at Kellad."

"Kellad?" C'los looked like he was having trouble focusing his eyes. "Why's he at Kellad?"

"It's a long story, Los, but C'mine's been hurt, and now Shimpath's rising and Epherineth's not here!"

"C'mine's been..." The green rider gazed dumbly at her for a moment, then twisted around to stare at the man sprawled on the couch beside him. "What the... I thought... Shard it all, Saren, what's happened to Mine?"

Sarenya watched helplessly as C'los tried to leap out of bed, found he was tangled in the furs, and eventually crawled out with a string of muttered invectives. "There was a forest fire. Kamen and Mine went to help."

The green rider had gone as pale as a man with naturally brown skin possibly could. He pulled on the leather pants that were hanging over the back of a chair, dragged a shirt over his shoulders and stamped his feet into his boots in a matter of moments. "Where is he?"

"Still at Kellad, I think, but Shimpath's flight..."

"*Between* with Shimpath's Threaded flight!" C'los exploded. "C'mine, oh, Faranth... *Indioth!*"

As the green rider sprinted from his weyr, hair dishevelled, clothes half hanging off him, Sarenya was left staring at the now-awake man still lying in the mess of sheets on C'los' bed. The rider stared blearily back at her. "Who're you?"

"Sorry, long story," Sarenya apologised, and hastened after C'los.

Indioth was aloft before Sarenya reached the ledge. The journeyman shielded her eyes against the fiercer light. "Tell T'kamen!" she shouted after dragon and rider, but with the din of the green dragon's wings she doubted either heard her.

The journeyman looked desperately towards the stock pens where Shimpath's suitors still crouched, watching the queen blood her kills with angry eyes. Not far from Indioth's ledge, bronze riders surrounded the blank-faced Valonna, their eyes as hot and intent as those of their beasts.

Two more dragons erupted low into the sky over the Weyr with bellows of fury that almost shook the ground. Sarenya shaded her eyes with one hand as she gazed up to identify the latecomers against the blazing sun, and she almost shouted with relief as she recognised Epherineth's iridescently shimmering hide.

Both bronzes landed close by, just long enough for their riders to slide free, and then – without even pausing to have their riding straps removed – the two great

males, Epherineth and the smaller, paler dragon Sarenya identified as Peteorth, made for the feeding grounds.

The waiting bronzes howled their indignation at the new contenders, snaking their massive necks skywards to challenge the right of these latecomers to compete for their queen, flaring their wings to make it impossible for them to claim places in the circle of bronze that ringed Shimpath. Epherineth checked his descent, holding his position with crimson eyes and bared teeth, but Peteorth blundered on, less adept in the air, and two of the dragons on the ground were forced to move. Epherineth and Peteorth landed fast and crouched in readiness, their wings half open, their eyes as scarlet as the fresh blood that still splashed their muzzles.

Shimpath drained her last victim and threw her head back, shrieking a contemptuous challenge to the males, stretching out her incandescent wings and whipping her tail back and forth, every inch of her hide glowing as bright as the sun. The queen was as terrible and beautiful a sight as Sarenya had ever beheld, golden and blood-smeared and marvellous. She screamed a final time, her voice full of rage, lust, and need, and with a thrust of her massive hind legs, Shimpath was aloft.

An instant later the bronzes were after her, some faster than others, but within moments the stock pens were empty except for the mutilated corpses of forty animals, and a scant few seconds after that the shining specks of gold and bronze, so brilliant against the azure sky, were gone.

Sarenya dragged her gaze away from the painful brightness of the sky to look at the earthbound riders. Instinctively her eyes sought out T'kamen. The flame in the bronze rider's eyes was unquenchable; the snarl that bared his teeth was inhuman; the massive force coiled in his tensed muscles spoke of a purpose that surpassed anything she could understand. Sarenya looked away, rapidly changing her assessment of the situation. These riders were not earthbound. In pursuit, in mating, they flew as high as their dragons, leaving the ground, and their flightless fellow humans, far behind.



The air was thick with wings, but Epherineth flew strong and swift, and T'kamen flew with him. It would have been impossible to say where dragon ended and rider began, and neither part of the greater whole that was Epherineth cared enough to try. They were together, single of purpose, strong and magnificent.

Shimpath soared ahead of them, close enough to fill their eyes and mind with her nearness, but far enough to make them burn with frustration at the distance. Epherineth's eyes never left the dazzling form of the queen. Every fibre of every muscle in his body was energised with the need to make her his, but for now

Shimpath had the measure of every bronze in the sky, and she didn't even deign to acknowledge them as they pursued her.

Epherineth contented himself with merely following where his prize led, matching her speed so as not to fall behind, but pacing himself. Shimpath was larger than he, stronger, faster for now, but when she tired he would not, and then he would claim her.

All around him, higher and lower, ahead and behind and to both sides, twenty others filled the sky with the thunder of their wingbeats. A part of Epherineth knew their names, recognised the pattern of their flight, watched them, scorned them as the first broke off the chase. The lean bronze flew on, higher and further, matching Shimpath's every move.

The awareness of danger penetrated his avid admiration of the queen. His dodge was half impulse, half instinct, and a dragon dropped through the air where he had just been. Epherineth bellowed his rage and lashed out, feeling his claws rake through fragile wingsail. The other's bronze's hiss turned to a scream of pain, and he spiralled out of control, nearly colliding with another dragon.

The fate of two of his adversaries meant nothing to Epherineth, but the incident had cut the pack of bronzes in half. The beasts closest to Shimpath now had the advantage over those whose flight had been disrupted. Epherineth rent the air with his wings, anger driving him now as he battled to make up the distance he had lost. Behind him, weaker dragons gave up, dismayed or exhausted.

Shimpath acknowledged her suitors now, and her seductive call filled Epherineth with renewed lust. He watched with crazed eyes as the golden dragon dropped back to taunt the leading bronzes, and strained to catch up.

A single dragon, the largest of them all, broke free of the pack with a sudden burst of speed and made a grab for Shimpath as she veered past. But the queen was too clever, dropping beneath the massive dragon's reach and screaming her contempt. Another bronze strained to fly below the queen, forcing her up towards the clutches of the big male above, but Shimpath darted sideways, splendidly swift.

Yet another dragon howled in frustration and fell away, and Epherineth took his place. The biggest bronze was still there, sheer strength and crimson-eyed fury pushing him on, but Epherineth was within a length of his goal now. Shimpath teased and flirted with the remaining males, tantalisingly close. She slipped out of the path of one desperate grab with contemptuous ease and squealed her delight as another dragon dropped away, spent.

They flew so high Epherineth could feel the cold, thin air burning in his straining lungs, and only four remained in the chase. Shimpath gloried in her

strength and agility, making turns and dips that forced her suitors to react quickly or else fail. A sharp veer threw off the dragon flying on Epherineth's right flank.

He was tiring now, the flush of energy that had filled him to overflowing waning, but the edge was leaving the queen's manoeuvres, too. The two males on either side of Epherineth flew on grimly, and now he recognised them: dark-hued Izath, and the monstrous brute that was Pierdeth. The consciousness of his rivals shored up Epherineth's fading strength. But another source of energy was flowing on the wind, a force not of flesh or blood, nor of the dragons themselves. It drove Epherineth on, wrapping around him, silent and invisible, willing him to succeed, and the bronze took heart from it.

Izath faded away. Shimpath was tired, her repertoire exhausted. Epherineth and Pierdeth matched her, but more than that, they matched each other. The two bronzes: brothers, clutchmates, rivals, strove to outlast each other. Pierdeth was straining, panting hard, his crimson eyes dull with the effort, but Epherineth ignored the wrenching of his muscles and the stabbing in his chest as his breath grew short. The unknown, intangible force that sustained him was enough. It would never let Pierdeth defeat him.

As the big bronze failed he threw back his head in a terrible cry of loss and anguish. Pierdeth dropped like a stone, his massive strength sapped, his cause lost.

Epherineth, triumphant over every other bronze of Madellon Weyr, had but one more dragon over whom to claim victory. Shimpath no longer strove to outfly him. With a howl of triumph, Epherineth seized his willing prize, for himself, for his rider, and for the Weyr that had chosen him, and gave himself up to the passion of the queen.