



CHAPTER THREE



L'stev was the last rider to arrive, hurrying in with a slightly relieved expression. "I thought you'd start without me."

"Never happen," C'mine said from his corner, deadpan.

"All here and accounted for?" asked C'los.

T'kamen glanced around the weyr. The nine riders C'los had assembled were a motley bunch, not least himself – the only bronze rider in the Weyr to have been stripped of the command of his Wing. R'hren and T'rello were important as fellow bronze riders, Chuvone had first hand experience of L'dro's unsuitability for leadership, and Jenavally's Craft connections gave her a unique perspective. C'los, C'mine and L'stev were irreplaceable. The only newcomer was V'rai, an older blue rider of L'dro's own Wing. T'kamen wasn't sure he trusted him yet, but C'los seemed to have faith in him.

"Well, I don't think I need to spell out what we want to achieve here," the green rider began.

"If you won't, I will," R'hren growled. "We need a new Weyrleader."

Everyone around the room muttered their agreement. T'kamen watched carefully to see if any of the others looked uneasy or uncertain. He caught C'los' eye, and the other rider nodded slightly.

"All right, since we're being open, it doesn't hurt to say that T'kamen here is our favoured candidate for the position," C'los went on. "With respect to you, R'hren, and you, T'rello, T'kamen is the most suitable bronze rider here to take on the duties of Weyrleader."

Again, old R'hren cut across C'los' caution. "Don't mangle words, green rider. I'm too old and this lad's too young. T'kamen has the experience, the dragon, and the motive to challenge L'dro's superiority."

"Excuse me," V'rai spoke up. "I'm sure this is a foolish question, but why exactly is there this enmity between you and L'dro, T'kamen? We've all got our reasons, but what's yours?"

"We Impressed from the same clutch," said T'kamen. "L'dro and I. C'los and C'mine, and Chuvone as well."

The dragonless man nodded his head vigorously. "Don't forget U'rane, T'kamen. Him too."

"U'rane?" asked V'rai.

"The other bronze rider from that class," said T'kamen. The ghost of a sad smile crossed his face. "He had the decency to die before he became a threat to L'dro."

R'hren gave a disgusted snort. "L'dro always was a belligerent little tail-fork, even before he Impressed. I remember U'rane. He was a nice lad."

"He was my brother," said Chuvone.

Everyone shifted uneasily at the former rider's vehemence. T'kamen wondered if the others were as subtly unnerved by Chuvone as he always had been. There was something disturbing about his gaze, something deeply unsettling about his demeanour – something obscene about the half-life lived by this crippled man. The bronze rider felt the silent comfort of his dragon's mind wrap around his, understanding without words. Would he have had the will to go on without Epherineth?

Pushing the thought aside, T'kamen went on. "L'dro was competitive. Not always the best at everything, but he needed to think he was. He resented the fact that Epherineth and I sometimes did better."

"Sometimes?" Chuvone laughed bitterly. "Always. You never lost a dragon under your command."

T'kamen closed his eyes briefly, remembering that day. The death of Ch'vone's Gommeshath had not really been L'dro's fault, but the bronze rider had overheard L'dro blustering to his friends, his cronies even then. *Who cares, what's one blue less anyway?*

"L'dro has always had a problem with the smaller colours," said C'los. "Blues and greens, mostly. The moment he Impressed a bronze, anything less was beneath him. I think he hated T'kamen for compromising his dignity as a bronze rider by having C'mine and me as friends. And hated us for being associated with the bronze

rider who kept outstripping him.” The green rider shrugged. “Maybe if it wasn’t for us three, he wouldn’t treat blue and green riders so badly.”

“Speaking as one of his wingriders, I wouldn’t say that he treats us badly,” said V’rai. “He just doesn’t treat us at all, other than the female green riders – and have you ever noticed that *all* the green riders in his Wing are young and female and pretty?”

“Without Thread, there’s no drive to muster good fighting Wings,” L’stev pointed out. “If Thread was falling, no bronze – and that includes yours, T’rello – would willingly take orders from a Wingleader brown who doesn’t know his ass from his elbow. How many Wings drill with firestone more than once a month?”

“Flame drill is hardly necessary at the mid point of an Interval,” R’hren objected.

“But if we get complacent and forget the technique, who’s going to pass it on to the weyrlings a hundred Turns from now when the next Pass begins?” L’stev argued.

“We’re getting off topic here,” C’los interrupted. “But the distance from the Pass does influence leadership. We don’t know how long it’ll be before Shimpath rises again.”

“Cherganth rose every four or five Turns,” said R’hren.

“It’s been more than four since Shimpath’s first flight,” said T’rello.

“You should remember,” L’stev told the youngest rider, not unkindly.

“She’s due any time now, then,” said Chuvone.

“It’ll be soon,” said T’kamen, and felt Epherineth’s concurrence.

R’hren nodded his agreement. “Even my old boy still knows when it’s a queen’s time, although I don’t think he has a weyrling’s chance in Threadfall against Shimpath.”

“Epherineth tried for her the last time, didn’t he, Kamen?” asked Jenavally. “How did Pierdeth beat him?”

T’kamen shook his head. “I don’t remember much about that day.”

“Short flight,” said C’mine. “Small clutch.”

“So Pierdeth got her early,” C’los concluded. “Could be inexperience on Shimpath’s part.”

“Pierdeth is very strong,” Jenavally mused. “He caught Hinnarioth once. Put on the speed early on. I doubt he’d have the stamina for a long queen flight. He’s just such a big dragon.”

“But if he can catch her fast he doesn’t need stamina,” said C’los.

“There’s more to it than just stamina and speed,” said C’mine. “L’dro Searched Valonna.”

“Actually H’restin’s blue did,” V’rai said dryly. “He’s our Search rider.”

“But L’dro brought her in, I remember that,” said R’hren. “That’s always a big advantage, the gratitude of a young queen rider.”

“But he treats her like a drudge,” said Jenavally. “Worse than a drudge.”

“She brings it on herself,” R’hren said dismissively. “Why Shimpath chose her, I don’t know. There were plenty of more suitable girls. T’kamen, didn’t you have a candidate for that queen egg?”

T’kamen looked away from the old Weyrleader, gritting his teeth. “Credit that to C’mine and Darshanth.”

“Shimpath chose Valonna, and we can’t change that,” C’los said quickly, throwing T’kamen a glance.

“I suppose not,” R’hren conceded. “But how are you intending to convince her of T’kamen here? She seems perfectly happy putting up with that loud L’dro.”

“Working on it,” C’mine said quietly.

“What about you, Kamen?” asked Jenavally. “How do you feel about Valonna?”

“She deserves to be treated better than she is,” T’kamen replied.

“But otherwise you don’t think much of her?”

“She’s the queen’s rider. I respect her.”

“T’kamen doesn’t have to love her, Jena,” C’los pointed out. “That’s never been a requirement for Weyrleaders.”

Leaning back in his chair, V’rai observed T’kamen with narrowed eyes. “So, bronze rider, say you manage this, say your Epherineth catches the queen and you become Weyrleader. What then?”

“Then, things change,” said T’kamen. “All deals L’dro has made with the Lords are off. Proper tithes, and decent conditions for all riders, not just bronze riders and favourites. I’ll put this place to rights.”

“Well, what about us?” the blue rider persisted, gesturing around the room. “Since we’ll have given you the Weyrleadership, what will you do to reward us?”

“Given him the Weyrleadership?” L’stev exclaimed.

“No one’s going to get special treatment,” C’los protested simultaneously.

“Wait a moment,” R’hren interrupted.

The meeting degenerated into a chorus of conflicting voices and opinions. T’kamen took a deep breath, then raised his voice. “That’s enough!”

There was enough force in his tone to silence them all. T'kamen looked around for a moment until all attention was back on him, then continued in a quieter tone. "L'stev is right. No one will *give* me the Weyrleadership. Your support, our discussions, could help. Will help. But we can only influence a queen flight so far. Epherineth will win or lose her.

"V'rai, you want to know what your rewards will be? Your reward will be a better overall standard of living for all riders. There will be no exchange of one privileged clique for another. But I can promise you all the opportunities you have been denied under L'dro. R'hren – the respect due your position and experience. T'rello – a chance to learn and develop your leadership skills under the best bronze and brown riders to teach you. I'll negotiate a new contract with a dedicated Master Harper so you, Jenavally, have time to be rider *and* Weyr Singer. But none of these things are rewards for your support. They're just the common courtesies due every single dragonrider in the Weyr, the things L'dro has taken from us all."

"You can't give back what L'dro took from me," said Chuvone.

"Well, what happens to L'dro?" asked V'rai.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," L'stev said darkly.

"L'stev's right," said C'los. "You can't Impress a dragon until it Hatches, and it's only just been laid."

"Well, it's clear who's playing mother queen to it," R'hren muttered, with an irate glance at the green rider.

"If you know of someone with a sharper mind than C'los, R'hren, I'd like to meet him," T'kamen said mildly, before C'los could object to the remark. "This is an Interval. Rider ability counts for more than dragon colour when we don't have to worry about Thread."

"So where do we go from here?" asked T'rello.

"Well, C'mine has the Weyrwoman covered," said C'los, pacified by T'kamen's defence.

The blue rider frowned. "Could you think of a less impersonal expression?" he asked. "Valonna needs a change of Weyrleader as much as any of us, but that doesn't justify treating her like a pawn."

"C'mine is helping the Weyrwoman to assert herself," C'los rephrased. "Probably starting tomorrow, we'll be getting her to talk more to the unranked riders about what they need."

"If Valonna suddenly starts getting involved in the running of the Weyr, won't L'dro realise that something's going on?" asked Jenavally.

"That's where R'hren comes in," said C'los.

The former Weyrleader nodded. “L’dro doesn’t perceive me as a threat,” he admitted reluctantly. “If he publicly objects to Valonna’s activities I’ll step in on her behalf. The Weyrwoman has every right to take an active interest in the way the Weyr is run.”

“Credit for her new assertiveness will go to C’mine and myself,” C’los added. “We won’t make a secret of that. L’dro doesn’t like us, but we’re not a threat, either.”

“Wait a moment,” V’rai objected. “You keep talking about not being a threat – surely T’kamen is the only one L’dro would ever consider a threat? And aren’t you counting on support for him among the wingriders to influence the queen’s flight?”

“Yes. But not openly, not yet. There are many riders who’d support T’kamen over L’dro, given the choice. The party Mine and I held a few days ago proved that. But there’s no point in we few,” C’los gestured around the weyr, “threatening L’dro and the Council bronze riders head-on. They’d laugh us off, and find ways to discredit T’kamen before he could build up any significant support. The support has to come first, and that means talking to individual riders. The riders at the party the other day, including those who aren’t here now – they’re the core of T’kamen’s support. For whatever reason, they want L’dro out, and they’ll support T’kamen to accomplish it. From them, we expand to the riders who don’t like L’dro, or have problems with the way the Council runs things, but who wouldn’t usually make a fuss. When they see that they aren’t alone, they’ll be more inclined to stand up and be counted. Blue and green riders might be at the bottom of the pecking order, but there’s more of us than them. We just have to show them that they *can* make a difference, and that they *do* have a voice – and T’kamen is the one to speak for them.”

T’kamen nodded, pleased to see all the others agreeing too. C’los was perhaps overly fond of the sound of his own voice, but when he was in full flow it was hard to doubt the green rider’s passionate belief in the rights of riders who were traditionally sidelined. He couldn’t have competed with him in a war of words. T’kamen was just glad that C’los was on his side.



D’feng crossed the dining hall with his thoughts still intent upon the livestock inventory he had left in his office. The figures that weren’t adding up on slate had even less chance of doing so in his head, but he believed strongly in the importance of taking breaks to clear his mind when the Weyr’s complex logistics were vexing him. His stroll in the fresh air had coincidentally taken him past the herdbeast pens, and he had stood for several minutes tallying the stock before recognising his

preoccupation. Chastising himself, he had headed instead for the kitchens. A fresh cup of klah would sharpen his wits.

Standing by the service hatch, waiting for one of the kitchen women to pour for him, D'feng noticed something strange. There was a congregation of riders on the other side of the dining hall. Three hours after the noon meal, there was no reason for so many to be gathered here.

Curious, D'feng moved closer. It was difficult to identify riders from their featureless backs, but glancing over the shoulder knots he could see that they were mostly green and blue riders. The bronze rider almost dismissed the gathering as an incidental meeting of low-ranked riders, but something, perhaps the tiny grain of instinct and intuition that remained defiant within his otherwise rational and orderly mind, stopped him.

Moving around to the side of the group, D'feng recognised Valonna, and for a moment was rendered speechless. The Weyrwoman was actually speaking to the assembled riders. Just as his counts of herdbeast and wherry were not balancing, so this assertive Valonna did not tally with the malleable, ineffectual personality he and L'dro had worked so hard to cultivate in the queen's rider.

The Flightleader considered stepping in there and then and putting an end to this dangerous new emergence of backbone in the girl. Undoubtedly L'dro would have done so. But D'feng was not of the same impulsive, hot-headed character as the Weyrleader, and as he began to pick faces out of the crowd his eyes narrowed.

C'mine was there, as quiet and unassuming as ever, but wherever that blue rider was, his more dangerous weyrmate would be, too, and sure enough, D'feng recognised C'los amongst the other riders. That pair had always been trouble. They made friends too easily, and it seemed like Valonna had become their latest conquest. It was a good thing neither of them rode bronze.

D'feng's eyes narrowed still further, and he scanned the crowd for the bronze rider he associated with the difficult pair, but a different rider caught his attention. R'hren? What was the former Weyrleader doing in the midst of this rabble? The old man had made his low opinion of Valonna quite plain over the Turns.

There was something going on here.

D'feng decided to move away before he was noticed. He wanted to discuss this with L'dro, and begin his own investigations, before he blundered in.

As he began to edge cautiously away from the group, one man on the far side of the loose half-circle surrounding the Weyrwoman caught sight of him. D'feng froze, his gaze locked to that of the other man, his measured, analytical mind horrified at the prospect of having to come up with a plan on the spot.

But the man simply held his stare for a moment, and then turned his gaze attentively back to the Weyrwoman.

D'feng moved rapidly away from the assembly, his thoughts awchirl with more than the problem of wherry numbers. *Tell Pterdeth I need to speak to his rider. Immediately.*



The audience had dispersed, and Valonna had listened carefully to each of the individual riders who had come up to her with requests or comments afterwards. Her mind was alive with all the details, and she was glad that C'mine had been taking notes.

But even more, she was glad for the blue rider's steady, supportive presence and his quiet confidence in her. The Weyrwoman had been momentarily stricken with horror at the expectant group of thirty or forty riders waiting for her. So many people, so many strange faces, and all of them there to listen to her.

"They're your riders," C'mine had encouraged, and the blue rider had introduced her to several of them as he had led her to the front of the group. "This way you won't be looking at a group of total strangers," he'd explained, and Valonna was startled to find that he was right. Even the briefest greeting gave her friendly faces in the crowd.

Her address had been short, outlining in simple terms her desire to contribute more to the Weyr by being available to hear grievances and suggestions from non-Council riders. Valonna had spoken haltingly at first, but following C'mine's advice she had focused on the faces she knew. Shimpath's encouraging voice in her mind had been as supportive and bolstering as C'mine's reassuring physical presence, and by the time Valonna had finished speaking her nervousness had vanished. The feeling of being respected, of having her words heeded, of knowing that she was among those who would listen and accept, was new to the young Weyrwoman, and yet somehow familiar, like a garment she had worn for Turns but that she had only recently grown to fit.

They should listen to you, Shimpath had said. Are you not my rider?

Now, C'mine extended the slate on which he had been taking notes to her. "I knew you'd be fine," he said, his deep voice warm with praise.

Valonna took the hide, scanning the concise script. Then she looked back up at the blue rider, restraining the unaccustomed urge to hug him. "I thought it would be harder," she admitted.

C'los sauntered up, his familiar grin in place. "The hard part is going to be attending to all that business."

Valonna was more comfortable with C'mine than his more demanding, flamboyant weyrmate, but after her success with more than thirty riders she felt less timid. "I didn't realise so many riders needed harness hide," she said, looking at the list of petitions.

"It's a major concern, especially for those of us with dragons who like to test our reflexes periodically," said C'los. "Where are you going to start?"

The question seemed casual, but Valonna noticed the manner of both men become subtly expectant. She looked at the slate, then at the two riders. "Master Mannis would know how much hide is needed, wouldn't he?" she suggested cautiously.

"I'd think so," said C'mine.

Relieved at the blue rider's approval, the Weyrwoman felt her spirits lift. *Darshanth's rider is a kind man*, Shimpath commented, in response to Valonna's unspoken sentiment.

Valonna didn't need to agree with what her dragon already knew. But C'mine's kindness also made her sad. How could the rider of a mere blue be so considerate when the bronze rider who she wished would treat her as kindly was not?

The Weyrwoman quickly hid the thought from Shimpath. L'dro would surely be pleased with her efforts to help the Weyr run more smoothly. He had been out-Weyr a great deal recently, and Valonna was sure he would appreciate her contribution, and that of the two riders who were helping her.



"Those two self-important tail-forks?" L'dro asked, with a contemptuous grunt.

"Don't rule them out too quickly," D'feng cautioned him.

"They've obviously been putting ideas in the Weyrwoman's head."

"Ideas?" L'dro shook his head. "Valonna wouldn't know an idea if she Impressed it."

"She was talking to a crowd of riders," the other bronze rider said earnestly. "At least three dozen, openly and with confidence."

L'dro shrugged. "Who were they?"

"Blue and green riders, mostly..."

"Hah!" L'dro snorted dismissively.

"...but not all." D'feng paused. "R'hren was there."

The Weyrleader dropped his casual demeanour. He leaned forwards over his desk, regarding D'feng through narrowed eyes. "What was that old fool doing there?"

"That 'old fool' is one of your Flightleaders, and was once Weyrleader," D'feng pointed out.

The hint of disdain that almost broke through D'feng's dispassionate façade irritated L'dro. "I'm not an idiot, rider," he spat. "I asked you why he was there, not who he is."

"His bronze caught Cherganth several times," D'feng replied, his neutrality hastily reasserted.

"Staamath couldn't keep up with a young queen. R'hren can't possibly be planning to retake the Weyrleadership."

"Staamath outflew Pierdeth – and Sejanth – in Cherganth's last flight," D'feng noted. "Strength doesn't count for everything. R'hren could be considering a bid for leadership."

"I can't believe it," L'dro scoffed. "He'd kill Staamath trying to fly Shimpath."

"There is another possibility," said D'feng, as if it had only just occurred to him. "Staamath has flown in a dozen queen flights – he may be extra sensitive to a queen coming into heat. Shimpath could be close to rising again."

"Pierdeth will know. *He's* her mate, not that ancient dried-up beast of R'hren's." But L'dro wondered if there was any truth to D'feng's theory. Old or not, the ageing bronze had been crafty enough to mate Cherganth more than once.

"Staamath isn't the only bronze you should worry about," D'feng added. "Given that C'los and C'mine are in the thick of this business with the Weyrwoman..."

L'dro scowled. "Did you see T'kamen there?"

"No," D'feng admitted.

"But by association he may as well have been consorting with my Weyrwoman in full view." L'dro slammed his fist down on his desk in a sudden excess of anger. "If they insinuate it into Valonna's head that T'kamen would make a better Weyrleader than me..."

D'feng flinched almost imperceptibly at the palpable threat of violence that hung, unspoken, in the air. "T'kamen has no support on the Council," he assured the Weyrleader. "His objections against his demotion when you became Weyrleader came to nothing. Brown riders climb over each other for a chance to crow at that failure of a bronze rider. Nobody likes a loser. T'kamen's impotent, L'dro."

L'dro's scowl deepened. Stripping his weyrlihood rival of his rank had been the single most satisfying moment of his time as Weyrleader. Forcing T'kamen to hand over his Wingleader insignia to a brown rider had sweetened the old bitterness

of always coming second to him. T'kamen had drawn little attention to himself since, relocating to a remote high-level weyr when his Wingleader quarters had been taken from him along with his status, as silent as his taciturn dragon. But much as L'dro wished he could simply forget about the other bronze rider, he knew he never could. He would never have admitted it, not even to D'feng, but T'kamen had left a lasting mark upon him. Pierdeth victory over Shimpath had reversed their roles, banishing the old humiliation of him, L'dro, son of L'mis who had been Weyrleader, always being runner-up to a trader boy whose closest friends rode blue and green.

L'dro calmed himself, reaching for Pierdeth's mind for comfort as remembered resentment put a sour taste in his mouth. Weyrleader these four Turns, his position was more secure now than it had been before Shimpath's crucial maiden flight, with twenty bronze riders and twice that number of browns throwing their support behind him. Pierdeth was a powerful bronze, well equipped to catch a rising female fast and early before a wilier male had time to manoeuvre, and the previous clutch bonded him to the queen in a way shared by no other dragon on Pern.

Still, there was no harm in making sure. "Keep an eye on R'hren," he told D'feng finally, breaking out of his thoughts. "I doubt he has serious ambitions to fly Shimpath. Have Sejanth watch his Wing's drills, and make sure that any mistakes – no matter how small – are reported back to me."

"R'hren's had a long career," said D'feng, betraying the hint of a smirk. "It's no surprise that he's slowing down at his age. He deserves a break – perhaps Southern would suit him?"

"See to it that you contact P'raima at Southern on the matter," L'dro told his Second. "As for T'kamen..." The Weyrleader paused, musing. "Did I see a report on the unsatisfactory output of our breeding herdbeast?"

D'feng's expression brightened momentarily. L'dro recognised the look: the other bronze rider was never happier than when looking over the dozens of accounts and itineraries and tallies that ran the Weyr's day to day affairs. That was the only reason he'd chosen the tedious rider as his right-hand man. L'dro couldn't stand D'feng personally, but the bronze rider's meticulous attention to detail removed a large burden from L'dro's own desk. "I was looking it over just now, but I don't see the connection."

"Watch Epherineth's consumption of Weyr beasts. See that he's taking no more than his allotted amount."

"Very good, sir." Then a crafty look came over D'feng's face. "Weyrleader, wasn't there a Beastcraft apprentice here around the time that Cherganth's last clutch Hatched?"

L'dro frowned. "A Beastcraft..." Then he remembered. "Of course. *Her*." He chuckled. "Track her down. The Beastcraft at Peninsula South will have records of her whereabouts. Madellon would like this particular apprentice to assist in our new breeding programme to increase the size of our herds." Then he added, maliciously, "Perhaps it'll give T'kamen something to think about other than Valonna's weyr."

Even D'feng's expression held a certain spiteful edge. "I'll see to it, L'dro."

"As for Valonna..." L'dro paused again.

"Weyrleader?"

L'dro nodded slowly, his eyes crafty. "Leave her to me."