



## XVII

### Of Hope And Promise



Most of the other candidates had already taken their seats at the closest two tables in the dining hall when Harrenar tacked the day's chore lists on the noticeboard. The Weyrbred lad paused, ostensibly to smooth the sheet of hide, until he felt the inevitable impact against his back. Then without changing expression he turned, picked up the crumpled ball of yesterday's chore list off the floor where it had fallen, and put it in his pocket. He ignored the titters from the culprits – Korralthe and his pals, no doubt – and went to sit next to Rastevon as their classmates started to gravitate reluctantly towards the board.

"Martouf," Rastevon noted casually, as Harrenar straddled the bench beside him.

Harrenar shrugged, pushing back a lock of his half-dark, half-prematurely-silver hair. "It's not worth worrying about. They'll get bored and give up eventually."

"Sure, and then find something more humiliating to do while your back's turned." Rastevon spoke dryly. "You should smack some respect into them."

Harrenar smiled. "I don't think that would do my chances at the clutch much good." He paused and, knowing that Rastevon would rather die than be seen to be making an effort, added, "You're meant to be helping in the kitchens today."

"My sharded luck," the other candidate muttered.

Harrenar masked his smile. Rastevon complained no matter what chores he drew. Then, too, he thought, watching the reactions of their classmates, candidate chores weren't meant to be enjoyable. The Weyrbred among them, like him and Rastevon, had always known what to expect, but some of the Holdbred candidates had more difficulty adapting to the tedious reality.

"It can't be much more than a sevenday off, now," he mused aloud.

Rastevon didn't ask what he meant. The Weyrlingmaster's son liked to flout L'stev's authority, but he followed every change in the clutch's development as intently as any of them. "The eggs are pretty hard," he agreed.

"And there haven't been any new candidates in a few days," Harrenar pointed out.

"You'd notice," said Rastevon, with scorn he didn't mean.

"I suppose so." As the most senior in Turns of the Weyrbred male candidates, Harrenar had taken on a position of responsibility for the group. It didn't go much further than keeping track of numbers and relaying messages – like the morning chore lists – from L'stev, but it was enough to make him the target of elements like Korralthe's clique. That, though, was small enough an irritant, and the new incumbents to the candidate group mostly seemed grateful for a bit of friendly direction.

"How many of us are there now?" asked Rastevon.

Harrenar hesitated, counting. "Forty-four, I think."

The other boy made a disgruntled sound. "Too much competition for only twenty-five dragons."

"It's not that bad," Harrenar told him. "Not with sixteen – seventeen – girls."

"So we assume half the clutch is green, and that only leaves twelve dragons for nearly thirty of us. I don't like those odds." Rastevon brooded a moment, then added grudgingly, "At least there's a queen."

Harrenar didn't need his friend to explain that, either. They'd discussed every facet of the Hatching so many times already that they had nothing new left to say. Rastevon had argued early on that the presence of a queen in this clutch could only be a good thing for the older candidates, like themselves. Harrenar was nineteen and Rastevon seventeen, and with Shimpath rising only once every four or five Turns, this could have been their last chance at a Madellon clutch. But the queen from this laying would mature within two or three Turns, and that would give them another opportunity to Impress – if they needed one. Harrenar considered himself fairly level headed, but he couldn't deny the knot of fear and tension that coiled in his stomach when he thought about the Hatching. He'd stood before and failed – they both had – but few candidates ever got a third chance. "You know, that means that whatever happens to us, we'll be completely ignored," he said cheerfully.

"Oh, yeah," said Rastevon. "Queen breaks shell and it's *between* with the rest of us."

"It's not such a bad thing," Harrenar opined. "It's nerve-racking enough without the whole Weyr looking at you."

Rastevon laughed. "They'll *look*, they just won't *care*."

"Family will," Harrenar insisted, and then realised his mistake as his friend's expression darkened.

"Yours might," Rastevon said, and without another word he got up and stalked off.

Harrenar sighed. Rastevon could be so touchy, especially where L'stev was concerned.

Murrany, the softly-spoken forester from Kellad, approached the place Rastevon had just vacated, glancing at Harrenar for permission. The Weyrbred lad smiled welcome and assent. Murrany was the same age as Rastevon, but in some ways he seemed older than any of them. The depth of sadness in his brown eyes spoke of the loss a man so young should not have suffered. Murrany didn't speak about his wife, not openly, and Harrenar didn't pry, but he couldn't help overhearing the murmured whispers, and he'd seen the two rings the Kellad lad wore on a chain around his neck, under his shirt. He felt bad that Murrany's personal tragedy had become the subject of candidate conversation, but he didn't see what he could do about it. Gossip had wings like a fire-lizard, and a similar propensity for appearing in unwanted places.

"Kitchen gardens again," said the lanky forest-bred candidate.

"Me, too," Harrenar replied. "At least it's not raining."

Murrany eased his weight on the bench, looking at Rastevon's retreating back. "He looks upset."

"It was something I said," explained Harrenar.

"His dad?"

Harrenar nodded.

"It must be hard for him, knowing that his father's going to be training this class," said Murrany.

Harrenar shook his head slowly, frowning. "It shouldn't matter. L'stev didn't bring him up." Then, because it was as bad to discuss Rastevon's business behind his back as it was Murrany's, he said, "We were saying that the eggs will probably Hatch this sevenday."

"Really?" Murrany looked startled. "Shards."

Harrenar couldn't help smiling at the mixture of apprehension and eagerness in his friend's voice. "These might be our last few days of freedom."

"It'd be worth it, though," said Murrany. "I mean, I know it's hard work, looking after a dragon, but..."

"I know," Harrenar agreed, grinning. It was another conversation he'd had before, but none of the candidates tired of talking about Impressing. "Have you thought about what you'll call yourself if you Impress?"

"I'm almost afraid to," Murrany confessed. "But...what do you think? M'ran or M'rany?"

"They both sound good."

The Kellad candidate shook his head. "I don't want to decide. What about you?"

Harrenar shrugged. "Maybe H'ren. I don't know, yet." Then he added, "I thought, if I Impress, I could ask my dragon what he thinks."

Murrany's slow, shy grin betrayed his appreciation of that idea. "I've been trying not to think about it too much," he said. "But I can't help wondering...what's it like, standing?"

Harrenar thought back to his first, unsuccessful, Hatching. "Terrifying," he admitted. "When you walk out, with the whole Weyr watching, you feel like your stomach's trying to climb up out of your throat. Then when the dragons start Hatching, you don't know where to look – dragonets everywhere, and you're trying to see if any of them are coming in your direction, and if they're not then you try to move so you're more in their sight.... But it's over so fast. It feels like hours at the time, but it only takes a few minutes."

"What happens if you don't Impress?" Murrany asked quietly.

"We got rounded up by a few riders," Harrenar said, smiling uncomfortably at the memory. "There weren't many of us left, only about ten. L'stev still made us go to the feast. It wasn't much fun, though."

"You must have been a bit younger then," said Murrany.

"I was fourteen, but then Tyrello had only just turned twelve, and he Impressed a bronze. The only bronze, actually – and now he's a Wingsecond." Harrenar sighed at the other lad's fortune.

"I don't care about getting a bronze," the Kellad candidate told him. "If a dragonet will have me, that's enough. Any dragonet."

"I know what you mean," Harrenar agreed. "You don't see any blue or green riders going around complaining, do you?"

Murrany shook his head. "A blue Searched me, and he and his rider nearly got themselves killed trying to help in the wildfire."

Harrenar nodded. "C'mine and Darshanth."

"You know them?"

The Weyrbred lad smiled. "Everybody does. Darshanth's about the best Search dragon Madellon has, and C'mine and his weyrmate are friends with the Weyrleader."

At that moment, as if summoned by the sound of his name, the Weyrleader, T'kamen, walked into the dining hall. Harrenar straightened automatically where he sat, and he wasn't the only one. Most of the candidates sat up, watching in silence as the lean, grim-faced bronze rider strode by. T'kamen didn't even turn his head in their direction, but Harrenar felt relieved rather than snubbed. Even to the Weyrbred, the Weyrleader cut a forbidding and unapproachable figure, and no candidate wanted to attract his eye. There was no telling what might displease the unsmiling bronze rider, and his poor opinion so close to the Hatching of his dragon's first clutch could be disastrous.

When T'kamen moved out of range, Murrany exhaled heavily. "I really wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of him."

"No one would," said Harrenar. Then he added, "At least, not now he's Weyrleader." At Murrany's inquiring look, he explained. "T'kamen and the last Weyrleader, L'dro, hated each other. When L'dro became Weyrleader he stripped T'kamen of all his rank, knocked him back down to wingrider. None of the other ranking riders would have anything to do with him."

Murrany whistled softly. "So when he became Weyrleader, what happened to all the riders who'd been snubbing him?"

"They got demoted, mostly. Or transferred out."

"He can do that?"

"He's the Weyrleader; he can do anything. Except disobey the senior queen, but the Weyrwoman's young. Fortunately," and Harrenar stressed that word, "My dad, was never one of L'dro's cronies, so he kept his Wing. Nearly doubled the size of it, too."

"You never told me your father's a Wingleader," said Murrany, sounding impressed.

"I don't really think of him as that," Harrenar said. "He's just H'ned. I don't even look like him, except for the eyes, and most people pay more attention to this." He scratched self-consciously at his conspicuous hair.

"It is kind of obvious," Murrany sympathised.

Harrenar shrugged. "If I Impress, I'll have an excuse to cut most of it off."

The forester rubbed at his own hair. "How short does it have to be?"

"Yours is all right," Harrenar told him. "It's some of the girls who'll be in for a shock. L'stev doesn't let anyone off. You get a sevenday to have your hair cut short, and after that he threatens to do it himself." He made a face. "Some green weyrling called his bluff, once. She wouldn't go outside without a hat for months when he'd finished with her."

"It's important, though, isn't it?" Murrany asked earnestly. "To show that there's been a change in your life, to show that you're committed."

Harrenar nodded slowly. It hadn't taken him long to realise that for Murrany, part of coming to the Weyr had to do with starting over. He hoped that the emotional burden of having lost a spouse in childbirth wouldn't damage his chances in front of the dragonets. "Right. New haircut, new name."

The Kellad candidate nodded, and then his eyes moved to the Bowl entrance. "We should probably go outside," he said in a low voice.

Harrenar followed his friend's gaze. "You're right," he said, getting to his feet perhaps quicker than he might have had Javerre, the formidable woman responsible for Madellon's kitchen gardens, not been standing there, her arms folded meaningfully.

Several of the other candidates followed Harrenar and Murrany's lead, with varying degrees of reluctance, until six of them had lined up in front of Javerre. Harrenar was tall, but the woman stood nearly as tall as him, and as stout as two of him put together. "I'd have thought you youngsters would be more punctual," the big woman declared. "Dragonets aren't going to wait for you. Come along now."

Harrenar glanced over his shoulder to see who else had been assigned garden chores. Willenze and Cebria, two of the youngest Weyrbred candidates, trailed along at the back as usual, giggling at something. Fonnain, the phlegmatic Minecraft apprentice, had fallen in behind Murrany, appearing to take very little interest in anything beyond his own feet. The new addition from the Peninsula's territory, Tarshe, completed the group, matching Harrenar stride for stride, but maintaining a certain cautious distance from the others.

Madellon's extensive kitchen gardens made a deceptively tranquil sight. Staked lines of climbing legumes ran precisely parallel to rows of the lush tops of root vegetables. Leafy greens and low-spreading berry bushes alike grew healthy and strong, without any evidence of pest or disease. The entire plot was neatly fenced off, with posts, bars, and gates painted pristine white. But Harrenar, like every other Weyrbred youth who had been alive during Javerre's tenure, knew what lurked behind the serenity of the gardens. Javerre ruled over them with an iron fist, and Faranth help anyone who disturbed, inadvertently or otherwise, the meticulously planned and planted plots. She thought nothing of sending out teams of Weyr children, candidates, or weyrings to pick off, by hand, any marauding insects that might be thinking of eating her plants. The perfect fences saw fresh paint four or five times a Turn courtesy of more reluctant conscripts. What seemed to be an oasis of peace and calm in the often hectic Bowl was in actuality one of the most closely supervised and regimented parts of the Weyr.

Javerre led them along the gravel paths between rows of sprouting herbs until she reached a long, narrow plot of stony-looking soil. "Tubers," she said, pointing at the bare earth. "We'll be planting tubers in this ground. You'll prepare the soil for them, and that means breaking up what's here and digging in some muck." The stout woman pointed imperiously at the mattocks and forks leaning against the closest stretch of fence. "Tools are there, and when you're ready for the muck, you'll find barrows and shovels by the manure pile." Javerre's smile wasn't quite malicious. "Any questions?"

Harrenar was relieved when none of the other candidates spoke. "I don't think so, Javerre," he replied, sufficiently acquainted with her ways to know that she expected an affirmative response.

"Good. Get on with it. And I've counted every bean in every pod on the stakes, there. If I find a single one has gone missing..." Javerre left the threat implicit, but Harrenar had to keep himself from shuddering.

"All right, let's get started," he said as Javerre sailed away without a backwards glance. "Murrany, Fonnain, we three will grab those mattocks and start breaking up the ground..."

"Like giving orders, don't you?"

Harrenar halted mid-sentence, turning to look at the speaker. Tarshe stared back at him, her intensely blue eyes narrowed, as demonstrative of her irritation as her accented words. The Weyrbred candidate found himself briefly lost for a reply. "It just helps to organise the job," he managed finally, not quite sure of himself.

"Stand back, women and children, and let the bronze riders in waiting take charge. Ha!" The Peninsula girl shook her head in disgust and stalked over to the tools. She hefted one of the mattocks easily, then passed another to Harrenar with a briskness that could have been interpreted as a challenge. "We'll see about that."

Harrenar exchanged a glance with Murrany. The Kellad lad just raised his eyebrows, and went to select a tool of his own. Harrenar sighed mentally and stepped up to the edge of the plot, keeping a safe distance between himself and Tarshe. She spat on both palms, twisting her hands on the shaft of the mattock for grip, and the ease with which she handled the heavy tool spoke of more than a passing familiarity.

The ground was hard: a heavy clay that had baked in the hot summer and then beaten flat rather than softened by the autumn rains. Harrenar's mattock had bitten no more than half a dozen times before he heard Tarshe's dry suggestion that Fonnain, Cebria, and Willenze try using forks to break up the bigger clods. He raised his head only enough to see her challenging gaze on him, and then bent his attention, and his back, to his work.

For a time, the steady chop of blunt edge through heavy earth was the only sound. It was hard work, and Harrenar's shoulders started to burn before long, but Tarshe kept a step or two ahead of him, and she showed no sign of intending to stop. Harrenar gritted his teeth and kept up. Despite the grey sky, he soon found himself uncomfortably warm, and he paused to wipe the

sweat from his brow with his sleeve. It gave him the slightest edge of satisfaction to see the sheen of perspiration gleaming on Tarshe's face, but she didn't even stop to towel it away. Apparently tireless, her mattock rose and fell steadily, until Harrenar wondered where she found the strength. Spare and compact of frame in the heavily faded and shabby tunic and trousers, Tarshe was built more like a runner than a labourer, but there could be no mistaking the stubborn determination in expression and stance. She had obviously done this before, and perhaps on even rockier ground.

It galled Harrenar when Tarshe reached the end of the plot a bare step before him. He set his jaw and hacked at the last patch of ground before painfully straightening up, resting the head of his mattock on the ground, and leaning on it to catch his breath. The Weyrbred lad didn't trust himself to meet Tarshe's gaze, and it was only when she reached out and grabbed his wrist that he looked up in surprise.

"You've never done this before, have you?" She turned his hand over, forcing open his fingers. "Idiot."

Harrenar had been trying not to think about the painful blisters the work had raised on his palms, and yet something in the tone of Tarshe's voice didn't tally with her scathing words. "I didn't notice," he said, partially truthfully.

"Of course not." Tarshe pointed at the fence. "Sit down."

Harrenar did as he was told, noticing as he did that Murrany still had a distance to go before completing his third of the plot. The Kellad candidate glanced up briefly, as if to say *I'm not in a hurry*.

Tarshe wiped her hands on a clean but very tattered rag, then offered the cloth to Harrenar. He took it, dabbing cautiously at the grimy sweat on his palms, careful not to disturb the blisters. Tarshe's hands, he noticed, were tough with callus, and while perspiration had darkened the few strands of sun-bleached hair that stuck to her face and neck, she seemed unconcerned. He had to admire her stamina. "You've done this a lot," he observed, still gingerly drying his hands.

Tarshe shrugged. "This has been dug over before. Virgin ground is more work."

Harrenar looked at Tarshe's dark tan and made an educated guess. "You're used to it being hotter, too."

She nodded. "This is cold, for me."

"Wait till you see a Madellon winter," said Harrenar. "Ice and snow up to your neck."

Tarshe shook her head slowly. "It's been Turns since I last saw snow."

"So what part of the Peninsula's territory do you..."

"The north," Tarshe replied curtly.

"Oh." Harrenar tried to remember his geography lessons. "I didn't know it could get so hot..."

"The extreme north," Tarshe cut across him, even more curtly. She paused, eyeing him guardedly, and added, "It's a new cothold."

“Oh,” Harrenar said again, but he could picture the southern continent in his mind, and he was fairly sure that the Peninsula’s boundaries didn’t extend even as far as the sub-tropical zone. “Why weren’t you Searched to the Peninsula Weyr?”

Tarshe smiled humourlessly. “Because my cousin and the Weyrleader there don’t get on.”

Harrenar decided not to pursue that particular line of questioning. “How are you feeling about the Hatching?” he asked. “You haven’t been here long; is there anything you need, anything you want to know...”

“You *do* like taking charge,” Tarshe accused, but with more tolerance than before.

Harrenar shrugged unselfconsciously. “I’m the oldest. It’s expected.”

“Is it, now.” Tarshe folded her arms, and once more Harrenar was made painfully aware of the raggedness of her clothes. “I know what I need to know.”

“Has anyone talked to you about a robe yet?” Harrenar asked, wondering how he could broach the subject of attire.

“L’stev gave me one almost before I was through the door,” Tarshe said casually.

Harrenar weighed up the risks, and then asked gingerly, “And have you got something to wear to the Hatching feast?”

Tarshe smiled, showing more teeth than humour. “Because everything I wear looks like it’s been handed down three times and worn out into the bargain?”

“Well, yes,” he admitted freely.

The Peninsula girl barked a laugh. “Least you’re honest. Aye, Harrenar of Madellon, I have something to wear to the Hatching feast that won’t disgrace me.”

Relieved that he had gauged Tarshe correctly, Harrenar said, “You can get some new clothes from the Headwoman if you need to. There’s plenty in the storerooms.”

“These have done me well enough so far,” said Tarshe. “After the Hatching, we’ll see.”

There was a note of finality in her tone, underlined by the forthright stubbornness that dominated her manner. Anyone looking to lock horns with this girl would have trouble making ground. Regardless, Harrenar liked Tarshe. Her confrontational demeanour would make her few friends, but Harrenar doubted that would trouble her greatly, and her straightforwardness appealed to him. She seemed more defensive about her humble background than was really necessary, but that wasn’t an unusual characteristic in a group of young people from all levels of Pern’s society.

Panting a bit, Murrany came to join them, leaning on the fence. “Give me wood to chop any day,” he sighed.

Tarshe smiled slightly, and the three of them settled into a companionable silence as they watched the younger trio complete the lighter work of forking clods of earth into a finer tilth.

“We’d better go and get some of that manure,” Harrenar thought aloud, and then caught himself. He looked at Tarshe with a wince, expecting a scathing retort.

The Peninsula girl just regarded him with an odd half smile, then shook her head. “That’s one thing you do know more about than me. Lead the way, muck boy.”

"*Muck boy?*" Harrenar muttered incredulously, but he grinned to himself, not letting anyone else see.



C'los opened his eyes, and flinched back instinctively from the rocky wall less than an inch from the tip of his nose. Next to him, K'ston mumbled in his sleep and tugged another six inches of quilt out of C'los' grasp.

The green rider stared down at the foot thus exposed to the chill air, and wondered what he was doing.

C'los had always hated being on the wall side, but since it was K'ston's weyr and K'ston's bed, he had graciously agreed to make the sacrifice. He'd hit his head on the wall the first night, leaving a bump that still throbbed, and the second woken up with his cheek mashed against it. He'd carried the imprint of barely smoothed rock on his face for the entire morning. He could only get out of bed by either struggling down to the foot of it – and banging something painful on the carved footboard – or clambering over K'ston, which as often as not didn't even wake the blue rider, and usually involved C'los landing on the floor on his face.

He opted for crawling out via the end of the bed. The bare stone floor was another thing he hated about K'ston's weyr, but for once C'los' feet landed on fabric. He looked down and realised it was his shirt, still on the floor where he'd dropped it the previous night.

Feeling thoroughly out of sorts, the green rider pushed bad-temperedly through the curtain that partitioned off K'ston's toilet facilities. Or, K'ston's chamber pot, as it might more accurately be described. Peeing was a miserable business, and any hope of a shave with hot water – or great stars, a bath! – meant venturing down two levels to the closest communal bathing room.

C'los found a shirt on the floor that he was sure he'd only worn once and pulled it on. All his clean clothes were still stuffed in the sacks piled up in a corner of Bronth's chamber, along with all his other possessions. He couldn't unpack them: K'ston's weyr barely had room enough for his own things. His trousers were by the bed, but since the bed was only about two paces away from the door, it didn't take much effort to locate them.

He stuffed his feet into his boots and went out onto the ledge. There was only room for one dragon to sleep there comfortably – the first night, Bronth had slept inside with Indioth on the ledge, but neither dragon liked the arrangement: Bronth complained of being closed in, and Indioth didn't like the blue blundering out on top of her in the mornings. The temporary compromise was that the dragons would take it in turns on the alternate nights, with the other finding a spot up on the Rim.

Indioth was still asleep, one wing extended to cover her nose. C'los sank down to the hard rock of the ledge, putting his back against the smooth warmth of Indioth's side, and closed his eyes. *What am I doing here?*

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. Still furious with C'mine for his apathy, and seduced – literally and figuratively – by K'ston's boyish charm, C'los had seen nothing

unreasonable about shouting at the top of his lungs when his weyrmate had come to find him after Indioth's flight. A fine time for Darshanth's rider to make an appearance – after the event. Then K'ston had suggested he move in with him for a while, and C'los had jumped at the offer – forgetting that he'd already seen what Bronth's rider called home. It might not have gone beyond that first night, except that when C'los went back to the weyr he shared with C'mine spoiling for a fight, the blue rider hadn't been there. Loath to leave without making a point, C'los had decided to pack up all his possessions and see if *that* provoked a reaction out of his weyrmate.

It hadn't, which was why C'los was still subsisting in a tiny space, in the company of a man whose habits were already irritating him, with facilities that weren't fit for a drudge, let alone a dragonrider.

Two days of defiance were enough. He missed his weyrmate's thoughtfulness: the way he would stir up the fire before C'los woke to warm the weyr, the way he would bring him a cup of tea or klah in bed, the way he would pick up C'los' discarded clothes and put them away or sort them for washing. He missed being able to talk, at length, on whatever subject was troubling him, and know that C'mine was listening, even if he didn't understand. He missed taking up his gitar or pipes in the evening to play, and hearing C'mine pick up an accompaniment to the tune on his four-stringed gitar. He missed their weyr, too, with its comfortable space and bathing pool, but mostly he missed C'mine.

C'los laid his cheek against his dragon's soft hide, and wondered how he could get things back to normal without losing too much face.

His head still hurt. The green rider put a hand up, feeling the lump where his skull had collided with the wall. It hadn't broken the skin, but it was tender, and he'd been taking willow tea for the ache. That, at least, was something K'ston had facilitated. Drunk cold rather than hot, it wouldn't be as effective, but C'los didn't feel like going all the way down to the kitchens for a cup of hot water. Cold would do, if he could find the herb.

Patting Indioth's belly, the green rider climbed laboriously to his feet. The night watchdragon had been relieved; it was later than he'd thought. It reminded him that he and Indioth were on the roster to take the day watch in two sevendays' time. He wondered if he could get T'kamen to take him off the schedule.

K'ston had rolled onto his stomach, his face half buried in his pillow, and he was making small snuffling noises that weren't quite snores. C'mine didn't snore, unless he'd had too much to drink, and that didn't happen all that often. C'los sighed and started looking for K'ston's willowsalic.

It wasn't in any of the boxes of junk on the single shelf, or in the pile of things that had been pushed aside on the table to make room for K'ston's mending work. C'los peered at the low boxes under the blue rider's bed, but by the thick layer of dust no one had ventured down there for months. He flipped open the lid of K'ston's clothes chest. Tunics and shirts vied for space with heavy wherhide flying gear. C'los rummaged through the mess until, near the bottom, his hand fell upon a small packet. He squinted at the neat writing until he was satisfied the herb was willow.

A single glove had been stuffed in a corner at the very bottom of the chest. It bulged strangely, tied with a leather thong. Curious, C'los picked it up. The glove felt light in his hand, but its contents crunched when he squeezed it.

Putting the willowsalic aside, the green rider set to unpicking the knot. It came undone easily. He upended the glove and shook it, and a fat bag slid out onto his hand.

It looked like the willow packet, except it had been stuffed almost to bursting, and other than the faded stamp of the Healerhall on one corner C'los couldn't find anything to indicate its contents. He turned the bag over in his hands for a moment, and then raised it cautiously to sniff at it. It smelled sweet and musty, not unpleasant, and although C'los couldn't immediately identify it, the aroma seemed familiar.

The green rider sat back on his haunches, thinking. Smell was supposed to be the most evocative of the senses, but C'mine had returned from Kellad with so many different tonics and salves and analgesics that C'los hadn't even tried to keep track. It could be any one of those. He untied the drawstring and opened the neck of the bag, letting a few dry brown leaves spill onto his palm, and then he remembered.

*The herb has several names...often called fellisbane...fellis has addictive properties, and an infusion of fellisbane taken regularly helps to overcome dependency...*

Isnan's words came back in perfect clarity with the fragrance of the brittle herb. Fellisbane. Whatever scientific name it might have, nothing could have been as chilling as the common name that described the herb's property. Fellisbane, unlabelled, and hidden in the possessions of a man whose weyrmate had been drugged and murdered.

What could K'ston *possibly* want with a secret stash of such a herb?

C'los found himself sweating. He tipped the loose leaves back into the pouch, tied it, put it back in the glove, and bound that closed. He stuffed the whole thing back where he had found it. As an afterthought, he put the willow back too: his headache seemed to have abated. The green rider rearranged the layer of clothes on top of the chest, and dropped the lid with a thump that almost made him jump out of his skin. In the bed, K'ston stirred, but didn't wake, and the green rider thanked Faranth that the man was a heavy sleeper.

The evidence of his search erased, at least unless K'ston noticed the disorder in his clothes chest, C'los' thoughts raced. To Isnan first, to confirm the importance of what he had found, or T'kamen? Isnan would be more cordial, but T'kamen would want to know first. With a sinking feeling, C'los realised that T'kamen would also want to know how he had been in a position to search K'ston's weyr. News of his problems with C'mine would certainly have reached the Weyrleader's ears by now. But having to face T'kamen with the news that the very rider for whom he had left C'mine could have had a hand in E'rom's murder...

C'los shuddered, but he knew his duty. Pulling his thoughts together, he hurried out of K'ston's weyr, and went to rouse Indioth.



K'ston had been waiting alone in the Weyrleader's office for almost an hour before C'los and Isnan returned. The Master Healer nodded to T'kamen, his expression grim, but C'los hung back, uncharacteristically reserved. *No matter. I'll deal with him later.*

The Weyrleader glanced around at the hastily assembled panel, seated at the long Wing table. Valonna looked grave, but oddly resolute. P'keo, K'ston's Wingleader, had been rapidly appraised of the situation, and sat frowning, although T'kamen was glad the older bronze rider hadn't made a fuss. H'ned sat opposite his fellow Wingleader: it only seemed fair to keep him in the picture, given that one of his own riders was still under suspicion.

"Wingleader," T'kamen murmured to P'keo.

The eldest man present rose and went into T'kamen's office. A moment later he re-emerged with K'ston.

If the blue rider had been scared when T'kamen had summoned him and told him to wait, he looked petrified by the seniority of the panel. Petrified – yet not bewildered. A man with nothing to hide wouldn't give the impression of being cornered. When K'ston's eyes fell on C'los he almost recoiled, as if betrayed. C'los, T'kamen noticed, just avoided the blue rider's gaze, looking at the table instead.

"Blue rider," he said, "sit down."

K'ston sat, but his knuckles were white where he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Weyrleader, I..."

T'kamen just looked at the man until he fell nervously silent. "Master Healer, would you please report on the herb found in this rider's quarters?"

C'los sank lower in his chair, and K'ston's eyes widened as Isnan came to his feet with the bulging bag of leaves in one hand. "These are the dried leaves of a herb commonly known as fellisbane, for its potency in combating the addictive qualities of fellis juice. It is not a rare herb, but rarely used."

"Does fellisbane have any other beneficial properties?" T'kamen asked.

"In sufficient quantity, it moderates some of the effects of fellis," Isnan said. "That is, reducing the strain on the heart caused by fellis juice, and counteracting its narcotic properties. Of course, it also reduces the effectiveness of fellis as an analgesic."

T'kamen nodded, letting the summary sink in. Then he looked at K'ston. "Blue rider." His voice cracked like a whip. "Can you tell me why you had a significant quantity of the herb fellisbane in your possession?"

K'ston looked terrified. "N-no, Weyrleader."

Epherineth's rider placed both hands flat on the table, staring into K'ston's frightened green eyes. "Does that mean you can't tell me or you won't tell me?"

"I don't... I don't know where it came from," the blue rider stammered.

“Weyrwoman!” T’kamen snapped, not taking his eyes off the rider in front of him.

“Bronth says he doesn’t think that’s true,” Valonna said, in a clear voice that shook only slightly.

K’ston’s face crumpled as he realised that his dragon was under interrogation by Shimpath. T’kamen pressed the advantage. “Why did you have the herb, K’ston? What was it for?”

“I...” K’ston shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. “I can’t...”

T’kamen looked at Valonna. The Weyrwoman was frowning, her eyes distant. “Shimpath says Bronth doesn’t know – he can’t make K’ston tell him.”

The Weyrleader cursed mentally: the one weakness in a queen’s authority was that she couldn’t demand what Bronth didn’t know. “Did you give E’rom a massive dose of fellis the day he died?”

“No!”

“He’s telling the truth,” said Valonna, her voice shaking a bit more, but whether from concentration or distress, T’kamen didn’t know. “Bronth says he’s telling the truth.”

K’ston had gone utterly white, all the blood leached from his face. “I’d never have hurt E’rom, never!”

“Then who did? Who’d have tried to drug him to death, and then when it failed, tried to make it look like he’d got drunk and fallen off his ledge?”

“I don’t know!”

T’kamen looked at Valonna. The Weyrwoman’s face was pale, but she nodded. “He doesn’t.”

“Then why have you been lying about his death from the start?” T’kamen demanded harshly. “Why did you say that you hadn’t seen E’rom since the morning of the day he died, when it’s clear by the leatherworking kit you’d left out in his weyr – a weyr E’rom always insisted was neat and tidy – that you had? Don’t you think it’s a little strange that your lover died with fellis in his blood, and you’re found with a herb directly related to it?”

“Was E’rom taking fellis when he died?” Isnan asked suddenly, his voice intent.

K’ston hesitated for an awful moment, then nodded; miserable, defeated. “Y-yes.”

Everyone in the room stiffened at the admission. “Why?” the Weyr Healer asked.

“H-his shoulder. It was never right after he d-dislocated it last Turn. It was hurting him so much...” The blue rider turned tortured eyes on T’kamen. “He was so afraid you’d take his rank away.”

The Weyrleader masked the shock he felt at that revelation. “How often was he taking it?” Isnan pressed.

The blue rider swallowed hard. “Every day.”

“For how long?”

“Since Turn’s End.”

“And who administered it?”

K'ston gripped his head in both hands, dragging his fingers through his hair. "I did."

Nobody breathed. T'kamen leaned forwards. "Did you kill E'rom?"

"No!" K'ston's howl of denial was wrenching. "I didn't mean to...I mixed the dose – I always measured it, I was careful! I didn't mean for him to fall!"

T'kamen looked at Isnan and then C'los. The green rider looked physically unwell. "Fall?" he queried sharply. "Are you saying you didn't push E'rom off his weyr ledge?"

"*Push* him?" The look of incomprehension on K'ston's tear-ravaged face was too genuine. "I...I wasn't even there!"

"But you gave him the fellis!"

"I mixed it when E'rom was bathing, and then Bronth wanted me at the lake...so I left it there – E'rom must have taken it when he'd finished washing... I didn't mean to hurt him, Weyrleader! You have to believe me!"

"It's true," Valonna confirmed, in a voice that shook with the strain.

T'kamen closed his eyes, feeling sick. "Why did you lie, blue rider?" he asked tiredly. "If you didn't mean to harm E'rom, why didn't you tell us about the fellis?"

"It was my fault." K'ston's voice trembled. "My fault he died. But I didn't think you'd believe me. I..." He hesitated, then went on. "I got rid of the fellis and fellisbane I had left – I took it *between* on Bronth. I didn't know I still had any left." He stared at the bag C'los had found with a hopeless expression.

"Where did you get it?" Isnan asked quietly.

"J-journeyman Berro." K'ston swallowed again. "He'd been stealing from the storerooms. He had a still for his own concoctions... I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, if he didn't record E'rom's fellis."

"Berro," Isnan muttered, with more venom in his tone than T'kamen would have believed possible of the Healer. "I don't believe it."

The Weyrleader exhaled heavily. "You didn't kill E'rom, blue rider."

"What?"

"The fellis wasn't what killed him. Not directly. K'ston, E'rom didn't fall off his weyr ledge. He was unconscious when someone pushed him off."

It was hard to say which must have distressed K'ston more: the thought that he had been responsible for his lover's death, or the revelation that he had been murdered. The blue rider sagged back in his chair, ashen. "Oh, stars. Oh Faranth."

No one spoke for a long moment. T'kamen looked at Valonna, nodding minutely to the question in her eyes: there was no point in upsetting Bronth any more. "Wingleader H'ned," he said softly, "would you take the blue rider back into my office and stay there with him?"

The red-haired Wingleader nodded. His face was grim, but his touch strangely gentle as he helped the devastated blue rider to his feet and led him quietly away.

The silence that reigned when they had gone was deafening. T'kamen coughed into the quiet. "P'keo?"

The Wingleader looked up. "I never would have pegged him for a killer, T'kamen. But then I wouldn't peg him for a liar, either."

"Valonna?"

The Weyrwoman lifted her chin. "Bronth is...very upset. Shimpath's comforting him."

T'kamen nodded. "Master Isnan?"

The Healer stared sombrely into space for several moments. "Have to contact the Hall about Berro," he said indistinctly.

T'kamen studied C'los for a while before speaking. The green rider looked ghastly. "Well?"

It was the first time in twenty Turns that T'kamen had ever seen C'los lost for words. "I need time to think," he said at last. "To think..."

"What are you going to do with K'ston?" P'keo asked gruffly. "He made some stupid decisions, but he's obviously no murderer. And I think you'd do well to get that blue out of the Weyr before he upsets all the rest, at least for a few days."

"C'los, where did you say that K'ston was Searched from?"

The green rider looked up. "Jessaf."

"Does he still have family there?"

"I think...think so."

"It might do him good to spend some time away from Madellon," Isnan conceded.

"Then I'll send him to Winstone," T'kamen decided. "A few days' watch with Bronth..."

"I'll get in touch with the Master Healer there," said Isnan. "Have him keep an eye on him."

"You'll need to send someone to watchride at Blue Shale, too," P'keo pointed out, "or Zinner will make a fuss."

"Of course. Thank you, Wingleader."

"I'll have Shimpath watch over Bronth," said Valonna.

"Thank you, Weyrwoman. P'keo, would you inform K'ston of what's going to happen?"

"Certainly, Weyrleader."

As the panel began to disperse, T'kamen watched C'los get up from his place. "Sit down, C'los. I want to speak to you."

C'los froze, then slowly sank back down into his chair. He looked uncomfortable, and not a little cowed; an assertive rider somehow diminished.

T'kamen waited until everyone else had gone, and then fixed his old friend with a cool gaze. "You got involved with him."

C'los was crestfallen. "T'kamen, it was just a flight, and then I lost my temper..."

"You got involved with him!" T'kamen came to his feet, too angry to remain seated. "He could have been a murderer!"

"He isn't a murderer!"

“He could have been!”

“All right, it was stupid!” C’los shouted. “I was stupid! But K’ston didn’t do it!”

“Then who did?” T’kamen demanded. “Well, tell me! A month you’ve been investigating this – more than a month – and what have you given me? Two suspects and still no idea of who in this Weyr planned and executed a murder in cold blood!”

“I’m trying!” the green rider yelled. “Scorch me, T’kamen, I’m *trying!*”

“Not hard enough!”

They glared at each other, T’kamen snarling with anger and frustration, C’los on the verge of tears, both of them stretched past breaking point.

Abruptly T’kamen let the strength drain out of his limbs, and he slumped back into his chair. “Get out of my sight, green rider.”

“T’kamen...”

“Just get out.”

C’los stared miserably at him. Stripped of his normal bravado, the green rider made a pathetic sight. Then he turned and fled.

T’kamen massaged his aching temples with both hands for a moment. Then he reached for hide and ink, and began to compose a missive to Lord Winstone.