



CHAPTER NINE



Across Madellon territory, the last day of the Turn dawned alternately dry or humid, but uniformly hot.

At the Weyr, the bustle of activity that usually preceded the Turn's End celebrations had been reduced to a sluggish crawl. The youngsters sent out to pick the best produce from the kitchen gardens sweltered in the heat, and the limp greens and wilted leaves of the roots they brought back paid testament to the arid weather. The grass in the stock pens had been scorched into straw, and exhausted beasts stood or leaned by the fences, drained even of the energy to fear the few dragons picking off meals.

Another group of youngsters trudged wearily back and forth from the lake to the kitchens with buckets. The stream that had long been dammed to run past the entrance to the kitchens had dried up. The level of the lake had dropped to a such an extent that even the oldest riders could not remember ever having seen it so low, and most dragons were opting to bathe out-Weyr rather than swim in the increasingly brackish water.

Up by the Star Stones, the watchrider had taken refuge from the sun under his dragon's slightly open wing. Being put on watch on Turn's End normally constituted punishment, which was why T'kamen hadn't been surprised to see his name on the roster. He had accepted his lot with equanimity, although some of his supporters had thrown savage looks at L'dro in the dining hall at breakfast.

Epherineth called a friendly greeting to the blue dragon who had just taken off from the Bowl and was flying up towards the watch post. T'kamen squinted against the sun to identify Darshanth, and signalled the blue permission to land beside his bronze.

Darshanth alighted, neatly folding his wings, and touched noses with Epherineth as his rider dismounted. C'mine ducked under Epherineth's wing, sighing in visible relief at the shade. "Morning, Kamen."

"Mine," the bronze rider replied. "What are you doing up here?"

C'mine smiled sheepishly. "C'los is throwing things, and I don't duck very well."

T'kamen looked down at the ledge shared by Darshanth and Indioth. C'los' green was preening and posturing by turns, and her hide glowed fiercely. "That counts you out of the Turn's End celebration, too."

"One way or another," C'mine agreed. "Even if Darshanth doesn't catch her, I won't be showing up."

The bronze rider looked at his friend's dragon. Darshanth was much smaller than Epherineth, but the blue was gleaming with good health, and the bright sun emphasised the almost silvery highlights of his fine colour. "Good chasing, Darshanth."

The blue rumbled pleasantly in response. "He says thank you," said C'mine.

The two riders stood in companionable silence for a few moments under the shade of Epherineth's obligingly spread wing. Then T'kamen noticed how C'mine was regarding his weymate's green. "Something the matter?"

C'mine's slight frown vanished. "No, it's nothing."

T'kamen folded his arms. For all that C'mine willingly took responsibility for his friends' worries, the blue rider was notoriously cagey about his own. "It must be something, Mine, or you wouldn't have that look on your face."

The blue rider frowned again, as if in thought. Then he asked, "Do you think C'los has...changed at all?"

"Changed?"

"Forget it," the blue rider said hastily.

"No, Mine, it's all right. How do you mean, 'changed'?"

C'mine's frown deepened. "Since we've been helping you build up to being Weyrleader. He just seems to have become more...I don't know...cold. No, that's not right." The blue rider fumbled for words. "Ruthless, maybe? Unscrupulous?" C'mine's expression grew troubled. "That's it. Unscrupulous."

"In what way?" T'kamen asked, concerned. If C'los was acting in a way that disturbed his weymate, something was certainly wrong.

"You remember that discussion we all had, when H'ersto offered to interfere with Shimpath's flight?" At T'kamen's nod, C'mine went on. "All that night, Los was trying to think of a way to turn that to our advantage. He asked me if I thought R'hren

and T'rello might get their bronzes to do something similar to what H'ersto suggested."

"He couldn't have been serious," T'kamen objected.

C'mine shook his head. "I don't know. I said straight away that it wasn't right. He seemed to agree, but I know he kept thinking about it anyway."

"You know what he's like when he gets an idea in his head, Mine," said T'kamen. "He doesn't let it up until he's explored all the possibilities. It doesn't mean he'd actually try it."

"It's not just that," said C'mine. "He talks about Valonna as if she's just a piece to be taken in a game of chess. He doesn't think of her as a person – just as a weakness to be exploited. Kamen, I know she isn't the Weyrwoman we would have liked to have seen Impress Shimpath, but that doesn't give us the right to take advantage of her the way L'dro has."

"Other than you, the rest of us have barely spoken to Valonna," T'kamen said gently. "It wasn't a rebuke, not exactly, but the scheme to work him into the Weyrwoman's good graces had never really happened."

C'mine wasn't dumb to the mild criticism. "Kamen, after the challenge it was difficult enough to convince her that I wasn't just using her the way C'los wanted to, let alone getting her to warm to the idea of you."

"All right, Mine. You don't have to justify it to me."

"But I do have to justify it to C'los," the blue rider said doggedly. "And that's what bothers me. He's so caught up in the game, he's forgotten that the pieces he's playing with are real people."

"I don't like it much either," said T'kamen. "Massaging egos and making alliances with people I can barely stand – the riders who seem to think it's clever or daring to salute me in the dining hall – always having to take care of what I say in case some of the more zealous ones pick up on it... I'm a dragonrider, C'mine, not a politician. But I think Los is right. If popular support counts for anything in a mating flight, I won't have a chance without him."

"I suppose so," C'mine said reluctantly.

"It won't be for much longer, anyway," said T'kamen. "And when Indioth rises she'll take both your minds off politics for a while."

Another dragon appeared from *between* above them. Epherineth raised his head and uttered a short querying bark. The brown bugled a response, and Epherineth shifted aside for the pair to land beside him. *Sweep rider*.

The bronze rider ducked underneath his dragon's neck to greet the brown rider. Part of the watchpair's job was to take reports from the day's sweep riders, and

pass pertinent information on to any departing dragons. “What have you got, R’han?”

The young rider scrambled down from his dragon, pulling his riding jacket open and fanning himself in the heat. “We swept north over Kellad. Skies are clear as far as the southern border, but there’s a storm front gathering north of there, and Bostrath says the air feels very thick.”

“Wind conditions?”

“Not much high up, but it’s hot and gusty on the ground.” The young brown rider made a face, scratching his sweaty hair. “About time for a good rainstorm, I think. I envy them!”

“Not rain,” C’mine said quietly, from behind T’kamen. “Thunder. You’ve just described all the warning signs of a Kellad summer thunderstorm.”

R’han looked puzzled. “Won’t it rain too?”

“For about ten minutes,” C’mine agreed. “Then it’ll stop, and the heat will turn it all to steam. The ground’s so hard now it won’t even soak in. Kellad gets them a lot at this time of Turn. Don’t worry about it. The holders there are used to them.”

“Oh.” The brown rider looked at T’kamen. “Can I go now? It’s hot up here.”

T’kamen nodded his assent, and R’han climbed back aboard his brown. “I was never there in the summer,” the bronze rider commented defensively.

“You weren’t missing much,” C’mine assured him. “I should get on. I was going to go find out if Saren knows where people have been going to hunt. Darshanth’s going to be hungry after Indioth rises, and he says the Weyr beasts stick in his teeth.”

T’kamen smiled briefly, and not only at the blue’s fussiness. “Give her my best.”

“Always, Kamen.” C’mine hesitated, as if he was going to add something else, then shook his head. “See you later.”

“Later, Mine.” T’kamen knew the blue rider was holding something back regarding Sarenya. But as he watched Darshanth launch off the heights and glide down towards the stock pens, he realised that he didn’t mind at all.



L’dro stripped the last shreds of flesh off the bone he had been gnawing and tossed the wreckage away. As a drudge appeared at his elbow to take away the remains of his lunch, the Weyrleader wiped his greasy fingers on the tablecloth and sighed contentedly. As a child, he’d hated the way that supplementary meals were always skimped on a feast day. Since becoming Weyrleader he had

made it clear that he would expect to eat as heartily as ever at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, no matter the occasion. His only concession to informality was that he ate in the kitchen while drudges and serving women laid out the dining hall for the evening's celebrations.

He was looking forward to the new Turn. Other than the constant thorn in his side that was T'kamen, the Weyrleader felt he had much to celebrate. Tomorrow, the ninety-ninth Turn of the Interval would begin, and he, L'dro, would see the new Turn in as Weyrleader for the fifth time, equalling the record set by his father L'mis. It had been more than thirty Turns since a Weyrleader had remained so for longer.

The thought made L'dro sneer, despite his good mood. That old bitch Fianine had seen to it that no one bronze rider could consolidate his position as Weyrleader. She had used L'mis, letting Pelranth fly her queen when it suited her own ends, and then influencing Cherganth against the bronze when she tired of his rider. L'mis' plans for the Weyr had never come to fruition through the old Weyrwoman's meddling.

L'dro had been thirteen when his father had first become Weyrleader. The pride he'd felt for L'mis' achievement had been crowned by the prospect of Impressing a dragon of Pelranth's parentage. For the Weyrleader's only son to Impress a bronze, first time, would have been a glorious portent for L'mis' career as Weyrleader.

It was not to be. The boy Leddrome had stood on the hot sands, confident, expectant, as one by one dragonets escaped their shells. He had watched, tolerantly at first, as other boys and girls Impressed blues and greens, safe in the knowledge that only a bronze would choose him. He had stepped forward proudly when the first bronze had broken free, only to see it rush to another boy. He had felt first disbelief and then anger as two more bronzes passed him over, one in favour of Frampton, the ridiculous slow-witted candidate he had taken so much pleasure in teasing. Unable to comprehend the hatchlings' decisions, Leddrome had closed in around the final egg with the other remaining candidates, convinced that his dragon must be inside. It was a large egg, quite large enough to hold a good sized bronze. As it had rocked and cracked, Leddrome had willed its occupant to be free, turning all his mental power on welcoming the last dragonet, the one that had to be his.

The hatchling that had finally burst free of the egg was blue. Frozen in shock and disappointment, Leddrome had watched dumbly as two other boys helped the little creature to its feet. The blue dragonet had taken a single step towards him, his sorrowful creeling momentarily hopeful. Leddrome had looked at the crying hatchling, so very different to the proud, strong bronze dragonet he had envisaged,

and known that it was not for him. The Weyrleader's son would never accept a lesser dragon.

L'dro remembered vividly how clear his mind had been at that moment, as he had stepped away from the blue dragonet. He had decided then that he would never settle for second best – a comprehension of his own mind almost akin to an epiphany. The uncompromising stance had stayed with him ever since.

He never regretted rejecting the blue. It had died little more than a Turn later anyway, lost *between* in weyrling training along with the boy who had Impressed it. But his failure to Impress from Pelranth's first clutch had doomed his father as Weyrleader. Five Turns later, when Cherganth rose to mate again, a different bronze won her. Leddrome maintained his confident façade on the sands, but inside he was a morass of doubts: guilt for standing to a clutch not of his father's bronze, worry that he would fail again, fear that this would be the last time he had a chance. Much of his confidence had come from taunting the weaker candidates. By making them feel unworthy of dragons – or, at least, of the bronzes Leddrome claimed as his own – surely he would improve his own chances.

He had targeted three other boys with particular scorn: Taskamen, Cairmine and Carellos. The latter two had made friends easily amongst the candidates, threatening to undermine Leddrome's authority, so he had approached the trader lad, Taskamen, in search of an ally. Even then, Carellos and Cairmine had been on the edge of the kind of relationship most Holdbred types would revile, and Leddrome had tried to use it to turn Taskamen against his friends. The tactic had backfired dramatically. Under the gaudy clothes and sashes and bandannas and earrings that made up the trader's apparel, there was a quick and savage temper, and an abiding loyal to his friends. The fight resulting from Leddrome's attempt to win Taskamen over had almost seen them both barred from the sands.

The battle lines were thus drawn for the remainder of their candidacy. Taskamen had been easily provoked, but his two friends had been adept at talking him out of retaliation, so Leddrome's forays against him were seldom reciprocated, and word of the pranks never got back to the Weyrleader. On several occasions Leddrome had thought he might finally have pushed Taskamen into giving up his candidacy and leaving the Weyr for good, but the trader lad had apparently inexhaustible reserves of determination.

By the time of the Hatching, their rivalry had become a bitter feud, with half the candidates siding with Taskamen and the rest with Leddrome. The sniping had continued even on the way to the Hatching Ground. But once the ceremony had

begun, Leddrome had been forced once again to watch boys he hated Impress before him.

Cairmine had been chosen first, claimed by a blue with more assertion than befitted the colour. A green, Hatched too late to choose from amongst the four female candidates, had gone to Carellos. Both Impressions had galled Leddrome, but with the pair attaching lesser colours he could at least disdain them. But when the egg to which Taskamen had been drawn from the start of the Hatching had spilled its inhabitant onto the sand, and the sleek bronze dragonet had looked straight into the trader boy's eyes and cried out for joy at finding him, the bitterness and jealousy twisting in Leddrome's guts had almost overwhelmed him.

Too sick with anger and envy to hear the cries and cheers, Leddrome had simply stared blankly at the remaining eggs, his confidence in tatters. All around him, newly linked pairs had been experiencing their first magical moments together, and the six or eight remaining candidates had gathered closer to the handful of un-Impressed dragonets, but Leddrome had only been able to stare at Taskamen and his bronze, with tears of resentment running down his cheeks.

Pierdeth had found him, then. The hatchling, ungainly but muscular from the moment of Hatching, had been wandering, inspecting each of the candidates that were left. A tentative push at his mind had startled Leddrome into focusing on the tear-blurred shape before him, and as he had taken in the sight of the powerful bronze dragonet of his dreams, the push had exploded into the presence and consciousness of the hatchling Pierdeth.

A smile crossed L'dro's face at the memory. Impressing Pierdeth had marked his second epiphany, confirming the first and banishing all uncertainty. And so it had been since. He personally had prevented the possibility of another Weyrwoman like Fianine by Searching Valonna. He had courted her, using every last shred of her awe and gratitude to him to gain her trust and love. He and Pierdeth had won her, snatching the young Shimpath quickly in flight before even half a dozen bronzes had failed, seizing power for himself. He had used that power as both armour and weapon, making an example of T'kamen to inspire the other bronze riders with fear, and courting them as he had Valonna, with power and luxury. Bronze riders had never been so well-off at Madellon Weyr, and it was all down to L'dro. Never mind what the lower echelons thought: in decisive flight, only queen and bronzes counted. The queen's rider was his: she had responded with pathetic gratitude to his renewed attention. Expensive gifts and exaggerated solicitude cost no more than Weyr marks and a finite amount of time: once Pierdeth had caught Shimpath again and consolidated L'dro's position, he would be free to pursue his own diversions again.

The riders of the Council knew to a man that they were best off under L'dro as Weyrleader.

T'kamen was the only threat. L'dro had once considered transferring him forcibly out of the Weyr, but D'feng had dissuaded him of the notion. To remove the rider altogether would suggest L'dro was afraid of him: better to keep him near and best him at every turn. There were ways to hamper a dragon in a mating flight, but with the queen's rider utterly devoted to L'dro, such measures shouldn't be necessary. T'kamen had never gained any standing with Valonna. Indeed: D'feng's sly plan to distract the other bronze rider by bringing back the failed candidate T'kamen had presented for Shimpath appeared to have worked, if their informant in the inner circle was to be believed. Other than the endorsement of a rabble of wingriders, and two bronze riders respectively too old and too young to make a difference, T'kamen had nothing. Maybe he'd even leave in shame when he lost to Pierdeth again.

L'dro leaned back in his chair, his smile broadening. Oh yes: he was *definitely* looking forward to the new Turn.



The afternoon dragged on: hot, airless, suffocating. Up by the Star Stones, T'kamen could only just keep himself from drowsing. L'stev had been up twice with cold drinks and a scathing appraisal of the celebrations already going on under cool canvas shade at the far end of the Bowl. Both pitchers were empty now, and T'kamen was considering whether to get Epherineth to ask Vanzanth to bring some more when the bronze alerted him to something.

There. Little ones.

T'kamen strained his eyes in the direction Epherineth indicated, then laid a hand on his bronze's smooth hide and let himself see use the dragon's sight. Three fire-lizards, young ones by the size, flew in a tight cluster, but their indecisive dips and swoops suggested that something was wrong. *Can you tell them to come over here?*

Epherineth expressed his doubt silently. *They're very young and have never seen a dragon. They would respond better to one of their own.*

Who at Madellon has fire-lizards? Then, T'kamen spoke and Epherineth responded at the same moment. *Sarenya.*

I'll get her.

T'kamen stepped back, unsure whether to be amused or annoyed by his dragon's initiative as Epherineth launched himself off the Rim. The bronze rider

wincing as the blistering sun hammered down on him, and hastily retreated into the shadow of the Star Stones.

Sorry.

T'kamen watched his bronze glide across the Bowl, bright sunlight flashing off his sleek back. He noticed that Indioth was still on her ledge. C'los' green was really working herself up into a frenzy. There was going to be a very loud mating flight before the end of the day.

Epherineth returned with Sarenya astride, quickly enough to make T'kamen wonder. He pointedly expressed his suspicion at the bronze as he reached up to help Sarenya dismount. "Did he tell you what we need you for?"

The journeyman touched his hand but lightly as she slid down. "Something about fire-lizards." She motioned to the bronze fire-lizard on her shoulder. "He'll get on it."

Epherineth was watching Sarenya with brilliant blue eyes. "Would some shade be too much trouble?" T'kamen asked his dragon dryly.

The bronze extended a wing without a word, although he threw his rider a disapproving glance.

Sarenya's lizard had taken flight from her shoulder. T'kamen borrowed Epherineth's long sight again and watched as Tarnish approached the three visitors. The young lizards veered towards Sarenya's mature bronze as if in relief.

"They're very young," said Sarenya, critically.

T'kamen looked at the journeyman, seeing the concentration in her eyes as she tried to make sense of the situation. "Any idea where they're from?"

"We'll soon find out. Come on, Tarnish, bring them over here." The last was spoken under her breath, like a new weyrling who had yet to grow fully accustomed to communicating silently.

Tarnish herded the cluster of lizards towards them, alternately reassuring them with soothing chirps and berating them for their reluctance with angry flutters of his wings. The green and two browns were clearly juveniles, but when a roll of hide dropped from their talons into Sarenya's hands it became clear that their owners were inexperienced, too.

"Shards, some people don't have the sense they were born with," said Sarenya, weighing the message in her hand before passing it to T'kamen. "These lizards are too young to be carrying messages, and it's no wonder it took three of them, with the weight of that thing!"

T'kamen inspected the outside of the hide, but it revealed nothing of its origin or intended recipient. "Thanks for your help, Saren," he said as he unrolled the message. "Epherineth will take you down again in a moment."

Sarenya nodded. "When do you get off watch? I guess it was inevitable that L'dro would put you on duty for Turn's End."

"Not until tonight..." T'kamen trailed off as he absorbed the import of the words that had been hastily penned on the piece of hide.

"What is it, Kamen? What does it say?"

The bronze rider made himself go back and read the words again. "It's from Meturvian at Kellad Hold."

"No wonder those fire-lizards were so timid," said Sarenya. "They must have hatched from the eggs we delivered a month ago."

T'kamen took a deep breath. "There's a fire in the forest."

For a moment they both stood there, absorbing the possible consequences of such a disaster, not only to the precious timber lots, but to the people who worked them. The long, hot summer had leached the Kellad area of moisture. A big fire could blaze for months. The loving husbandry of five generations of Kellad holders could be wiped out in a single season.

The bronze rider scarcely hesitated an instant before acting. "I don't know how L'dro will take this, but he can't ignore it." He vaulted to Epherineth's neck ridges, putting a hand down to assist Sarenya. "Epherineth, make some noise."

For once, the bronze didn't grudge the uncharacteristic necessity. As he extended his wings to take off he called out to the Weyr with unmistakable notes of urgency and alarm in his voice, and T'kamen heard his broadcast to every other dragon. *We are needed!*

T'kamen looked down at the tents and awnings that had been erected in the Bowl, seeing the confusion of riders and Weyrfolk. *Land as close as you can.* Then he turned to address Sarenya, shouting over the clamour of wings. "You'd better hang on."

The wind of Epherineth's wings made the canvas pavilions flap wildly, straining against their tethers. The bronze landed hard, absorbing most of the impact with his powerful hind legs, without his normal grace.

The other dragons of Madellon had responded to Epherineth's cry, trumpeting alarm. Even Pierdeth had bugled a query. Riders and Weyrfolk crowded around Epherineth, demanding to know what was happening.

"Urgent message from Kellad Hold," T'kamen shouted above the din. He held the missive high in his fist. "It goes to the Weyrleader."

“What does it say?” someone in the crowd demanded.

“Let him dismount!”

T’kamen clenched his teeth against the irritation, and slid down from Epherineth’s neck. “Clear some space, this needs to get to L’dro.”

“Make way!”

Amazingly, the shout was D’feng’s. The press of bodies eased as the tall Flightleader waded into the crowd. T’kamen nodded curtly to the man, wary, but grateful for his intervention. “L’dro needs to see this.”

D’feng nodded, equally wary. “Come this way.”

T’kamen followed the other bronze rider with Sarenya beside him. The mob of riders – most of the Weyr, now – trailed at a slightly more respectful distance: good, T’kamen thought. He wanted to see how L’dro would deal with this.

The Weyrleader was already on his way, with a face like a thundercloud. “Who in Faranth’s name do you think you are?”

T’kamen stared impassively at L’dro for a moment before holding out the message. “I think I’m the watchrider.”

“What is this?” L’dro snatched the hide away and narrowed his eyes to focus on it.

“Lord Meturvian of Kellad Hold urgently requests the Weyr’s assistance,” T’kamen said, for everyone else to hear, quoting the brief message as he remembered it. “A fire is sweeping through the eastern forests of the Hold and endangering the lives of Kellad holders.”

“Endangering his timber industry, more like!” L’dro scoffed, throwing the message back at T’kamen. “It’s Turn’s End, no one’s going to be in the forest today. Let it burn.”

“Weyrleader, communities made up of woodcutters and their families have sprung up in the deep forests in recent Turns,” D’feng said discreetly. “Their holds are built of timber: they would most certainly be at risk.”

L’dro’s anger at being disturbed from his day of revelry combined with the embarrassment of having his ignorance shown up publicly. Crimson-faced, he spat, “The Weyr doesn’t protect fools who shelter in wood! If Thread was falling...”

“Thread isn’t falling,” T’kamen interrupted.

The Weyrleader glared at him with such an intensity of hatred that T’kamen felt his own spine go rigid. “Idiocy!”

“You’d let them burn, then, Weyrleader?”

The disapproving mutters from the crowd, and the looks being thrown at L’dro, almost made T’kamen pity the Weyrleader. He had no concept whatsoever of

how to handle a crowd in a crisis. Without D'feng's meticulous hard work, L'dro would be nothing.

"Fine!" L'dro snapped. "If you're so concerned about them, why don't *you* go and help!"

"Yes sir," T'kamen replied, so immediately and so smoothly that his obedience was mocking. He turned to the crowd of riders, the necessary commands coming to him easily. "I need volunteers who can have their dragons ready to go in ten minutes. Healer training or knowledge of Kellad's forests would be an advantage, but I need a good spread of colours."

After an instant of stunned silence, a chorus of willing voices greeted T'kamen's request. The bronze rider felt a sudden surge of pride, not only at their response to him, but at the eagerness of dragonriders to help the people of Pern. "All right!" he shouted above the racket. "L'stev, T'rello, you're seconds." He scanned the volunteers rapidly. "Ishane, I want you to take A'len, L'jando, and Jenavally to the infirmary for litters and first-aid supplies. T'sten, get *between* to Kellad to tell them help is on the way."

Riders scattered to follow his orders, and those who remained looked hopefully at the bronze rider. T'kamen rapidly named another ten blue and green riders: their smaller dragons would have less trouble moving in the forests, but he still only had two bronzes. Several Council riders had volunteered, but T'kamen didn't trust any of them. R'hren was just too old to risk in a perilous environment. It left him only one option. "Fr'ton."

The blonde bronze rider looked startled.

"We're going to need you and Peteorth." T'kamen raised his voice as riders hurried away. "I want everyone in full wherhide and fighting harness, and back here in ten minutes."

T'kamen paused to draw breath, and only then noticed the expressions of those he hadn't chosen. There was regret on many faces, but also admiration. He turned to Sarenya. "I don't know what kind of casualties we might have, if any, but I want the healers and dragon-healers prepared, and everyone else ready with numbweed."

"Kamen. I'm coming too."

The voice belonged to C'mine, and it was full of resolve. T'kamen looked at the blue rider, realising that he had automatically counted his friend out of the rescue wing because of his weyrmate. "Mine, you don't have to. Stay and be with C'los."

C'mine shook his head; there was shielded anguish in his eyes, but his determination overrode it. "He'll understand. This is more important. I lived at Kellad for sixteen Turns, remember? I know how the fires spread."

T'kamen gripped his friend's shoulder. "C'mine, I would have you come more gladly than any other rider in the Weyr, but I know how much Indioth's flights mean to you and Los."

"I know. That's why I'm asking you: please don't leave me behind."

For a moment T'kamen didn't understand, but then he realised what C'mine meant. The blue rider had made a difficult decision in putting his duty as a dragonrider over his dedication to C'los. It wasn't T'kamen's place, as friend or leader, to belittle him by questioning that decision.

T'kamen thumped C'mine's shoulder. "Get Darshanth ready."

C'mine paused and then said softly, "Kamen, look at L'dro."

The bronze rider turned. The Weyrleader stood with D'feng in the shade of one of the pavilions. The thin Flightleader was talking rapidly to him, but L'dro's gaze was fixed on T'kamen.

It might simply have been the shadow of the canvas, or the fact that T'kamen was standing in direct sunlight, but the Weyrleader's face seemed grey, and his eyes showed stark hatred and naked fear.