



XI

That Glimpse Of Love



“So *anyway*,” Leah continued, mindful of keeping her audience’s attention, “my da C’los and his weyrmate C’mine grew up with T’kamen, and that’s why he’s not all ‘you blue and green riders are beneath we mighty bronze riders’, because it’s not the colour of the dragon that matters, it’s how smart the rider is at making the best of his situation.”

Kessirke, Jenafa, and Bela were quick to agree, but behind them, Kodam made a scornful noise. “Shows what you know,” he said. “You’re not even Weyrbred.”

“If being Weyrbred means looking and smelling like you, I’m glad,” Leah retorted. “My da’s a rider.”

“Yeah,” Kodam agreed, “a *green* rider, and greens are pretty stupid.”

Leah turned on him. “Oh, and you’d know!”

Kodam gave a snort. “If your da’s so smart, how come he never got promoted?”

“Give over, Kodam,” a new voice cut in. Harrenar had dropped back from where he’d been walking at the front of the procession of candidates. “You’re not making yourself any friends.”

Kodam shot him a resentful look, and seemed about to answer back, but something stopped him, and he skulked off to join his own friends.

“Thanks,” Leah said to Harrenar, glancing sideways at him. The oldest of the candidates, and Weyrbred, Harrenar stood out as much for his quiet authority as for his striking appearance. His hair would have been dark were it not for the premature greying that had already turned half of it white, and his eyes were very pale, but he had a ready smile, and Leah couldn’t find much to dislike about him.

“He was spoiling for a fight,” Harrenar said. “It’s easy to get dragged in.” He flashed her a grin that warmed his almost colourless eyes, then lengthened his stride to catch up with Folzal and Murrany.

“I wonder if I could get Mine to put some money on him for me,” Leah mused to herself. Then she noticed Bela’s avid gaze, and rolled her eyes. “Get that expression off your face.”

Bela didn’t look chagrined. “Do you suppose, if I got the queen, and he got a bronze....”

“Didn’t I tell you to get that rubbish out of your head?” Leah scolded. “It’s only in Harpers’ tales that everyone falls in love in mating flights.”

“But your da’s got a weyrmate,” Jenafa pointed out.

“Oh, they were together long before Indioth ever rose, and Darshanth doesn’t always catch her.” Leah heaved an exaggerated sigh. Disabusing the Holdbred Bela and Jenafa of their romanticised notions was proving to be more difficult than she’d imagined. “L’stev already told you, mating flights don’t mean anything. And he’s right!”

Jenafa didn't have a chance to reply as the candidates reached their destination. The Weyrlingmaster had stopped at the entrance to the dragon infirmary, wearing the grumpy expression that Leah, from Turns of association with the brown rider, knew to be a front. "When you go inside you're going to sit down, shut up, and listen to what Master Vhion has to teach you," L'stev told them. "There are sick dragons in here, and if one of them so much as twitches because you've disturbed him, you're going to be mucking him out for a month."

Even the most boisterous of the candidates took that threat seriously. They filed into the cavern in silence. The antiseptic smells of redwort and numbweed immediately met Leah's nostrils, and she shivered, reminded of the shelter that had been improvised for Darshanth at Kellad while his burns had healed.

Vhion, the Master Dragon-healer, ambled out of one of the bays, wiping his hands on a cloth. "Ah, L'stev, you're here with your youngsters." He beamed around at the candidates.

"This is Master Vhion," L'stev informed the class. "He's one of Pern's most experienced Dragon-healers. Madellon is lucky to have him, and so are you. This is who you'll be coming to if your dragonets need help with injuries or illness. Do as he says. I'll be back to give you your chores at the end of the session."

Most of the candidates managed to stifle their groans, but Vhion's grin broadened. "Thank you, Weyrlingmaster." He regarded the candidates with a keen gaze that belied his plump, bumbling appearance. "Well, now, if you'd all like to follow me, we'll be starting with some theory in the teaching room."

The cavern to which they were led branched off the main infirmary, and had obviously been designed for humans rather than dragons. Rows of benches faced an open area. Slates and chalk lay at intervals along each bench, and three large blackboards on the wall displayed painted diagrams of dragon anatomy. Blue notations on one of them suggested a recent lesson. The other walls bore pictures and studies of dragons: wings, heads, legs, claws, all beautifully rendered and labelled.

"You may all take seats, but be sure that you can see," said Vhion, walking towards the blackboards. "All the basics I'll be teaching you today will be vital to the care of your dragons if you Impress."

Leah led Bela, Kessirke, and Jenafa towards a place near the end of a bench on the middle row. The rest of the class spread out. Several of the boys, including Kodam, took seats at the very back.

Master Vhion was wiping the blue chalk from the board with a cloth when three more people entered the teaching room. "Aha, journeymen, I trust you've fortified yourselves with klah?"

The two male Crafters were both Healers, by their rank cords, but Leah recognised the third journeyman. "Saren!" she hissed at the Beastcrafter, stretching her arm across the empty place at the end of the bench beside her to stop anyone else taking it. "Over here!"

Sarenya made her way rather gingerly across the teaching room, and finally took the seat Leah was saving. "Hello, Leah."

"Did you hurt yourself?" Leah asked, looking askance at the normally energetic Beastcrafter.

Sarenya made a face. "That's a long story. I thought I might see you here."

"You're not going to be standing for the clutch, are you?" Leah asked, without thinking.

"No." Sarenya smiled briefly, though she didn't look in Leah's direction as she went on, rapidly, "I've been seconded to Master Vhion. He only has Rymon to assist him at the moment, and he'll need more to help out with the dragonets once Shimpath's eggs Hatch. My Master thought this would be a useful way for me to spend my time while I'm indisposed to be wrestling with cows. Zafandrie and Kat are here because they're responsible for making up the muscle salves and so on that dragonets need as they grow."

Leah schooled herself not to ask any more tactless questions. She admired Sarenya, as much for her success in a male-dominated Craft as for the dry wit and clever sense of humour that often rivalled C'los', and it was unfair to drag up the old failure. "So you'll be helping with the weyrling class?"

"It looks that way," Sarenya agreed. "Anyone I should look out for?"

"All them," Leah said, indicating the boys at the back of the room with an indiscreet jerk of her head.

Sarenya looked casually in their direction, and then away. "I'm familiar with Goridar. What about the others?"

"Dastur, the one with the blonde hair, and Kodam in the blue shirt – they're Goridar's friends," said Leah. "And that's Rastevon on the end, but he's not one of them. He's L'stev's son. He's always making trouble."

"Sometimes it's important to put some distance between yourself and your family," Sarenya said. "And the others? Anyone I should be putting money on?"

"That's Sinter two rows in front, next to that Healer," said Leah, pointing out the slight lad. "Darshanth Searched him. And these are Kessirke and Jenafa and Bela." She indicated the three girls sitting the other side of her. Sarenya nodded politely to them.

"Over there, with the grey hair, that's Harrenar, who Bela fancies," Leah went on, ignoring the other girl's mortified gasp, "and next to him that one with the long face is Murrany. He's one of Darshanth's too." She lowered her voice and confided, "His wife died, and he couldn't bear to stay at Kellad, so he asked C'mine if he could come to the Weyr."

"You should probably keep that to yourself," Sarenya told her.

Leah didn't blush at the mild admonition, but she felt deflated. What was the point in gossip if you couldn't pass it on? "Well, it's true," she said, a touch defensively.

"Who's the lad with the fire-lizards?" Sarenya asked.

Leah looked. "Gidra? He's from the Seacraft at Blue Shale Hold."

Sarenya frowned thoughtfully. "I was there five Turns, but I don't recognise him."

Leah looked at Saren's shoulders, noticing the absence of her lizard pair. "Where are yours today?"

"Sleek had a little accident about a sevenday ago," Sarenya replied, with an edge in her voice. "He broke some of the finger bones in his wing, so he's grounded."

"What about Tarnish?"

"He's got other things on his mind at the moment." Sarenya nodded towards Vhion. "I think the Master is about to start."

The Master Dragon-healer was scanning the room, counting. "Well, I think we're all present and accounted for," he said at last. "So I believe I'll begin."

"The purpose of the time you'll spend with me as candidates is to learn some of the fundamentals of a dragon's physical constitution. Young dragons in particular are prone to a whole range of complaints – most of which I'm sure will come to my attention in the months and Turns ahead." He beamed again, as if that were something to be hotly anticipated. "But before we can study how to treat a sick dragon, we need to know how a healthy one should look and feel and behave."

"Now, some of you are going to Impress in a few sevendays' time when Shimpath's eggs have hardened. I'm sure the Weyrlingmaster has advised you adequately of the nature and depth of the dragon-rider bond. If your dragonet is in pain or discomfort, you'll certainly be the first to know! Young dragons don't hold back, and so they shouldn't. If something hurts, there's usually a good reason, and problems left untreated in a dragonet can potentially turn into permanent weakness in an adult." Vhion paused, then added brightly, "You *are* all taking notes, I hope?"

Every candidate in the class hastily picked up his or her chalk. Leah started to scrawl down a summary of what Vhion had just explained, noticing that Sarenya was trying to hide a smile.

"A healthy dragon's hide is smooth and glossy, and feels silky to the touch," Vhion continued. "Sometimes, if the dragon is an unusual shade of his colour, it's more difficult to make a visual judgement, but if his hide feels slack or rough or sweaty, there's a problem. The cause can be as simple as dehydration or hunger, in which case a drink or meal will usually remedy it, but as you get to know your dragonets' needs, they should never want for food or water. On the other hand, it's very easy for a dragonet who thinks he's starving to eat too much, and believe me when I say that a dragon with indigestion – or constipation – or diarrhoea – is not a pretty sight."

A titter ran through the class, accompanied by much wrinkling of noses. Leah rolled her eyes..

"However, I said I'd start with a healthy dragon's condition, so if you'll turn your attention to this fine fellow here –" Vhion indicated the detailed sketch of a dragon's head on the central blackboard, "– I'd like to begin with his senses." The Dragon-healer looked at the class with a slightly pained expression. "Some Turns ago, one of my more excruciating apprentices named this

dragon Health.” Amid the resultant chorus of groans, Vhion went on, “An atrocious pun, I’m sure you’ll agree, but nonetheless it seems to have stuck.”

Leah heard Sarenya murmur, “He trots that one out every time.”

“As most of you know, humans have five senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. Dragons have the same five, and in addition a sixth, which we loosely define as their telepathic sense – the part that links them to their rider, and permits them to communicate without what we would think of as words, amongst other things.” With his blue chalk, Vhion circled the depiction of the dragon’s faceted eye. “A dragon’s eyes are quite different to a human’s. There is neither iris nor pupil, but instead this multi-lensed structure you can see on the diagram. It gives a dragon both excellent long sight and night vision superior to any human’s. You can also see that where we have one set of eyelids and eyelashes to protect our eyes, dragons have three sets of lids and no lashes.” He tapped a single facet with his chalk. “Dragons’ eyes also change colour depending on mood. Green and blue indicate that the dragon is happy, content, comfortable, while grey usually indicates pain or discomfort. White or yellow can indicate fear, alarm, danger. Shades of red and orange can mean something as simple as hunger, or they can mean anger or mating arousal. The exact shades vary from dragon to dragon, but you’ll have a better idea of what colour means what when you’ve Impressed – you’ll know first-hand what your dragon is feeling.

“You’ll probably have observed at some point that dragons have no ears, but that doesn’t mean they’re deaf. Dragons can hear sounds, probably through the headknobs.” Vhion pointed to that part of the dragon’s anatomy. “However the sense of hearing is a secondary concern to a dragon. You will mostly communicate mind-to-mind, and this holds true even when you address your dragon aloud.

“Smell and taste,” and Vhion circled the nostrils and mouth of the dragon, in turn, “are also secondary senses. A dragon’s sense of smell is no better than yours or mine, and his sense of taste is extremely primitive. Those of you who’ve handled firestone will know how hard it would be to persuade a dragon to chew it if he could taste the stuff! Most of his appreciation of food comes from the texture. A young, succulent herdbeast that’s rich with fat will feel much better in his mouth than a tough old wherry. Dragons have two kinds of teeth, like we do – sharp ones to rip and tear meat at the front, and broad, blunt grinding teeth at the back, to chew food and firestone. The adult fangs take some time to grow in, which is why young dragons must have their food cut up for them.

“Dragon hide is very tough, and dragons are extremely resistant to the cold because of it. Your dragonets will undoubtedly be complaining of itches for most of the first two Turns of their lives, simply because of their phenomenal rate of growth. When they reach adult size, less skin stretching occurs, and less itching, but while they’re young you’ll have to keep your dragonets’ skins well oiled to prevent flaws developing.” Vhion touched the depiction of the eye ridge with his chalk. “Most dragons love to be stroked and scratched. Eye ridges are often very sensitive, but that’s something else that varies from dragon to dragon.

“Going back to the headknobs, we understand them to be related to the telepathic sense. If you compare a fire-lizard to a dragon,” and he pointed at the pair of blue dragonets perching on Gidra’s shoulders, “you will notice that a lizard’s headknobs are much more primitive, almost under-developed, by comparison. That’s not to say that a dragon with pronounced headknobs is any more telepathic than normal.”

Vhion paused, and most of the class seemed to breathe a silent sigh of relief. Leah scribbled down the last of what he had said and massaged her cramped fingers. The furious scratch of chalk on slate from all around suggested that she was one of the first to finish, but then not everyone had the benefit of a Harperhall upbringing. “How come you don’t have to take notes?” she whispered to Sarenya.

“We went over this earlier,” the Beastcrafter replied.

“Did it hurt your hand, too?”

Saren shook her head. “I’ve been a journeyman more than six Turns and I was an apprentice for seven. I’ve learned how to take notes in shorthand.”

“Everyone finished?” Master Vhion asked gaily, even though the sound of frantic writing indicated that not everyone was. “I’m sure you’d all like a break from the classroom. We have several dragons in with minor complaints this morning, and their riders have given their permission for you to come around and see how they’re being treated. So, if you’d all like to come this way – bring your slates – and I’ll have to ask you to keep your voices down, as there’s one very sick dragon who needs peace and quiet.”

“I missed all that about headknobs,” Kessirke hissed to Leah. “Can I look at your notes?”

Leah handed her slate to the younger girl. “Will you be all right?” she asked Sarenya as the rest of the candidates started to leave their seats.

“So long as no one runs into me,” Saren replied. “Don’t wait for me. I’ll be lurking at the back.”

As the class gradually filtered through the doorway, Harrenar’s friend Folzal approached Leah. He was a reserved, unremarkable young man, whose untidy hair made him look like he’d got up in too much of a hurry. “Who was that you were talking to?”

“Saren?” Leah asked. “She’s a friend of my da’s.”

“Saren,” Folzal repeated, in a glazed sort of voice.

Leah shot him a direct look. “Don’t even think about it. She’d laugh in your face, and anyway, she’s taken.”

Folzal looked crestfallen. “You’re sure?”

“Quite sure,” Leah said airily. And then, because Folzal wouldn’t tell her off, she added, “Of course, if you want to go and fight T’kamen for her, you’re entirely welcome to try.”

“She’s... The *Weyrleader*?” He threw a distinctly nervous glance in Sarenya’s direction.

Leah shrugged. “I wouldn’t trouble yourself about it. Anyway,” and she lowered her voice conspiratorially, “Arina likes you.”

“Really?” Folzal blinked, looked at the slight blonde girl from Jessaf, and then asked, “*Really?*”

Leah nodded sagely. “And you know, you should really make the most of it now, *before* you Impress, or you’ll be waiting a Turn for the good stuff.”

Folzal’s eyes widened. “Thanks, Leah,” he said, sounding like he wasn’t sure if he should be thrilled or terrified.

Leah chuckled to herself as the bemused Folzal hurried to catch up with Arina. Men – especially young men – were so easy to manipulate when one was in possession of the relevant facts. He’d owe her now, and while Leah wasn’t in the business of extorting favours and promises out of people, she was too much her father’s daughter to be blind to the importance of networking.

“If you’ll wait here for a few moments, I’ll see if our patients are ready for you,” Vhion told the class, with yet more of that apparently permanent jollity.

Leah drifted apart from her friends to think. She’d always liked to be in the thick of things – not necessarily as the centre of attention, although she wasn’t averse to that when the occasion demanded – but always involved. In the few sevendays she’d been at the Weyr as a candidate, Leah had found herself in a good position to study her fellows. She occupied a middle ground between the Weyrbred candidates and those from Crafts and Holds. Brought up at the Harperhall at Kellad Hold, but thoroughly acquainted with Weyr culture through her green rider sire, Leah had a perspective on all three cultures. Naijen came from a similar background – born to a rider and brought up by his Holdbred father – but he hadn’t spent the time at Madellon that Leah had over the Turns. Her understanding of Pern’s diverse social structures gave her a broad appeal to candidates with more limited education. She was a natural hub, gathering and disseminating information with equal facility, and very little went on in the candidate community that didn’t get back to her. Leah had an exhaustive knowledge of those candidates who liked each other, those who were rivals, and those whose mutual attraction had led to more than friendship. She knew which of the girls had been brought in merely as pretty faces and which were viable prospects for the queen – and which, of both types, frequented the weyrs of their sponsoring bronze riders. She even had a good idea of who would Impress what – or rather, who would be best suited to each colour under ideal circumstances. But there was one thing Leah didn’t know, and it disturbed her sleep each night, more so even than the furtive sounds of Shenaz sneaking out of the cubicle they shared to meet with Korralthe. Leah didn’t know what colour she herself would Impress, if she Impressed at all, and further, she couldn’t decide what she would prefer.

Leah had never let her unusual parentage either embarrass or obstruct her. Some people called her dragonspawn, but the fact was that she’d been conceived before her father had Impressed. The truth of the relationship between her parents was both complex and, as far as Leah had ever been concerned, private. She had spent her life ignoring the eyebrows people raised when they found out that her father rode a green dragon. C’los had never shirked his responsibility to her, and Leah had a second father in C’mine. Growing up in the relaxed

atmosphere of the Harperhall rather than the Hold proper had probably spared her the worst of the jeers, but Leah had simply never risen to the taunts.

She had known from her earliest Turns that she would be allowed to stand for a Madellon clutch – when she came of age. It wouldn't have been possible for her to grow up with her father, and both C'los and Robyn had wanted her to have the benefit of a Harperhall upbringing like their own. Five Turns ago, at nine, Leah had been too young for the last clutch, and since her twelfth birthday she had chafed for the queen to rise again, bothering her father and his weyrmate for news of any sign that Shimpath might be close to mating.

The forest fire at Kellad had overshadowed the queen's eventual flight for Leah, and C'mine's recovery had featured higher in her mind than any thought of candidacy. But as the blue rider's wounds had healed, he had promised that when he returned to the Weyr, she would come with him to take her rightful place as a candidate for Shimpath and Epherineth's clutch.

Leah had attended every Madellon Hatching since her birth, with the exception of one when a bad head cold had prohibited her from going *between*. Dragon eggs were nothing new to her, but when she and Sinterlion and Murrany had gone into the Hatching cavern to look at the clutch, the enormity of the situation had suddenly hit her. It wasn't an ordinary clutch. One girl would Impress the hatchling that emerged from the precious golden egg, and that girl wouldn't just be a dragonrider – she would be a Weyrwoman.

The cynicism that was her father's legacy, and her mother's pragmatic nature, had planted Leah's feet firmly on the ground from an early age. The fact that queen eggs were extremely rare, combined with her lack of tolerance for overblown romanticism, meant that she had never seriously considered or even fantasised about Impressing a queen. It was pointless – and Leah had always scoffed at the banal songs and ballads that so many female Harper apprentices wrote on the subject. Now, she found herself unnervingly close to becoming the cliché she had derided for so long.

Leah could have argued the case for green over gold in her sleep. Green dragons were faster and more agile, smaller and thus easier to tend; they could chew firestone and fly in the fighting Wings. They weren't burdened with the tedious chore of procreation that chained queens and their riders to the Hatching Ground. Their flights were fast, frequent, and fun. They didn't have the overbearing personalities of queens, and nor did they come with a massive set of responsibilities. A green rider had freedoms that a Weyrwoman did not.

But seeing that gold egg, and knowing that within it slept instant power and privilege for the chosen girl, had affected Leah in a way she couldn't explain. Perhaps, after fourteen Turns of exposure, those same silly apprentice compositions had actually infiltrated her mind. Or maybe the knowledge that whoever Impressed the hatchling queen would be the absolute centre of attention had something to do with it.

Leah knew that draconic choice sometimes seemed completely arbitrary. Her father's comments on various riders – mostly bronze – certainly called hatchling intelligence into question.

She thought about the other female candidates. Soleigh and Maris, the two Weyrbred girls everyone always mentioned in the same breath, had all but stated that they weren't going to look at the queen. Ivaryo was happily working her way through the Weyr's younger male riders, and Leah couldn't see a queen choosing her. Jardesse was stupid, Chenda was spiteful, and Lisette was two-faced. Kessirke was too young to Impress a dragon, in Leah's opinion. Jenafa would be funny about mating flights, and Bela was next to useless under pressure. Most of the others were trophy candidates. There wasn't a single one to whom Leah would be happy to defer in a crisis.

Or maybe her natural aversion to being on the fringes was compelling her to desire the most pivotal position, not only in the weyrling class that would result from the clutch, but in the Weyr itself? Leah wasn't sure if she wanted to shoulder the responsibilities and restrictions that came with a queen dragon, but even the thought of it filled her with a strange kind of anticipation – and expectation. She'd never been very good at settling for second place. Grace in defeat, Leah conceded honestly, was not one of her strengths. She took too frank a line with herself to deny that her desire to excel in all things had a bearing on her contemplation of becoming a queen rider.

L'stev had warned them early on that boys with preconceptions about what colour they wanted to Impress often ended up with nothing at all – a candidate focusing only on attracting a bronze could discourage a brown or blue from choosing him. The Weyrlingmaster had been less forthcoming about how the girls should behave. Leah felt certain that half or more of her fellow female candidates would focus on the gold egg, to the exclusion of any greens that might Hatch before it. After the queen dragonet had made her choice, some of the rejected girls would certainly turn their attention to the greens, while others, too desolate by their failure to attract the golden hatchling, would be closed to a green Impression. Leah suspected that L'stev shared her reservations about the suitability of many of the Searched candidates, and preferred not to encourage the more useless girls towards fighting dragons. There were enough boys for the greens to choose from once all the receptive girls had been taken.

But Leah's conflicting feelings about that egg were interfering with her planned strategy. If she faced the clutch with an open mind, a green could choose her before the queen ever had a chance. But if she concentrated on the gold egg, and it Hatched towards the end of the Impression ceremony, she might miss out on Impressing a dragon at all, and that would be terrible – as would be her humiliation of acting like the silliest of Holdbred girls who just wanted to be queen riders.

If she could only reconcile her ambiguity towards that shard-blasted queen egg, Leah thought, she would be content. She didn't trouble herself with false modesty – her father was a rider, her mother could have been; she was young, healthy, fit, well educated in Weyr ways, and prepared to make the sacrifices required of a dragonrider. Darshanth had given her his formal approval – if anything about that blue could ever be said to be formal. Leah had all the environmental advantages a candidate could want. And yet a tiny voice of doubt in the remotest corner of her mind still troubled her. What if, for whatever reason, she didn't Impress? Yes, she was young enough to stand again, and yes, there would be more opportunities when the queen

from this clutch matured, but that left her at a loose end for three or four Turns, and there was no guarantee that she would Impress on a second attempt, either. There was a place for her at the Harperhall, she knew, because her voice was good enough that she could live out a comfortable existence there. But she had never apprenticed and, like C'los, didn't have the inclination to be a true Harper. It was an unappealing prospect indeed, compared to the lifestyle of a dragonrider.

Master Vhion's voice, somewhat more hushed than it had been, broke into Leah's thoughts. "We're ready for you now, candidates. If you'd all remember to keep a bit quiet..."

The Dragon-healer indicated the closest bay. The infirmary comprised a single large cavern divided into open-fronted areas, each big enough to accommodate an adult dragon. The bays, Leah noticed, were spotlessly clean. The sand that usually filled dragons' wallows presumably posed an uncomfortable risk to wounded beasts, and rushes, instead, covered the floor.

The green dragon crouching beside her rider was holding her wings awkwardly high. "Melith here has sustained a very common injury for green dragons," Vhion told the class. "Green rider, would you explain what's happened?"

"Melith rose to mate last night," said the green's rider, an attractive blonde woman. "The brown who caught her took harder hold of her than he should have."

"The lacerations on her wing-shoulders are quite plain," said Vhion.

The wounds looked like they'd been made by the claws of a much larger dragon, and they oozed greenish ichor. Leah winced. Her father's Indioth had several scars on her shoulders from rough matings, and C'los had been known to berate the riders of offending males with all his considerable eloquence.

"Injuries like this are, as I say, quite common in greens, and most are easily treated. An initial cleansing with redwort," and the Dragon-healer indicated a bucket, "and then regular applications of numbweed for the pain. Melith's injuries are somewhat deeper than might be expected, however, and will require sutures. That's one aspect of dragon care I don't recommend you try." Vhion's assistant, a tall young man in a nondescript smock without any markings of rank, carried a stepladder into the bay, and the Master continued, "As you can see, accessing a dragon's wings requires a certain amount of assistance, even for Rymon here!"

A blue occupied the next bay, a beast whose age showed as much in the greyness of his muzzle as by the appearance of his rider. "Yezzath's one of Madellon's veterans," said Vhion, with a note of affection in his voice that spoke of long association with the old blue and his rider.

"Even veterans sometimes catch a talon hunting," Yezzath's rider rasped, patting his dragon's shoulder.

"You can see how the talon has been torn from the nail bed. It'll have to be removed, of course." Vhion's cheerfully graphic description made Leah, and most of the other candidates, squirm. "Redwort again, and numbweed to ease the pain, and the talon will be cut away from the

forepaw. It will regrow in a couple of sevendays. Young dragons just learning to hunt for themselves are especially prone to this sort of injury.”

Then the Dragon-healer’s manner became more serious, and he folded his hands behind his back, scanning the candidates solemnly. “The last dragon you’re going to see is very badly wounded indeed. The Weyrlingmaster specifically asked that you see him, as a warning to you of how serious and dangerous an undertaking it is, becoming a dragonrider.”

“Sejanth,” Leah murmured, and she heard the name repeated by several of her classmates.

Master Vhion led them to the last bay on the end of the row, away from the activity of the main infirmary. The first few candidates to reach it stopped abruptly, and some of them gasped, or swallowed hard. All of them looked, their eyes fixed upon the bay’s tenant.

The bronze dragon lay motionless on the soft rushes of his bed. His eyes were open, but dull, almost grey, and moving so slowly that they might as well have been stationary. His hide held no lustre. And worst by far, horribly, obscenely, his right wing was almost gone. A few shreds of membrane, scorched and blackened, still clung to the awful wreck of bones, but most of the wingsail and entire areas of cartilage just weren’t there any more.

“This is Sejanth, Wingleader D’feng’s dragon,” said Vhion. “There was an accident in firestone drill three days ago. As you can see, the effects of firestone flame on living matter are severe.”

Leah would have liked to look away from the horribly maimed dragon, but she couldn’t. She had known D’feng – not sociably, for C’los had never liked the bronze rider who had once been L’dro’s right-hand man – but by reputation, and for all the man’s faults, she would never, ever have wished this fate on any dragon.

“The queen, Shimpath, is helping Sejanth with his pain,” Vhion went on. “His rider was also very badly wounded, and without Shimpath’s support Sejanth could lose the will to continue.” The Dragon-healer’s voice spoke sympathetically, but with stark honesty. “The obvious damage to his wing, while extreme, may heal in time, although he won’t fly again. Less visible, however, are the complications involved with a firestone burn. There is very little we can do to help Sejanth fight the firestone poisoning of his own flame. We douse him with numbweed hourly for the surface pain, and aloe to soothe the burn and promote healing, and Shimpath compels him to eat and drink. His water,” and Vhion indicated the big trough, “is heavily laced with several tonics to help strengthen his body and allow regeneration to take place.” The Master Dragon-healer paused, and then added, “As future dragonriders, you should be made aware of the reason behind the most obvious omission. Sejanth’s rider, D’feng, has been sedated with a strong dose of fellis juice for the pain. Sejanth, however, has not, and there is one very simple and crucially important reason for this: fellis juice is toxic to dragonkind.” Vhion shook his head. “At times like this we may wish it were otherwise, but the fact is that a dose large enough to provide the pain relief that we associate with fellis would be poisonous, if not fatal, to a dragon. An analgesic such as willowsalic, which a

Healer might use as a milder alternative to fellis, is simply not strong enough to ease a dragon's pain in any quantity. In that, Sejanth is alone."

Master Vhion fell silent. Leah continued to look at Sejanth, hearing his laboured breathing, smelling the reek of burned bone that the numbweed could not mask. A profound change had come over the class. Even the least sententious members of the group stared at the disfigured bronze with a kind of sick horror. There was something unnerving about the sight of a dragon so humbled, somewhat akin to how Leah thought she would feel in the sun failed to come up one day, or if the solid, immutable ground were suddenly to fall away. All her experience of dragonkind had not prepared her for the pathetic reality of what had happened to D'feng's dragon.

"That's the responsibility you accept," L'stev's voice growled from the back of the class. Leah had not been aware of the Weyrlingmaster's presence, too transfixed by Sejanth. "That's why you can't be anything but absolutely serious about becoming dragonriders, because if you're any less than completely dedicated, your dragon will suffer. And then you'll suffer."

The eerie quiet held for several moments more, as the candidates absorbed the Weyrlingmaster's words.

Finally, L'stev said, "Thank you, Master Vhion."

The Dragon-healer inclined his head. "Weyrlingmaster."

And in silence, still in universal contemplation of the grisly object lesson of bronze Sejanth, the candidates fell in line and followed L'stev sombrely from the infirmary.