



## XIV

### Seen Then Unseen



Darshanth's intent expression made C'mine instantly suspicious when he came out onto the ledge, bearing the blue's flying harness across his shoulder. He paused to study his dragon's stance with interest before prodding him in the ribs. "Pay attention."

*I am paying attention.*

*"To me."*

*Do I have to?*

*"Yes."*

*I'd really rather look at Kinerth.*

*"I'm sure you would, but she's not your rider."*

*No, my rider's uglier than her.*

*"Thank you."*

*Much uglier.*

Darshanth acquiesced graciously enough to having his harness tightened, but his gaze still wandered in the direction of the green dragon preening herself up on the Rim. Kinerth's hide didn't seem bright, but then some greens didn't show any overt signs of their season. Darshanth's interest, and that of several other males, indicated more accurately her readiness to mate.

The blue had expressed very little interest in chasing greens since Kellad, and C'mine was glad to see that his dragon's libido appeared to have returned. In a testament to the strength of their bond, Darshanth had refrained from even commenting on females – usually his favourite subject – while C'mine had been convalescing. The blue rider didn't know if Darshanth had been consciously suppressing his needs, or if the dragon's reduced ardour had directly mirrored his own physical health, but he felt grateful that the issue hadn't come up. Worrying about his dragon's happiness would only have contributed to his illness, and Darshanth's unstinting support and buoyant company had done much to speed C'mine's recovery.

Still, there was a time and a place for chasing greens, and this was neither then nor there. "I hate to rein you in, Darshanth, but we do have other commitments."

*You ruin all my fun,* the blue grumbled.

The flight to Sh'zon's weyr took moments. Kawanth regarded the smaller dragon with an aloof eye, but no hostility. The big bronze already wore his harness, and as Darshanth settled deferentially to the ledge, Sh'zon emerged from his weyr, clad in his customary long coat. "Stay there," he told C'mine, as the blue rider began to dismount. "You ready?"

*"Yes, sir,"* C'mine replied.

The blonde Wingleader made a show of vaulting to his dragon's neck. "You won't have been to where we're going," he shouted across the intervening space. "So this is what we're going

to do. Have your dragon take the visual direct from Kawanth. Don't try and identify it, you'll put 'em off."

"Where are we going, sir?" C'mine asked politely.

Sh'zon scowled across the distance between their dragons. "That's for me to know and you not to! Now, let's go hunting!"

Kawanth launched skywards with a mighty leap. Darshanth followed, too sensible to try to match the much larger dragon's flamboyance. C'mine patted his blue's soft neck. Darshanth liked to show off, but he did know his limits.

As they gained height, C'mine wondered about Sh'zon's reluctance to describe their destination. T'kamen had told him to expect a certain amount of caution on the Peninsula bronze rider's part, and also not to let it concern him. The Weyrleader suspected that Sh'zon had a girl in mind for the queen candidate, and that she would be found in Peninsula territory. It wasn't really polite for the riders of one Weyr to poach candidates from the territory of another, but it did happen, particularly when there was a family tie. *How's Kawanth's visualisation?*

*It's quite clear.* Darshanth sounded unconcerned. *I know how to get to where we're going.*

Sh'zon's bronze paused, swivelling his head to follow his rider's line of sight, and C'mine recognised Trebruth as the object of the bronze pair's attention. He still hadn't met the unusual brown dragon or his rider, although he felt he owed M'ric a debt of thanks for coming to Sarenya's rescue. News of the friendship that had sprung up between the Peninsula brown rider and the journeyman Beastcrafter had come as no surprise to C'mine. They had fire-lizards in common at a Weyr with few of the little beasts, and besides, Sarenya had always been quick to make friends with handsome men.

*And ugly ones,* said Darshanth. *Kawanth's ready.*

C'mine looked across to catch Sh'zon's signal. *In your own time.*

They went *between*. C'mine closed his eyes against the darkness, listening to his own pulse – the only thing he could hear. He counted ten beats and then opened his eyes, expecting Darshanth to emerge at the same moment. But they remained *between*, and C'mine's stomach lurched in an instant of panic.

*I know where we're going,* Darshanth told him resolutely, and with an almost palpable *wrench*, the blue dragon emerged low into light and warmth.

C'mine gripped the neck ridge in front of him for reassurance, aware that all the blood had drained from his face. Those extra few seconds *between* had given him a fright that he would not soon forget. In fifteen Turns and Faranth knew how many thousands of jumps *between*, Darshanth had never lingered any longer than it took for C'mine's heart to beat ten times. Other riders had other measurements, but his had always been constant. Now, his pulse was racing so fast he could barely distinguish one beat from the next, and the sting of wind in his face made a welcome discomfort.

*What happened?* he demanded as, following Kawanth's cue, Darshanth began to descend.

*I don't know.* The blue sounded calm, but a reflection of C'mine's own momentary panic underlined his voice. *It took longer?*

C'mine looked at Sh'zon. The bronze rider seemed unconcerned. *I don't know. It felt like you did. Maybe I counted wrong.* He knew his explanation lacked conviction.

As Darshanth circled, C'mine took enough time away from his preoccupations to take in their surroundings. The modest settlement below comprised a cluster of one-storey buildings that had clearly been built with haste rather than artistry in mind. The resulting untidy muddle of structures lacked the orderly lines of most cotholds. The buildings near the fringes of the small settlement were obviously recent additions – some of them only half-finished. But the entire holding could not have been home to more than thirty souls, and C'mine wondered what circumstance had compelled these holders to throw up such poorly-designed buildings with such little regard for planning.

C'mine couldn't see a central courtyard, but Kawanth made for a site on the far side of the compound with a practiced veer that spoke of familiarity. As the two dragons landed, C'mine loosened, then removed his jacket, and only then realised the temperature. It was definitely warm – much warmer than at Madellon – and he wondered what part of Peninsula's territory could be so far north as to enjoy such heat this close to winter. He looked for the colours, but the improvised flagstaff – little more than a pole lashed to the corner of one of the far buildings – was flying only the banner that requested a dragonrider's visit.

*You know what we're here to do,* he told Darshanth as he dismounted. *They seem to be expecting us.*

The blue snorted.

Several people had emerged from the settlement, some with tools in their hands, others whose mortar-smear appearance attested to their work on the unfinished buildings. Three of them, two men and a woman, approached Sh'zon with a confidence that confirmed C'mine's suspicions: the bronze rider was no stranger here. But even as Kawanth's rider strode to meet the cotholders, C'mine observed the signs of hardship on these people. They all looked just a little underfed, and their clothes noticeably threadbare, if not actually ragged. Every one of them was darkly tanned. But it took the blue rider several moments to notice another anomaly: not one of the hold folk wore shoulder knots.

"Ho, Sh'zon!" the bigger of the two men bellowed and, casting aside the pickaxe he had been carrying, engulfed the bronze rider in a massive hug.

C'mine watched, politely but with interest, as holder and rider pounded each other firmly on the back. "How you holding out, old man?" Sh'zon demanded.

"Aye, much like always, much like always." The cotholder spoke with the same accent as Sh'zon, if thicker – as if external influences had softened the dragonrider's home dialect over time. But he glanced at C'mine with suspicion, and the blue rider realised that his presence had stopped the other holders from greeting Sh'zon. "Who's this you've brought?"

Sh'zon motioned C'mine forward. "This is Search rider C'mine of Madellon Weyr," he said. "C'mine, this is Shevrán, my father's brother."

The blue rider nodded courteously, and some of the distrust in Shevrán's eyes faded, but he didn't extend a hand. "Aye," he said instead. "Search rider, you say? Not much for you here."

"Sometimes it only takes one," Sh'zon said easily. "Now, Varfer, pal, it's been a season or two."

As the Wingleader turned to greet the others – members of his extended family, by the definite physical resemblance – C'mine considered where this would lead. He expected that T'kamen's suspicion had been correct, and that Sh'zon had someone specific in mind. The blue rider wondered why Sh'zon hadn't just brought the girl in. Search sensitivity might be the domain of blue and green dragons, but many bronze and brown riders nominated family members or friends for candidacy regardless. Although having a sensitive dragon approve a young person's ability to Impress helped, the only actual stipulations were that a candidate be of a suitable age, physically fit and healthy, and, in the case of girls, not pregnant. Crafter candidates needed the permission of their Master to respond to Search, and journeymen weren't approached – a Crafter who had gained that rank represented too much value in his Craft's eyes for the Weyr to take him without excellent motivation. But Sh'zon had gone out of his way to procure Darshan's Search talent on this occasion, and C'mine wondered why. The Peninsula bronze rider didn't strike him as a man who liked to do things by numbers.

His greetings complete, Sh'zon beckoned with a tiny jerk of his head. "Walk with me, C'mine."

C'mine obligingly fell into step with the bronze rider, folding his hands behind his back. It took him a moment to match the taller man's long stride. They walked without speaking for a time, only the scuff of their boots in the dust, and the flap and creak of Sh'zon's coat, breaking the silence.

Then Sh'zon turned abruptly to him. "Done much Searching?"

"Some," C'mine admitted.

"How much is some?"

He counted in his head. "Sixteen Impressions."

Sh'zon's answering grunt betrayed grudging respect. "Ever Searched for a queen?"

"Once," said C'mine, thinking of Sarenia.

"She didn't make it, eh?"

"No."

The bronze rider made a sound that C'mine interpreted to mean 'obviously'.

They walked on. Ahead, a small figure darted out of the alley between two buildings, scurrying across their path, before disappearing into the shadows. The blue rider raised an eyebrow at the first evidence of children.

"One of my nephews," Sh'zon said, with a shrug. "Scrap of a thing."

“You were brought up here, then?” C’mine asked.

The bronze rider didn’t respond for several long moments, staring straight ahead. C’mine was starting to wonder if he had spoken out of turn by the time Sh’zon answered, “My family’s here.”

On cue, the Wingleader turned a corner into a small triangular courtyard, formed by the walls of three buildings that had been built at awkward angles to each other. Under the shade of woven grass awnings, four youths – two boys and two girls – worked around a long wooden table. C’mine just had time to observe that the two younger children were scribing carefully on slates with sharpened chalk when the smallest girl’s eyes widened. She scrambled off her seat and launched herself at Kawanth’s rider, exclaiming, “Sh’zon, Sh’zon!”

The Wingleader caught the child with a feigned stagger and exaggerated grimace. “Ah, lassie, you’ll knock your poor uncle down.” By the ease with which he cradled the girl, no more than six or seven, in one arm, and reached down with the other hand to ruffle the hair of the slightly older boy who had knocked over his stool in his excitement, it was clear that Sh’zon was well-acquainted with the boisterous antics of his young relatives.

The lad on the other side of the table looked to be in his mid-teens, and C’mine noticed how carefully he stowed away the knife he had been using to cut strips from a cured hide before rising from his task. But it was the other girl who caught C’mine’s eye. Older, a Turn or two off her third decade, she had the same deep tan, sun-lightened hair and blue eyes as the rest of her kin. She wore a heavily faded shirt that must once have been blue, which left her bronzed arms bare to the shoulder, and tan shorts that had clearly been cut down from a longer garment. Like all the others, her feet were bare. The girl met C’mine’s curious gaze with a direct, slightly defiant look through eyelashes several shades darker than her bleached hair.

“C’mine, these are my sister’s children, Ashan and Arville,” said Sh’zon, hitching up the little girl in his left arm, and resting a hand on the young boy’s shoulder. “And my cousins, Zonan and Tarshe.”

“Who’s the man?” the boy, Arville, asked, staring unashamedly at the blue rider. Like the adults, the boy spoke with a heavy accent.

“This is C’mine,” Sh’zon told his young nephew.

Arville studied C’mine sceptically for a moment. “Are you a dragonrider? You’re not very big.”

C’mine couldn’t blame the lad for basing his image of all dragonriders on his striking and obviously well-loved uncle. “Yes, I’m a dragonrider, and no, I’m not very big,” he said good-naturedly.

Arville’s face lit up. “So I could be a dragonrider? ‘Cause I’m not very big, either.”

“Maybe when you’re a bit older,” C’mine replied, smiling at the familiar longing in the boy’s eyes.

“What colour’s your dragon? What’s his name? Is he with Kawanth? Can I go see? Will you....”

“So many questions, you’d think there’s nothing in your head but thin air,” Sh’zon rebuked Arville gently. “Go see Kawanth, and don’t be bothering Darshanth.”

Arville flashed him a grin, and bolted.

Ashan squirmed until Sh’zon put her down, and trotted after her brother, calling, “Arvy, wait for me!”

With the two younger children gone, Sh’zon’s manner changed. He nodded brusquely to Zonan, and exchanged a more knowing look with Tarshe, before addressing C’mine. “Tarshe here’s nineteen, and Zonan sixteen,” he said. “They’re the ones you want to be looking at.”

C’mine nodded, touching Darshanth’s mind. *Paying attention?*

Yes.

The blue rider looked at Zonan first, appraising the lad’s physical condition. He seemed fit, if rather thin, under the worn clothes that seemed universal to the people of this nameless Peninsula cothold. He definitely resembled Sh’zon, having the bronze rider’s naturally golden-blond hair, but the Wingleader’s cousin didn’t radiate the same kind of intensity.

Not so Tarshe. The girl held herself proudly, showing no sign of self consciousness at C’mine’s scrutiny. The front almost convinced him, but C’mine was too good at reading subtleties, and he recognised a young woman with something to prove when he saw one. It didn’t put him off, but it did make him wonder. The girl was attractive enough, in a slightly wild, unruly way, and yet clearly unmarried. Either the cothold was more remote than C’mine had thought, or Tarshe’s ostentatious independence made her a less than desirable match. Either way, he surmised that her current status – overseeing the younger members of the Hold – might have something to do with her attitude. But whether she felt defensive of a simple lifestyle, or resented it, C’mine didn’t know.

*Darshanth?*

*You’re right about the boy.*

C’mine felt a pang of regret. Zonan seemed responsible, and he wouldn’t have had any reservations about taking him to the Weyr, but if Darshanth judged him lacking in the right sensitivity to Impress, there was no point. *And the girl?*

*Bring her to me. I want to look at her.*

The blue rider cleared his throat before addressing Tarshe. “My dragon would like to meet you. Will you come?”

The girl glanced at Sh’zon. The big bronze rider nodded fractionally. “Zonan, why don’t you show me if there’s a beastie about for Kawanth to snack on?”

Zonan nodded, but from the sag of his shoulders he recognised the rejection. C’mine cringed inside, and hoped that Sh’zon would employ some of his considerable charisma to cheer the lad.

“You’re a blue rider?” Tarshe asked, as she started in the direction of the two dragons, leaving C’mine to follow.

“Yes,” he admitted, lengthening his stride to catch up, aware but tolerant of her boldness. “How did you know?”

Tarshe threw him a knowing look over her shoulder, but didn’t reply.

C’mine was sure that C’los would have devised a complex theory to explain the girl’s knowledge, but he could only think of two possibilities. Tarshe either knew that most Search dragons were blue, or Sh’zon had specifically briefed her on C’mine’s identity beforehand. In either case, as no one had mentioned Search, and Tarshe had not been surprised by C’mine’s presence, she had clearly been expecting the visit. The probability that she had been tutored in suitable answers to the normal questions a Search rider asked was not lost on C’mine. Sh’zon obviously had his young cousin in mind for Shimpath’s queen egg, and it seemed that the Wingleader hadn’t left anything to chance.

“What do you do here?” he asked.

Tarshe shrugged expressively. “This and that.”

“What sort of this and that?”

“I forage. I fish. I make line and mend net.” The girl’s accented voice flowed almost lyrically.

C’mine frowned slightly. “I didn’t realise you’re so close to the coast here.” They had come in low, and he’d been so preoccupied with Darshanth’s uncharacteristic hiccup *between* that he hadn’t looked for a bearing from the air.

“Close enough.” The wary note in Tarshe’s voice was baffling.

The blue rider considered his next question carefully. “What are the new buildings going to be? Are you expecting more people?”

She looked up, as if trying to gauge the point behind the question. “No, they’re just storehouses.”

By the scale of the structures being constructed, the cothold must have a significant need for storage. C’mine wondered if there was some product exclusive to the region that they exported – perhaps something particularly valuable, which would go some way towards explaining Tarshe’s caution.

It occurred to him that he could spend the afternoon asking questions and still glean no more from the girl than she had been prompted to give. C’mine seldom confronted anyone for any reason, but he felt that a little directness might win him Tarshe’s respect, if not her trust. “Tarshe, I’m a Search rider,” he said. “But you know that already.”

If Tarshe felt any surprise that he suspected her foreknowledge, she didn’t show it. She nodded. “Yes.”

“How would you feel about being Searched?” Then, before she had a chance to reply, C’mine added, “And I mean how do *you* feel, not how did your cousin tell you how to feel.”

Tarshe shot him a look that softened her abrupt manner. She took several moments to answer, but C'mine sensed that the delay was due to her wishing to frame her thoughts accurately, rather than to obscure a true meaning. "It wouldn't be a surprise," she replied, at length. "Sh'zon has been saying it for Turns. You can't always take him seriously, though."

"Do you know why he's waited until now to have you appraised by a Search dragon?" When the girl hesitated, the barriers going up again, C'mine went on, "Because it's no shame to wait for a queen egg."

Tarshe nodded. "I suppose not."

"Do you want to be a queen rider?"

Sh'zon's cousin smiled, the first smile C'mine had seen on her. "My cousin is a bronze rider, C'mine. There's no one here who doesn't envy what he has."

"How do you feel about the possibility of being a green rider?"

Tarshe looked faintly surprised. "I hadn't considered it, to be honest."

"If you come to Madellon to stand for Shimpath's clutch, you'll need to," C'mine told her.

"Why would a green choose a queen candidate?"

"Why does any dragon choose any candidate?" C'mine smiled, thinking back to his own Impression. "There are no queen candidates at Madellon, Tarshe. Candidates chosen with the queen in mind, perhaps, but even Search riders can't second-guess a dragon's choice."

"I'll have to think about that," said Tarshe. "Sh'zon obviously neglected to mention a few things."

C'mine smiled, but said nothing.

"Are you in his Wing?"

"His Flight. The Weyrleader's Wing."

"I see." The girl was pensively silent for a moment. "What if I don't Impress?"

"Sh'zon didn't comment on that possibility either?" C'mine asked.

Tarshe made a disgusted sound. "You can't know my cousin very well. Of course he didn't. He's never heard of failure."

"If you don't Impress, you can stay at the Weyr, or come back here, whichever you prefer," said C'mine. "You'll be past the age of candidacy by the time of the next clutch, if you stay, but the choice is entirely yours."

"And if I do Impress?"

"You'll spend about two Turns as a weyrling, training under the same Weyrleader who trained Darshanth and I. It's hard work – I can't lie to you about that – and there are sacrifices involved in being a dragonrider, but..."

"Let me guess, you think they're worth it," said Tarshe, gently mocking. "You would say that. Hard work isn't anything new. Sacrifices – let's see, now: two Turns of being ordered around, a list of rules as long as my arm, the prospect of losing friends in training – oh, and being at the mercy of your dragon's heat cycle."

"That's most of them," C'mine agreed. "But if you Impress a queen, you can add responsibility to the list."

"And less liberty to do what I want than the rider of a fighting dragon would enjoy, I presume."

The blue rider nodded. "I'm glad you understand about the heat cycle," he added belatedly. "That one's sometimes hard to explain."

"I have more second cousins at the Peninsula than I can count," Tarshe said dryly. She cocked her head and asked disarmingly, "Do you have children?"

"Not that I know of," said C'mine. "My weyrmate's daughter is standing for this clutch, though."

"Female weyrmate or male?"

C'mine smiled. He wasn't sure if Tarshe was asking out of genuine curiosity or just to show off her understanding of Weyr life, but he didn't really mind the personal queries. "Male."

Tarshe's eyebrows rose and fell in an expression that might or might not have been faint surprise as they rounded the corner of the last building. Kawanth, C'mine observed, was patiently enduring the attentions of Sh'zon's small niece and nephew. Ashan and Arville had climbed onto the bronze's neck, and were thumping their heels into his sleek hide, as if the big dragon were a runner. Darshanth looked faintly relieved that the pair hadn't accosted him, but he came alert as C'mine and Tarshe came into view. The blue, who had been lounging on his forearms, scrambled to sit up, staring intently at Tarshe.

"He's Search sensitive?" Tarshe asked.

When C'mine nodded, the girl walked closer to the blue dragon without fear or hesitation. Darshanth gazed down at her, his nose no more than a few inches from her face. C'mine could see his dragon's breath stirring Tarshe's hair. In his Turns as a Searcher, he had never seen any potential candidate approach his dragon with such presumption – or such boldness. Even Sarenya had waited for his permission before moving towards the blue. But Tarshe looked directly into Darshanth's jewelled eyes, and Darshanth held her gaze, until finally the sensitive dragon eased back on his haunches. *She'll do.*

With visible effort, Tarshe tore her eyes from Darshanth's and looked at C'mine. Her demeanour had changed: gone was the wariness, gone the cockiness, to be replaced by an openness and vulnerability that C'mine would scarcely have believed possible from his first impression of the girl. It wouldn't be the first time that Darshanth had charmed a potential candidate, but Tarshe's reaction was extreme. "What does he say?"

C'mine hesitated before replying. Search required discretion on the rider's part as much as sensitivity on the dragon's. "Tarshe, are you promised to anyone?"

"Promised? Me?" Tarshe shook her head. "No."

The blue rider chose his words with great care before asking his next question. "Please don't take offence, but it's important that I know: is there any chance at all that you're with child?"

Tarshe folded her arms resolutely. “No. None.”

C'mine surveyed the girl – young woman, he corrected himself – briefly, assessing her fitness for himself rather than asking. She looked sound, strong; thinner than really desirable, but that was nothing an improved diet couldn't solve, and C'mine would rather bring in a girl lean and fit from hard living than one with the spare flesh of indolence. Her fingers, resting lightly on her darkly tanned upper arms, showed white nicks and scars, and nails kept scrupulously short and clean. Nothing suggested her health to be any less than perfect.

“Well?” she asked, with more than a hint of that belligerent impatience.

The blue rider couldn't help but smile. “We'd like you to come back to Madellon Weyr to stand for Shimpath's clutch.”

Tarshe nodded curtly, although she couldn't entirely conceal her pleasure. “Thank you, blue rider C'mine. I'd like that.”

Darshanth sneezed. C'mine flinched reflexively and threw a reproachful look at his dragon, but in looking at the blue, he saw Sh'zon, standing beside Kawanth. The Wingleader had clearly been watching for some time. *You could have just said he was there, you know.*

*Who?*

*Sh'zon. You didn't have to sneeze to get my attention.*

*I didn't. The blue's eyes glowed with innocence. My nose itched.*

C'mine decided not to acknowledge the bronze rider. Darshanth's approval, not Sh'zon's, had been the crucial factor in Tarshe's Search, and it would be insulting to suggest to her that he had acted because the Wingleader had told him to, rather than because his cousin was worthy. “You won't need to bring much, Tarshe, but if you need some time to get your things together, then I'm sure Sh'zon will come and pick you up in a day or so.”

Tarshe went visibly tense, and said quickly, “No, I'll come back with you now.” Then she added, “I've already packed, anyway. Sh'zon warned me.”

“He must have been very confident in you,” C'mine replied, but he wondered why the girl was so keen to get away. “Does the rest of your family know you're going?”

“He warned them, too,” said the girl, with a more natural roll of her eyes. “I'll get my pack. I won't be long.”

C'mine knew, even before Tarshe had disappeared out of sight into one of the thick-walled buildings, that Sh'zon would be on him for details. The blue rider turned to make some unnecessary adjustments to Darshanth's flying harness, wondering what to say. The least charitable part of him almost wished that Tarshe had proved unsuitable, just to knock Sh'zon's towering self-assurance down a notch. But C'mine honesty wouldn't let him rebuff an excellent prospect out of spite, and besides, he liked Tarshe. Her manner was perhaps more abrasive than strictly necessary, and there were definite similarities between her outspoken confidence and Sh'zon's, but the blue rider sensed that much of that aggression was bluster. Tarshe's strong personality might not always make life easy for her, but her brusqueness resulted from something

else, something that had forced her to be tough, if only on the outside, in order to survive. The blue rider had thought at first that Tarshe reminded him of Sarenya – and in a way she did: determined, unafraid, rather stubborn. But, as C'mine ran their conversation back through his mind, he realised that the girl put him more in mind of the close-mouthed, short-tempered, but totally straightforward and trustworthy T'kamen.

“So my cousin’s coming to the Weyr?”

C'mine took a quick deep breath before turning to face Sh'zon. “Darshanth and I think that she’d make an excellent dragonrider.”

“She’s a good lass,” Sh'zon asserted. “The best.”

C'mine considered suggesting Tarshe would make a first-rate green rider, but he decided against it. Deliberate provocation wasn't his style. But the very fact that he had thought of the barb was telling: Sh'zon's attitude bothered him. The bronze rider's charisma would appeal to many, but C'mine didn't quite feel comfortable with it. It reminded him too much of L'dro.

“What’s this place called?” he asked instead.

Sh'zon's eyes narrowed fractionally, but his tone didn't waver. “Just Shevran's hold, after my uncle.”

If the settlement had been named after the bronze rider's uncle, it must be quite new, which would account for the apparent haste of its construction. “I didn't know any part of the Peninsula's territory was this warm.”

“Long way north,” Sh'zon said shortly and, as if to cut off further questioning, he stalked back towards his bronze.

C'mine looked at Darshanth and shrugged.

He was scratching the blue's throat when Tarshe reappeared. She had changed into a long-sleeved tunic and trousers just as shabby as the vest and shorts she had been wearing earlier, and she wore battered sandals on her feet. As the blue rider went to take Tarshe's bag of belongings, he frowned at the garments. They weren't nearly substantial enough to keep out the cold of *between*.

Sh'zon intercepted his cousin as she crossed the space between the two dragons, doffing his long flying coat. “Here, lassie, put this on, or you'll catch a death.”

Tarshe winced a bit as she pulled on the heavy, too-long coat, but she touched Sh'zon's arm fondly. “Thank you.”

The bronze rider snorted in response, and buttoned shut the lighter jacket he had been wearing under his coat. “Go on with you.”

C'mine had mounted to Darshanth's neck ridges before he realised that Tarshe was waiting expectantly for a hand up. He blinked down at the girl. “You're not riding with your cousin?”

Tarshe shrugged laboriously, the bulk of the leather coat obviously weighing her down.

“You'd better come with us, then.” C'mine leaned down, offering his hand.

The girl took it, eyeing the distance between ground and neck ridges uncertainly, and with a flash of insight C'mine realised that she must have little or no experience of riding dragons. He masked his surprise. "Just step up on his forearm there, and I'll give you a pull the rest of the way."

Darshanth politely bent his elbow to assist the procedure, and Tarshe, clumsy in her borrowed coat, clambered onto the blue's arm. C'mine shifted his grip to her wrist, and tugged her up his dragon's side until she could throw a leg over the soft neck behind him.

The blue rider looped the passenger safety strap around Tarshe's waist, then secured the loose end to the secondary eyelets on Darshanth's neck strap. He pulled on the leathers to make sure, and asked, "Does that feel all right?"

Tarshe nodded, and C'mine added, "You can hold on to me. Has Sh'zon told you about *between*?"

"I *have* flown," Tarshe said, with asperity. Then, grudgingly, she admitted, "It's just been a while."

"Just remember that it doesn't last long, and you'll be fine." The blue rider checked their safety harness one more time, and looked to Sh'zon for permission before rousing Darshanth with a light slap. "Let's go."

As the blue reared to his haunches, extending his wings, C'mine moved with him, but Tarshe was thrown back in her place. The blue rider gave her a reassuring smile. Riding a dragon was exciting to a beginner, but seldom comfortable.

Darshanth and Kawanth sprang aloft almost at the same moment, banking in different directions to achieve suitable altitude and airspace. C'mine looked down at the cothold, noticing the small group of people who had gathered outside one of the buildings, looking up. He supposed that Sh'zon had laid the groundwork for Tarshe's removal to the Weyr long ago, but the lack of reaction to her Search was still puzzling.

*Let's go home*, he told his dragon.

The blue went *between*.

C'mine caught himself counting again, and the memory of their last, inexplicably long, jump *between* made a sweat break out of his forehead. *Seven...eight...nine...*

Darshanth re-emerged over Madellon, into a darkness almost as intense as the one from which they had come. C'mine clutched the neck ridge in front of him with frantic strength.

*Darshanth, what happened?*

*This is home*. The blue's tone was confused, and as he turned his head back to look at his rider, C'mine could see yellow flashes of distress in the dragon's eye.

*But it's the wrong time! Darshanth, it was daylight when we left!*

"C'mine?"

The blue rider had forgotten about their passenger. "It's all right, Tarshe, don't worry," he called back, hating himself for the lie.

*What should I do, Mine?*

C'mine looked down at the sleeping Weyr. The watchdragon was looking up at them, but the brown would not vocalise a challenge or query so late at night. *We've come to the wrong time, Darshanth.*

The blue angled on a wing, and then cried out softly, a piteous sound. C'mine looked down to see what had distressed his dragon, and swallowed hard. Below, on their weyr ledge, another silvery sky-blue dragon lay asleep. Darshanth.

C'mine felt a wave of disorienting nausea roll over him. He shook his head, trying to focus. *Come on, Darshanth. We have to find our own time. It's daylight, and Kinerth's going to rise soon. There's a blue on watch.* He formed the image in his mind, concentrating hard on the preening green. *Let's go.*

The blue rider felt Darshanth's mind take hold of the visualisation, and they went *between*.

He couldn't count: Darshanth had too strong a grip on his thoughts, clinging to the clarity of the picture C'mine had drawn. Every detail he could muster seemed to burn in his brain as the blue relied on him absolutely to find his way through the freezing blackness, and for the first time, transfixed as he was by the powerful grasp of Darshanth's mind, C'mine experienced some of the immensity of a dragon's pathfinding ability. He only touched the edges of it, and understood less than he saw, but the alien complexity of the dragons' instinctive gift to navigate *between here and there* made him shudder away.

*Here!*

C'mine didn't know which of them had spoken, but as Darshanth's vicelike clutch on his consciousness eased, he opened his eyes.

Madellon sprawled below them, in daylight. The blue was on watch. Kinerth perched on the Rim, preening her wings, and the same few males still watched her. Even the brown, Trebruth, was where he had been.

C'mine felt something ease inside him, and he wiped the film of perspiration from his brow with a trembling hand. *Good lad, Darshanth, clever lad.* He swallowed convulsively. *Ask the watchdragon how long we've been gone.*

Darshanth's voice was a little shaky, too. *He says only a minute, and why are we back so soon.*

*Tell him it's a long story. Let's get on the ground.* C'mine pulled his flying goggles down, letting the air cool the sweat on his face for a moment. Then he turned to touch Tarshe's arm, knowing that she wouldn't hear him speak over the wind of Darshanth's flight. The girl looked perplexed, but not afraid: blissful in her ignorance of the disaster that had almost occurred.

Darshanth checked his descent for a moment, looking back at C'mine. *Trebruth wants to know where Kawanth is.*

If C'mine had forgotten about Tarshe, sitting behind him on Darshanth's neck, in his fright, he had as good as forgotten Sh'zon's existence. *Didn't they come back with us? Did they stay?*

*I don't know.*

If Kawanth had lost his way like Darshanth, the bronze and his rider could be anywhere – or anywhen – and the Peninsula pair might not have a strong enough image of Madellon to find their way back. *Can't you find them, Darshanth?*

But before the blue could reply, a shadow fell abruptly on them from above. C'mine looked up, and exhaled in relief at the sight of Kawanth's bright hide.

Darshanth flinched, wobbling and then correcting himself. *Kawanth's very angry*, he said tremulously.

*Why should he be angry?* But C'mine couldn't dispute his dragon's report: as the bronze dived to flank Darshanth, he could see the orange of Kawanth's eyes, and the furious expression on Sh'zon's face. *You'd better land.*

The Wingleader released his straps and slid down from his dragon's neck almost before Kawanth had settled to the ground, and there was wrath in every inch of his body as he stormed across to Darshanth. "Get down from there!" he bellowed up at C'mine.

The blue rider unfastened the fighting strap. "Just swing your leg over his neck, and slide down," he told Tarshe.

Sh'zon stood fuming as first Tarshe and then C'mine dismounted. "What in the name of Faranth's first egg did you think you were doing, going *between* on your own?" he shouted in the blue rider's face, heedless of his cousin's presence.

C'mine straightened, offended despite his scare. "Darshanth and I have been going *between* on our own for thirteen Turns, sir."

"You went without my permission! You went without taking the visual!"

Sh'zon couldn't know about their detour into another time, and his rage was out of all proportion. "With respect, Wingleader, we know our way home."

"You should have waited!" Sh'zon's roar was enraged, but he hadn't flushed with anger. If anything, he was paler than usual. "Next time, you wait, you hear? Scorch you, you wait!"

"Yes, sir," C'mine said, thinking privately that there wouldn't be a next time. He was glad that he was in T'kamen's Wing. The Weyrleader had his moments, but at least C'mine understood him.

"Give me that." Sh'zon pulled at the coat Tarshe was still wearing, hardly giving the girl a chance to take it off. Tarshe shot her cousin a baleful look, but said nothing. "Now get out of my sight, both of you."

"I'm sorry about that," C'mine said softly to the girl, as Sh'zon strode away, yanking on his coat.

Tarshe shook her head. "It's all right. It's not your fault."

C'mine hesitated, then said, "That first jump *between*...I'm sorry. I don't know what happened there."

"It's not your fault," the girl repeated, looking at him with those fiercely blue eyes.

The blue rider sighed, and took Tarshe's pack down from Darshanth's harness. "I'll take you to meet L'stev, the Weyrlingmaster. He'll be in charge of you, but his bark's worse than his bite."

"That's often the way."

C'mine walked his latest candidate to the weyrling barracks, leaving her in L'stev's capable hands. But he couldn't help being unnerved by the problems Darshanth had encountered going *between*. He might have been able to forget one anomaly, but not two in the same day. Why had they ended up at Madellon in the middle of the night? Had they gone back in time, or forward? Darshanth's instinct had never been unreliable before. And why had Sh'zon reacted so extremely to their jump *between*, unless he knew they'd gone astray? How would he have known?

The watch dragon said that they had only been gone a minute. C'mine had used his last time-specific visual of Madellon as a reference. But Sh'zon and Kawanth had arrived back only a few moments after Darshanth. They had been at Tarshe's cothold for an hour or more: why had the bronze pair jumped back in time to a minute or two after their departure from Madellon? Had Kawanth lost his way, too?

The thought was ominous. Relying on your dragon to find his way *between* was a fundamental part of being a dragonrider. If that foolproof instinct could no longer be trusted....

The blue rider shivered, chilled to his very soul.