

XV

Who Loves, Lives



“Raise your arms, green rider. Come on, I don’t have all day.”

C’los did as he was told, but he glared at the top of Ironam’s head as the tailor stooped to stretch a measuring tape around his chest. He didn’t normally mind being measured for new clothes – in fact, he quite enjoyed the conversation that accompanied a fitting. Ironam, though, was not his usual tailor, and E’rom’s eldest brother had neither the flattering manner of Avair, who had been making C’los’ clothes for most of a decade, nor his flair for innovative design. C’los had caught a glimpse of the fabric swatches Ironam had brought, and they all looked drab and dull. If talking to Ironam hadn’t been so crucial to his investigation, C’los would have told him to take his boring fabrics and get out.

He endured, keeping in mind his promise to T’kamen to avoid arousing suspicion. At least he could charge the price of the shirt to the Weyrleader. That thought cheered him.

“Don’t puff out your chest like that,” Ironam said peevishly. “And stop sucking in your belly.”

“Excuse me?” C’los asked, automatically holding himself in tighter.

“Do you want this shirt to fit or not?”

C’los scowled as the tailor whipped the tape around his waist. The number Ironam noted down on his slate was offensively high. Avair cut his shirts to fit, but the man had tact and never wrote down C’los’ real measurements where the green rider could see them. But then, Avair had trained at the Hall, and Ironam merely had a useful talent. The difference was in the service.

Finally, Ironam put down his slate. “You can look at those swatches and see what you like,” he said, jerking his head at the stack of fabric.

C’los eyed the selection dubiously, but he was glad to be free of Ironam’s brutally honest measuring tape. He picked up the first square of cloth – patterned in a sober blue and white stripe – and sighed mentally. “Can you guarantee you’ll have this ready before the Hatching?”

Ironam glanced up from putting his tape away. “That’ll be extra.”

C’los sighed again. Fingering the top few swatches without really feeling them, he arranged his thoughts. “I was at your brother’s funeral,” he said. Then, without much sincerity, he added, “Your eulogy was very touching.”

Apparently deaf to the irony, Ironam assumed a pious expression. “I only did what any brother would. I didn’t know you knew E’rom.”

“Not as well as I’d have liked to,” C’los lied.

“He was the best of men,” said Ironam. “He deserved better.”

“A better death?” asked C’los.

The tailor sniffed. “That, too, but no. He deserved a better weyrmate than that blue rider.”

“K’ston?”

"You know him?" Ironam asked, suddenly wary.

"I know of him," C'los shrugged. "The Weyr Singer and I are friends, and she was close to E'rom."

Ironam seemed to relax. "We'd all rather she'd been his weyrmate."

"If you don't mind me asking, what didn't you like about K'ston?"

The tailor folded his arms. "We're a close family, green rider, and we don't soon forget wrongs against our own."

C'los felt more convinced of the latter statement than the former. "What sort of wrongs?"

Ironam huffed to himself. "Our youngest brother, Heromar, Impressed from the same clutch as K'ston. And let me tell you, I don't know what was going through that dragon's mind when he chose *that* little bully."

"He and E'mar didn't get on?" C'los asked, rather redundantly.

"Ha!" Ironam checked himself, then said darkly, "And him a blue rider too, that was the worst of it. Holdbred and hidebound, that's all I'll say." He shook his head. "E'rom should have known better than to take up with his like. It's been thirty Turns, he said; he's changed, he said, but a tunnel snake doesn't change its markings just because it's shed a skin. Are you going to look at that fabric or not?"

The level of animosity Ironam clearly felt towards K'ston surprised C'los. The green rider wondered if the tailor resented him for something as simple as the fact that the Holdbred boy had Impressed and Ironam had not, but he didn't think so. Weyrbred boys who had been given opportunities to Impress and failed were typically given short shrift if they bemoaned the injustice for too long. But Ironam's manner had become wary again, and C'los doubted he would get any more on the subject out of the pompous little man.

He flipped through the scraps of material without really paying attention. Brown, brown, boring, boring, dull, dull, dull. He liked colours with life, personality, eye-catching appeal. "You know, the Weyrleader hasn't chosen E'rom's replacement yet," he said conversationally.

"Of course not," Ironam said stiffly. "Respect for the dead."

C'los didn't mention that, during a Pass, a new Wingsecond would have been promoted immediately. "Who do you think will be appointed?"

"Why don't you tell me, green rider? I'm not a dragonrider. I don't presume to know the Weyrleader's mind."

C'los paused, and then asked, "There's not a rider from his Wing he thought might have an eye on his position...?"

"You're asking the wrong person. Now tell me what you want this shirt made of, or I won't have it ready by Turn's End, let alone the Hatching."

In the end, the green rider chose plain but very fine white linen for his shirt, reasoning that it would echo the simple white robes that the candidates, including Leah, would be wearing. It took longer to persuade Ironam to cut the sleeves rather fuller than was strictly functional, and the tailor

complained that the embroidery C'los wanted – a green dragon, her wings spread, across the shoulders, and finer detail of head and neck on the left breast – would have to be outsourced to someone skilled in close needlework. Still, C'los was forced to concede that the overall effect would probably be met with greater approval by his daughter and weyrmate than something in the loud colours and patterns he normally preferred.

It was late for lunch, but C'los found himself ravenous, and he drifted towards the dining cavern. Only a few people still ate at the long tables, but the green rider didn't feel like company anyway. He flashed a practised, entirely insincere grin at one of the kitchen helpers as she dished up his serving of the meal and found his portion of the dessert doubled. C'los gloated over his unerring ability to charm extra out of almost every woman in the kitchens, and then remembered Ironam's measuring tape.

He trudged towards the vacant end of a table, reflecting bitterly that sessions with tailors weren't supposed to make one feel bad about oneself. He sat down and took the first bite of his pie. If there were meat in there, it was hiding where he couldn't find it. C'los stared gloomily at the miserable fare. He was expanding his waistline for this? He ate anyway, too hungry to pass up the meal, and too conscious that he couldn't be fussy with the Weyr struggling to make ends meet.

By the time he had cleared his plates, and taken them back to the service hatch, C'los was wondering what to do next. Ironam hadn't shed any more light on T'fer's involvement with E'rom's murder, and the green rider needed something more to go on than circumstantial evidence and a hunch. It had been almost a month since E'rom's murder, and for all C'los knew, the brown rider's killer could still be at loose in the Weyr. It was an unnerving thought.

C'los wondered if there were any more to be gleaned from L'stev regarding the double tragedy that had occurred in T'fer's weyrling class. If he could get a better sense for the limitations of the brown rider's ambition, he might be better able to confront T'fer with his suspicions. Perhaps more frustrating than anything was being forced to investigate the crime without being able to do so openly. C'los understood why T'kamen didn't want the Weyr at large to know, but it made his task ten times more difficult. Riders who had been obstructive would surely be more helpful if they knew what was at stake.

As he left the dining hall, C'los realised he still felt hungry. *Indioth, are you hungry?* he asked, but she was asleep. Perhaps dreaming of food.

The weather outside was sullen: grey and gusty. C'los didn't want to wake Indioth just to find out where L'stev was, so he headed in the general direction of the weyrling barracks. But his eye was drawn to a dragon emerging from the lake, and C'los hesitated to identify him before changing course mid-stride and almost tripping over his own feet. The striking deep-hued blue was Bronth. K'ston might have some more answers.

The blue rider was wrapping a towel about himself, shivering and blowing with the chill of the water, but Bronth showed the sparkling health of a newly-clean dragon. He cocked his head to look at C'los as he approached, and his interest alerted K'ston.

C'los only had a few moments to remind himself that K'ston knew he was investigating E'rom's death before the blue rider hailed him. "C'los!"

"Hello, K'ston," the green rider replied. "Bronth's looking well."

K'ston shuddered. "He'd better. I don't know what possessed me to go into that water in this sort of weather." He rubbed vigorously at his head with his towel, making his sandy hair stand up in spikes.

C'los hesitated, taking care with his words. "How are you feeling?"

K'ston froze for the barest of instants and then lowered his towel. "I'm getting by," he admitted.

C'los waited until the other rider had put some clothes back on before saying, "I was wondering if you'd sit with me and tell me more about E'rom."

"You're still investigating what happened?" Bronth's rider asked.

C'los nodded. "Why don't you come up to my weyr?"

Indioth and Darshanth were both dozing on the ledge. C'los stepped carefully in between the two dragons. "C'mine?"

His weyrmate didn't respond, and a quick glance around the weyr satisfied C'los that Darshanth's rider had gone out. "Sit down and dry off," he invited K'ston, indicating one of the chairs by the hearth. The green rider prodded at the embers in the fireplace with a poker, almost extinguishing them before they flared back into life. C'mine usually tended the fire.

"This is a really nice weyr," said K'ston, in the manner of a man making small talk.

"It belonged to one of Madellon's founding bronze riders," C'los replied, taking his own seat by the fire. "He did most of the work of chiselling it out of the rock, so when he died and left his possessions to Mine and I, this was included."

They both lapsed into silence for a difficult few moments, and then both spoke at once.

"Can you tell me...?" C'los began.

"Have you found out any more...?" K'ston said.

C'los grinned, a little of the tension eased. "You first."

The blue rider smiled uncomfortably. "Have you found out any more about how it happened?"

Yes, C'los wanted to shout. *Your weyrmate was murdered. Someone drugged him, and then killed him, and I think it was T'fer, but I don't have any proof, and...*

"Some," he replied, with a calmness he didn't feel. "I'm still trying to get a sense for the sort of man E'rom was, to put his death in context." The green rider considered for a moment. "Did he see much of his family?"

"He couldn't fail to, with so many of them around the place," said K'ston, with only a hint of bitterness. "E'rom was from a big Weyrbred family – they came from Telgar when Madellon was founded. His eldest brother can recite the lineage as if it's sacred." There was no mistaking the scorn in his curled lip.

“Why didn’t you get along with them?” asked C’los, deliberately skipping the establishment of that fact.

K’ston shrugged. “They didn’t like me from the start. I thought maybe it was because they missed E’rom’s last weyrmate, but...I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you and his younger brother Impress from the same clutch?” C’los asked, falsely casual.

K’ston’s expression betrayed him. The blue rider started to speak, then stopped, shaking his head. “I guess there’s no point edging around that,” he said regretfully. “E’mar and I were weyrlings together, yes.”

“Go on,” C’los prompted.

“There was a certain amount of rivalry between us,” said K’ston. “Both being blue riders, him from the Weyr and me from Jessaf. I might have been pretty unkind to him at the time – I was bigger than him, and...well, we were kids. It was thirty Turns ago. I mean, everyone’s got something in their past they’d rather wasn’t there, haven’t they?”

C’los could believe that the friction between E’rom’s family and K’ston stemmed from that long-ago rivalry. Ironam had said himself that he never forgot a slight. “Did you and E’rom talk about it?”

“Not much,” said K’ston. “Like I said, it was a long time ago, and I was pretty young and pretty stupid. E’rom realised that, even if his brothers didn’t.”

C’los mulled that over. It cleared up another loose end, but it still didn’t resolve anything. He was convinced that the answer lay with T’fer. But while C’los was desperate to find something that would conclusively point to the brown rider now stationed at Kellad, he was perversely relieved every time a line of questioning failed. He wanted to find the killer, but cynical as he was, pragmatic as he was, C’los still couldn’t bear to be the one who proved that one dragonrider could murder another in cold blood.

“Did E’rom ever mention one of his wingriders, T’fer, to you?” he asked.

Bronth’s rider nodded. “One of the brown riders from his new Wing, under H’ned,” he said.

“What did he think of him?”

K’ston frowned thoughtfully. “He never really said. I think he said once that T’fer might have been made Wingsecond in his place.” The blue rider smiled: a brief, oddly forced smile. “But there was no reason for E’rom to be demoted. He didn’t support L’dro; he was qualified for his position.”

“Did T’fer ever go to E’rom’s weyr on Wing business?” asked C’los.

“Most of his wingriders did at some point,” K’ston replied, blinking. “At least, from his old Wing. He always took a personal interest in his riders.”

“So E’rom wouldn’t have been surprised if T’fer dropped in to discuss a Wing matter before drill?” C’los pressed.

The blue rider looked askance. “Well, no.”

"Maybe for a cup of klah?"

"Oh, no, E'rom never drank klah after mid-afternoon," K'ston said earnestly.

Something about the blue rider's words struck a distant chord in C'los' mind. He frowned, rubbing at his temples, frustrated by the sudden torpor of his mental agility. Making connections without conscious effort had always been one of his gifts. But at the edge of his awareness, beyond the barrier he had maintained between himself and Indioth for the duration of the murder investigation, he felt his dragon rousing, and with a shock of recognition C'los realised how and why the normally gentle and introverted green had been interfering with his concentration all day. She was ready to mate.

The green rider tried to count up the sevendays since Indioth's last flight, and couldn't. Was she early, or had he just lost track of the days? He couldn't focus: Indioth wasn't in control yet, but the building intensity of her emotions pulled his mind this way and that, buffeting his thoughts, demanding his attention. A lone coherent thought reared up in the morass: *oh, love, why didn't I notice*, but the guilt and mortification of the thought was gone almost before it formed, swept away in the green dragon's growing need.

C'los didn't even realise K'ston was still trying to get his attention until the blue rider actually seized his shoulder, shaking him back to himself for a moment. "C'los!" The other man looked down at him intently, and then his eyes went vague. "It's Indioth, isn't it?"

The green rider dragged both hands back through his hair, desperately trying to hold on to himself. Indioth's flights were to be cherished, but not like this, not without warning or preparation or even a moment to collect himself. He was an experienced green rider of nearly fifteen Turns and dozens of flights: he should have known she was close.

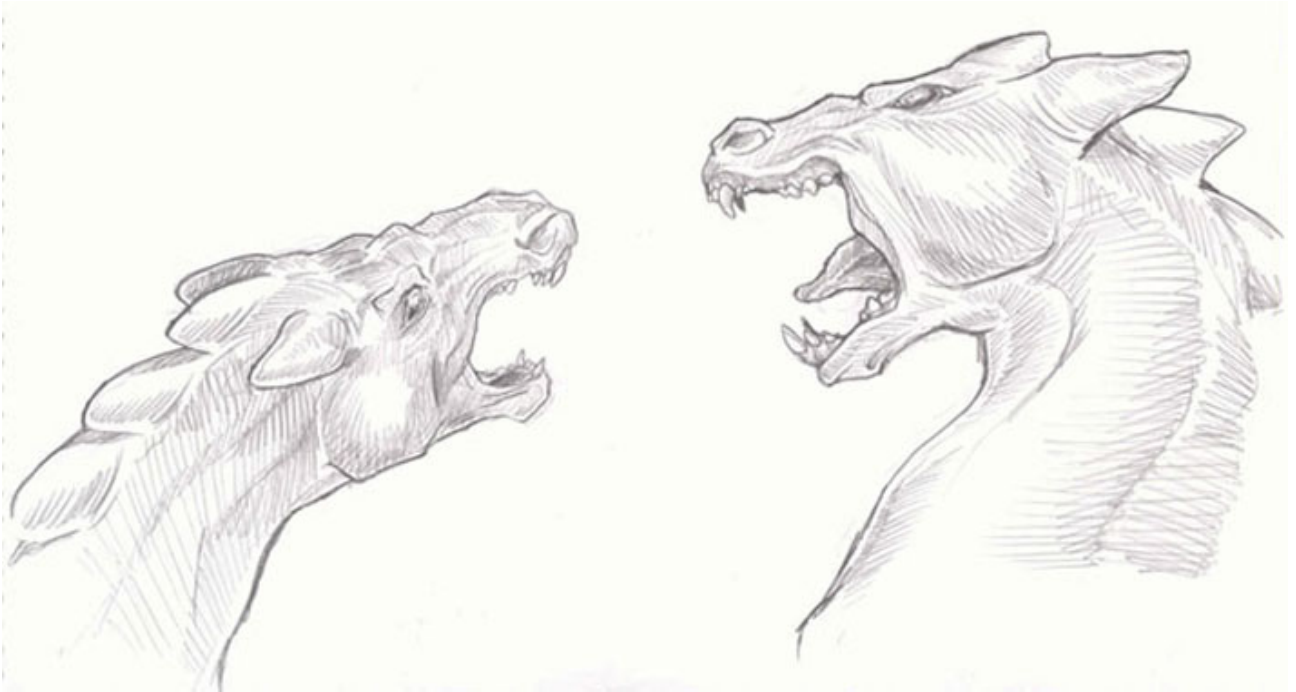
All thoughts of the investigation gone from his mind, C'los got shakily to his feet, driven by the need to be with his dragon. He was only peripherally aware of K'ston beside him, only half conscious of the chair in his way and the blue rider's help as he almost tripped. It was only when C'los reached the ledge, and his green, that he could focus, and then on the furious, vibrant form of Indioth, rearing high above him with eyes like amber lanterns.

What are you doing rising now? he asked weakly into the unyielding strength of her emotions.

It's time, she declared. *We will fly.*

With that, she launched herself into the air. C'los clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached, but Indioth alighted on the Rim, flaring her wings and bugling a raucous challenge to the males of the Weyr.

C'los spared a moment to be relieved that his dragon hadn't gone for the flocks: a green who blooded kills before a flight was an unnecessary drain on the Weyr's resources, and he wouldn't have had the presence of mind to restrain her. Other concerns were already becoming more pressing. As dragons around Madellon responded to Indioth's challenge, their riders began to drift in C'los' direction, eyes slightly glazed as they focused on their blues and browns.



Blue... Where was C'mine? Fighting for a moment's control, C'los turned on Darshanth. The blue had made himself small on the ledge, but he regarded C'los with peaceful eyes. "Where's C'mine?" the green rider demanded, not sure if the words were coherent or not. "Where is he?" But Darshanth didn't react, and C'los suddenly realised that the blue dragon showed no sign of agitation: his eyes were slow and calm, his sprawl relaxed. He clearly had no intention of pursuing Indioth.

"What's the matter with you?" C'los shouted, half at Darshanth, half at his rider. "What's the *matter?*"

Darshanth still showed no sign of a response, and by then the other riders were closing around C'los in a determined circle, and helpless to resist any longer, the green rider gave himself up to Indioth.

Through her lust-reddened eyes he glared at their suitors; through her heightened senses he scented them; through her thoughts he felt them. Dragon and rider bared their teeth in a silent snarl of calculated scorn, provoking the shifting males with their disdain, daring them to prove themselves. A brown landed close to Indioth, rearing over her in a display of dominance, but the green hissed and flung a wing in his face, even as C'los blocked the advance of the brown's rider with his forearm.

Indioth curved her neck towards the rest of her admirers, screaming once more in a mixture of defiance and invitation, and then with a powerful spring she was aloft. C'los fought down the urge to leap into the air himself only with the experience of many flights, and with the tiny part of him that was still conscious and aware he staggered in the direction of his inner weyr. The riders, some of whose dragons still hadn't reacted to Indioth's abrupt take-off, grasped vaguely at the green rider, but C'los evaded them and they followed him instead, out of the light and into privacy. That responsibility complete, C'los let the last part of his mind merge with Indioth's.

She flew, the rapid sweeps of her wings carrying her fast and far, concerned with nothing more in the first few moments than showing off her speed and grace, compelling her pursuers to keep up, if they could. There would be time for the catch later; for now, the chase was everything. The chase would sort the strong from the weak, the determined from the indifferent: Indioth was no queen, but her pride soared with her, and she would not settle for any male if another could show himself more worthy.

Confident of her lead, the green threw a glance back over one shoulder. Blues, and browns, and a single bronze larger than them all, flew in her wake with the same orange gaze. Indioth derided them all with a shriek. What were they, compared to her?

But when the first hint of tiredness from the headlong flight touched her wing muscles, Indioth ceased her exhausting sprint. Turning almost on her tail she doubled back, almost colliding with the pack of males behind her, diving with easy precision to avoid them, and screaming with contempt as her suitors tried to compensate. One blue was buffeted midair by another as they



struggled for airspace: both flew on, but Indioth was already ahead again. The green banked out of the range of a brown and darted beneath him before he had time to close the difference.

Ducking and weaving between the larger dragons, flaunting her superior agility, Indioth felt herself tiring, but the need to outfly the males had faded: now, she waited for one of them to make a move to prove himself worthy of her. On the outskirts of the pack, the bronze dipped suddenly, a massive form twice Indioth's size, but the green evaded and the big dragon couldn't turn as fast.

But as Indioth turned, a blue turned with her, matching her speed and angle. She twisted away and the blue followed that manoeuvre too: she dived and he dived, she climbed and he climbed. However she tried to best him, the persistent blue would not be shaken. And when Indioth turned a little too slowly, at last satisfied that here was one worthy of her, her most ardent suitor took his opportunity, and grabbed.

All thoughts of escape evaporated from Indioth's mind as the blue seized her shoulders, blocked her wings with his body, tangled their tails together, gripped the back of her neck gently in his jaws, extinguished her fight to make way for a brighter, fiercer flame that scorched dragons and riders, and took possession of his prize.



Consciousness returned slowly, and C'los was aware of Indioth long before he could register his own situation.

You're awake.

The normal post-flight satisfaction in the green dragon's voice was tempered by something else that, groggy as he was, C'los couldn't identify. *You're back safely, girl?*

Yes. Safely. You didn't know it was time.

The strange note in Indioth's voice was accusatory. C'los tried to think. *No, I'm sorry, I... You would have known if you'd asked. If you'd let me in, you would have known. Indioth... Sometimes I can hardly feel you.* And Indioth's mind wrapped around him, gentler than during her flight, but no less fierce. *You're my rider, and I love you, and nothing should come between us.*

Indioth's vehemence touched C'los almost as deeply as the tangible strength of her devotion to him. His mild dragon seldom spoke out so forcefully. *I'm sorry, girl. Things have just been so...* The green rider's thoughts turned to E'rom's murder, and automatically he started to shield the knowledge from his dragon.

Don't you trust me?

The piteous tone of Indioth's question was heartbreaking. *Indy, no, it's not...* With an effort, C'los collected himself. *Of course I trust you. It's not about that. It's just that some things have been happening, bad things, and I didn't want you worrying about them.*

You can tell me anything, C'los.

Indioth...

I don't want to be protected if it means you won't let me in.

She had skimmed that thought, C'los' intended reply, off the top of his mind with an ease that was almost ostentatious. *You don't want to know, Indioth*, he tried feebly.

No. I don't want to know. So why won't you just trust me not to go looking?

C'los was spared fumbling for an answer by the movement beside him that made him abruptly aware of his physical self. He opened his eyes cautiously. His field of vision was limited, and in the faint light he could only make out part of a shoulder. C'los started to heave himself up on his elbows before realising that he didn't have the strength. He reached out instead, feeling across the other man's chest for something with which to identify him. The skin was smooth underneath his fingertips, the muscles well defined, and C'los felt disappointment crush him. It wasn't C'mine.

But before he could formulate a thought beyond that realisation, a hand suddenly closed around his. "C'los?"

It took the green rider a moment to place the voice, and then he sat bolt upright, his tiredness forgotten. "K'ston?"

The rider beside him sat up more slowly, still gripping his hand, and shaking his head slightly, as if to clear it. "Indioth rose?"

"Well...yes."

"I didn't realise...Bronth hasn't..."The blue rider buried his face in his free hand for a moment, and then raised his head. "Why, why'd he..."

"Why'd he do what?" C'los asked. He was aware that K'ston was still holding his hand, but he couldn't decide if he minded or not, so he didn't mention it.

The blue rider looked at him, green eyes serious under his incongruously tousled hair. Then he released C'los' hand with a start, and glanced away. "It's nothing."

C'los blinked. Waking up with a random rider was sometimes embarrassing, but he wasn't embarrassed on this occasion, just baffled. "What's nothing?"

"Nothing's nothing." The blue rider started to move, almost pulling the tangled furs off them both. He stopped to unwind the covers from his legs. "I'll get out of the way before your weyrmate comes back."

The memory of Darshanth sprawling indolently on the ledge, quite unmoved by Indioth's challenge, came back to C'los like a fist in the gut. "He won't care," he said, before he could stop himself. "It's not as if he cares about Indioth's flights any more."

"I'm sure that's not true," said K'ston.

"I can't remember the last time Darshanth caught her," C'los continued. "He hasn't even tried the last three times." A part of him objected - Darshanth's injuries had disqualified him from the last flight - but then the blue wouldn't have been hurt if C'mine hadn't chosen the chance to be a hero over his own weyrmate.

“There’s got to be a good reason for that,” K’ston insisted. “Anyway, just because his dragon hasn’t been chasing, doesn’t mean he’s not interested in you any more.”

And that was the worst part – more hurtful by far than Darshanth’s indifference. “He’s not,” C’los said, the words tasting bitter in his mouth. “He doesn’t even want to be near me. We’re sleeping apart.”

“Oh, C’los...”

There was sympathy in K’ston’s voice, and understanding, and when the blue rider engulfed him in a rough hug C’los didn’t object. The green rider leaned his head against the other rider’s shoulder, fighting with his misery at the betrayal of his weyrmate, the estrangement of his dragon, the terrible burden of knowing the truth about E’rom. Never had he been so in need of support from those closest to him, and never had that support been so lacking.

K’ston was a solid presence, his frame larger and more muscular than C’mine’s, and there was something comforting about that. His skin was soft, without the disfiguring scars that fire and sharp claws had left in C’mine’s flesh. His hair was shaggy and sandy blonde, barely receding at the temples, but not thinning like C’mine’s, not certain to vanish altogether. And his face – generously sculpted, with fine lines of nose and brow and jaw, with those unusual deeply green and soul-filled eyes – was handsome, not homely.

C’los could sense where his thoughts were going, and a part of him rebelled. But the larger part was in control, and it was too tired and too stressed and too bitter to do the right thing. He just wanted to be wanted.

The green rider lifted his head just far enough to look K’ston full in the face. Bronth’s rider gazed up at him. “C’los, wha...”

C’los silenced him with a kiss. The blue rider’s instant of shock was fleeting, and then he was responding, wrapping a strong arm around C’los’ shoulders, stroking his hair was a tenderness that the green rider couldn’t have predicted.

It had been so long since C’los had known another man’s embrace outside a flight; all those Turns and Turns he’d been weyrmated to C’mine. The green rider forced away thoughts of Darshanth’s rider, pushed them back into that tiny part of his mind that housed his conscience and his better judgement.

Not to mention the ever-loving, and increasingly distant, presence of his dragon.