



XIX

Man And Dragon Fully Matched



Sarenya shielded Agusta with her free arm as somebody jostled past, almost dislodging the fire-lizard from her shoulder. The stands heaved with people, and no one seemed to be looking where they were going, much less at anyone who might happen to be in the way. The queen muttered indignantly, and tightened her grip. Sarenya winced. The material of her best Gather outfit wasn't made for fire-lizard purchase, and Agusta's talons were sharp. Tarnish, at least, on her other shoulder, knew enough to lock his talons into the fabric, not her flesh.

The queen extended her left wing, and Sarenya looked right to see M'ric and C'mine. "Good directions, Agusta," she told the fire-lizard, raising her voice to be heard over the din of people and the dragons' hum.

The two riders had secured a place with an excellent view of the sands on the second tier, not much more than a dragonlength from the clutch. M'ric saw her coming first, perhaps alerted by his fire-lizard, and rose from his seat. He was, Sarenya noticed, looking very good in a pale blue shirt cut in the Peninsula style and open at the throat against the combined heat of Hatching sands and massed bodies. The royal blue of her own garb – a simply-cut shift dress, sleeveless and dropping almost straight from shoulder to mid-calf but intricately embroidered at the bust – complemented the lighter shade rather well.

M'ric leaned close and shouted, "She got you here all right, then?"

"Excellent service," Sarenya shouted back, letting the queen hop from her shoulder to M'ric's. "I'll recommend it to my friends!"

"Take the weight off," M'ric told her, indicating the seat he and C'mine had left vacant between them.

Sarenya did with a sigh that even she couldn't hear, then peered around Tarnish to look at C'mine. "Looking good, Mine," she shouted in his ear. The blue rider wore his best dusky red shirt – so freshly ironed that the creases were still sharp.

"I thought you weren't going to make it," C'mine replied.

"I almost couldn't get away," said Sarenya. "Sejanth got a bit excited, and it took us some time to settle him." She looked from one man to the other. "Have I introduced you two?"

"We managed that part without you," said M'ric, with a knowing glint in his eye.

Sarenya gave C'mine a baleful look. "What have you been saying?"

"Me?" The blue rider's look epitomised innocence.

M'ric laughed. "Only good things."

“Here they come,” said C’mine, and a moment later the level of noise increased as the white-clad candidates, marching in single file behind the Weyrlingmaster, emerged into the Hatching cavern.

Sarenya felt only a little wistful as she watched the young people cross the sands. Had it really been eight Turns since she’d been out there herself? She remembered putting on the thin robe as if it were only yesterday. If she concentrated hard enough, she could recall the discomfort of heat and grit underfoot and between her toes. The thirty-odd boys and girls – mostly boys – walking out today looked more composed than she remembered feeling.

“There’s Leah,” said C’mine, although he didn’t point. “About tenth in the line.”

Saren picked out C’los’ daughter easily. “There aren’t many girls, are there?”

“The rest will come in with the bronzes,” the blue rider told her.

“Of course.” She should have known that: she’d done it herself, with T’kamen. Curious, she looked across the sands to where the Weyrleaders were seated close to their dragons. T’kamen wore black, naturally, and beside him Valonna was in a pale shade of Madellon’s indigo. They were too far away for Saren to pick out any more detail, but she hoped T’kamen would be generous to the young Weyrwoman. This should be a day for them both to be proud of their dragons.

“Have you been to a Hatching before, Saren?” asked M’ric, transferring Augusta onto his other shoulder so he didn’t have to talk through her.

“Only once,” Sarenya replied wryly, letting her eyes follow the curves of the queen egg.

The Peninsula brown rider regarded her contemplatively. “Spectator or participant?”

Sarenya looked at him. “What do you mean?”

M’ric smiled and looked down at the candidates. After a moment, he glanced over at C’mine. “Was she one of Darshanth’s?”

“Leave him out of it,” Saren insisted, before C’mine could reply.

“I’m sorry, Saren,” the brown rider said, shaking his head. “I didn’t mean to give offence.”

“I’m not offended.” But Sarenya’s curiosity was piqued. “All right, C’mine Searched me,” she said at last. “It was a long time ago. How did you know?”

“I didn’t,” M’ric replied. “I just couldn’t believe that Madellon’s Search riders could have missed you.”

Sarenya studied the brown rider intently, searching for the irony – however gentle – she was sure must be there. M’ric just met her gaze calmly and steadily, with his natural good humour, and no trace of mockery or sarcasm. “I didn’t Impress.”

“Not all of these will, today,” he said, nodding at the candidates below. “Doesn’t mean they wouldn’t, given a different clutch.”

“Did you Impress first time?” Saren challenged.

“Yes,” M’ric admitted, “but that was probably more to do with being willing to take on a dragon like Trebruth than any innate worth of mine.”

“No one else wanted him?” she asked, amazed.

“Well...” M’ric looked slightly uncomfortable, then tried, “He wasn’t a bronze. Everyone wants the bronze.”

“Except you?”

The brown rider shook his head. “No, I wanted the bronze until Treb came for me.” He shrugged. “It’s about the dragon, not the colour.”

“I still didn’t Impress.”

“Trebruth’s still half the size of any other brown here,” M’ric replied. “But if he hadn’t Hatched, I’d rather have gone without.”

Sarenya considered the brown rider’s philosophy as six bronze dragons entered through the high entrance to the cavern, each bearing a white-robed candidate on his neck in addition to his rider. Three browns followed the bronzes in, similarly burdened. She had never met a rider yet who would have traded his mount in for a higher colour, nor even for another dragon of the same. Maybe her dragon had just never Hatched. The thought was melancholy as well as comforting.

C’mine touched her hand to get her attention. “That’s Tarshe,” he said, pointing out a girl with sun-bleached hair and a tan that contrasted strongly with her robe.

The nine big dragons dropped off their riders as well as their passengers before heading for the high ledge to find spaces to perch. Each man hastened up into the stands, and one of the bronze riders, a tall blonde man in an ankle-length black coat, made directly for where Sarenya, M’ric, and C’mine were sitting.

Sarenya thought she heard C’mine mutter something, but it was difficult to tell over the dragons’ swelling voices. With the addition of the last nine males the sound seemed fuller, richer than before: more urgent. As the girls hurried to join the other candidates around the eggs, the hum increased dramatically in volume to the point where it would have been painful had it not been filled with such joyous anticipation. The buzz of conversation died away, slowly at first, and then more rapidly as the expectant atmosphere affected even the most insensitive holder. Watching the eggs intently, Saren found herself holding her breath and clenching her fists on her lap. The strain and yearning on the face of every single candidate was unbearable. She felt C’mine take her left hand, gripping it lightly, but expressing every last ounce of how he felt: his excitement, his nerves, his sorrow that C’los was halfway across the cavern instead of beside him where he belonged. Saren tore her attention away from the shuddering eggs long enough to glance at M’ric. Augusta was as tense on his shoulder as Tarnish was on Saren’s, and the brown rider’s eyes were keen. Sarenya reached for his hand, but he beat her to it, wrapping his long fingers around hers, and holding on tight. Augusta and Tarnish took flight as one, as if in disgust, but Sarenya noticed more fire-lizards than just her bronze and M’ric’s queen rise to join the dragons high above.

The dragons’ song grew until it seemed it could surely grow no more, building to an incredible crescendo while the eggs shivered and shuddered as if the ground itself were shaking



beneath them, and then, abruptly, the hum ceased, and in the instant of absolute silence that followed, the snap of breaking shell seemed as loud as a clap of thunder.

The top of an egg standing on end near the centre of the clutch shattered outwards with the force of a blow from within. Next to it, big chunks of shell flaked off another egg. A split ran the length of a third as its occupant fought to escape. But it was a fourth egg, standing in the shadow of the big golden shell of the queen, that gave a little jerk, shuddered once, and collapsed into shards.

The shrill cry that pierced the air was heartbreaking: a wail of incredible longing, impossible need. Amidst the wreckage, a dragonet stumbled to its feet: dark and wet with egg fluids, ungainly, awkward, lost. With her Craft's instinctive eye for sizing up a newborn, Sarenya guessed that the hatchling measured six or seven feet from the tip of its nose to the forked end of its tail. It extended its wings, and the light shining through the translucent sail revealed its colour. He was blue, a dark steel blue; the colour of his hide became clearer as the heat of the sand evaporated the egg-fluid. He raised his head, focusing with visible difficulty until the brilliant white of the candidates' robes gave him purpose.

As the blue hatchling blundered towards his goal, a second shell disintegrated, then two more in quick succession. An awkward green, a spindly brown, and another dragonet whose colour was not immediately obvious came crying into the world. Another green, Sarenya thought, but the tears in her eyes blurred her vision, and she blinked furiously to clear them away. The dragonets' thin, high voices were painful on ears and heart alike, and the distance from shell to candidates seemed too far for their staggering legs to carry them.

The steel blue tottered towards the closest group of candidates, but though the boys all met his pleading gaze he passed over every one. He wavered, but some instinct pulled his head to the right, and dragging wings and tail behind him he moved in that direction. The male candidates looked at him as he passed, but the dragonet's demeanour was growing steadily more purposeful, his cry less despairing. Saren felt C'mine's grip tighten on her hand as, one by one, candidates stepped aside for the hatchling, until only a tall young man with light coloured hair and widening brown eyes remained.

The hatchling's shriek changed, becoming a query filled with hope, and when he looked up into the lanky candidate's face the shock of recognition, of understanding, of fulfilment and completion, struck the chosen lad like a physical blow. He reeled backwards, barely breaking his fall with his hands, but his eyes were still locked with the blue's, and as the dragonet's suddenly ecstatic voice turned anxious they were no longer a frightened hatchling and a nervous candidate, but dragon and rider, matched wholly and exultantly, and Sarenya couldn't blink back the tears any more.

"Murrany!" C'mine's muffled exclamation of the candidate's name made Sarenya glance at the blue rider. There were tears shining on his scarred face, and as a roar went up from the

audience for the first Impression of the day, she clutched his hand, sharing in his joy at the achievement of one of his candidates.

It seemed almost too much to bear that there would be twenty-four more pairings, and the second was as rapturous as the first. The first green, coloured like the lush foliage of Southern's rainforest under the darkening moisture, barely took two uncertain steps before rushing to her chosen, the Weyrbred girl Sarenya remembered as Maris. A brown with hide the colour of dappled autumn leaves completed half a circuit of the candidates before almost knocking over Gidra, the Seacraft lad from Blue Shale, with his relief. Too many things were happening at once; it was impossible to watch every dragon Hatch, or every Impression, but when the first bronze broke shell every eye went to him.

From the moment that a pointed muzzle thrust through the crumbling shell it was clear that the young bronze looked like Epherineth. He struggled out of his prison with methodical determination, wrenching one shoulder free, then the other, then shaking stubbornly free of the egg casing, and even before his wings had unfurled the iridescent green-gold sheen that distinguished his sire was plain on his hide.

Sarenya couldn't imagine what must be going through T'kamen's mind at the sight of this striking son of Epherineth's. Several candidates took a single involuntary step towards the dragonet before catching themselves, but the lad with more silver than black in his hair kept moving, that expression of incredulous hope already on his face as the bronze charged decisively towards him, their eyes already locked across the distance between them. They met, Harrenar almost skidding into the hatchling who had chosen him in a flurry of sand, like old friends kept too long apart, and for a long moment dragonet and new weyring sprawled together, oblivious to everything around them, connected eye to eye, hand to neck, heart to soul.

There seemed to be a lot of greens roaming without partners, their piteous cries almost drowned out by the cheers that accompanied each new Impression. Saren counted five wandering from candidate to candidate. Some of the girls were standing back, as if to discourage the hatchlings' interest. "What are they waiting for?" she demanded, under her breath.

"The queen," said M'ric, but the inflection in his voice was muffled by the background noise.

"Stupid girls," Saren murmured. "You'll end up with nothing."

The palest of the greens turned aside suddenly as one of the youngest girls hurried to meet her, leaving four still looking, and another that had Hatched in the meantime. But then the great golden queen egg began to move in earnest, and a new hush fell over the Hatching cavern.

Pieces of shell fell away in showers of gold as the dragonet inside battled fiercely to break out. A weak point where most of the hard casing had fractured away from the soft inner layer was unexpectedly breached by birth-soft hind claws, and then the hatchling queen burst free of her egg.

Objectively, it was hard to call any hatchling pretty. Clumsy, disproportionate, covered in egg fluid and sand, they lacked the dignity and grace of the adults, and only the most besotted new weyring would call his dragonet beautiful. The queen made no exception – ungainly and wobbly

on her feet, blunt of head and stubby of wing – but her colour set her apart. The sheen that showed green-gold against bronze hide shimmered exquisitely silver-gilt on hers of pale gold. Her cry rose more forlorn than any before, and every girl left on the sands moved closer, her eyes fixed on the golden hatchling.

Saren could hardly feel her left hand any more, but she didn't have the heart to say anything to C'mine. "Leah's still there," the blue rider muttered. "Come on, girl!"

The queen was looking at the closest girl, but her gaze dismissed her. There were still at least a dozen female candidates, and every one of them had gathered around the crying dragonet. Leah was almost the furthest away. "Come on," Sarenya willed the newborn queen. "You're looking in the wrong place, go down the other end!"

One girl let out a short scream and literally jumped out of the way as a green hatchling with a hide like cloudy jade bumped into the back of her legs. The dragonet looked dazedly at the candidate she had almost felled, and wandered on. Behind her, the queen stumbled determinedly onwards, her head held high, and turning from side to side as if scenting out her rider.

Leah was still looking at the queen when the lost green paused in front of her. Sarenya saw C'los' daughter step back, startled. The golden hatchling still hadn't chosen. Slowly, Leah looked at the little queen, and Sarenya saw her shake her head. Then the girl sank to her knees and wrapped her arms around the green dragonet's upturned head, her shoulders heaving with sobs of joy, and Sarenya heard herself shout with the rest of the crowd in the stands to celebrate the union.

"What happened?" C'mine pleaded.

The blue rider had closed his eyes, unable to watch. "She's got a green, Mine!" Sarenya shouted in his ear. "Leah's got a green!"

C'mine opened one eye to look, then the other, and his grin was proud and happy and sad all at the same time. "That's our good girl, Leah! That's our clever girl!"

M'ric leaned across to thump C'mine on the shoulder. The brown rider wasn't crying, but there was something in his gaze that recalled the moment when an undersized dark-brown dragonet had claimed him for his own.

Sarenya didn't think Leah's own parents could have been any more delighted than C'mine. She wondered how C'los and Robyn had reacted to their daughter's Impression, but the collective gasp from the audience cut the thought dead. "Look at the queen!"

The golden hatchling had stopped looking at every candidate, drawn towards the end of the group. She almost tripped over her own feet in her hurry, and her wings impeded her progress. A girl with blonde hair stepped into the dragonet's path, conviction that she had been chosen written all over her face, but the queen brushed her aside without so much as a glance, and all but pounced on Tarshe.



“Yes!” The individual shout was lost in the massive roar as the young queen warbled happily, but Saren heard it. The rider in the long coat she had noticed before was on his feet on the other side of M’ric, and his face displayed his jubilation.

“Tarshe got the queen?” C’mine asked, with something between disbelief and dismay in his voice.

“Of course she did!” Sarenya told him. “Darshanth only chooses the best!”

“Faranth,” the blue rider said faintly. “He’s never going to let me forget this.”

Sarenya watched the new queen rider with her dragon for a moment. Tarshe was alternating between wiping the hatchling’s eyes with her sleeve and wiping her own, and the arm she had curled lovingly around the dragonet’s neck spoke eloquently of her delight. The last, and only, hatchling queen Saren had seen had been Shimpath, and in her disappointment it had been more than she could do to be pleased for Valonna. Now, she didn’t begrudge Tarshe an ounce of her happiness.

The last few eggs had cracked during the fuss, and at some point two more bronzes had Hatched and chosen their riders. Three bronzes and a queen in a clutch was an excellent result, Saren knew, and all the dragonets looked healthy. Many of the girls who had been rejected by the queen quickly paired off with greens, and none of them looked the least bit unhappy. Sarenya just wished she had been able to watch every Impression. She’d forgotten how quickly a Hatching was over.

The final egg Hatched another green, and the candidates left unchosen, almost twenty of them, started to move in on her. The lone green stepped back in alarm – quite understandably, Saren thought – and howled in pain as her foot came down on a jagged shard of eggshell.

Shimpath and Epherineth bugled at almost the same moment, lowering their great heads to their daughter, and across the cavern Sarenya saw T’kamen stand up. She put her hand on the first-aid kit she had brought from the infirmary, but she didn’t know what anyone could do to help the dragonet until she’d been Impressed, nor what candidate would have the courage to approach a hatchling in pain and with her extremely protective parents an arm’s length away.

Then one of the lads stepped out bravely from the pack. He glanced nervously at the Weyrleaders’ dragons, then set his jaw and hurried to the injured green’s side. When the hatchling looked up, her pitiful cries of pain and loneliness died off abruptly, and her happy croon sealed the last Impression of the day.

The shout of acclaim that went up from the crowd was one of the loudest. “He deserved her,” said M’ric, adding his applause to the din. “He really deserved her.”

“Wasn’t that another of yours, Mine?” Sarenya asked, watching as the Weyrilingmaster urged the last pair over to where the other new dragonets were bolting down their first meals.

The blue rider looked like he might not be able to stand up on his own as he nodded. “Darshanth’s going to be unbearable.”

“I think we need to get a couple of celebratory drinks into him,” Sarenya told M’ric.

"We'll do that." Then the brown rider said, "Saren, I'd like you to meet Sh'zon." He indicated the rider with the coat.

Sarenya let go of M'ric's hand, with some reluctance. "Bronze rider. Wingleader," she added, belatedly noticing the three stripes on his shoulders.

"Aye, journeyman," the blonde man replied, catching her wrist in a firm shake.

"Tarshe is Sh'zon's cousin," M'ric explained.

Sarenya smiled at the fierce pride on the bronze rider's face. "Congratulations to you both, then."

"Never doubted her a moment," the bronze rider grinned.

Saren looked down at the sands: Vhion was seeing to the green with the injured foot, and all the new weyrlings were grappling with meat and oil. T'kamen was standing a discreet distance away with L'stev. "We should probably make a move if we want to go and see the dragonets before they're bedded down," she said.

Sh'zon looked dubiously at C'mine. "He all right?"

Between them, M'ric and Sarenya pried C'mine up out of his seat. Saren finally retrieved her hand, and covertly massaged some feeling back into it. M'ric noticed, and grinned wryly at her.

"You look lovely, by the way," he told her, leaning down.

"Thank you," she replied sincerely. "It's nice to be wearing something that isn't muddy."

"I heard mud was *in*, this season," the brown rider said solemnly.

Sarenya sighed. "Mud's in *every* season in the Beastcraft." She smiled up at him. "You look good too."

Waiting to leave the stands was a lengthy business with the cavern so full. It was Sh'zon whose patience ran out first, after they had been standing around for ten minutes or so. "Shard this for a fair of fire-lizards," he muttered, and climbed down over the row of seats in front before vaulting over the barrier between stands and sands.

M'ric raised an eyebrow at Sarenya. "Shall we?"

Saren eyed the precipitous climb unenthusiastically. "I bring these adventures on myself, don't I?"

The brown rider chuckled. "At least there aren't any sheep."

"Oh, shut up."

The descent wasn't as bad as Saren had feared with C'mine and M'ric to help. A few other riders had obviously had the same idea as them, leaving the cavern via the ground access tunnel. Shimpath and Epherineth had already left, so the sands were empty except for the pile of shell fragments.

Evening had fallen, and the area immediately outside the Hatching cavern had been lit with big torches. Each new dragonpair was surrounded by a little knot of people: family in some cases, or friends, or members of L'stev's team. Leah was standing close to the exit with her green, her

tearstained face glowing with happiness. "Mine!" she cried, when she saw them approach, but she didn't leave her dragon.

The blue rider went to her, enveloping her in a hug, regardless of the bloodstains on the front of the new weyrling's robe – evidence of her dragon's first messy meal. Sarenya and M'ric stood back a little, just watching. "I'm so proud of you," the blue rider told the girl who might as well have been his daughter in a thick voice. "What's her name?"

"Jagunth," Leah replied, with pride and love soaring in her voice. "Jagunth, this is C'mine."

The hatchling looked up at the blue rider with sparkling eyes. C'mine looked to Leah for permission before stroking her head, on a level with his chest. "Jagunth. What a lovely lady you are."

"Leah! *Leah!*"

The familiar voice made Sarenya wince. "Trouble?" M'ric asked her quietly.

"Trouble," she confirmed uneasily, as C'los and Robyn hurried into view.

The green rider hesitated when he saw that C'mine was already there, but he tore his eyes away from the blue rider who had been his weyrmate for over a decade, and hugged his daughter. "Oh, sweetheart, we're so proud."

"She's beautiful, Leah," said Robyn, stepping closer to embrace the new weyrling. Her smile was nearly as radiant as her daughter's. "What's she called?"

"Uh oh," Sarenya murmured to M'ric, as C'mine and C'los looked at each other. The green rider looked uncharacteristically sober in a white shirt embroidered in green. His shirts usually caused mild to moderate blindness.

"How've you been?" C'mine asked.

"Oh, you know." C'los paused. "She's lovely, isn't she?"

"Lovely," C'mine agreed. He paused. They looked at each other. "So..."

"Think we should leave them to it?" M'ric asked.

"Probably a good idea."

They drifted away. Sarenya recognised some of the candidates – weyrlings now, she reminded herself – from the limited contact she'd had with them during their classes. "Lovely brown, Polian," she complimented the Healer apprentice, whose family didn't appear to have arrived yet. "What does he call himself?"

"His name's Sparth," the lad replied delightedly, resting his hand on the almost sand-coloured dragon's headknob.

"Can't go wrong with a nice brown," M'ric told him.

Polian grinned. "Thank you, sir."

"I'd like to see how the green with the injured foot is doing," Saren told the Wingsecond as they walked on.

M'ric nodded. "These dragonets are going to start collapsing of exhaustion soon," he said. "Some of them are looking shaky already."

“There’s not as much difference in size as I thought,” Saren observed, comparing a bronze with one of the many greens.

“Not at this stage,” said M’ric. “But within the first month the gap will open up. The bronzes and browns especially put on a lot more bulk than the others.” He paused, then added, “Except Trebruth, who looked runtier than half the greens at that age.”

Sarenya grinned, pleased that the brown rider was comfortable enough with her to make sarcastic remarks about his dragon. “I’m sure he was never runty.”

“Oh, he was,” M’ric laughed. “And there I was trying to make him eat as much as the other browns – Faranth, what a bloody mess *that* made when he sicked it all back up again.”

“Thanks for that,” Sarenya groaned, as they approached the place where Master Vhion was chatting to the lad whose dragonet had cut herself on the sands.

“You will have to keep a good eye on her for the first few days, but –” Vhion paused and beamed at Sarenya. “Ah, journeyman, your timing couldn’t have been better. And this is your...?” He looked enquiringly at M’ric.

Sarenya glanced at the brown rider, but he just gave her one of those fiendish looks, offering her no assistance whatsoever. “This is Wingsecond M’ric, Master,” she said dryly.

“Of course it is,” Vhion replied expansively. “Now, Saren, I was just telling S’terlion here –” he grinned conspiratorially at the brand-new green weyrling, and then at the proudly bemused pair of holders that must be his parents, “– what he’s going to have to do with his dragon’s foot. Green rider, if you’d ask her to show the journeyman?”

“Nerbeth,” the young man addressed his dragon, with the same affection in his voice exhibited by all the other weyrings, “can you show us the foot that hurts again?”

The hatchling extended her left foot for examination. It had been lightly bandaged, and the distinctive smells of redwort and numbweed were strong.

“Puncture wound, journeyman,” Vhion told Sarenya. “Deeper than we first thought, but dragon shell is hard. Hard work getting out of it, too!” He smiled fondly at the hatchling green. “So, standard procedure, and I’d like you to look in on our fine young lady here later tonight and again in the morning. No need to have her in the infirmary, but will you check on her?”

“I knew this would involve work,” Sarenya sighed, but she grinned at S’terlion. “Of course I will.”

“Thank you. I’ll have Zaf and Katel cover your infirmary rounds.”

Encouraged by the Weyrilingmaster, the new dragonriders began to lead and coax their dragonets towards the weyring barracks. M’ric and Sarenya moved out of the way, to give the rapidly tiring hatchlings some space.

The young queen was one of the last, and Sh’zon was still walking alongside her rider. There was definitely a resemblance between the two dragonriders, but it was more a similarity of manner and attitude than actual physical features. Of those, only their eyes were the same: fiery blue and piercing.

“Congratulations, Tarshe,” M’ric said quietly as the queen rider passed.

The young woman flashed him a smile that was genuine for all its fierceness. “Thanks, M’ric, and it’s Berzunth, before you ask.”

The brown rider chuckled. “She’s putting it on,” he murmured, when Tarshe was out of earshot. “I’ve never got tired of telling people my dragon’s name.”

“I’d noticed that,” Saren teased him. “What was he called again?”

M’ric shrugged. “Tre-something. I can’t remember.”

The Beastcrafter laughed, and for more than M’ric’s dryness. Wit came naturally to her, and she loved the stimulation of fencing words with a like-mind, but Saren had never known anyone with a sense of humour as arid as M’ric’s whose touch with it was so gentle. C’los was a worthy opponent, but his baits invited – demanded – barbs in response. M’ric teased without spite, mocked without bitterness, and made himself a target at least as often as anyone else. Bantering with him was companionable rather than competitive. There was something deeply compelling about a man so comfortable in of himself that he didn’t feel the need to belittle others to make himself feel good.

L’stev stalked out of the barracks, driving Sh’zon – the bronze rider protesting his innocence – before him. “I don’t care who you are, rider,” the Weyrlingmaster was growling. “You don’t go in the barracks and you don’t meddle with my weyrlings. They’re going to get all the meddling they’re ever likely to need from me.”

“I was just...!” Sh’zon objected, but L’stev had already walked past him, his customary hunched stance emanating disgust.

“The lot of you can clear off to the dining hall now,” the Weyrlingmaster told the gathered friends and family of the newly Impressed. “They’ll be out to join you soon enough.”

“You know, I heard they’re actually serving real wine at the feast today,” Sarenya confided to M’ric.

Trebruth’s rider recoiled in mock disbelief. “Surely not!”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“We should probably investigate,” the brown rider said gravely. “I’m a Wingsecond. I have a responsibility to find out these things.”

“It could be dangerous,” she warned him.

“In that case, I might just stick to drinking those murky Southern reds. At least then I know what I’m letting myself in for.”

“You might, M’ric, but I’m not sure I do.”

“But that’s half the point, Saren,” the Wingsecond told her, “and all of the fun.”

“You’re a terrible influence on me, brown rider.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But if we can’t corrupt each other, who *can* we corrupt?”

“Just about anyone unfortunate enough to be watching.” Sarenya slid her hand around M’ric’s forearm. “You just remember – whatever happens, it was your idea.”

“Fine by me,” he replied, but the hand he placed lightly over Saren’s belied the flippancy of his tone. “No one ever suspects the brown rider.”



In T’kamen’s admittedly limited experience, a Weyrleader’s rewards were few and far between, but he had to concede that witnessing the birth and Impression of Epherineth’s first clutch of offspring had been a pleasure that would be hard to beat.

The day had already been long and stressful. The Weyrleader had been on his feet since before dawn, rushing around the Weyr to oversee a hundred aspects of the detailed plan he had devised to make sure the day ran smoothly. The logistics of providing food, transport, and necessary facilities for several hundred guests were immensely complicated. Ensuring that all the important personages – Lords, Mastercrafters, Weyrleaders – were properly greeted, escorted, and entertained was almost as challenging. And all that to think about before he could start on the real business of worrying about the Hatching itself.

Things had gone better than his cynicism had expected. The visiting dignitaries had been duly attended; Weyrfolk stationed at every entrance of the dining hall were offering discreet directions to head off the possibility of nasty surprises the next morning; and twenty-five dragonets had Impressed without significant incident. T’kamen had even been able to watch the hatchlings devouring their first meals with pride instead of concern about how the Weyr would provide for them as they grew. It was hard to reconcile Epherineth’s vigorous, strong offspring with the statistic that had been haunting him for sevendays.

The twelve greens, five blues, four browns, three bronzes, and one striking young queen all seemed lively and healthful, and T’kamen had offered his congratulations to about half the new weyrings and their proud parents. Jenavally’s youngest son Naijen – the lad she’d had grow up with his Holdbred father – had Impressed a brown. H’ned’s eldest had attached the bronze dragonet who looked so much like Epherineth. It had already reached T’kamen’s ears that L’stev’s own unruly son had Impressed one of the other bronzes. He knew that C’los’ daughter had been chosen by a green, and looked forward to greeting the girl he had known from infancy as a dragonrider.

Most of the holders whose sons and daughters had Impressed seemed thrilled, with only one or two making a fuss, and all of those about colour. T’kamen had never had much patience for anyone, Holdbred or otherwise, who discriminated on the basis of dragon colour. It had no bearing on a rider’s intrinsic worth, on the quickness of his mind or the stoutness of his heart. A bronze might be more inclined to choose a rider with natural authority or ambition, but there were bronze riders enough with ambition and no sense, or authority and no conscience. Most of the dragons who had been at Kellad at Turn’s End had been blue and green, and their riders had done Madellon proud. One of the new blue weyrings had obviously been lambasted by his father for

“not doing better”. T’kamen had put the burly Holder in his place, and the lad was standing straighter now, defiantly proud to have had the Weyrleader take his side.

T’kamen sipped at his drink, managing not to make a face only because the awful wine had already numbed his tongue. The good Southern wines had been depleted within the first half hour, leaving only the cloudy Madellon vintages – one of Winstone’s less successful projects. Even those were going down fast enough that the Weyrleader wondered if the people of Madellon’s territory had palates at all.

Halfway across the dining cavern, T’kamen could see Valonna speaking with Meturvian and Juillara of Kellad. The Weyrwoman had taken a more active role in the Hatching feast than T’kamen had thought she would, making herself available to their most important guests as well as offering her personal congratulations to the new weyrlings. Perhaps the success of the Impression ceremony had put some iron in her backbone: whatever the reason, T’kamen was glad that she was taking some of the burden off him.

Thinking of the Weyrwoman turned his thoughts automatically to the new queen weyrling, and T’kamen scanned the mass of people for a moment before locating the girl. Attractive rather than pretty, she had changed from the uniform white robe of a candidate into a long black gown and an emerald wrap, edged with silver. It was an outfit well suited to a queen rider, although perhaps too much for a weyrling. T’kamen couldn’t help wondering if the girl would have worn something so ostentatious had she Impressed a green.

For all that she was standing alone, with neither family nor friends in attendance, Tarshe regarded him with a steady gaze and immense self possession. “Weyrleader,” she greeted him.

“Weyrling,” T’kamen replied, placing no particular emphasis on the diminutive. “Congratulations on Berzunth.” The name sounded good to his own ears: a queenly name indeed for Epherineth’s golden daughter.

“Thank you.” Tarshe’s voice was marked with the same accent as Sh’zon’s; T’kamen had been made aware of her connection to the Peninsula bronze rider early on. It didn’t especially concern him, not with L’stev as Weyrleader.

“Your family couldn’t come?” he asked, deciding not to dance around the conspicuous absence of any relatives.

The queen weyrling’s small smile hid as much as it revealed. “They couldn’t. Sh’zon is filling in.”

“So I’ve seen.” A glance over the weyrling’s shoulder located Sh’zon, a short way distant, standing with a green rider who must have come from another Weyr near the edge of where Harpers had defined a dance floor. T’kamen had to check his own expression: Sarenya, elegant in deep blue, was partnering the Peninsula brown rider M’ric in one of the close dances, and by the intent look in the eyes of both, not for convenience. T’kamen tore his gaze away, telling himself that he didn’t care. “The weather here is a little more temperate than you’re used to,” he said to Tarshe, choosing the first banal topic of conversation that came into his head.

The queen weyrling's eyes narrowed fractionally: heated blue. "I liked the weather at home well enough."

Despite himself, T'kamen smiled. It was good to see that the girl had some nerve. "Evidently." He raised his wine cup slightly, in salute. "Best of luck with Berzunth."

The Weyrleader wondered, as he walked on, if he was being callous, leaving the new weyrling on her own again. But he had spent no more time with any of the other youngsters, and he certainly had no intention of showing favouritism to the one who had Impressed the queen. Tarshe seemed more than capable enough by herself.

He was looking for another weyrling to approach when a tall man with dark hair, eyes like jagged ice, and an expression that barely masked a predatory smile intercepted him. T'kamen had to raise his head slightly to look him in the eye; almost as he did, the other man lifted his head a fraction more, making a point of the difference in height. T'kamen willed himself not to clench his fists, and offered the thinnest and coldest of smiles.

As if to spite him, the taller man broke into a broad grin, his eyes flashing with amusement. "I wasn't sure I'd ever find you, T'kamen. You're an elusive fellow."

"I'm available when I need to be, H'pold." If the Peninsula Weyrleader wanted to play matey, T'kamen could do that too.

"I'm certain you are." There was emphasis on the words, but before T'kamen had a chance to decipher the inference, H'pold had continued. "Not a bad Hatching, for your first."

It had been an excellent Hatching by anyone's standards, but T'kamen knew the other Weyrleader was trying to provoke him. "Not bad," he conceded, wishing he could remember the details of Ipith's last Hatching. He felt sure that the weyrling queen at the Peninsula had come from a junior clutch.

"Of course, Madellon needs the extra bronzes, seeing how quickly you get through them," the Peninsula leader said, still smiling. "After all, what's a Weyrleader without a little healthy competition?"

"I'm certain neither of us would know," T'kamen replied coolly.

"Indeed." H'pold's eyes flicked over T'kamen's shoulder, and the Madellon Weyrleader had to restrain himself from looking in that direction. "I can see that Peninsula-trained riders stand out here, to have been promoted so quickly."

Epherineth's rider couldn't help looking back. Sh'zon was standing quite still some distance away, out of earshot, but close enough that it was clear that his fierce gaze was fixed on H'pold. "Madellon recognises merit, Weyrleader." He put enough of an edge in his voice to turn the title into a dig.

"Madellon is a young Weyr, T'kamen," H'pold replied, and his continued refusal to use the bronze rider's title was as conscious a slur.

"The Peninsula scarcely less so," T'kamen replied, "but perhaps too old to learn from its mistakes."

For a moment H'pold's smile slipped. Then it was back, as superficially friendly as ever. "Time will tell, T'kamen. Four Turns a Weyrleader has taught me that."

"It took you four Turns?" T'kamen asked lightly, and turned away.

The barb had struck: the instant's silence was enough to confirm that. Then H'pold spoke again. "Your new queen weyrling – some relative of Sh'zon's, I assume?"

"So I understand it," T'kamen replied offhandedly, not turning around.

The Peninsula Weyrleader laughed shortly, a satisfied sound. "That *will* cause you some trouble. A shame no one told you about that family."

It was an odd comment: a remark whose venom went deeper than that for a rival removed to a position where he was no longer a threat. But even as T'kamen began to speak over his shoulder, a sudden premonitory chill went through him as he felt a stab of shock from Epherineth.

Half the buzz of conversation died instantly as every dragonrider in the room went silent. The Harpers played on a moment and then limped to a halt; fire-lizards on shoulders assumed a listening pose, and when the cry came through the rock of the Weyr, their shrill high voices cut through the low keen of loss.

What happened! T'kamen's demand was echoed a dozen times across the crowded cavern as the dragons' moan shivered through Weyr and Holdfolk alike.

Bronth, Epherineth told his rider, his voice heavy with sorrow and confusion. *Bronth has gone* between.