



CHAPTER TWO



C'los and C'mine and their dragons weyred in a series of caves set into the north face of the Bowl, enjoying amenities of which most such lowly-ranked pairings could only dream. It had once belonged to a bronze rider, T'hone – one of the founding riders of Madellon – and he had owed them a favour. He had left them all his possessions, and that included the weyr he had carved out of the rock for himself some ninety Turns before. With Madellon under populated, the demand for Flightleader-standard Weyrs was low, and it had slipped beneath the Weyrleader's note that the two wingriders were sharing such opulent quarters.

As T'kamen weaved through the throng packing the living area from wall to wall, he conceded that the pair threw mean parties. Everything breakable vanished into storage alcoves, kegs of beer and skins of wine materialised with miraculous speed, and no one ever staggered off the weyr ledge. It wasn't far to the ground, but as a precaution they had Indioth and Darshanth mind the ledge.

In the normal course of events, C'los and C'mine wouldn't specifically invite guests so much as make the right people aware of the event to ensure the desired turnout. On this occasion, though, T'kamen knew that every guest had been invited personally, in accordance with C'los' plans.

Even after so many Turns of association, the extent of C'los' passion for intrigue could still surprise T'kamen. The razor-sharp intellect and instinct that lay behind that friendly demeanour and open smile had seen the green rider in a frenzy of activity since their meeting near Kellad the previous sevenday. C'los had drawn up colour-coded lists and charts and graphs, most of them covered in notes scrawled

in his own personal shorthand, documenting the probable opinions of each of Madellon's riders, the eight Weyr Masters, and various other notable individuals. T'kamen didn't pretend to understand half of the diagrams C'los had shown him to explain his plans, but he trusted the green rider to know what he was doing.

There were only slightly more than two hundred dragonpairs in the Weyr, and somewhat fewer than thirty riders standing around C'los and C'mine's weyr, but T'kamen still didn't know most of the guests. He recognised them, by face and mostly by name, but he had never been as sociable as his friends, and with half a dozen exceptions they were all strangers to him. The situation made him slightly uncomfortable. T'kamen preferred the company of his dragon, and his own thoughts, to that of a crowd, but C'los had insisted. He wasn't there to enjoy himself, after all.

The Weyrwoman was conspicuous by her absence. T'kamen gathered that she had been the source of some contention between C'los and C'mine, with C'los asserting that she should be there and C'mine steadfastly rejecting the idea. T'kamen could see both sides of the argument, but he was inclined to agree with C'mine. C'los could be overzealous at times, and Valonna probably wouldn't react well to such an overtly political gathering. C'mine had won, of course, as he always did on the rare occasions when he made a stand against his weyrmate.

T'kamen might not have been able to fathom the more obscure aspects of C'los' scheme, but he could understand the reasoning behind most of the riders he did know. R'hren had served as interim Weyrleader in the period between Fianine's death and Shimpath's first mating flight, but on L'dro's accession the older bronze rider had been effectively sidelined. R'hren had been allowed to retain his Flightleader rank, but T'kamen knew he had been put under pressure from L'dro and D'feng to retire. There were two Wingleaders loyal to L'dro ready to take control of his Flight, and an ambitious young brown rider poised to assume command of his Wing. R'hren was well into his eighth decade, but neither he nor his Staamath were frail, and their pride resented L'dro's interference. Madellon was fortunate to have a senior rider so stubborn. R'hren was probably only resisting the pressure on him to resign to be contrary, but as long as he did, his Flight remained in opposition to the Weyrleader.

T'rello had Impressed Santinoth, the only bronze of Shimpath and Pierdeth's clutch, slightly more than four Turns ago at the age of twelve. He was ostensibly thought too young for the responsibilities of a Wingsecond, but in truth, he was suppressed because of his connections with C'los and C'mine. The lad was bright and very able, and a few more Turns would give him the experience he needed to

take on a Wing. T'kamen could feel the young man's potential, despite his youth, and considered him a valuable ally.

Fr'ton, bronze Peteorth's rider, was standing near one of the ale kegs with a slightly bemused expression on his face. T'kamen made a mental note not to get too close. It wasn't that he didn't *like* Fr'ton...well, actually, he amended mentally, it was. Fr'ton seemed quite oblivious to everything that went on around him, and T'kamen had wondered on more than one occasion what had possessed Peteorth to choose him. It was rumoured that Fr'ton had taken so long to grasp the basics of *between* visualisation that he had been kept back from graduation with his weyrling class for an entire Turn. It was perhaps a kindness that he didn't seem aware of his status as the Weyr joke.

L'stev had served as Weyrleader for the last four classes of weyrings and, in the Turns between clutches, as T'kamen's Wingsecond. L'dro had tolerated him as Weyrleader of Pierdeth's first clutch, but the Weyrleader had denied the gruff, abrasive brown rider his Wingsecond rank after the graduation of the class. L'stev had never been afraid to speak his mind, commanded instant, automatic respect from almost every dragonpair to have training under him, and was completely loyal to T'kamen. That was what had made him a target of L'dro's spite, but L'stev was still one of the most reliable and experienced riders T'kamen had ever known, a fund of common sense, and brusquely good-humoured underneath the constant affected scowl that had terrorised several generations of weyrings.

Jenavally, the Weyr Singer, had been an ally ever since T'kamen had Impressed. Herself a journeyman Harper before unexpectedly Impressing her green, she had a unique perspective on Weyr and Craft relations. Under Fianine as Weyrwoman, the green rider had been given permission to return to the Harper Hall for further instruction, and over the Turns had qualified for her full Mastery, although as a dragonrider she could not take the title. She had ably assisted and supplemented Tovan, Madellon's assigned Master Harper, until Fianine's death and L'dro's accession to the Weyrleadership. D'feng had dismissed Tovan back to the Hall for reassignment, appointing Jenavally as his sole replacement. The Flightleader's explanation was that by doing so, Jenavally would be allowed to 'play to her strengths'. No one had been fooled. Appointing a rider as Weyr Singer meant there was no Harper loyal to the Hall to criticise L'dro's methods.

T'kamen, C'mine, and C'los all had links to the Harpercraft. C'los had been born there, his unique talents had been developed by Harper Masters, and his thirteen-Turn-old daughter seemed sure to be apprenticed. C'mine had been brought up at Kellad, the hold to which the Harperhall looked. And T'kamen himself, trader-

born, had spent every winter of his life there, pre-Impression. Jenavally had naturally been inclined to associate with the three of them, and her connections in the Craft were potentially invaluable.

T'kamen scanned the rest of the guests, occasionally asking Epherineth to identify riders. J'vondan was an outspoken brown rider who, despite his Turns of service, had never been promoted to Wingsecond. B'stroc and Petra were a weyrmated pair who had been consistently denied the use of a ground-level weyr in which to bring up their children on the grounds that it wasn't traditional. Chuvone had Impressed a dragon of Epherineth and Pierdeth's clutch and lost him flying under L'dro in weyrwing manoeuvres. The Weyr Tanner, Mannis, had been hard hit by the reductions in hide tithes. Gelsian and Wenvo had both enjoyed L'dro's favours until they had conceived his children and been put callously aside. C'mine had been right. The Weyrleader had many enemies, but few with the facility to do any more than complain about him in private.

C'los drifted closer. "Let me fill that up for you," he murmured, taking the bronze rider's almost untouched cup.

T'kamen watched as C'los made a show of refilling his drink. "Nice turn-out you have here," he said dryly. "Malcontents and underachievers."

"You're the biggest underachiever of them all, T'kamen," said C'los. "But like you, it's not their fault."

"Ch'vone can hardly blame L'dro for losing his dragon. We both know how he used to fly."

"Perhaps," C'los conceded. "But a dragonless man has enough to blame himself for. If it gives him any peace to blame another..."

"And the women who had his children? Green riders. They have no one to blame but themselves."

"Bearing the Weyrleader's child has always carried a certain prestige. They weren't to know L'dro would throw them over for it." C'los shook his head. "You need to be more objective. These people will be behind you when Shimpath rises."

T'kamen made himself relax as he accepted his wine cup back from C'los. "It seems insincere to accept the support of people I don't respect."

"No one ever said politics would leave you with a clean conscience, T'kamen," said C'los. "You want a chance at Shimpath when she rises, you need more than just me and Mine on your side." Then, at the approach of two riders, he clapped the bronze rider meaningfully on the shoulder and raised his voice. "A'kul, Lishen, have you met T'kamen...?"



L'dro had come in late and left early. Valonna, as usual on the occasions when the Weyrleader shared her bed, had stayed where she was until she was sure he was gone. If he had simply got up for a drink or to relieve himself, he wouldn't have been pleased to return to an empty bed, and she hated upsetting him.

But Shimpath had reported sleepily, *He has gone to the lake*, with the particular emphasis on 'he' that Valonna knew meant L'dro. The queen never referred to him by name, nor even by title: only as 'Pierdeth's rider', when she deigned to speak of him at all. It was a point on which dragon and rider had often argued; needless to say, Valonna had never convinced Shimpath to change her mind.

She bathed and dressed, braided her hair with the deft speed of practice, then ventured out onto the ledge. Shimpath rested back on her haunches there, serene and beautiful, her hide as golden as the buttery sunlight that shafted into the Bowl from the east. "Good morning, Shimpath."

The queen lowered her huge head to her rider, exhaling a soft warm breath over her. *Good morning, Valonna.*

The Weyrwoman caressed the sleek muzzle, flattening her hands against the smooth, brilliantly golden skin, leaning her forehead against her dragon's nose. *Do you want to bathe today?*

Shimpath hesitated, her eyes turning green as she swivelled her head to look in the direction of the lake. *Perhaps later.*

Valonna followed her dragon's gaze. Pierdeth wallowed in the shallows, his wings half spread as his rider bathed him.

The Weyrleader's bronze was a superb beast. Valonna still remembered the first time she had laid eyes on the huge dragon, landing majestically in the courtyard of Jessaf Hold with his Wing behind him. All the dragons had been awesome, but the one great bronze, stocky with muscle and nearly half as large again as the biggest brown, had drawn every eye.

Valonna had discovered much later that a blue dragon had chosen her from among the other girls of the Hold, but L'dro had singled her out personally, and the instant when the handsome bronze rider had pronounced her suitability for Search had been the single best moment of the fourteen-Turn-old Valonna's life. Riding Pierdeth, mounted in front of the Wingleader on the smooth, warm bronze neck, had been an unthinkable joy; *between* a terrifying shock, but her gratitude to L'dro, and her awe of him, had coloured her first three Turns at Madellon.

But how was a girl, shy and quiet even in her home Hold, supposed to adjust to being the absolute focus of all the sexual and political tensions of twenty bronze riders? How could she have known that the bronze rider to whom she owed her marvellous bond with Shimpath would become so cold to her as soon as his dragon had flown her queen? How was a seventeen-Turn-old meant to cope with the pressures of being the only queen rider in the Weyr, her predecessor having died without giving her any significant training in the duties that being Weyrwoman would entail?

L'dro still held sway over her. His rugged stature and handsome good looks had captivated her from the first moment. Tall and broad in the shoulder, the Weyrleader conveyed a sense of easy strength and confidence. The rich, deep blue and emerald green tunics he favoured contrasted effectively with his daringly long red-brown hair. Even on the worst days, when he treated her as if her very existence offended him, when he made her feel unworthy to ride her queen, when she despaired that she had ever been anything to him save a route to power, she knew she owed him everything, and some tiny part of her clung to the hope that one day he would treat her right, that deep down inside, bold, dashing L'dro really did love her.

Shimpath was too perceptive to be unaware of Valonna's ambiguous feelings regarding L'dro, and she showed no overt affection for her bronze mate. But Pierdeth was such a magnificent specimen of dragonkind. Even now, watching L'dro care for his beast in a rare moment of tenderness, Valonna could see the condition in the shining brown-gold hide, the supple strength and density of muscle, the rugged, powerful conformation. The strongest, fastest, cleverest bronze won the queen: how many times had Valonna heard that? But she knew that the Weyr could influence the queen's choice too, and L'dro's support among the senior riders was almost unanimous.

Even if Shimpath was caught by a different bronze the next time she rose – and Valonna trembled even at the thought of such treachery – there was little to choose between the other bronze riders. Most of the Wingleaders supported L'dro, content to keep him as Weyrleader when the rewards for loyalty were so apparent. The old Weyrleader, R'hren, had as little time for Valonna as had his weyrmate before him. The remaining, unranked bronze riders were out of contention.

Valonna didn't even like to entertain such thoughts at length while Shimpath was awake. Weyrwoman Fianine had, at least, given her instructions on how to behave when Shimpath rose to mate. Valonna was terrified of somehow wrongly influencing her dragon in flight and driving the queen *between* with her own fears.

She had wanted Pierdeth to win Shimpath's first flight, and even with all that had happened since then, Valonna was afraid of sharing a flight with any but the man she knew, and still loved. She might not be comfortable with the bed she had made, but try as she might, the Weyrwoman could think of no alternative other than to lie in it.



Pierdeth and Sejanth have left the Weyr.

C'mine looked up from the painstaking work of repairing his worn riding straps. "You're sure they've gone?"

Darshanth replied with casual certainty. *Vallenth is on watch. She says Pierdeth said they can be found at Kellad Hold if they are needed today.*

The blue rider rose from where he had been sitting against the curve of his dragon's neck and took the half-finished piece of work inside. "Would you ask Shimpath if her rider would mind a visitor?"

Of course.

"Politely."

There was a long silence. C'mine frowned as he stowed his leather-working tools away. "Darshanth?"

Shush, the blue told him. Then, after a moment longer, *You may go to Shimpath's weyr.*

"What were you two talking about?"

Dragon things, the blue said offhandedly. *Do you want a lift?*

"No, I'll walk. I think there are still enough bronze riders around who would query even a blue on Shimpath's ledge. "

Darshanth lifted his chin off the ledge enough to watch his rider walk towards the short flight of steps that led to the ground, his eyes placidly green. *What bronze ever notices a mere blue?*

C'mine paused to stroke his dragon's silky silver-blue neck fondly. *All the ones we beat in mating flights.*

Darshanth snorted in amusement and knocked his rider's hand away. *I beat them. Not you. Shimpath's rider is waiting.*

The blue rider crossed the Bowl to Valonna's weyr, glancing up as the shadows of the dragons drilling overhead fell upon him. C'los and Indioth were up there, flying on the extreme left of the formation, as usual. C'mine absently wondered if the green was due to come into season again soon. He had a very poor memory for her schedule, but it seemed to him that it had been a while. C'los would know. C'mine made a mental note to ask.

“Good morning, Shimpath,” C’mine murmured politely to the queen as he stepped onto her weyr ledge. Then he raised his voice slightly. “Valonna?”

“I’m here,” the Weyrwoman called, from inside.

C’mine entered the weyr, squinting through the darkness. The young queen rider was hovering awkwardly, as if uncertain of how to behave. It was still an improvement on the flustered stammering that had greeted him the first few times he had initiated conversation. It didn’t help that Valonna was so small. Fianine had been tall, giving her an impressive physical presence to match her personality, but the young Weyrwoman stood barely taller than C’mine’s shoulder, and the blue rider wasn’t tall. Valonna’s slightness was emphasised by her pale blonde, intricately braided hair and light coloration: fair skin, and blue-grey eyes. She looked younger than she was, despite the formal richness of a gown that a Lady Holder would not have rejected. Valonna’s overall demeanour was one of vulnerability, and C’mine had never been good at being unkind. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Valonna affirmed, in a tone that told C’mine she was not. “I’m fine.”

“Shimpath’s looking well,” the blue rider continued.

Valonna looked down, and then up again, smiling with genuine pleasure at the compliment to her dragon. “She wants to bathe, later.”

“I can’t blame her, in this weather,” C’mine agreed amiably. He glanced back out at the golden dragon. “She’s at least the size Cherganth was. Nice agile conformation, too. You only have to look at T’rello’s bronze to see she’s passed that on.”

“I thought he might have been more stocky because of...”

Shimpath rumbled, and Valonna stopped, her face falling.

“The sire?” C’mine prompted, and then continued before she could withdraw again. Getting her to talk about dragons was the best way to coax her out of herself. “You can see the muscle mass of the blues and browns came from him, but the greens seem to have taken Shimpath’s build, and Santinoth has that brightness of hers in his hide.”

Valonna seemed to relax again. “How’s Darshanth?” she asked, with sincerity that belied her normally timid exterior.

“Full of himself, as usual,” C’mine replied. “He won’t tell me what he’s been saying to your queen. I don’t trust him around the ladies.”

The Weyrwoman actually giggled, and C’mine was reminded forcefully of the girl’s youth. “I’m serious,” he said earnestly. “Dragons and humans. He likes nothing better than having women fuss over him.”

“Doesn’t Indioth get jealous?” Valonna asked.

“No. She has her own flock of admirers.” C’mine paused, and then added, “I think they, like Los and me, just like to have someone friendly to come home to.”

Valonna was silent for a moment as that gentle truth sank in.

“Why don’t you come over and indulge my blue?” C’mine suggested. “If Shimpath doesn’t mind, I know Darshanth would love to see you.”

The queen rider’s gaze flicked automatically to the empty space on the weyr ledge where Pierdeth customarily alighted. “I don’t know...” Then her eyes went briefly vague. “Although Shimpath says I should...”

“There you go,” C’mine told her. “Don’t ever argue with a queen dragon.”

The blue rider led Valonna the scenic route, along the edge of the lake, rather than crossing too close to the low level weyrs of ranking bronze and brown riders. A couple of dragons were diving at the far end of the lake, near the empty weyrling barracks.

C’mine decided to try a different tack. “Do you ever wonder what it would be like to live during a Pass, Valonna?”

“Sometimes, I suppose,” she replied uncertainly. “Do you?”

The blue rider nodded. “It’s crossed my mind a few times. I’m not sure I’d want to, though. Threadfall’s so dangerous. We’re not used to dragons dying. Do you remember when G’stor died the other month?” At Valonna’s shudder, C’mine went on. “We only lose a dragon when the rider dies of age or illness, or if there’s an accident in drills, or when there are weyrings. During a Pass, I guess there’d be dragons dying most Falls.” Then, because it was a rather sombre subject, he continued, “Of course, there’d be more clutches. And more queens. Do you know much about Madellon’s history?”

“I’ve read some in the Archives, but...” Valonna shook her head.

“C’los is the historian, really, but I’ve picked up a little from him.” C’mine folded his arms, thinking. “The Weyr was founded just after the end of the last Pass, about ninety Turns ago. Southern and the Peninsula had been struggling to protect all the inhabited parts of the South, and there were already plans to expand into the uninhabited areas of the continent, so the eight Weyrleaders decided to found a new Weyr here, in the west.” The blue rider touched the Weyr badge on the sleeve of his riding jacket, embossed with the westward-pointing compass arrow of Madellon. “It was just called Western Weyr at first, but for Turns it was know as M’dellon’s Weyr – he was the first Weyrleader – and when he died, in about ’26, the decision was made to call it Madellon Weyr. It was built a little in advance of the population spread, but the settlements had caught up to it within about a decade. So, like at the Peninsula, provision was made for a larger population than any of the Northern Weyrs.” C’mine

nodded at the many empty weyr openings. “Most Weyrs have four Flights at capacity: twelve wings, about four hundred dragons. Madellon has space for seven Flights – almost seven hundred dragons at full strength.”

“Seven hundred?” asked Valonna. “We’ve only two hundred and twenty now.”

C’mine hesitated, gauging the young queen rider’s mood, and then said, “That’s a good thing.”

“Why is it good?”

The blue rider sighed mentally, wondering whether he should pity Valonna’s ingenuousness or envy it, and then led the Weyrwoman up the steps to his and C’los’ weyr. “Come on up.”

Darshanth raised his head at their approach, humming a greeting to Valonna, and commenting to his rider, *You bring me such nice presents.*

Behave yourself. “He thinks he’s funny.”

The blue ignored him and extended his head towards Valonna, nudging delicately at her hand until she raised it to rub his eye ridges. “He seems so small compared to Shimpath.”

“Less to keep clean,” said C’mine. He thoughtfully moved the tip of Darshanth’s tail, stretched across the entrance to the cave, with one foot. “Will you come in and have a drink?”

Valonna nodded, and C’mine led the way into the weyr. “Excuse the mess,” he said. “We had some friends over last night. Can I get you a cup of wine?”

There was plenty left from the party. The blue rider poured for them both, then moved the harness he had been working on from the table. “Fixing straps,” he explained.

“The Weyr Tanner makes mine,” said Valonna.

C’mine sipped his wine, then said carefully, “It’s a little difficult to get hold of the hide for new straps at the moment.”

The Weyrwoman looked blank. “Is it?”

The blue rider picked up the neck strap he had been repairing, turning it over to show Valonna where the leather had already been patched and re-riveted several times. “There are a lot of harnesses looking like this in the Weyr right now.”

The Weyrwoman shifted uneasily, clenching her fingers around the wine cup. “The Headwoman organises the hide tithes.”

“Traditionally the Weyrwoman oversees all tithes,” C’mine said gently, but he continued before the girl could retreat back into herself. “Fianine left a lot to the Headwoman. You still have ultimate authority, though.”

Valonna looked even more uncomfortable. “L’dro negotiates with the Holds and Halls on tithe quantities.”

C’mine hated being in this position, but he knew he was probably better equipped to talk to Valonna than either C’los or T’kamen. “Also a traditional duty of the Weyrwoman’s.”

The young queen rider went very still, her eyes downcast.

“Valonna.” C’mine reached over and touched the girl’s arm lightly. “You’re young. Fianine died before her time, and you were pushed into being Weyrwoman before you’d even finished weyrling training. No one is criticising you: you’ve just never had a chance to learn all the ins and outs of your job.”

“L’dro says that in an Interval it’s the Weyrleader’s duty and privilege to take the burden of responsibility off the Weyrwoman,” said Valonna, as if reciting something she had heard many times.

Outside, Darshanth snorted, vocalising his rider’s disgust. C’mine steadied his dragon, keeping a firm hold on his full opinion of the Weyrleader. “L’dro has always been fully aware of his privileges,” he said. “But he doesn’t ride the queen. His position isn’t permanent.”

Valonna tensed, and C’mine wondered if he had said too much too soon. “You and Shimpath, you’re the real Weyrleaders,” he went on. “There are twenty more bronzes, twenty more bronze riders, but only one Weyrwoman and only one queen. And Shimpath wouldn’t have chosen you if you didn’t have the right skills to lead the Weyr.”

The young queen rider looked down at Darshanth’s harness, her eyes running along the neatly spliced and repaired length. “I don’t know how,” she said finally, in a very small voice.

“Sure you do,” C’mine assured her. “You just have to find out what has to be done, and then do it, or delegate.” That was a gross simplification, but there was no point in overwhelming her. “You need some practice, is all.”

“But the Headwoman...”

C’mine persisted, “The Headwoman is there to help you, Valonna, and she’s a great resource, but you have one crucial advantage over her – you’re a dragonrider. You understand dragon and rider needs better than Adrissa ever will. Like the need for a good stock of harness quality hide at the Weyr Tannery.” The blue rider paused, sensing her torn loyalties, and added, “L’dro has so much to think about himself, he can’t see to every detail. So that’s where you can help him – with the little things he doesn’t have time for.”

“Do you really think I could help him?” Valonna asked.

“I know you could.”

“How do I start?”

“Well, why don’t you talk to your riders and find out what they need? Most of the bronze riders of this Weyr have enough influence to look after themselves, but I’m only a blue rider – the likes of my weyrmate and me could use a champion on the Council.”

Only a blue rider, Darshanth grumbled. *You’d be sorry if I was bronze.*

“I don’t know many riders who aren’t on the Council.”

“You know me,” C’mine pointed out. “C’los and I can get you talking to the right people. Some of the female green riders, especially – L’dro might be Weyrleader, but he’s never been a woman.”

Valonna actually laughed at that, and C’mine relaxed, finally confident that he had hit his mark.

“You’ll help me, though?” the queen rider asked him anxiously.

C’mine smiled. “Of course. Darshanth and I, and Indioth and C’los, are always here if you need us.”

The young Weyrwoman smiled back, and there was suddenly more strength and character in that expression than the blue rider had yet seen. *There’s strength here, Darshanth. It’s buried, but it’s there.*

The blue ignored his comment. *Only a blue rider!* he muttered indignantly, half to himself. *What do you want from me? Blood?*