



## Five Heated Weeks



Epherineth roared.

The deafening sound reverberated through the weyr like a private thunderclap, making the collection of mugs on T'kamen's desk rattle together, and jolting the Weyrleader himself out of his quiet contemplation and to his feet before he had time to think. "What? What?"

The echoes of that bellow were still rebounding off the walls when Epherineth said, quite calmly, *Darshanth and his rider are coming.*

T'kamen used the time it took for the resonance to fade completely to form a reply from his scattered thoughts. *You didn't have to shout.*

*I wouldn't have had to if you'd been listening.*

Epherineth's voice was so reasonable, his rationale so unapologetic, that T'kamen couldn't argue with it. *Do you mean they're coming, now, or....*

*If I'd meant tomorrow, I wouldn't have shouted.*

T'kamen sighed. He'd been staring fixedly at F'yan's report, wondering how to address the Wingleader's list of grievances. Reorganising the Wings hadn't been entirely popular, but he'd expected that. The deliberate truculence of the older bronze riders was what T'kamen had failed to predict.

*I can be louder, if you like,* Epherineth offered meaningfully.

*I liked you better when you were the silent bronze.* The Weyrleader cast a weary eye over the stack of unopened message slates that had been cluttering a corner of the big skybroom desk that dominated his office. He'd intended to open them with Valonna in attendance, but as the Weyrwoman had barely left the Hatching ground in the last sevenday, and the heat of the sands shortened T'kamen's short temper even further, they remained there, untouched and faintly accusatory.

He shrugged on his jacket against the damp chill that was seeping into his office from the outside. The silver stars on the epaulettes caught his eye. Some Turns had passed since he had last been allowed to wear more than the single gold stripe of a wingrider, and the novelty of the two five-pointed stars on each shoulder had not yet worn off. They, like all the insignia of his status, had been newly sewn for him. T'kamen's predecessor had not bowed out graciously.

Stepping from the room, he almost collided with the somewhat shaken looking rider coming the other way. T'kamen checked his stride in time and looked at the other man with interest. Epherineth's roar must have been positively ear splitting at immediate range. "What is it, D'feng?"

The stick-like bronze rider rubbed at the side of his head, speaking too loudly. "I've got those tithe projections you wanted, Weyrleader. I'm sorry, I can't hear very well. Epherineth seemed upset."

Unsure whether to praise Epherineth or rebuke him, T'kamen decided to ignore the openly amused bronze dragon. D'feng was proffering a thick sheaf of hides with the air of a man bestowing an extra special treat. The other bronze rider's cooperation had proved crucial in T'kamen's assumption of the Weyrleader's responsibilities, but he suspected that D'feng had been deliberately complicating matters in a bid to make himself indispensable. "Just put them on my desk. On my desk," he repeated more loudly, when D'feng showed signs that he hadn't heard the first time.

"Of course, sir!" D'feng reached past T'kamen and deposited the pile of documents squarely atop F'yan's Wing report, burying it from sight and knocking several rolls of hide off the desk.

*The floor would be as good a place for them as any,* T'kamen thought to Epherineth as he deftly caught the displaced scrolls. He glanced down at the broken blue and white seals on the rescued missives. "Tell me, D'feng, have you given any more thought to choosing another Wingsecond yet?"

D'feng straightened, clasping his hands behind his back, and replied as if he feared discipline for the oversight, still almost shouting. "No, sir!"

T'kamen thrust the pair of documents into D'feng's unresisting hands. "Transfer papers for those riders who came in from the Peninsula the day before yesterday. Give the bronze the interim Wingsecond slot. I'll want a recommendation on the brown by the end of next sevenday." It represented the tiniest fraction of his load, but of the matters that required immediate attention it was the most important that he trusted D'feng to handle.

"Yes sir. But, sir..."

The Weyrleader pretended not to hear, continuing outside to Epherineth's ledge. Dealing with D'feng required a certain determined momentum. *Don't you look at me like that,* he said in response to Epherineth's accusing stare. *You're no better.*

The bronze dragon stretched, lithe muscles rippling beneath the green-gold sheen of his glossy hide, and only then deigned to offer a forearm. *I don't know what you're talking about.*

T'kamen smacked a neck ridge as he mounted. Epherineth grunted with exaggerated indignation, but his play-acting had no bearing on the power of his skywards leap. T'kamen leaned back into take off, and savoured the feel of the cold wind in his face. He'd had little opportunity to fly his dragon since Epherineth had won Shimpath's mating flight three months ago. His time was no longer his own, and although his duties necessitated frequent journeys to and from Madellon's major tithing Holds, fast trips *between* could not compare with the companionship of a long straight flight. T'kamen missed the quiet solitude of the remote weyr he and Epherineth had once shared, too. The accessibility of the Weyrleader's weyr, close to the Lower Caverns and easily reached on foot, had put an end to that privacy.

*What do you want privacy for when all you do is work?* asked Epherineth.

The bronze's remark was gently reproachful: not an accusation, but a reminder born of concern. T'kamen knew he'd been working longer hours than were strictly sensible. Epherineth often woke him when he had fallen asleep at his desk. But so many affairs required his attention, and with the better part of most days spent out-Weyr in summit with the increasingly intractable Holders of Madellon's territory, only night time remained for the domestic affairs of the Weyr.

Epherineth held a position just above the Star Stones, raising his brilliantly green eyes to the cloudy sky. T'kamen reached down to rub his bronze's neck as they waited for the anticipated dragonpair to arrive. The wildfire that had blazed out of control in the forests of Kellad Hold at Turn's End had proved the mettle of dozens of Madellon's finest riders and dragons, but none more so than C'mine and his brave blue Darshanth. In fighting for the lives of a group of foresters trapped by the flames, C'mine had nearly sacrificed his own. T'kamen had almost lost one of his oldest and dearest friends that day, but Darshanth had demonstrated courage and daring of the like seldom seen in an Interval in rescuing his rider from among the burning trees. Dragon and rider had remained at Kellad Hold in the months since, waiting for C'mine's injuries to heal. Despite his busy schedule, T'kamen had felt the blue rider's absence keenly, and taking this time to honour the return of a true hero of Madellon was both duty and privilege.

On time, Darshanth appeared from *between*, bright against the slate-grey clouds. Epherineth bugled a greeting, and all around the dragons of Madellon added their voices to welcome one of their own home.

"Report, blue rider!" T'kamen bellowed across the intervening space.

Aboard Darshanth's neck, C'mine acknowledged the command with the affirmative signal. Darshanth circled to land, and Epherineth matched him in the honour escort that the blue dragon had earned.

A good natured cheer erupted from the score or more riders waiting on the ground as Darshanth landed, gazing around at his admirers with sapphire eyes that complemented his own shade of blue. Epherineth alighted a discreet distance away to let T'kamen down. *Darshanth loves the attention.*

*C'mine's not so sure*, T'kamen replied, looking over at the rider dismounting, stiffly but unaided, from Darshanth's neck. The presence of a second figure on the blue's neck surprised him. *Has Darshanth said who his passenger is?*

*Darshanth's far too busy enjoying himself to waste time telling the likes of me*, said Epherineth, with a tolerant snort. *Here's Indioth.*

T'kamen squinted up at the green who had just winked in. *It's not like C'los to miss being part of a spectacle.*

*Indioth's carrying three*, Epherineth observed. *Candidates.*

*Of course.* With the best part of five sevendays to go before Shimpath's eggs were due to Hatch, candidates for the new dragonets were the least of the Weyrleader's worries, but he did remember the green rider mentioning their finds.



But seeing C'mine fit enough to fly *between* and dismount without help was cause for celebration, and T'kamen greeted the blue rider with a lightened heart. "Welcome home, Mine."

The shiny burn scar on C'mine's brown face didn't affect the warmth of his smile, and his grip was as strong as ever as he clasped wrists with T'kamen. "Glad to be back, Kamen." Then C'mine straightened, still with the hint of a smile. "Reporting for duty, Weyrleader."

"You're going to be taking it easy for a while yet, rider," T'kamen told him. Then he showed a rare smile. "But when you're ready, I'm short one blue in my Wing."

"Yes sir." C'mine wasn't a big man, nor had he ever been a handsome one, but his grin was like summer sun. "Kamen, Los and I have brought in some kids for Shimpath's clutch."

"Don't worry about them for now, Mine." T'kamen nodded towards the other riders who had turned out to welcome C'mine back to Madellon. "You've been missed."

As the blue rider went to meet his friends, C'los came up beside T'kamen. "You'd better order him not to overdo it, Kamen. You know what he's like. Always wants to be the hero."

C'mine's weyrmate of more than ten Turns, C'los had taken the blue rider's injuries as a personal affront. Indioth's brilliant rider, whose intuitive grasp of Weyr politics had helped T'kamen to win the Weyrleadership in the face of overwhelming opposition, obviously hadn't yet forgiven C'mine for risking himself. T'kamen ignored the edge in the green rider's voice, replying mildly, "He *is* a hero, C'los."

"Then I'd rather he were a coward," C'los retorted. "Heroes get themselves *killed*."

"Oh, da, stop saying that, it's boring."

The slim girl who had walked up beside C'los, loosening her wherhide jacket, had the same curly black hair and dusky-brown skin tone as the green rider, stood nearly his height, and had an expression of annoyance on her fine features that made her identical to C'los at his most exaggeratedly irate. "You're just jealous that Mine's getting all the attention and you're not," she went on. "It's old, get over it. Hello, T'kamen." She added the last almost as an afterthought.

"Carleah!" C'los snapped. "That's the Weyrleader! Show some respect!"

"Leah," T'kamen greeted C'los' daughter, privately amused. "You're looking well."

"Thank you, Weyrleader," Leah responded, turning a sunny smile on him. "Epherineth looks fabulous."

T'kamen kept half an eye on C'los as the green rider turned away in agitated disgust, but he also noticed the vehemence with which Leah stuck her tongue out at her father's back, and he nearly smiled. Leah was exactly like Carellos had been at fourteen – confident, opinionated, and perhaps just a little more clever than was good for her. "He is. And your mother?"

"She's fine, we're all fine, and don't listen to *him*." Leah rolled her eyes dramatically. "You'd think C'mine was still an invalid or something."

T'kamen watched as the blue rider clasped wrists with Vhion, the Master Dragon-healer who had treated Darshanth's burns. "I think he has a way to go yet."

C'los had beckoned the blue's passenger down, and now he herded a slight young man, and the taller, older lad who had ridden behind Leah on Indioth, towards T'kamen. "Weyrleader, I'd like to present Sinterlion," he indicated the younger boy, "and Murrany of Kellad Hold. And you know Leah." The green rider said the last with resignation.

The Weyrleader nodded to both young men, passing a brief mental request to Epherineth. "Welcome to Madellon, Murrany, Sinterlion."

"Thank you, Weyrleader," both replied together, with creditable poise, although T'kamen felt Sinterlion's awestruck gaze on the stars of his epaulettes.

In response to Epherineth's unobtrusive summons, L'stev stalked over from the group of riders welcoming C'mine home. The tough old brown rider fixed the three youngsters with a menacing look, his suspicious scowl and hunched posture making it very clear that he would tolerate no nonsense. "More, eh, Weyrleader?" He spoke in the low growl that T'kamen remembered from his own weyring days. "You're too kind to an old Weyrleader."

"I'm sure you'll have no trouble with them."

"I'm sure I won't," L'stev said darkly.

T'kamen masked his amusement. L'stev put on the act with every new group of youngsters that came under his tutelage, but his bark was far worse than his bite, and it didn't hurt a candidate to know where he stood from the start. If any or all of these young people Impressed from the clutch currently on the Sands, they could be wearing the stripes of full dragonriders within two Turns. T'kamen trusted L'stev to see that each would be qualified. The brown rider had a better touch for encouraging or bullying the best out of his young charges than any other man T'kamen could have chosen.

The first of the rain that the sullen skies had threatened all day began to spit. C'los scowled up at the clouds, as if personally offended by them. "C'mine, I want you inside, where it's warm and dry, right now!"

"Oh, leave the man alone!" Leah exclaimed. L'stev gave her an ominous look, and she subsided.

C'mine glanced towards the yawning entrance of the Hatching Ground, smoothing his thin moustache with thumb and forefinger as he turned back towards his weyrmate. "I'd like to see Shimpath's clutch, if she'll let me."

"I expect the Weyrwoman would be glad to see you," T'kamen said, before C'los could protest. The green rider shot him a glare, but with the candidates present T'kamen was certain C'los wouldn't make a fuss.

"It's warm and dry in there," L'stev pointed out.

T'kamen noticed the evil glint in the Weyrleader's eye. L'stev had always delighted in provoking C'los. "You may as well bring your candidates, Weyrleader. Walk with me, C'mine?"

The Weyrleader kept his normal long stride in check in deference to C'mine's injuries as they walked towards the cavern, letting L'stev, a reluctant C'los, and the three new candidates draw ahead. "How are you really, Mine?" he asked quietly.

"Better," the blue rider replied. "Not all the way, but better, and it's good to be home."

"Sarenya sends her love."

C'mine smiled. "She's well?"

"She said she'll come up and see you as soon as she gets off duty."

"And, you and she are well?" the blue rider asked, half teasingly.

"Such as she and I are," T'kamen said, wry more than bitter, although C'mine would understand that. If the duties of a Weyrleader – and a new Weyrleader fighting to cope with the legacy of an incompetent and corrupt predecessor – left T'kamen little time for himself, less still remained for Sarenya, the journeyman Beastcrafter he had presented as a candidate for the infant Shimpath nearly eight Turns ago, and who, despite everything that had happened since, still held the monopoly on the bronze rider's heart.

"Los tells me that you've made some changes," said C'mine, considerately changing the subject.

"One or two," T'kamen said dryly. "Mostly not very popular."

"They never are, at first," the blue rider agreed. "C'los said twelve Wings now, instead of twenty-one?"

The Weyrleader shrugged. "There's no justification for having that many Wings without the riders to fill them. I wanted to make it nine, but what's left of the bronze rider Council argued me up to twelve."

"You must have demoted a few Wingleaders, then. I'll bet they took that well."

"It would have been worse if R'hren hadn't made the case for honourable retirement so compelling," said T'kamen. "A'krig and Y'kat fell for that. B'mon was always too young, but I put him as Wingsecond under L'mis, and by the time he retires in a few Turns, B'mon will have the experience to take over. F'digan left, and the other two browns are Wingseconds. S'herdo doesn't like the demotion but he won't speak up against it, and since Alonth's never going to fly properly again, H'ersto opted for extended convalescence at Southern."

"And L'dro?" C'mine asked.

"L'dro went to the Peninsula."

"Willingly?"

"Eagerly, although they weren't so happy to have him. We negotiated an exchange in the end. H'pold agreed to take L'dro off my hands in return for a couple of riders he wanted out of his Weyr."

"You think they'll be trouble?"

"I don't know yet," the Weyrleader admitted. "But between H'pold wanting to get rid of them, and L'dro wanting to get away from Madellon, I've been spared a decision."

“How does Valonna feel about it?”

T'kamen shook his head. The mysteries of the Weyrwoman's mind were beyond his comprehension. “You'd be best off asking her yourself.”

As the two riders passed through the massive tunnel leading into the Hatching cavern, blasted out of the rock nearly a century ago by the clever masons and miners who had shaped Madellon from the ancient stone, T'kamen heard the thunder of wings. Epherineth glided into the cavern, followed immediately by Darshanth, smaller but more swift than the great bronze. “Should he be doing that?” T'kamen asked C'mine, watching as the blue made a breakneck landing on one of the high ledges.

“Probably not, but it makes him happy,” C'mine replied. “And he wants to see the eggs.”

T'kamen led the way off the uncomfortably hot sand onto the first tier of seats and then stopped to let the blue rider appreciate the view. “There they are.”

The setting was grand enough at any time: a vast cavern, its upper reaches lost in shadow, the lower levels bathed with the yellow-green light of hundreds of glows. The baskets were replaced frequently, and most often by candidates – the enormous chamber was only lit when a clutch was hardening. The stands had been built of massive blocks, cut precisely to form the neat terraces that ran the length of the cavern and could easily accommodate every member of the Weyr, and as many guests besides.

But no one was looking at the stonemasonry. At the far end of the sandy expanse, Shimpath, Madellon's only queen, loomed fiercely golden over her precious eggs.

“That's a beautiful sight, Kamen,” said C'mine. “How many did she lay?”

T'kamen was sure that C'mine already knew the particulars, and that the blue rider was asking purely to make him feel good about his dragon's achievement, but he answered anyway. “Twenty-five.” It still felt good.

“Twenty-five,” C'mine repeated. “And the gold one. That's a good day's work for Epherineth.”

The Weyrleader glanced up at his bronze, sitting quietly beside Darshanth, his eyes bright points of light in the gloom. “He knows.”

“Look.” C'mine pointed at the three candidates L'stev and C'los had taken a little closer to the protective Shimpath. “Look at their eyes, Kamen. They're enthralled”

T'kamen remembered his own first glimpse of a dragon's eggs, standing not so far from here. He remembered studying each gleaming shell, trying to guess what colour hatchling would come from each, and which one, if any, might choose him. He never had discovered just which egg had been Epherineth's. In the aftermath of Impression, shocked to his very soul by the impact of the bronze dragonet's mind bonding with his, it hadn't occurred to him to ask. But now, as he looked across at the clutch his Epherineth had sired, T'kamen studied individual eggs, and wondered. Would that big one, with soft yellow markings under the opalescent sheen, yield a bronze? Would the smallest egg, marbled with a pale bluish shade, produce the green its size

suggested? Many shells had no distinctive features at all to hint at the nature of their tenants: soft cream in hue, with that subtle, beautiful lustre of rainbow colours that seemed to swirl and eddy of its own accord.

Only the golden shell of the largest egg left no doubt as to the colour of the dragonet within. T'kamen regarded it with a satisfaction that almost mirrored Epherineth's smug pride. The healthy size of the clutch had been reason enough for jubilation, but the inclusion of a queen egg was a significant endorsement of both bronze and rider.

"Have the Search riders had any luck?" asked C'mine.

"L'stev's directing them," T'kamen replied. "But it's hard to miss all the decorative Hold girls who've been convinced that all they need to Impress a queen is a pretty face and suitable recompense to whichever bronze rider brought them in."

C'mine smiled. "That's harmless so long as there are enough good prospects." He nodded at his dragon. "He thinks Sinterlion, there, and Murrany, are sensitive. Sinter's been helping me with Darshanth, and Murrany asked to be considered."

"And Leah?"

The blue rider looked across at his weyrmate's daughter. "Robyn could have stood, if she'd accepted Search, and I don't think there was ever any doubt that Los would present Leah as a candidate. He'll be insufferable if she gets the queen."

"He'll be insufferable if she doesn't."

C'mine eased himself upright from where they had both been leaning companionably against the rail separating stands from sands. Concerned that his friend was tiring, T'kamen started to move to support him, but the blue rider waved him off. "I'm all right, Kamen. I need to pay my respects to Shimpath."

The Weyrleader let him lead the way along the terrace to where the queen's rider had joined L'stev and C'los, keeping a cautious distance. Valonna, Madellon's young Weyrwoman, greeted the blue rider with ingenuous delight. "C'mine, I'm so glad you're home, and well."

"When I heard Shimpath had clutched, I knew I had to get back," C'mine replied solemnly. "You and she and the eggs are looking radiant."

T'kamen fixed his gaze on Shimpath, almost envying the ease with which C'mine handled Valonna. Certainly, he wished he could communicate with her half so well. He knew it hadn't been easy for the girl, adjusting to a new Weyrleader. Despite L'dro's ignominious departure from Madellon, and the deplorable manner in which he had behaved towards Valonna, the Weyrwoman had been emotionally dependent on him for Turns. T'kamen treated Shimpath's rider with respect at all times, and tried to make himself approachable, but although Valonna was obedient to his requests, she still seemed afraid of him. There were matters that required the Weyrwoman's attention – not least her belated education in the duties of a queen rider – but T'kamen couldn't find the time for her. Perhaps after the Hatching...but that was a month or more away, and then he

would have bigger problems, unless he had managed to convince the Holds of Madellon's territory to tithe enough to meet the urgent needs of twenty-five new dragonets.

The very fact that he was standing dumbly in the Hatching cavern, admiring the eggs from which more than two dozen walking appetites would shortly burst, caused the Weyrleader a pang of guilt, and he stepped towards C'mine and Valonna. "Weyrwoman, blue rider, I should get back to...."

But T'kamen trailed off, for behind Valonna, Shimpath had assumed a horribly familiar pose, raising her head as if listening to a far off sound.

No, Epherineth said softly, in T'kamen's mind, and the bronze rider was overwhelmed by the terrible weight of sorrow in that single word even as his dragon's deep voice rose in a mournful song, blending with the lighter tone of Darshanth's cry, Shimpath's piercing wail of loss, and the keen of two hundred dragons outside the Hatching cavern.

Staggered by the emotional impact, T'kamen seized his head with one hand, and asked painfully, *Who is it, Epherineth?*

*Sigith has gone between.*

"Sigith...."

"E'rom...."

C'mine and C'los spoke simultaneously, both voices heavy with the grief that still rang the walls of the Hatching cavern. The Weyrleader spared a glance for the three candidates; Leah, who understood best, had gone pale, and the two boys looked startled and even a little frightened. T'kamen couldn't blame them. "What in Faranth's name happened?" he demanded over the dragons' mourning dirge, trying to order his thoughts. Sigith, a brown, and E'rom, a Wingsecond in the new Western Flight – neither suffering from any injury or illness that would cause their death, at least not as far as T'kamen knew. And as Weyrleader, he should have known!

*The man fell from the ledge?* Epherineth's words were a question as much as an answer, his attention evidently divided a dozen ways as dragons offered him conflicting reports. The one clear image he provided was of the body of a rider, impossibly sprawled on the rocks. *No one is sure what happened. The Healers are on their way.*

*Don't let them touch him.* The command was automatic, born not only out of the knowledge that E'rom was dead – Sigith's suicide was proof enough of that – but of some instinct that insisted T'kamen see the scene of the tragedy for himself before anything was changed.

"Kamen, don't let them move the body," C'los urged him in a low hiss that confirmed T'kamen's gut reaction.

The bronze rider nodded curtly and called Epherineth down. "Valonna, have Shimpath confirm Epherineth's order."

"Of course." The Weyrwoman's face was white with the shock of Sigith's death, amplified through her dragon. "Can I do anything?"

"Be with your queen. The Weyr will need her. Los, Mine, I want you with me. L'stev...."

The old Weyrleader acknowledged the command that did not need to be voiced with a grimace, his expression more stony than ever, and addressed his new charges. "You lot, with me."

T'kamen paused long enough to take his leave of Valonna with the briefest inclination of his head. Epherineth crouched low to let him mount and then sprang aloft, changing the angle of his wings to clear the entrance out into the Bowl. E'rom's weyr was at the other end of the caldera – a fact T'kamen would not have known but for the shocked, silent crowd that was already gathering there.

It parted for him when he dismounted, riders and Weyrfolk acknowledging the Weyrleader's right to be first on the scene. T'kamen made himself look at the lifeless form, still feeling Epherineth's sadness, as C'mine and C'los joined him. The death of a dragonrider – any dragonrider – hurt every other rider in the Weyr. Sigith's rider deserved better than the morbidly fascinated stares of a crowd.

Isnan, Weyr Healer, hurried up breathlessly, his long face contorted with the exertion of running half the length of the Bowl. "Weyrleader, is he...?"

"We need to get this area screened off," T'kamen said softly.

"There's no hope?"

"Sigith's already gone."

Isnan's expression clouded over briefly, and then the Master Healer took control. "Get back, please, everybody. Heftan, Lante, fetch the screens from the infirmary. I said get back, please!"

Epherineth added a rumble to reinforce Isnan's order, and the spectators slowly began to back off. The bronze's presence gave T'kamen an idea, and he asked his dragon to extend his wings to conceal the site of E'rom's demise from curious eyes, and to protect the body from the drizzling rain.

"Do you know what happened?" Isnan asked in a sombre voice.

"Not yet. Riders don't just fall from their own weyr ledges."

The Healer stepped closer, to examine E'rom's twisted body, then turned his head away, coughing. "But if they've been drinking enough to smell like this..."

T'kamen moved near enough to catch the reek of spirits exuding from the brown rider's corpse. It was strong enough to sting his nostrils. "Why would a Wingsecond have drunk enough to drown a dragon halfway through the afternoon?"

Isnan shook his head, still examining E'rom. "I don't know, Weyrleader."

T'kamen stood back, frowning at the body. It didn't make sense. He remembered this rider. He had seen him to confirm that he would retain his Wingsecond status, not much more than a month ago. The brown rider had seemed relieved, but no more so than most of the riders who had feared for their positions following the change of Weyrleader. What could have made him jeopardise his rank?

The sound of running feet made the Weyrleader look up, and a rider burst past C'los and C'mine, his expression aghast and incredulous. "E'rom, oh Faranth, E'rom, no!"

"C'los!" T'kamen said sharply, and the green rider instantly seized the newcomer by the shoulder, holding him back. He just dropped to his knees without resistance, weeping. T'kamen realised that he must have been the dead man's weyrmate.

Isnan's assistants rushed up with screens, shielding the body from view. The Weyr Healer's expression was very grim as he straightened. "It's too early yet to know, Weyrleader, but I'd be inclined to view this death with suspicion. I'd like to examine the body."

T'kamen nodded. "What do you need?"

"There's a Master at the Hall who specialises in diagnosing the exact cause of death in uncertain cases. I'd like to bring him in."

The Weyrleader thought of his limited bargaining power with Hold and Hall, and tried not to wince at what this specialist might cost. "Do it."

"Jessaf brandy."

T'kamen looked round. C'mine was comforting E'rom's distraught weyrmate, and C'los had drifted closer. "What?"

The green rider gestured towards the screens. "The drink on him. It's Jessaf Hold brandy. And that stuff isn't cheap."

The Weyrleader looked at his old friend, then at Isnan, who was donning gloves, and came to a decision. "Los, work with the Healer, and with his specialist. Find out what happened here."

C'los nodded, his eyes brightening with the challenge. T'kamen excused him the reaction. If anyone could get to the bottom of why a brown rider had seemingly walked off his weyr ledge in the middle of the day, C'los could.

T'kamen met C'mine's eyes briefly, wishing he could express more regret to the blue rider. It should have been a day for celebration. C'mine shook his head slightly, but it still mattered to T'kamen.

The crowd was lingering. T'kamen raised his voice. "That's enough. Let the Healers do their job."

He walked away, back to Epherineth.