



CHAPTER TWELVE



Valonna woke abruptly, drawing a sharp breath as her eyes searched frantically for something familiar in the strange room.

Be calm, said Shimpath, her voice filled with enormous satisfaction. *All is well.*

Valonna sat up, seeing but not registering the bruises on her upper arm, groping through the tumult of recent memories. The couch beside her was empty, but as she gazed around the sparsely-furnished room she saw the silhouette of a rider, sitting before the hearth, cradling a cup in both hands.

“L’dro?” she asked timidly, but even before the rider looked at her, she knew it was not.

“No.” His voice was soft, tired, without a hint of smugness. The rider rose from his place by the hearth, and as he turned to face her the light of the small fire washed across the stark lines of his profile.

“T-T’kamen?”

The bronze rider nodded slowly.

Suddenly flustered, Valonna clutched the bedfur to herself, acutely aware of her nakedness before a strange man. She was relieved when T’kamen turned his head slightly. She groped for her clothes, found they had been piled on the floor beside the sleeping couch, and noticed then that T’kamen was fully dressed in ash-smudged fighting leathers. How long had he been awake before she had roused?

The Weyrwoman dressed quickly, then stood smoothing down her skirts, unsure of what to do. It hadn’t been like this last time. L’dro was the only man she had ever known – had been, she corrected herself. And yet for all her uncertainty and embarrassment, and the residual mental shock of the flight, Valonna felt...right.

“Sit down, Weyrwoman.” T’kamen motioned to the second chair by the hearth. “We should talk.”

All is well, Shimpath told Valonna again. *Sit. Talk.*

Valonna sat, tucking her skirts well away from the grate. She folded her hands in her lap and gazed at them as T’kamen resumed his own seat, wondering what he was going to say.

“I don’t know you, Valonna, so I can’t presume to know what you’re thinking.” The bronze rider’s level tone was courteous, but unapologetic. “As your Weyrleader, the first thing I ask from you is that you tell me.”

Valonna looked up. T’kamen’s dark gaze didn’t waver, and the hard lines of his expression daunted her. “You...want to know what I’m thinking?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Not just now. Always. I need to know what you think, what you want, what you need. I can’t promise you’ll always get it, but if I don’t know, I can’t try.”

T’kamen’s quiet words confused Valonna. What did he want from her? He’d already seized the Weyrleadership for himself. “Why?” she asked.

“There are going to be changes,” he said. “Some big, some not so big, but the one I want to establish right now is the way you, as Weyrwoman, will be treated.” His gaze held hers firmly. “You are the queen’s rider, and the honour due your circumstance has never been in doubt, but you are also the Weyrwoman of all Madellon, and that is the role for which you haven’t been respected.” He raised his head slightly, and Valonna lifted her chin. “You are the rightful leader of the Weyr, Valonna, and I won’t tolerate any form of disrespect directed at you. But you should know that I consider you Weyrwoman in deed as well as name. I will expect you to serve your riders as such.”

The matter-of-fact tone of his voice somehow chilled Valonna more than any of L’dro’s sudden rages, and she bowed her head in acquiescence. “I’ll do my best, Weyrleader.”

“That’s all I ask,” T’kamen said, more softly. “Thank you.”

Valonna looked up at the lean bronze rider, still shy of him, but reassured by his even manner. “Shimpath chose you,” she said, thinking of the extraordinary chase her queen had led.

The shade of a smile touched T’kamen’s mouth for a moment. “In three months, we’ll see.”

Valonna looked away, shyly this time, thinking ahead to when Shimpath would lay her eggs. But the thought that this clutch, resulting from such a long flight,

might be larger and better than that sired by Pierdeth filled her with a sudden sense of chagrin. "What's going to happen to L'dro?"

T'kamen's expression turned more grim, but he appeared to consider the question for some moments. "That will depend on him," he said finally. "Valonna..." He frowned, looking suddenly fierce. "I won't tell you who you can or cannot have in your weyr. But I would ask you to use your judgement, and your queen's judgement. Madellon is in a weak political position in Pern at this time. I intend for us to do something about that, but we will need to present at least the appearance of a united front."

"Will you...be staying in my weyr?" Valonna queried uncertainly. She wasn't sure she understood what T'kamen was saying.

The bronze rider shook his head. "I wouldn't expect you to welcome that; nor will I lightly give up the habits of a rider used to living alone." He paused long enough for Valonna to realise it was a dry joke, then continued in a tone that was pointedly more formal. "Weyrwoman, our relationship is political, not personal. In a Pass, if Shimpath was rising more often, it might be different, but I don't see any reason to put unnecessary strain on the working relationship. Keep your liaisons discreet, and I will do the same."

Valonna couldn't see herself enjoying *any* liaisons, not with the veiled warning against being with L'dro that T'kamen had expressed. "I will, Weyrleader," she assented.

T'kamen leaned back in his chair, running his fingers wearily through his hair. He looked exhausted, with more than the fatigue of even such a long flight. Then Valonna noticed the soot on his clothes again, remembering what had happened before Shimpath's mating, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Shards! What happened at Kellad?"

The bronze rider shook his head. "I still don't know. Epherineth and I left at a bad moment." His eyes went briefly distant, and then narrowed. "The situation is under control for the moment, and C'mine is stable, but the dragons there need to be relieved." He got decisively to his feet.

Valonna hung back, suddenly daunted by the prospect of facing the Weyr. Looking about for a distraction, she focused on the flying gloves lying on the edge of the hearth. She stooped to pick them up. "T'kamen, you forgot your...oh!"

She dropped the gloves as her fingers tingled and then went numb. T'kamen looked back from the entrance of the room with a wry half-smile. "I should have warned you about that..."



The first jug of wine had gone down like water, the second had taken the edge off the intensity of Pierdeth's agony and frustration, but the third – which should have pushed him into a hazy, painless stupor – had made L'dro angry instead.

The surprise when Shimpath had evaded Pierdeth's first grab had turned into a greater determination to best the queen which had sustained the huge bronze through the gruelling latter stages of the flight. But when Pierdeth had faltered, having pushed himself to the point of physical injury only to see another bronze take *his* queen, the shock to L'dro's system of being violently thrown back into his own sweating, shivering body had been appalling.

Someone had given him wine, and the bronze rider had gulped the liquid down without tasting it, letting it dull the shock. Somehow he had found his way across the Bowl to meet his returning dragon. Pierdeth was still a shaking wreck, his condition worse than that of any of the other unsuccessful bronzes besides Alonth, whose left wingsail had been torn to ribbons during the flight, and who had barely managed to land safely, howling in pain. But in defeat, Pierdeth, L'dro's magnificent giant of a dragon, was a pathetic shell of himself.

Defeat...L'dro barely suppressed the urge to scream aloud. How had this happened? How could he possibly have lost? He had Valonna's vapid devotion, the support of all but four of Madellon's bronze riders, and the deal with H'ersto as a failsafe to guarantee Epherineth's removal from the flight if necessary. Everything had worked out beautifully, with T'kamen and three of the rebel bronzes at Kellad when Shimpath had finally come into heat. How T'kamen had even found out that the queen was rising was a mystery to L'dro's pain and drink-fogged mind. But somehow everything had fallen apart. Epherineth had arrived in time to give chase; H'ersto's professed control over Alonth had been proved a farce when his dragon, not T'kamen's, had been the one to limp home with a wing so badly injured he might never fly again; Shimpath had evaded Pierdeth's capture time and again; and ultimately the flight had dragged on until Pierdeth had no longer been able to follow.

As L'dro slumped, half unconscious, against his devastated bronze, the full meaning of their defeat had slowly percolated past the sluggish rage in his mind. He was not the Weyrleader any more. The insignia he had worn on every item of clothing for the last four Turns was meaningless. He would have to move out of his sumptuous weyr. The resources of the Weyr would no longer be his to dip into at will. The connections he had bought or bullied among the Lords of Madellon's territories would be worthless to him.

But worst: a taste that was bitter in his mouth, rank in his nostrils, foul to the point of nauseating in his stomach; worst of all, the knowledge that Epherineth's rider had beaten him filled L'dro with fury, fear, and abject despair.

How could he serve under T'kamen? How could a man go from supreme leader to subordinate within the space of a day? It was ludicrous. He, L'dro, was the Weyrleader. No upstart bronze with an unranked rider could be fit to lead. Shimpath had been stupid to evade Pierdeth. Epherineth had been lucky, not worthy.

The sluggish reasoning oozed from L'dro's brain, and with it, a drunken solution. The bronze rider dragged himself upright, swaying on his feet. Riders were congregating across the Bowl, around the entrance to the chamber that had been used for the flight. L'dro headed that way with a growing sense of purpose.

If T'kamen, and that silly bitch Valonna, thought L'dro was going to give in without a fight equal to that Pierdeth had provided, the hundred-times Threaded rider of bronze Epherineth was in for a very nasty surprise.



T'kamen and Valonna emerged into the ruddy light of the sun going down on the Turn. It was uncomfortably warm after the cool of the deep-set cavern, but the fierce heat of the day had eased. The dark silhouettes of dragons against the scarlet sky crowned the Rim, and two mighty forms glided gracefully over the Bowl, calling out in greeting.

"Shimpath!" Valonna cried, and ran to throw her arms about the queen's foreleg.

T'kamen walked stiffly to his bronze, feeling the exertions of the day setting into his muscles. Epherineth lowered his great head to him, his eyes gleaming like star-filled sapphires. T'kamen laid his hands on the sleek muzzle, expressing without words or effort the magnitude of love and pride he felt for his dragon, his bronze, his Epherineth.

We fly well together, you and I, the bronze said softly.

T'kamen closed his eyes to recall their merging, those precious minutes of total combination, rider and dragon more than linked, more than together: united as one being. The green dragons they had chased and won had not demanded the same level of submersion; the queens they had chased and lost had left them too dazed to recall their absolute fusion. In winning Shimpath, T'kamen knew he and Epherineth had reached a level of understanding that few riders ever would. They

had stayed as one throughout that glorious fall to earth, until safety demanded that queen and bronze, and dragons and riders, break apart.

The violent return to himself had shaken T'kamen, far more than the sudden consciousness of Valonna where Shimpath had been. The division of the gestalt of which he was a part into rider and dragon had pained him, and while the regret was fading now, he knew Epherineth understood and shared it.

T'kamen moved to the fighting harness still buckled on Epherineth's neck, loosening the straps. They had not affected the bronze in flight, but now their continued presence was causing him mild discomfort. T'kamen ran his hand lightly along the chafe marks on Epherineth's sweaty hide.

"Weyrleader?"

The bronze rider turned at Valonna's hesitant query, Epherineth's harness looped over his shoulder. Riders and Weyrfolk were gathering, looking expectant. T'kamen slowly coiled his dragon's safety straps and set them on the ground by Epherineth's forepaw. He placed a hand briefly on the bronze neck, then stepped up to face the growing crowd.

Most of the younger faces were eager, excited. Many older riders wore respectful expressions. Some merely regarded him with interest. But there were unfriendly faces in the crowd, too, and T'kamen recognised brown riders who had prospered under L'dro, including F'digan, and the devastated expressions of bronze riders who had failed.

Talking to Valonna had not been easy, but addressing an audience was even harder. T'kamen wasn't an orator. He had spent his life keeping his own counsel. C'los would surely have urged him to make a victory speech, but the green rider was nowhere to be seen, and rhetoric was beyond him. Shimpath had risen, Epherineth had caught her, T'kamen was Weyrleader. Stating the obvious wouldn't achieve anything, but what else was there to say?

T'kamen fought to keep the deep weariness out of his voice as he spoke. "The riders still at Kellad need reinforcements. I need twenty riders willing to help."

The crowd stirred, visibly surprised by his words, clearly expecting to hear something pertaining to T'kamen's sudden rise in power. But then a young blue rider stepped forward and saluted, standing to attention. "Weyrleader, sir, Reth and I would be honoured to serve."

Gerah, the stern old green rider T'kamen had counted as a wingmate under F'digan, was the next to come forth. "My ancient bones are yours to command, Weyrleader," she said proudly.

As Madellon's riders answered his call for the second time that day, T'kamen recognised and appreciated the subtle shift in emphasis. Riders like Gerah, who knew they were not equipped for a hazardous rescue mission whose perils had already seriously injured one dragonpair, were volunteering regardless, putting their trust in the man they acknowledged as their rightful Weyrleader to choose wisely from those who offered their help. The deference they showed was not to the title of Weyrleader, but to the rider laying his own victory aside in favour of his responsibility to the riders under his command.

"Weyrleader?" The raucous sneer silenced the renewed buzz of excitement, and the crowd of riders parted almost instinctively to reveal the speaker. T'kamen narrowed his eyes as he regarded L'dro.

The bronze rider staggered closer, unkempt and stinking of wine. "There's only one Weyrleader here, and that's me!"

L'dro's declaration took a moment to register with T'kamen, incredible as it was. "Stand away, L'dro," he said softly.

"Who do you think you are, bronze rider?" the former Weyrleader raged. "Think you're so important because that wherry hen you ride got lucky?"

The watching riders reacted with muted disbelief at L'dro's words, but T'kamen knew that this situation was for him to disarm. L'dro was sodden with drink, and his raving was absurd, but there was a definite potential for violence in the air. "You shame your dragon, L'dro, and insult the queen's choice. Go and sober up."

L'dro bristled, his lips curling in a snarl. "You can't tell me what to do, rider! You're nothing!" Wild-eyed, he looked around at the crowd, isolating several bronze riders. "S'herdo! Y'kat! D'feng! This idiot isn't even a member of the Council! You can't possibly accept him!"

The three riders, each looking exhausted from their dragons' failure to fly Shimpath, stirred uneasily, but said nothing to support L'dro. D'feng's lips were set in a thin, disapproving line as he avoided his former Weyrleader's gaze.

Incredulous, L'dro looked about for supporters. "L'mis!" he cried. "Tell them!" But the old bronze rider just shook his head slowly.

Speechless with disbelief, L'dro gaped at T'kamen. "You...how dare you..."

Pierdeth's rider lunged suddenly, but T'kamen had been expecting the move. He sidestepped, letting L'dro charge on unchecked.

The ranting bronze rider stumbled, bellowing, to a halt, looking and sounding for all the world like a maddened herdbeast. "I'll kill you!"

T'kamen stepped aside again as L'dro rushed him, but this time he deliberately tripped his old rival. With a yell, L'dro went flying.

But before the former Weyrleader could rise, a massive golden forepaw descended upon him, pinning him easily to the ground. Shimpath curved her neck and hissed at the writhing, screaming L'dro, holding him in place with the merest fraction of her awesome strength. The bronze rider stopped thrashing as needle-sharp talons nipped into his chest, staring up in terror as the greatest of all Madellon dragons demonstrated her displeasure with him.

"No, Shimpath, let him go!"

Valonna's cry silenced Shimpath's menacing hiss. The queen shot a reluctant glance towards her rider and haughtily removed her paw, as if even touching L'dro had offended her.

T'kamen watched with a sinking feeling as Valonna hurried over to the bronze rider lying on the ground. L'dro seemed too dazed to move, as indeed anyone who had just found himself as the mercy of an angry queen dragon might be.

But Valonna's expression as she looked down at her former weyrmate was not sympathetic but disappointed, perhaps even to the point of disgust. As if blinkers had suddenly been removed from her eyes, the Weyrwoman gazed at the man who had dominated her for the last seven Turns, and perhaps finally saw him for what he was.

"I think you should go," she said quietly.

T'kamen nodded discreetly to a couple of burly riders who had been standing by. Valonna turned away from her lover as the two green riders hauled the still-dazed L'dro to his feet and half dragged, half marched him away. Her eyes were dry, but the anguish in them was plain. T'kamen met the Weyrwoman's gaze, grudgingly impressed by her composure under the circumstances, and nodded his approval.

Then he turned his attention back to the gathered riders. "Politics can wait until tomorrow. There are tired riders and dragons who need replacing." He rapidly named a Wingful of riders, choosing only green, blue, and brown riders.

"Weyrleader, Santinoth and I are ready to go again," T'rello protested weakly.

T'kamen regarded the weary young bronze rider with deep pride. "You've done your part, T'rello, and Santinoth. Rest now."

"You should do the same, Weyrleader."

The gruff voice belonged to R'hren. The man who had been Weyrleader himself stepped from the ranks of riders, and murmured to T'kamen, "First rule of being Weyrleader – if your dragon's just flown a queen, you're both allowed a rest."

T'kamen met the old bronze rider's steady gaze with the hint of a smile as they clasped forearms. "I'll defer to that wisdom, my friend." Then he raised his voice. "J'vondan, you're in charge. Report to L'stev."

The brown rider saluted proudly. "Yes sir!"



Vanzanth followed Epherineth and Shimpath out of *between* into a downpour.

Mounted behind L'stev, Sarenya cringed against the unexpected deluge. She heard the brown rider cursing good-naturedly ahead of her, felt Vanzanth's happy rumble, and realised what the rain meant to the riders who had been working through the night.

Sarenya peered down through the sheeting rain as an arpeggio of bugles rang out from below. Dragons crowded side by side on the fire-heights, their hides shiny with rain. People leaned out of the windows of the Hold in spite of the weather, staring up at the most unusual spectacle of a queen dragon.

As Vanzanth spiralled down towards the courtyard, Sarenya caught sight of the blue dragon already there, lying awkwardly on his side with a canvas awning sheltering him from the rain. Vanzanth reduced the speed of his descent, waiting for the other two dragons to land, before backwinging neatly to alight on the far side of Shimpath.

Sarenya slid down the big brown's side, thanking him politely. On her shoulders, Tarnish and Sleek huddled against her, wrapping their tails around her neck and nuzzling her face with their cold noses before she shooed them away.

The blue turned his head towards her, humming a soft greeting. The awning protected his heavily bandaged underside, and the normally lively dragon looked forlorn and vulnerable.

"Oh, Darshanth," Sarenya murmured, hurrying over to him, the rain forgotten. "Oh, you poor, brave thing."

I'll be all right, the blue said stoically as she stroked his eye ridges.

"Of course you will." The journeyman hugged the blue dragon's muzzle, kissing his nose. "Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need?"

Darshanth exhaled a very gentle, warm breath over her through his nostrils. *I'm comfortable. The healers will come to see me again soon and the water of the lake is cool.*

"You know that Epherineth flew Shimpath?"

I know. I heard. The placid movement of Darshanth's eyes increased fractionally in speed. *There is one here who would be right for a dragon.*

Sarenya shook her head, mock-stern. "You should be resting, Darshanth, not Searching."

I was resting. It was the boy who came to take away my... The dragon looked dolefully towards his tail, and made a little embarrassed sound in the back of his throat.

Sarenya stayed with Darshanth, making a fuss of him, until L'stev called her. "It seems that C'mine's had quite a few visitors," the brusque old rider told her. "We can see him, but not for long. He needs to rest."

The Beastcrafter gave Darshanth a final good scratch, promising to talk to him again before they left. As Sarenya left the blue to follow L'stev, she crossed paths with Vhion, the Madellon Master Dragon-healer, and she nodded to him, grateful for his expertise, as he went to rouse Darshanth for his morning soak in Kellad's lake.

Ahead, T'kamen and Valonna walked with the big man Sarenya recognised as Lord Meturvian. Snatches of the conversation between Weyrleader and Holder came back to her.

"...sure we can work out some agreement...maintain the status quo...no need to upset the way of things..."

"...I'm not my predecessor, Meturvian...for the Weyr, not myself..."

"...of course, of course...no harm in keeping things friendly..."

"...tithes must be re-negotiated..."

"...surely, Weyrleader, you understand...this fire, our resources..."

"...if not for the Weyr's assistance, this Hold could be afire now..."

"...yes, I suppose – ah, here we are."

They turned a corner to the infirmary, marked by the Healer emblem on the door. As they were shepherded in, Sarenya thought bleakly that T'kamen was going to have a fight on his hands with the Lords who had grown so accustomed to life under L'dro as Weyrleader.

A sharp-eyed nurse regarded the four visitors suspiciously as they passed into her domain. "Don't tire him out," she snapped. "He's had Faranth knows who in and out all night. He's quite alert, and he's in no pain, but the man needs to sleep, dragonrider or not."

They filed into the cubicle Meturvian indicated. Sarenya had been saddened by Darshanth's condition, but when she saw C'mine she felt shocked. The gentle blue rider's arms and chest were swathed in bandages that extended to cover most of his lower body under the light blanket. A dressing adorned the left side of his face. He looked as tired and subdued as his dragon. C'los sat beside him, holding his uninjured hand, and by the dark circles under the green rider's eyes, he hadn't slept much.

“Mine,” said T’kamen, with a gruff note in his voice. “You’re looking better.”

C’mine opened his eyes. He looked around with care, not moving his head, and then spoke slowly, so as not to aggravate the burn on his cheek. “Kamen, I guess I should be calling you Weyrleader now. Congratulations.”

“I had some help,” T’kamen admitted, inclining his head fractionally towards Valonna.

C’mine’s eyes flicked from Weyrleader to Weyrwoman. “Don’t treat him too badly, Valonna.”

The young queen rider flushed and looked away. “It was Shimpath who chose him.”

“I’d wager we’ve a slyer queen in that one than any of us guessed,” said L’stev. “She knew Epherineth would beat all the rest on stamina.”

“The Weyr was with us,” T’kamen said simply. “And that was your idea from the start, Mine.”

“Never doubted you for an instant.”

“But for Saren’s message, and Fr’ton for intercepting it, I still wouldn’t be any better off.” T’kamen threw a look in Sarenya’s direction that said more than words. “I never thought I’d be grateful to Fr’ton.”

“You have a few scores to settle, too, from what I hear,” said L’stev. “H’ersto for trying that stunt during the flight.”

“Epherineth tore up Alonth’s wing for his trouble,” said T’kamen, without relish.

“Don’t forget Chuvone,” Sarenya put in, remembering when the former dragonrider had shown his true colours.

“What did he do?” asked C’mine.

“Turns out he was passing information to L’dro the whole time.” L’stev barked a laugh. “A lot of good it did him.”

“I don’t know if I could do anything to Chuvone that’s worse than what he’s done to himself,” T’kamen said quietly.

There was an awkward pause. Sarenya cleared her throat slightly. “So how are you feeling, Mine?”

“Numb, mostly,” C’mine replied, “and like I’ve been drinking fellis.” He looked in Sarenya’s direction, and the journeyman moved slightly closer to make it easier on the blue rider’s eyes. “Darshanth said you were kind to him. Thank you.”

“He’s feeling a bit sorry for himself,” said Sarenya, “but he’s not too uncomfortable. He’s tough. You both are.”

“Don’t encourage him,” C’los hissed. “Sharding idiots, both of them.”

“C’los,” T’kamen said warningly.

The green rider shook his head angrily. “He had no right, trying to be a hero. Shards, if he’d died...and you know for who’s sake, Kamen? Ogharn. May he be freezing his ass off *between* right now, where he belongs.”

“Ogharn?” T’kamen asked, sounding surprised, and a little wary.

“I couldn’t save him,” C’mine said dully.

“You shouldn’t even have bothered trying,” C’los snapped.

“Lay off, C’los,” said L’stev.

“He knew it was me, Kamen, and he didn’t say anything,” C’mine explained. “Not until the end...he called me Cairmine. I couldn’t save him. I’ll never know...”

“You already know,” said C’los. “He deserved to die!”

“C’los!” T’kamen, L’stev, and Sarenya all objected at once.

The green rider subsided, but Sarenya pitied C’mine in the Turns to come. C’los was never going to forgive the selfless act that had nearly robbed him of his weyrmate.

“You saved many lives, Mine,” T’kamen said gently. “No one will forget that: not here, not at Madellon.”

“The rain came too late.”

“It usually does.”

The nurse swept into the cubicle then. “All right, that’s enough. Out, all of you.” She pointed a menacing finger at C’los. “That includes you, Carellos of the Harperhall!”

“But Allerin...!” C’los swore under his breath. “Sharding relatives! No respect for dragonriders.”

One by one they bade C’mine farewell, promising to return soon. Sarenya lingered, waiting till last, and then when everyone else had gone she slipped around to where C’los had been sitting, and gingerly took C’mine’s hand.

“It’s all right, it’s not hurt,” the blue rider told her.

Sarenya gripped it more firmly, then covered it with her other hand, squeezing his fingers. She suddenly knew how C’los felt. “Don’t ever risk yourself like that again, Mine.”

“I couldn’t not try, Saren.”

“I know, but too many people rely on you. C’los wouldn’t be able to cope without you. I’d fall apart.”

“You’re stronger than you think, Saren.” C’mine’s gaze was as patient as ever, despite his injuries and fatigue. “You can stand up to anything.”

“Even T’kamen as Weyrleader?”

“Even that.”

She sighed. “I couldn’t even ride with him to come here, Mine.”

“I know, Saren.” The blue rider’s voice was infinitely understanding, infinitely sympathetic. “I know.”

Sarenya hesitated for a long moment, staring at nothing. “Sometimes it feels like Valonna’s destined to have everything I want from life. Shimpath, T’kamen…”

“She doesn’t have T’kamen,” C’mine interrupted her. “You know that. And Shimpath – do you think a queen who chose Valonna would ever have been compatible with you?”

“No,” Sarenya admitted heavily, “I suppose not.”

“A dragon’s choice doesn’t necessarily make a man, or a woman, strong or decent, Saren.” The blue rider’s voice was becoming more sluggish. “But as far as I’m concerned, you’ve never had anything to prove.”

The nurse bustled in again, frowning at Sarenya. “Out, out, let him get some rest, and perhaps he’ll be out of here by next Turn’s End!”

Sarenya smiled ruefully at C’mine. “I’d better go before I end up in the next bed along.” Knowing she couldn’t hug him, she stroked the back of his hand. “Get better soon, Mine. You know we love you.”

C’mine grasped her fingers in his, his normally powerful grip feeble, but no less comforting. “I know. Take care, Saren. Love you too.”



Pacing in the corridor outside the infirmary, T’kamen looked up as Sarenya emerged. She looked like she was fighting back tears, and T’kamen knew how she felt. C’mine had been a calm point of reference in his life for Turns, too.

“He’s so brave, Kamen,” she said. “He could have died yesterday, but he still puts everyone else ahead of himself.”

“He’ll be all right, Saren,” T’kamen reassured her. “He’s strong, and Darshanth won’t let anything happen to him.”

They walked a pace or two down the corridor. Then T’kamen stopped, for the same reason he had waited outside the infirmary. Sarenya halted, glancing uncertainly at him. “Where are L’stev and Valonna?”

“Went on ahead,” T’kamen replied, too quickly, but he’d lost his nerve again.

They continued to walk, in silence. These corridors were still familiar to T’kamen, as cold as ever, wrapped in the thick stone walls of the Hold, and yet they were not home. He was Weyrleader now, the man who must suffuse himself in what

was best for the Weyr, undo the damage L'dro had done, set right the corruption of the bronze rider Council.

But he craved one luxury, one indulgence, one reward that his new rank couldn't provide, and finding his courage once more, he stopped again, putting a hand on Sarenya's shoulder. The journeyman looked up at him wordlessly, her eyes asking for an explanation. T'kamen breathed deeply, meeting her gaze, as unsure of himself now as he and Epherineth had been certain yesterday.

"You know that mating flights don't mean anything, don't you?"

Sarenya reacted with surprise first, then uncertainty as she ran his words over in her mind, and finally, finally, a slow smile of comprehension that spread all the way to her eyes.

"Yes...I know."