



CHAPTER FIVE



“...And the dragons stay clear of this end of the Bowl, see, so they doesn’t spook the milkers, though the most of ‘em’s so daft they wouldn’t blink twice if a dragon come down right afore ‘em...”

Sarenya stifled a sigh as Kerrickan burred on. Master Arrense had charged the lad with the responsibility of showing the new journeyman around the beast pens, but Sarenya guessed that Madellon’s Master Beastcrafter had just wanted a reprieve from his garrulous apprentice.

She leaned on the fence of the enclosure, making a rough estimate of numbers. The dairy herd, at least, seemed sufficient to meet the Weyr’s needs. Of considerably more concern was the woeful state of the beast and wherry pens set aside for dragon use.

Sarenya guessed that Madellon’s complement of two hundred and twenty-four dragons consumed slightly less than seven hundred beasts per sevenday. Even with the older milk cows that had been pulled off the dairy herd, the pens were a full third under-strength. The amount of out-Weyr hunting that must be necessary was incredible.

Things had certainly changed since the last time she had been here.

Epherineth had come in too low and too fast for her to get a good look at the Weyr from above. T’kamen had given her only the most cursory directions to the Master Beastcrafter’s office and then left her there in the Bowl, directing Epherineth up to a ledge at a level Sarenya could not hope to reach without a dragon.

But reporting to her new Master was more important than chasing after a foul-tempered bronze rider. The fact that that Master also happened to be Sarenya’s father’s brother was of little consequence. Sarenya had found her way to Arrense’s

office and presented herself. The Master had taken her documents and given her Kerrickan as a guide, and instructions to report back once she was settled.

Now, Sarenya wondered if Arrense hadn't bargained the best end of the deal. Kerrickan had led her on a lovingly detailed tour of the Weyr's stock pens, and his earnest description of the ways of dragons was almost patronising. She resolved to remain patient. The boy wasn't to know that she had been here before – and Sarenya intended to keep it that way.

Tarnish came to her rescue. The bronze arrowed in low over the dairy enclosure, startling one of the placid milk cows. Sarenya offered him her arm as a perch, and Tarnish landed, broadcasting a slightly shaky image of the blue dragon she had sent him to find.

Sarenya stroked her lizard's neck gratefully, then addressed Kerrickan, interrupting his commentary. "My thanks for your help, apprentice, but Tarnish has just informed me that my presence is required elsewhere."

The lad stared at her blankly. "But, Master said I were to show you everything."

"You have, Kerrickan, and I thank you. But I'd like to do some investigating for myself." When the boy still didn't move, Sarenya added gently, "You're dismissed, apprentice."

As she headed briskly across the Bowl away from Kerrickan, Saren made a mental note to praise the apprentice to Master Arrense. Rambling or not, he had not shirked his duty, and at least his methodical tour had given her an accurate impression of the Weyr's predicament. Its herds were clearly inadequate. Sarenya wondered how Madellon's dragonriders felt about the shortage.

Tarnish chirped in her ear, and Sarenya touched his forepaw, returning her attention to her new objective. The sight of the familiar blue dragon resting in full sun on his ledge made Sarenya lengthen her stride. As she climbed the short flight of steps cut into the rock the blue raised his head, gazing at her with sparkling eyes and a welcoming rumble. "Good day to you, too, Darshanth," Sarenya greeted the handsome dragon courteously.

Darshanth lowered his head to her. *Thank you, Sarenya of the Beastcraft.*

Pleased that he had spoken to her, Sarenya rubbed the blue's downy near eye ridge, and asked, "Is Mine home?"

He's coming.

"Saren? Is that you?"

The soft baritone, so close a tonal match to Darshanth's deep voice, made Sarenya smile, and she moved around the dragon's bulk to greet his rider. "Who else were you expecting, C'mine?"

The blue rider stepped around his dragon's tail, moving into the light to meet the journeyman. "I wasn't expecting anyone, but I'll take you gladly. It's good to see you." He held out his arms to her.

Sarenya sent Tarnish aloft and stepped into C'mine's embrace unencumbered, hugging him warmly. "Good to see you too, Mine."

The blue rider held her at arm's length for a moment, regarding her with an expression of sincere pleasure. Sarenya felt his smile lift her spirits. C'mine wasn't handsome – he had been known to refer to himself quite cheerfully as 'ugly and thinning', an accurate, if unkind, description. But there was a nobility and dignity to his features, an incredible gentleness in his eyes, and his incorruptibly beautiful soul radiated from him. It had been less than a month since he and C'los had last stopped by Blue Shale, but Sarenya was still glad to see the blue rider.

"You're looking well," C'mine complimented her. "What brings you here?"

"I've been transferred," Sarenya replied. "I arrived about an hour ago."

"You're here for good?"

"It looks that way. Something about improving the Weyr's breeding programme." Sarenya shrugged. "Not really my field of expertise, but this is where the Hall's put me, and I wasn't about to turn down this place."

C'mine looked briefly concerned. "You're all right with being here?"

Sarenya was about to reply, "Why shouldn't I be?" when she remembered who C'mine was, and stepped down her defences. She smiled a little sadly. "T'kamen was sent to pick me up."

The blue rider's eyes widened, and then he shook his head. "No wonder he just called C'los up to his weyr."

Unwilling to dwell on the issue, even with this most understanding of friends, Sarenya asked, "He and Indioth are all right?"

"Of course," said C'mine. "They'll be glad to see you." His tone became teasing. "You'll have to find someone else to keep score, though. I'm not getting involved."

Sarenya smiled wryly. "I'm out of practice. Los is bound to get in a few on me before I get my touch back."

C'mine squeezed her hands lightly. "Saren, I actually have a guest at the moment."

“I didn’t realise, Mine, I’m sorry,” Sarenya apologised hastily. She hadn’t thought that the blue rider might be otherwise occupied. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“No, on the contrary: you should probably come in and make your introductions anyway. You’ll need to do so at some point.”

Mystified, Sarenya asked, “You’re not being unfaithful to C’los?”

C’mine laughed. “Nothing like that. Come on in.”

Sarenya stepped over Darshanth’s tail, which lay across the entrance to the weyr, as if the blue wanted his presence acknowledged. She glanced up at the dragon with a smile as C’mine led her inside.

The weyr was brightly lit with glows, and comfortably furnished, but neither its warm lighting nor the evidence of its occupants’ impeccable taste in décor surprised Sarenya as much as the young woman sitting at the table. Her rank cords were half-hidden on her shoulder, and she was older by seven Turns than she had been the last time Sarenya had seen her, but the girl was undoubtedly the Weyrwoman of Madellon.

Or Valonna of Jessaf Hold, as Sarenya remembered her: the timid, awestruck little girl who had been brought to the Weyr at the last possible moment, spending only a single night in the Weyr before the Hatching. Valonna, rider of golden Shimpath: the dragonet Sarenya could have loved, had the infant queen not turned from her to choose the one girl who had hung back. Valonna, whose worthiness of Impressing a queen had been proved on that day, at the expense of Sarenya’s own.

The journeyman felt C’mine’s hand drop lightly onto her shoulder. “Saren, this is Weyrwoman Valonna. Weyrwoman, this is journeyman Sarenya of the Beastcraft, just posted to Madellon.”

Journeyman? Sarenya thought furiously, irrationally angry with C’mine for his innocuous introduction, as if she and Valonna had never met. *I’m a failed candidate first and a journeyman second, especially to her.*

But the Weyrwoman showed no sign of recognition. Smoothing down her skirts, Valonna stood, extended her hand to Sarenya and spoke in a clear voice. “Welcome to Madellon, journeyman.”

Sarenya stared at Valonna’s hand. The girl’s fingers were smooth and pale – strengthened by the exercise of caring for a dragon, no doubt, but a stark contrast to her own sun-browned and work-callused hands, just as the sudden upsurge of doubt in herself contrasted with the young Weyrwoman’s quiet confidence.

She covered Valonna’s hand before her hesitation became embarrassing, and managed a smile. “Thank you, Weyrwoman. It’s an honour to be posted to the Weyr. I look forward to the new challenges.”

Valonna's expression wavered for a fraction of an instant. Sarenya caught the change, fiercely curious to know what the Weyrwoman's polite façade was hiding, but C'mine spoke first.

"Saren's an old friend of ours," he told the Weyrwoman. "We've kept in touch over the Turns."

Sarenya watched Valonna intently, but the Weyrwoman's attention was all on C'mine as the blue rider spoke, his soft words filling what would otherwise have been an uncomfortable silence. The journeyman frowned slightly: there was suddenly a look of totally unguarded dependence on Valonna's face, quite at odds with her previous assurance. Either the girl was as uncertain as Sarenya had become, or she was a consummate actress. Surely not the latter: the Valonna that Sarenya remembered had been genuinely shy and unsure, and C'mine was not easy to fool.

But then, Valonna had surprised everyone by Impressing Shimpath, and her influence on her queen was mutely evident in the identity of the current Weyrleader. No: Sarenya had no intention of underestimating the Weyrwoman a second time. Any woman capable of Impressing a queen dragon must have something special about her, and whatever C'mine's reasons for this association with Valonna, Sarenya was determined to keep her guard up at all times.



C'los sat quietly, watching T'kamen pace. The angry glint in the bronze rider's eyes, and the aggravation that showed in every inch of his lean frame, had convinced C'los to tone down his normal flamboyance. Provoking T'kamen was one of his favourite pastimes, but not when the bronze rider was already agitated.

The green rider sorted through the implications of what T'kamen had told him. The new evidence of L'dro's indiscretion was unsurprising – potentially useful, but otherwise predictable. C'los was more interested in the significance of Sarenya's posting. T'kamen was clearly too upset to think the issue through, but C'los was already suspicious.

It wasn't the first time L'dro had sent T'kamen on silly errands with the express purpose of riling him. Adding embarrassment into the bargain by leaving him ignorant of the journeyman he was also supposed to convey was a slightly more subtle twist, but still nothing new.

No: the real clue was Sarenya herself. New members of any Craft had been rare at the Weyr during L'dro's tenure: certainly, there had been more dismissals than appointments. The chances of Sarenya's posting being a coincidence were slim. L'dro was not ignorant of her connection with T'kamen. Around the time of Cherganth's final Hatching almost every bronze rider had acknowledged links with at

least one female candidate. The advantage of having favour with a queen rider in mating flights had been amply illustrated when Pierdeth had flown Shimpath. But the understanding between T'kamen and Sarenya had been more sincere than most, and that fact had not gone unnoticed by the other bronze riders of the Weyr. Sarenya had been widely regarded as one of the most likely candidates for the queen egg, and by association that had made T'kamen a serious contender for the Weyrleadership. Valonna's Impression, and Sarenya's subsequent disappearance from the Weyr, had marked the end of any overtly political interest in the connection, but C'los was sure that L'dro had not forgotten.

So the Weyrleader had specifically requested that Sarenya return to Madellon. Why? Simply to add insult to T'kamen's injury? To make his humiliation before Hold and Hall worse? There were many other ways to achieve that, most less costly and troublesome than pulling a journeyman out of an established post.

The green rider frowned to himself. L'dro was hardly famed for his mental flexibility – a heavy-handed approach would be his style. But D'feng must have had a hand in this, too: C'los sensed a more calculated influence than L'dro behind this plot to upset T'kamen. Sejanth's rider was even more rigid than the Weyrleader, but D'feng had the beginnings of a sense of subtlety. L'dro would not have restricted the audience for T'kamen's embarrassment to a few unimportant Hold and Craft folk. D'feng, then, had engineered the details. But by openly sending T'kamen to Blue Shale for the fire-lizard eggs and Sarenya, albeit neglecting to mention the latter duty, D'feng had drawn attention to the journeyman. Why had he and L'dro gone to such pains to put Sarenya in T'kamen's way?

Under any other circumstances, C'los would have been pleased to have Sarenya so close. He relished their often vicious verbal sparring, valuing her as an opponent, and he knew that C'mine was extremely fond of her. But the green rider could sense that Sarenya was a pawn in a larger plot contrived by D'feng and L'dro to trip up T'kamen, and the unusual complexity of intrigue from two riders whose methods were typically far blunter could mean only one thing.

"They've started thinking about Shimpath's next flight," he said aloud.

T'kamen stopped pacing, looking at C'los with narrowed eyes, but the two riders had been acquainted with each other's peculiarities for many Turns, and the bronze rider did not question the apparently random statement. Instead, he simply said, "Go on."

"It's not much of a plot yet, T'kamen, but they've realised Shimpath hasn't got long to go, and they're starting to take steps to secure their positions."

The bronze rider folded his arms, obviously still upset, but focusing more on C'los now. "Where does that put our campaign?"

C'los considered. "L'dro must have guessed that we have something in mind by now. If he's thinking about Shimpath's mating then he's thinking about possible rivals to Pierdeth, and that means Epherineth. He made a move against you today, but not directly. I think it's time you went public with your intentions."

"My intentions are only the same as every other bronze rider," said T'kamen.

"Not every bronze rider has a chance." C'los calculated swiftly. "There are twenty-one bronzes at Madellon now. Nine of them are over thirty-five Turns. Four, maybe five, are young enough but their riders don't have the edge. Santinoth is too young. D'feng and Sejanth don't have an ounce of popular support behind them. Peteorth..." C'los grimaced. Then he went on, "That leaves Pierdeth, Epherineth, and perhaps two or three others. Maybe Sewelth, or Kidbeth. But their riders would be as happy to settle for L'dro again, and they wouldn't dare declare opposition."

T'kamen laughed ironically. "They'd end up like me."

C'los nodded. "On numbers, it's you against L'dro. That's the basis we've been working on. And since I had the foresight to start planning early..."

"Don't wrench your shoulder patting yourself on the back," T'kamen said sourly.

The green rider ignored the comment. "We have a certain advantage. Those quiet talks you've been having with discontented riders have gone down well. Valonna's developing a backbone, thanks to Mine. Epherineth's in the shape of his life."

"As is Pierdeth," the bronze rider pointed out.

C'los shrugged. "We discussed this. Pierdeth's built for quick bursts of speed. Epherineth will destroy him in a long flight. If you want some practice, get him to chase a few greens and see how much distance he can get out of them." He grinned, unable to resist teasing, "Have him chase Indioth. She's a stayer. Remember?"

"That was a long time ago," T'kamen muttered. "Can we get back to the subject?"

C'los chuckled, glad that he'd provoked his friend's traditional reaction to any mention of that long-ago flight, then became serious. "You should make your opposition to L'dro known. Making the first public move in acknowledgement of Shimpath's imminence will win you a lot of respect. And I think it's time you talked to Valonna."

The bronze rider stiffened slightly. "Valonna."

"She's the Weyrwoman," C'los said. "Shimpath's rider."

“I know who she is.”

“She’s a big part of the plan, Kamen. You can’t pretend she doesn’t exist forever.”

The bronze rider’s expression darkened. “She’s the queen’s rider. Of course she exists.”

C’los sighed. “The woman comes with the job, T’kamen. And somehow you need to get her to like you.”

T’kamen shot him a black look.

The green rider shook his head. “Like you, dislike L’dro – C’mine’s been working on her. But you have to get Saren out of your mind. You have bigger things to worry about right now than her.”

For a long moment the bronze rider said nothing, staring straight ahead, tense in every fibre of his being. Finally he said, “I need to be with Epherineth for a while.”

“I’ll get the word around to our people.”

T’kamen nodded, but his eyes were already distant.

C’los shrugged mentally, leaving T’kamen’s weyr without further comment, heading for the ledge where his green waited beside Epherineth.

You worry about him, Indioth said perceptively.

Him, the mere receptacle of all our hopes and dreams? The green rider sighed as he stepped lightly up to his dragon’s forearm. *Always have, girl. Always have.*



Valonna could feel something strange as she made her way towards the top table in the dining hall.

The greetings of riders she had met in the last sevenday sounded strained, almost expectant, as if each person was waiting for something. Valonna looked cautiously around the tables. There was a pattern to the way people were sitting, she was sure of it, but she couldn’t decide what.

“Good evening, Valonna,” C’mine said softly, as she passed his place.

“Thank you, C’mine,” the Weyrwoman replied. The blue rider always put her at her ease.

Beside C’mine, C’los spoke unexpectedly. “Weyrwoman, why don’t you sit with us tonight?”

Valonna saw C'mine look sharply at his weyrmate as she fumbled for an answer. "I should always sit with the Council at the evening meal," she said, paraphrasing something D'feng had once said.

"We can't deprive them of the Weyrwoman all the time," C'mine said to the green rider.

"Thank you anyway," said Valonna.

"We'll see you for the noon meal tomorrow," C'mine promised her.

As Valonna continued towards her place, she puzzled over the subtle evidence of disagreement between the weyrmates. C'mine and C'los usually seemed to enjoy the easy harmony of long association.

The Weyrwoman stepped up onto the dais where the head table ran at right angles to the common tables of the dining hall. Most of the Council bronze riders were already seated, but without exception, each that she passed ignored her.

As usual, Valonna struggled with her heavy chair; as usual, neither S'herdo, on her right, nor D'feng, two places to her left, offered to help. She poured herself a cup of wine from the carafe on the table before her and sipped, her gaze ranging out over the tables, trying to pinpoint what was causing the tension in the room.

L'dro's hand thumped down on the back of Valonna's chair, making her start in surprise. "Weyrwoman," he greeted her, sitting down without further ceremony.

"Weyrleader," Valonna replied. She reached for the wine carafe and poured for the bronze rider.

L'dro drank off his wine in a single draught, but as Valonna went to refill his cup, he stayed her hand, and spoke over his shoulder to a passing steward. "You, bring something suitable for your Weyrleader to drink. This turns my stomach."

Valonna sat quietly while the steward brought several alternative vintages for L'dro's appraisal. The Weyrleader would generally drink whatever was set in front of him, and Valonna wondered what had prompted the display.

Choosing one of the wines, L'dro dismissed the steward and drank deeply of his new cup. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, surveying the dining hall with a satisfied expression. Valonna relaxed minutely: she had feared that L'dro's displeasure with the wine was reflective of his poor mood.

"There's a Gather at Peninsula North tomorrow," the Weyrleader said abruptly. "I thought we would...do you want to go?"

Valonna was taken aback by the offer, inelegant as it was. She peered cautiously at L'dro, wondering how he wanted her to react. The Weyrleader seldom asked her to accompany him to Gathers in their own territory, let alone those held at Holds outside Madellon's boundaries.

"I'd like that," she replied finally.

L'dro nodded, looking pleased. "The Peninsula is three hours ahead of us. We'll leave just after noon."

As kitchen women began to serve slices of roast beast onto the plates, the Weyrleader took a small loaf from the basket of bread and broke it in half, offering a piece to Valonna. The Weyrwoman took it, mystified by L'dro's suddenly courteous behaviour, but reluctant to comment. The bronze rider had clearly had a good day, and Valonna had no wish to antagonise him by questioning his pleasant disposition.

"You've had a good day?" asked L'dro, almost as if reading her mind.

Valonna swallowed the bite of bread she had been chewing. "Yes, thank you."

"What have you been doing?"

"Well, I bathed Shimpeth," the Weyrwoman replied uncertainly. She had spent much of the day in C'mine's company, but she didn't dare mention him.

"Good. You should be looking after her. She's the only queen we've got."

"Is Pierdeth well?" Valonna asked dutifully.

L'dro smiled. "He's always well."

L'dro was never more good-humoured than when speaking of his dragon. Valonna nibbled at the good roast meat, to buy herself a moment's thought, then spoke tentatively. "I've compiled a report on the riders who'd like to move into those three Wingsecond weyrs on the ground level."

"Wingsecond weyrs are for Wingseconds," said L'dro.

"Yes, but all our Wingseconds are already weyred, and it seems such a waste to have those three going vacant..."

The Weyrleader paused before replying, as if gathering himself, and then replied in that same even, reasonable tone. "A low-level weyr is a privilege that must be earned. If we just gave them to anyone who wanted them, riders would have no incentive to work towards promotion."

"But what about all the riders who can never be promoted to Wingsecond because they ride greens or blues?"

Patently, L'dro explained, "Anyone chosen by a blue or green doesn't deserve promotion. The dragons choose their riders wisely, Valonna. Queens and bronzes are superior over all the other dragons, and they choose the best and most deserving people to be superior over all the other riders. Blue and green riders are inferior to us, like their dragons are inferior to ours. That's dragon hierarchy. We're better than them, so we deserve better."

It wasn't the first time Valonna had heard the explanation, but as she looked out at the common tables below, her gaze automatically fell upon C'mine. He was so kind, so reassuring, so understanding. But his dragon was blue, and according to L'dro, that made him inferior.

Valonna looked at the bronze rider on her right: S'herdo, Helvianth's rider, an ill-favoured man of some forty Turns' experience, whose breath always reeked of the harsh spirits he favoured, and whose clothing exuded a faint, sour odour of sweat. She looked at D'feng, on L'dro's left: meticulous to the point of being dreary, almost openly contemptuous of her.

Were these men really superior to C'mine just because they rode bronze dragons?

"What about my report?" she asked L'dro.

For a moment, Valonna thought the Weyrleader was going to issue an angry retort: irritation flashed briefly in his eyes, and his lips twitched in the start of a snarl. Then, almost as soon as it had materialised, the expression was gone. "Put it on my desk," he replied at last. "I'll read it after the Gather tomorrow."

They continued to eat in silence for several moments. The meal was fine: succulent meat, rich gravy, tender vegetables, and the best quality white bread. Even the wine L'dro had rejected was good.

So it came as a surprise when a rider sitting at the near end of one of the common tables shoved back his chair with a clatter, rose noisily to his feet, and cried out, "Faranth's teeth, how much longer do we have to put up with this swill?"

The buzz of conversation in the dining hall died instantly.

Valonna didn't recognise the rider: a burly giant of a man, despite the age evident in his white hair and craggy features, with a patch depicting a green dragon visible on the shoulder of his jacket, but inwardly she held her breath in anticipation of L'dro's reaction.

The Weyrleader had shot to his feet almost at the same moment as the old green rider. "Sit down, rider."

"A watch-wher wouldn't touch what we eat while you and your precious Council dine on prime fare!" the green rider spat, and seizing his plate, he strode to the head table and slammed it down amidst the dishes before L'dro.

Valonna recoiled as a splash of the plate's contents spattered onto her hand. The dish contained a thin stew, grey-brown in colour, containing unidentifiable lumps of what she presumed were meat and vegetables under a revolting slick of grease. The smell alone was enough to turn her stomach, and she wiped her soiled hand frantically on a napkin.

“A’keret, this man is one of your riders,” L’dro said under his breath to the bronze rider on D’feng’s left. “Deal with him.”

“Sit down, S’mik, you’re making a scene,” A’keret hissed urgently to the green rider.

“I will not sit down!” S’mik roared. “Forty-six Turns I’ve been a rider of Madellon Weyr. I’ve seen five Weyrleaders sit in that chair, and you, L’dro, disgrace the title!”

Outside, a bass roar that could only have belonged to Pierdeth rumbled across the Bowl, but the voice of the green that responded was shrilly defiant. L’dro muttered under his breath, “Pierdeth, shut that green up!”

The utter silence that had followed S’mik’s initial outburst had been replaced by a hushed murmur as more than two hundred riders and twice as many Weyrfolk watched and commented on the unfolding drama.

Pierdeth has silenced Belvonth, Shimpath reported, but the queen’s tone revealed her distaste for the measure.

S’mik was shaking his head dully as his green’s distress affected him. A’keret and another rider moved quickly to escort the dazed green rider away. But then the shriek as another chair was shoved roughly across the stone floor made everyone freeze, and as another rider rose to his feet, Valonna felt a thrill of recognition.

“Why don’t you try asking Pierdeth to gag *my* dragon, Weyrleader?”

T’kamen spoke loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the dining cavern, but there was still a softness to his tone, a focused intensity in direct contrast to L’dro’s furious outburst, but just as compelling. Every head turned, every eye drawn to the lean bronze rider as he stared with fierce dark eyes at the Weyrleader.

“I’ve had enough of starving him because the Weyrleader can’t provide food for him. I’ve had enough of risking myself with old flying harness because the Weyrleader can’t provide leather for new. I’ve had enough of subsisting on this slop while the Weyrleader dines on the few prime beasts that are left. And I’ve had enough of seeing riders repressed because of the colour of their dragons. I’ve had enough, Weyrleader, and I’m not the only one.”

“Aye, T’kamen, you’re not.” On the other side of the hall, another rider stood up, and Valonna recognised L’stev, the old Weyrleader. “I’ve had it to the back teeth.”

“And so have I.” Another rider, one Valonna didn’t know, leapt to his feet. He raised his plate. “I’ve had my fill.” And, raising the dish in the air, the rider dashed it vehemently to the floor.

As if the tinkling of broken earthenware had been a signal, riders began to stand up all over the dining hall, calling out their names and throwing their plates on the floor.

“B’stroc and blue Ivorth!”

“C’los and Indiorth!”

“S’rius and Padseth hear you!”

“A’len and brown Chyilth!”

“Ashina and Kessemath!”

“T’rello and bronze Santinoth for T’kamen!”

“N’kro and green Vyroth! T’kamen!”

And on, and on, until dozens of riders were standing up, in every part of the dining hall, at every table, and the crash of plates was joined by a chant as the throng of green, blue, brown, and bronze riders took up the name of their champion, banging their fists on the tables and stamping their feet on the floor.

“T’kamen! T’kamen! T’kamen!”

Stunned by the accusations, and the show of opposition for her weyrmate, Valonna looked mutely at L’dro. The Weyrleader’s face was ashen, his expression thunderstruck as he stared at T’kamen, as if he wasn’t aware of the riders’ chant, conscious only of the bronze rider who remained a point of still focus in the midst of the chaos that had erupted.

Then L’dro suddenly seemed to come to his senses, and he rounded on Valonna. “Control them! Control their dragons!”

“I can’t,” the Weyrwoman said helplessly, bewildered. “There are too many...”

Dismissing her, L’dro turned on his Wingleaders. “Bronzes!”

The deep bellows of a dozen bronze dragons seemed to shake the very stones of the Weyr, but three times as many voices responded in protest.

No more! Shimpath cried, and her single roar silenced every dragon.

But it was T’kamen whose soft command calmed the riot in the dining hall. “Enough.”

Silence descended, within and without. Riders resumed their seats, some looking ashamed at their part in the upheaval, some still visibly filled with the frightening intensity of the moment, others seeming quietly satisfied.

Finally, only T’kamen and L’dro still stood, facing each other across the dining hall. L’dro was incandescent, his fingers curled into fists, his fury a dreadful, palpable force, and yet despite the staggering display of defiance, he still carried himself as the Weyrleader, the rightful superior of every rider in the Weyr.

T'kamen simply returned L'dro's glare, apparently unaffected by it, his expression calm and resolute. Then, finally, he turned from his place and walked from the dining hall, not in defeat, but in disregard for the rider he had just so publicly challenged.

Every eye that followed him from the cavern simultaneously swivelled to watch L'dro's reaction.

"...sit, just sit down and pretend nothing's happened..."

The whisper barely reached Valonna's ears, and it was with some difficulty that she recognised the voice as D'feng's. Sejanth's rider was speaking without moving his lips, advising L'dro undetected by all except those close enough to hear his murmur.

The Weyr watched as its Weyrleader sat down. L'dro reached for his wine cup, and his hand shook slightly as he gulped its contents. Then he picked up his knife, speared a slice of meat and started to eat.

Slowly, painfully slowly, conversation returned to the dining hall. Valonna lifted her own cup in suddenly nerveless fingers. Her heart was pounding and her thoughts were scattered. She didn't know what to think or where to look.

Automatically, her eyes sought out C'mine. The blue rider appeared troubled, but beside him, C'los' expression was animated as he spoke rapidly to several of the other riders at their table.

Valonna had heard C'los pledge his support to T'kamen, but not C'mine. A part of her hoped desperately that the blue rider had taken no part in the demonstration. Not C'mine: he wouldn't speak out in opposition to L'dro – would he? But perhaps his voice had simply been lost in the cacophony.

The Weyrwoman stared at her plate, at the meal that had seemed so fine a short time ago. She had no appetite for it now, and even less to chew over what T'kamen had argued it represented: unfair privilege, abuse of power, and a way of things that the enigmatic bronze rider seemed set on changing.



C'los had managed to contain his delight until both he and C'mine were safely clear of the dining hall, and public scrutiny, but in the privacy of their own weyr, the green rider was almost hopping with glee. "Beautiful! Just beautiful!"

"It went as well as could be expected," C'mine replied cautiously.

"Better than that, Mine. Did you count the number of riders who spoke up of their own accord?" C'los shook his head, flushed with success, as he sought ink and

fresh hide on their scroll-strewn table. “We couldn’t have hoped for a better first show.”

But the green rider’s normally infectious grin failed to lift C’mine’s unease. His weyrmate’s strategy had worked: there was no doubt about that. C’los had chosen S’mik to spark off the demonstration, partially by merit of the older green rider’s many Turns of experience – lending him greater credibility than a young rider – but mostly because S’mik was a known troublemaker who took an almost perverse pleasure in disrupting the status quo. Riders already sympathetic to their cause had been planted at every table with instructions to generate as much vocal support for T’kamen, or at least opposition to L’dro, as possible. C’los had even contrived to make the stew served to the common riders more spectacularly disgusting than usual.

The result of the green rider’s meticulous planning had been the impressive show of discontent. But C’mine felt as if that was all it had been – a show, a carefully rehearsed and polished performance, the audience’s responses cleverly managed by a skilled director. C’los’ manipulation of S’mik’s anarchic tendencies seemed exploitative, the staged protest false.

But worst of all, C’mine felt that the real victim of the strife he had helped to engineer was Valonna. C’los’ unexpected suggestion that she sit with them had been a blatant attempt to create the impression of a public rift between the Weyrwoman and L’dro. Whatever Valonna’s actual feelings, she would have been considered guilty by association if she had been sitting with the chief engineers of the challenge to L’dro’s superiority. C’mine was less than happy with his weyrmate for trying to make Valonna an accessory.

He had watched L’dro turn on the queen’s rider at the height of the chaos in the dining hall, seen Valonna’s genuine horror at the display, and her distress at L’dro’s fury. From listening to her in confidence, without judging, C’mine had learned a great deal about the Weyrwoman’s ambiguous feelings for L’dro. Valonna loved and feared the Weyrleader in almost equal measures: still young enough to be in awe of L’dro’s decisive and bold manner, and still painfully eager to please him, she nonetheless lived in fear of his vicious, intolerant temperament. The Weyrwoman’s disappointment in L’dro’s change from conscientious suitor to callous brute was painfully clear. A part of her resented his transgressions, but she was more apt to forgive, or forget, or simply deny them.

Befriending the Weyrwoman had always been a key element in C’los’ plot to replace L’dro, but taking advantage of Valonna’s vulnerability through her friendship with C’mine made the blue rider deeply uncomfortable. He had grown fond of the

young queen rider in the last several sevendays. She reminded him of his second youngest sister: timid, uncertain, self-effacing, but possessed of a hidden streak of natural calmness and competence that would make her an excellent Weyrwoman, if properly nurtured.

C'mine had been reluctant to bring up the subject of Shimpath's next flight with Valonna. Now that T'kamen had made his intentions known, the blue rider feared that the Weyrwoman would no longer trust him. He wouldn't blame her if she felt betrayed. Influencing Valonna in the hope of manipulating the outcome of her dragon's next mating made C'mine as bad as L'dro.

"Twenty-two spoke up for themselves," C'los reported exultantly, marking the figure down with a flourish and underlining it several times for emphasis. "Only three browns, and the ones we expected, but eight blues and eleven greens. Then the sixteen of us we know are definite already, seventeen including Chuvone. R'hren didn't speak up, nor did Jena or V'rai, but that's what we arranged. That gives us thirty-eight riders against L'dro on the first count. Three bronzes, six browns, thirteen blues, sixteen greens."

C'los' rapid tallies only partially registered with C'mine. The blue rider asked, "Where's T'kamen?"

"His weyr, I would guess," C'los said. His eyes went momentarily distant, and then he nodded. "Indy says Epherineth's on his ledge. Probably doesn't want to be seen back here straight away."

Quietly, C'mine asked, "How was he feeling about Saren when you talked to him earlier?"

"Well, not happy, obviously," the green rider replied. "But I think he understands that he needs to keep his mind on the Weyrleadership." C'los sighed. "It's the old wounds that are dangerous. If Saren had stayed on here they'd have settled by now, and she wouldn't be a distraction. I wish she'd never left. Anyway, T'kamen said his bit convincingly enough, and that's what counts."

C'mine was glad that his weyrmate had changed the subject. Saren's sudden departure from Madellon seven Turns ago was not a matter upon which he wished to dwell. "Kamen doesn't need instruction," he said. Then, uncharacteristically volunteering a controversial opinion, the blue rider added, "He doesn't even really need any help. Plans and challenges are fine, but when Shimpath rises, she and the bronzes will be all that count."

C'los regarded him in momentary bemusement, then shook his head, grinning. "If it was that simple, Mine, Epherineth would have won the first time. He's

the better dragon. But Valonna wanted L'dro, and most of the other bronze riders were amenable. He's L'mis' son, remember."

"L'mis was marginalised by Fianine," C'mine said doubtfully.

"All her Weyrleaders were. That's at least partially why the Council are so intent on keeping Valonna subdued: Fianine was too powerful." C'los grinned. "Now Kamen's made his challenge, though, L'dro won't be able to push him around quite as much as he has. Everyone's going to be watching the pair of them. L'dro won't dare send him out on any more weyring errands: it would make him look petty."

"L'dro *is* petty."

"Of course, but now he's had a well-supported challenge levelled against him, he can't afford to show it. We've made the entire Weyr aware that the leadership could change when Shimpath rises. That puts all the bronze riders on alert. But especially L'dro."

"And T'kamen," C'mine pointed out.

"And T'kamen," C'los conceded, "but at least his temper isn't what it used to be. Epherineth saw to that."

C'mine had to agree with his weyrmate. In his adolescence, Taskamen's quick temper had been his dominant characteristic. The bronze rider's basic disposition had not changed, but Epherineth had been a calming influence from the moment of Impression. The wicked temper that had once seethed so close to the surface was contained now, internalised. It was a definite improvement. Epherineth, like many dragons, had made a better man of his rider.

And T'kamen was a good man. Not open, not agreeable, not easy to understand or befriend, but honest, direct, and a stalwart friend. The blue rider would never forget how fiercely Taskamen had defended him and Carellos in the difficult early days of their understanding, when the people of Kellad had regarded them with suspicion and unease. He had protected what others had reviled, and in accepting their unique bond without question, he had helped Cairmine and Carellos to accept themselves. It seemed so long ago – a lifetime ago – but C'mine would carry the memories, and his enduring friendship with T'kamen, to the end of his life.

So for all T'kamen's abrasiveness, C'mine knew the bronze rider would do right by Valonna and the Weyr. But increasingly, the means by which that end might be achieved were troubling the blue rider. Weyr politics on this scale seemed to have brought out the conniving worst in C'los, and while C'mine could not fault his weyrmate's cleverness, the relish with which the green rider manipulated events and people was subtly unpleasant.

"What next?" he asked quietly.

C'los rummaged through the hides on the table for a moment before pulling out one of his charts. "Next, we ask some of these people to come for a friendly drink and chat." He circled several names. "We have Kamen put himself about as much as possible, gathering support. We make all the unranked riders of the Weyr aware of how bad the conditions are for us. And it's definitely time that we got T'kamen and Valonna together in the same room. If you'll prepare Valonna for it, I'll see if I can persuade Kamen to be pleasant for an afternoon."

C'mine shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, Los. I think it's too soon."

"Too soon?" C'los echoed. "Shimpath could rise at any time now. We don't have the luxury of waiting."

"I have no idea how Valonna's feeling after today. If she thinks we've been friendly to her just to help T'kamen win the Weyrleadership..."

C'los frowned. "Mine, she's a nice enough girl, and I know you've taken a liking to her, but she's the queen's rider. She gave up exemption from Weyr politics the moment she Impressed Shimpath. If we don't guide her..."

"Don't you mean 'manipulate her'?" C'mine asked, with a more overt hint of his aversion to the situation.

"Call it that if you have to," said C'los, serious now. "But if we don't control her, someone else will, and that means we get L'dro as Weyrleader for another five Turns, and Valonna continues to be treated like a drudge."

"I know. I know. But..." C'mine struggled to express himself properly. "It's just that the way we're trying to control events seems as dishonest as anything L'dro and D'feng would do."

"The end justifies the means. Once T'kamen's Weyrleader we'll all benefit, Valonna included." The green rider shook his head in exasperation. "Mine, getting tender-hearted about the Weyrwoman won't help matters. And it's not as if she's Sarenya." C'los shrugged. "Then again, if Sarenya had Impressed, we wouldn't have this problem with L'dro."

C'mine shook his head. "That doesn't make it any more acceptable for us to use Valonna."

"We're not like L'dro. We're not doing this for selfish reasons. Shards, C'mine, L'dro's abused his position for five Turns. We can't just stand by and let it continue, but neither you nor I ride the right colour dragon to effect a change. That's why we have to work through T'kamen, and Valonna." C'los sighed. "I know you don't like it much, Mine. You're too honest for politics. But if you want to make fire, you have to chew stone, however much it stinks."

"I suppose you're right," C'mine conceded reluctantly.

C'los squeezed his weyrmate's shoulder. "Not much longer. Once T'kamen's replaced L'dro, things will be much better all round."

But C'mine's concerns were not entirely assuaged, and as he helped C'los put the next stage of his intricate plan into action, the blue rider couldn't help thinking that even when the last of the stone had been digested, and the last of the flame had gone out, the firestone ash would reek just as strongly as ever.