



## XX

### All Hope Banish



C'los didn't realise that he'd staggered until C'mine caught him, seizing his shoulders and stopping him from falling. He'd simply lost all consciousness of his body, so stunned by the keen, and by the name that was now being spoken in shocked whispers all over the cavern. Thoughts formed and dissipated in his mind so quickly that he couldn't examine each one; he could only grab at a few, desperately trying to make some sense of them.

*How can Bronth be gone? Not today. Not today.*

*Trust C'mine to catch me: he's always said he'd never let me down.*

*If Bronth's gone, what about K'ston? Haven't even seen him since Kamen sent him to Jessaf. Haven't wanted to.*

*It's my fault he went there.*

*Bronth's gone.*

*The poor weyrlings....*

*Leah.*

That one cut through the morass, and C'los became abruptly aware of his own dead weight, the strain C'mine was under to support him. The green rider struggled to regain his footing, and whirled to find his daughter. Leah had gone to talk to one of the other new weyrlings, one of her friends, but she hadn't gone far, only a few steps. Her pale, strained face told of her shock, and her friend was wide-eyed and shaking, muttering under her breath. The loss of a death hit any dragon hard, but the emotional impact on the fragile mind of a newly Hatched dragonet especially so.

"Tell her it's all right, Leah." *Indioth, tell Jagunth to be calm.* C'los took his daughter's hands, trying to lend her some of the support she needed. "Tell her it's going to be all right."

"None of them know what to do, da." Leah's eyes flicked vaguely back and forth as she struggled to impose a calming influence on her dragon. It was a titanic task with the bond so unfamiliar.

*Indioth!* "Tell them they're not to do anything but stay calm."

*Vanzanth just told me to keep out of it,* Indioth reported. Her voice trembled.

"C'los," said C'mine, his tone a warning.

T'kamen was making his way grimly through the crowd towards C'los, ignoring or shouldering past the people getting in his way to demand explanations. "Come with me now," he said simply.

"But...Leah...."

“L’stev’s dealing with the weyrlings. Come with me.” The Weyrleader’s voice left no room for disobedience.

Helplessly, C’los let Leah’s hands go. “Be brave, sweetheart. Mine, look after her?”

“Of course I will, C’los.”

As he followed the Weyrleader, C’los wondered what had ever possessed him to fall out with C’mine. He vowed to swallow his pride and apologise to the blue rider for being such a selfish idiot. The thought seemed incongruous, given the situation, but C’los felt certain that if he faced the reality too quickly he might not be able to cope.

T’kamen paused long enough to snap out orders to two Wingseconds standing near the main entrance to the dining cavern. C’los was lagging too far behind the Weyrleader’s rapid stride to hear, but in the back of his mind he felt Indioth quiver. *Epherineth has grounded every dragon in the Weyr. Shimpath supports him. No one may leave.*

The command, evidently passed on to every rider through his or her dragon, was already spreading through the throng by the time C’los hurried through the exit after T’kamen. The first few objections were clearly audible even as the green rider hastened out of earshot. He had no doubt that T’kamen’s orders involved every ranking rider in the room: they would earn their stripes tonight, keeping Madellon’s visitors under control.

It was cold and bright outside under the full moons, and C’los shivered in the thin linen of his shirt. “What happened?” he called after T’kamen, breaking into a run to catch up. “Where’s K’ston?”

“Don’t know. He’s not accounted for.”

C’los had caught up with the bronze rider before he thought to wonder where he was headed. “Where are we going?”

“Dragon infirmary.” Then, without waiting to be asked, T’kamen went on, “Bronth came back from Jessaf looking terrible. Underfed, dehydrated. Vhion filled me in. I was going to deal with it later. After the Hatching.”

The bronze rider bit off each phrase as he completed it, his anger very clear. C’los still felt peculiarly numb. He could cope with some of the ripples spreading outwards from Bronth’s death – the new dragonets’ distress, the guests’ objections to being penned in the dining cavern – but not the fact itself, nor its possible significance. It skated across the surface of his thoughts, and so long as he didn’t try to take hold of it, he could function.

Dragons crowded the Rim, a jagged crown of restlessly shifting wings studded with the dim jewels of sorrow-greyed eyes. They should have been alert and lively with the joyous occasion. It should have been a day for celebration.

A member of the Dragon-healer’s staff, silhouetted against the light streaming from the entrance to the dragon infirmary, hailed T’kamen as they approached. “Weyrleader!”

T'kamen broke into a run, loping so fast he was almost horizontal. Even at his best C'los had never been able to keep up with the bronze rider, so he jogged into the infirmary several moments after the Weyrleader.

The big cavern seemed quiet, peaceful, but Zafandrie, Master Vhion's assistant, was white and trembling with shock. He ran shaking hands through his hair as T'kamen and C'los approached. "He w-went c-crazy," he stammered. "Thrashing, screaming...he was grey, totally grey, when he went..." The man almost retched.

T'kamen grabbed Zafandrie's shoulders. "What happened? Why were you here?"

"I came to check S-Sejanth. Bronth was asleep. I was mucking out Sejanth's bay, and... He gets upset when people come too near – restless - it must have woken Bronth up. I could hear him moving about."

*Epherineth says that Bronth's rider has been found.*

*Found? Alive or...* C'los couldn't bring himself to complete the sentence.

Indioth paused, and when she spoke again there was a bleakness in her voice that C'los had never heard before. *He wishes he were dead.*

C'los felt sick. He was aware that Zafandrie was still speaking, but he couldn't make himself listen to the words.

"C'los, look at this."

One of the dragons' wallows evidenced a commotion: rushes had been flung in all directions. T'kamen's gaze focused on the water trough. His face was a mask, but his eyes were terrible.

Somehow C'los made his legs work. A part of him already knew what T'kamen had found, his mind leaping ahead and independent of him again.

Bronth must have been thirsty: he had almost drained his trough. But there were dregs enough in the bottom, and the smell – not so pungent as the numbweed stink that always pervaded the infirmary, but telltale nonetheless – was horribly familiar.

C'los reached down to trail his fingers through the shallow puddle left in Bronth's trough. The pale green liquid dripped off his fingertips. He heard his own voice before he realised he'd spoken. "Fellis juice." He didn't dare look at T'kamen, realising, perhaps for the first time, just how much his relationship with the bronze rider had changed in the last four months.

"Could this have been an accident?" the Weyrleader asked.

"I don't see how." C'los had to wrench his eyes away from the fluid still wetting his fingers. "Zafandrie? Do you know how fellis juice could have found its way in here?"

The dragon-healer's assistant looked unwell. "The Healerhall's tithe. Master Vhion had us move it here, out of the way." He pointed.

C'los felt his insides contract. He wiped his hand convulsively on his trousers, and crossed the cavern to the pile of boxes and kegs Zafandrie had indicated. One of the barrels had been opened and then poorly resealed. He could get his fingers in the crack between lid and barrel.

Tightening his grip, the green rider levered the lid free, and a fresh wave of nausea broke over him. The barrel was half full of fellis juice.

“Must have used a bucket,” he said, half to himself. He tried to calculate how much had been taken. Gallons. He looked from the barrel to the floor, his eye drawn to the faint shine where liquid had dripped and dried. Fellis juice. Poured, bucket by bucket, into a dragon’s water trough. *Gallons*. Fully half of a barrel that would have been enough to meet the needs of Madellon’s riders and Weyrfolk for an entire Turn.

Quietly, T’kamen asked, “Zafandrie, do you know who did this?”

The man replied in a voice that shook. “I don’t know who would.”

“Who else has been in here tonight?”

“Master Vhion. The rest of the team.” Zafandrie shook his head. “I don’t know who else. K’ston was here.”

*No, C’los thought. He couldn’t have. Not his own dragon.*

*Why?*

Indioth’s tremulous query sliced through the haziness that had been dulling C’los’ thoughts ever since the dragons’ keen. She *knew*. In those few moments of sick disbelief the green had penetrated months of shielding, targeting the very root of her rider’s anxiety and distress, and in that one word, that one question, C’los realised that it had all been for nothing. *I don’t know, Indioth. But I have to find out.* “T’kamen, I need to talk to K’ston.”

The Weyrleader looked at him for a long moment, visibly weighing it up. C’los met his stare as steadily as he could. T’kamen had no reason to trust his judgement, not after everything that had happened. Finally, the bronze rider pulled him aside, out of Zafandrie’s earshot, and spoke in a low voice. “I can’t keep the Weyr locked down like this for long, C’los.”

The green rider shook his head slowly, but his thoughts were sprinting. “There’s no point, now. If the...if whoever did this intended to leave, he’ll be long gone. More likely he’s still here. No one left the Weyr after E’rom.”

“You’re sure it’s the same person?”

C’los looked at the half-empty fellis barrel. “I need to talk to K’ston.”

“Then go and do it, but I’m going to have to address the Weyr.”

T’kamen’s expression was stony, and C’los realised that the Weyrleader intended to make the truth about E’rom’s death public. “You can’t,” he said sharply. “I need more time.”

“You don’t have any more time, C’los,” said T’kamen, with finality. “Someone killed a dragon. I can’t hide it from the Weyr any more. Nor the Lords.”

“Kamen, they’ll eat you alive!” Their roles reverted suddenly to normal: C’los as T’kamen’s advisor, his eyes and ears and guile. “If you stand up and tell them that there’s a murderer loose at Madellon and you’ve know about it for a month – it’s political suicide. H’pold and P’raima would be within their powers to have you removed as Weyrleader.”

The bronze rider's face paled, but he insisted, "The connection will have been made already. And the killer's still out there. I can't risk him picking off another rider, another dragon."

"He won't! Bronth wasn't chosen randomly! T'kamen, I've been going about this all wrong. E'rom's not the lynchpin, K'ston is! His weyrmate was killed, and now his dragon. I just need a chance to work it out. Please!"

"That could take you forever."

C'los cast about for another angle. "T'kamen, trust me. Please. I'm close to working it out now. But I need time!"

"C'los..."

"Please, Kamen!"

The Weyrleader bowed his head, as if the burden of his responsibilities were a physical weight on his shoulders. "All right," he said, at last. "You have an hour."

The green rider exhaled hard; he hadn't been aware that he'd been holding his breath. "You won't regret it."

"But I'm calling the Wingleaders to an emergency council," the Weyrleader went on, "and if you haven't turned anything up by the end of the hour, it goes public. All of it."

"I'll work it out," C'los promised. "I'll get him."

"You'd better." There was no threat in T'kamen's tone: merely a bleakness that made C'los shudder. "I'll have T'fer confined."

"T'fer?" It took C'los a moment to remember the name: his thoughts were already far ahead. "Don't bother. He doesn't fit the profile any more."

"Then find me somebody who does." The Weyrleader raised his voice to address the distraught Zafandrie. "I'll have someone relieve you here, journeyman." Then he threw C'los a sideways glance. "An hour, C'los."

The green rider was moving before T'kamen had even finished speaking, running before he'd even left the dragon infirmary, and still his mind ranged ahead of him: forming and discarding theories, comparing old facts to new, mapping out the pattern. There were still parts missing, but now C'los understood that K'ston was the key he could feel the answers within his reach.

He burst into the Healer caverns at a dead run. There was no one at the desk, but C'los could hear the sound of a struggle coming from the ward. The green rider lengthened his stride, racing through the deserted waiting room, and then almost stumbled over his own feet as he skidded to a halt.

K'ston was writhing and thrashing on one of the beds despite the best efforts of three Healers, including Isnan, to hold him down. The once-handsome blue rider's face was bloody, and with a sick jolt C'los realised that he had torn at his own cheeks with his fingernails. Dry heaves stifled the scream that his mouth worked to describe, but the rhythmic thump of his boots against the frame of the bed as he convulsed was awful enough. For the space of three deafening heartbeats C'los just stood and stared. However briefly, this man had been his lover. He had

enticed him from C'mine. His habits had irritated him nearly to distraction. And now he was no more than a man, and perhaps less: Bronth had been ripped from him, and half of K'ston had perished with the blue dragon.

One of the journeymen forced K'ston's jaws open, wedging his teeth apart. "Hold him!" Isnan bellowed, but the former blue rider tossed his head this way and that, his eyes rolling in their sockets. Another Healer gripped K'ston's head. The dragonless man's legs kicked wildly, but with his upper body immobilised the Weyr Healer bent close, a cup in his hand.

C'los was shouting even as he lunged to dash the beaker from Isnan's grasp. "Faranth, don't!"

The cup went spinning from the Master Healer's grasp and shattered on the floor. The smell of fellis juice almost made C'los retch, but he shoved aside the closest journeyman and seized K'ston's shoulders with both hands, pinning him to the bed with his full weight. "K'ston!" The smell of stale beer and vomit on the blonde man's rumpled tunic was nearly as nauseating as that of the fellis. "K'ston, you scorching son of a whersport!" The green rider freed a hand and slapped the bleeding face hard; he felt Isnan's crafters yank at his shirt, trying to pull him off, but he smacked the dragonless man another dizzying, glancing blow to the face. "If you want Bronth avenged then *stay the shell still!*"

The combined effort of three Healers dragged C'los back off the bed, but K'ston's convulsions had ceased. "What the shell...!" Isnan began, but C'los silenced the Master Healer's outraged questions with a look.

K'ston lay still, panting raggedly, his once-soulful green eyes expressing such agony that C'los couldn't bear to meet them. He did anyway, his stomach knotting in sympathy. "You have to tell me what happened, K'ston," he said, in a low voice. "Tell me what happened, we'll find who did it, and..."

"He's gone," K'ston cried, and his wail of loss was as unearthly as any dragon's keen. "Bronth, Bronth, oh, Faranth, no, no, *no! Bronth!*"

"C'los, what in Faranth's name happened?" Isnan muttered urgently in the green rider's ear as K'ston began to choke on his own tears again.

C'los didn't look up from the stricken man. "Someone put fellis juice in Bronth's water trough."

"Faranth's shards!" The Healer's oath was shocking: C'los had never heard him swear like that before. "Oh, stars above! Not from the tithe.... How much, C'los? Shards, how much?"

C'los shook his head. "Half a barrel. I don't know."

"Kill me," K'ston pleaded suddenly, the words muffled but distinct. "Kill me, please, someone kill me, it's my fault, it's all my fault!"

"It's not your fault, shard you! K'ston!"

"I deserved it, but Bronth, why did they have to take you, why did they have to take you?"

C'los grasped K'ston's arm, his fingers biting into the former rider's bicep, knowing that the grip would hurt. "*You didn't deserve it!* Who would want to kill your dragon, K'ston? Who? Tell me, and I'll kill him. I swear, I'll kill him."

"I didn't feed him," K'ston wailed. "I couldn't stand being there, I couldn't stand remembering.... I thought he'd be all right; he said he'd look after him. He said he would! But I should have stayed with him, I should have *stayed!* E'rom died because of me, and Bronth died because of me, and it's *my fault!* Oh, Bronth, *Bronth!*" K'ston's voice rose, becoming hysterical, his words growing less coherent as the enormity of his loss weighed down up his sanity: bending it, cracking it. "Oh, stars, Bronth, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

C'los' hand was shaken loose as K'ston seized his own head in both hands, ripping at his hair. C'los let Isnan shoulder past him, watching without really seeing as the Master Healer and his journeymen worked to restrain the former blue rider. "I'm going to have to sedate him, C'los, I'm sorry," Isnan said through gritted teeth as he strove to hold K'ston down.

C'los didn't protest as a second draught of fellis was forced down K'ston's throat. The green rider let himself be shunted away from the sickbed as the healers bustled around to make the dragonless rider comfortable. K'ston's words, barely coherent and coloured by the grief and pain that had all but destroyed his mind, had thrown everything into confusion again.

"Green rider." Isnan pulled C'los aside, leaving his journeymen to curtain off K'ston's bed. "You say Bronth had fellis?" At C'los grim nod, Isnan continued, "Wouldn't he have objected to the taste before he had enough to do him any harm?"

"A dragon's sense of taste is limited," said C'los. "And Bronth had been dehydrated. He was thirsty." The green rider paused again, considering something else. "But even half a barrel, to a dragon...Master, would that be enough to kill him?"

Isnan shook his head slowly. "I don't know, C'los. Fellis is hard on the heart, in humans. I've heard of fire-lizards dying from drinking the dregs of fellis-laced wine."

A detail C'los had noticed about K'ston suddenly became relevant. "He smelled like beer. Had he been drinking?"

"He was found in the privies. I suspect he'd been drinking heavily. He'd been sick, and I think he was probably unconscious when Bronth went *between.*"

C'los shuddered as the probable explanation dawned on him. "We're trained to comfort our dragons when they're hurt or sick," he said. "They panic easily, and when they panic.... Isnan, it's the same as when a dragon's mating. If the rider isn't with them, they'll go *between.* Bronth must have started feeling sick. Nauseated. Maybe his hearts started beating irregularly. He reached for K'ston, for reassurance...."

"And K'ston was unconscious," Isnan completed for him.

"He couldn't reassure him, and Bronth couldn't sense him properly. So he panicked...went *between.*" C'los closed his eyes, and felt for Indioth. She wasn't far away, and her mind wrapped

protectively around his for a moment: an embrace of souls. "If he hadn't had so much to drink, maybe Bronth wouldn't have died."

"That still doesn't explain who gave him that fellis," Isnan pointed out.

C'los forced himself to calm, concentrating. "No one's been on duty in the dragon infirmary full-time tonight. Anybody could have slipped away from the feast, and there wouldn't have been anyone there to see them put the fellis in Bronth's trough. Except..." The green rider's eyes widened. "Isnan, Sejanth was there! Where's D'feng?"

The Healer nodded decisively. "Come with me."

The injured bronze rider had been moved to a small chamber of his own. The sickroom smell pervaded. D'feng was still swathed in heavy bandages, barely able to move, and it took several moments for C'los to realise that the bronze rider was awake and gazing at him.

"D'feng, we need your help," Isnan told the maimed bronze rider, in a brisk, unsympathetic tone that C'los felt D'feng would appreciate. Sejanth's rider had always been a pedantic soul, but he thrived on being made useful.

"What?" the bronze rider asked, slowly and painfully.

C'los stepped forwards at Isnan's prompt. "D'feng, K'ston's Bronth is dead. Somebody poisoned him with fellis juice. He was in the infirmary. We need to know if Sejanth saw anyone unusual there."

D'feng took such a long time to answer that C'los wondered if he would at all, but finally the bronze rider croaked a reply. "No one unusual."

Disappointed, the green rider looked at Isnan, shaking his head.

Then D'feng spoke again. "Blood. Bad blood. Not -" he made a garbled attempt to form a word that C'los thought was 'appropriate', "- choices. Either one."

"Either one what?" C'los asked intently.

D'feng's mouth moved without sound for a moment. He closed his eyes, evidently in frustration, and then managed one more word. "Holdbred."

C'los stared at the crippled bronze rider, willing him to say more, but D'feng appeared exhausted by the effort of speech. Something about that word tickled his memory. "D'feng?" he pressed.

"C'los," Isnan murmured, and then spoke more loudly. "Thanks for your help, D'feng. It's good to hear you talking again."

The green rider didn't resist as the Master Healer led him out of the room, but he was burning with frustration. "Isnan, I nearly had something there," he complained.

"D'feng hasn't spoken more than two coherent words together since his accident, C'los," the Weyr Healer told him quietly. "He's nearly exhausted himself saying that much. I'm sorry."

C'los squeezed his eyes shut, summoning his mental focus. He could sense the answer more closely than ever; some instinct told him that he had all the pieces now, if he could only fit them together. "Holdbred," he muttered to himself. "Holdbred. Holdbred and...*hidebound*."

Something shifted minutely in his mind, and the green rider opened his eyes. "I have to go," he told Isnan, the newly clarified pattern still dancing in his mind. "I just need to check one thing in the archives."

If the Master Healer replied, C'los didn't hear him. His pulse racing, the green rider set off at a run.

The deeper corridors of the Weyr were never busy, but with almost the entire population of Madellon still being held in the dining cavern they were utterly deserted. C'los ran, conscious that his time was short, and glad he knew the route to the main archives so well.

The door was never locked. It didn't need to be: few other than drudges carrying new additions to Madellon's records frequented the chamber. C'los was one of the few. Campaigning to raise popular support for T'kamen had required a thorough understanding of Weyr politics, and the green rider had spent months studying records of Madellon's previous Weyrleaders. He knew the layout of the sprawling cavern, with its dozens of dusty shelves and bins, all crammed full of mouldering record hides and stacks of slates. He knew where to find the shelf marked "Weyrlings" and, at one end of it, the smaller subsection labelled "Candidates".

The green rider ran his finger along the shelf, ignoring the newer indexes. Farther back, where the dust was thicker, faded handwriting labelled the appropriate era. C'los pulled out one folder, scanning down its list of contents before stuffing it back in the row, then chose another. The date, penned neatly at the top, was right and when the green rider read down the list of names below he tensed with the thrill of impending discovery. Propping the folder against a pile of record slates covered in half a century's accumulation of dust, C'los started to read, squinting in the low light to decipher the tiny writing.

What he read there completed the pattern. C'los made himself read the pertinent entry twice, to be sure that he wasn't hallucinating. Then he stuck a marker in the right place and closed the folder. As he did, he realised he was trembling. "Got you," he said aloud, savouring the words almost as much as the victory he could scent would soon be his.



The first few sevendays of a dragonet's life were predictable down to the last minute. Turns of experience had given L'stev a finely-tuned instinct for knowing when newborn hatchlings would wake, how much they would eat, and when they would collapse into sleep again. After a couple of days he could guess with a good degree of accuracy which dragonets would eat too much and wake up prematurely with indigestion, and which would sleep through without a fuss. By the end of the first sevenday, L'stev was generally able to make a projection of which dragonpairs would give him problems and which would not. A Weyrlingmaster who couldn't second-guess his weyrlings wouldn't last five minutes against the inevitable difficult cases, and it certainly didn't hurt to give the impression that he could read their minds.

Not even he could have predicted the tragedy that had woken the hours-old dragonets out of their first sleep. Dragons died, and sometimes suddenly, but not dragons whose riders were healthy and strong and not even halfway through their forties, and not during a Hatching feast. L'stev didn't know what had happened – that was for the Weyrleader to investigate – but he did know that twenty-five hatchling dragons had been roused from their sleep by the shocking blow of a dragon's death.

Rounding up the new weyrings had been a horrendous job in the crowded dining cavern. He'd been missing about ten by the time he had fought his way to the exit, bellowing for people to make way. Vanzanth had gone straight to the barracks without prompting to reassure the dragonets, but even he could only do so much in the face of so many upset hatchlings whose distress was amplified by their riders'. L'stev had left one of his assistants in charge of locating the stragglers, and herded the rest towards the barracks.

Things had calmed somewhat from the bedlam that had greeted them there, but the fifty youngsters, dragon and human, were still huddling together for mutual comfort and reassurance. Most of the weyring riders had been all but incapacitated by the emotional impact of the death, felt through a brand-new and still strange bond. Vanzanth had done a certain amount to calm the dragonets, but a gentle touch was crucial at this early stage. L'stev could have asked Shimpath to come down on the hatchlings' fear, but the queen's intervention had the potential to do more harm than good. Well: it wasn't an ideal situation, but the weyrings would just have to start learning to manage the bond themselves.

The Weyrleader scanned the class, looking for the least shaken of the older weyrings. As he started to call out names, he realised that he hadn't even had the chance to find out what all the boys had named themselves. "Harrenar. Gidra. Tarshe. Maris." He paused, then added, "Rastevon."

The five answered the summons slowly, each taking time to reassure their dragonets with words and touch. L'stev approved of that, although as their training progressed he would expect the weyrings to jump at his command. "I need you five to help the others," he told them in a low voice. "You're older and you're handling this shock better. So you're going to split the class up into five groups of five. I want you each to take a slate and chalk from the pile and make me a list of the names and colours of each dragonet in your group, and the names you boys have chosen for yourselves. It'll give everyone something else to think about, and that will calm the dragonets. Understand?"

"Yes sir," Harrenar replied, and the others responded with nods or affirmatives.

"All right." L'stev raised his voice. "You're going to get in teams, weyrings, and I want you all to start finding out about each other now you're riders. And you'd better be good at listening, because I'm going to be asking questions."

The five weyrings he had chosen took the cue to start organising the others into groups. L'stev noted with approval that they had the sense to split up the class with the minimum fuss,

gathering the closest into each team rather than their particular friends. A hesitant murmur of conversation soon became more confident as the weyrlings talked about themselves, and their dragonets' distress eased with the change of subject.

The Weyrlingmaster couldn't help watching Rastevon's group more keenly than the others. He didn't know the name of the sturdy young bronze, dark overall but with a handsome dappling of sunny gold, who had chosen his son. He'd barely had a chance to think about it. He did remember the mixture of delight and trepidation that had filled him when he'd seen his stubborn youngest son Impress. But perhaps it was that very characteristic that was sustaining Rastevon when so many of the other new weyrlings were still in shock. L'stev watched how his boy encouraged one of the girls into talking through her tears. He couldn't hear what was said, but something fundamental had already changed about Rastevon's demeanour. A bronze dragon could make or break a young man, perhaps more so than any other colour. A poor choice, or worse, a poor match, could have long-term repercussions for the entire Weyr. L'stev would never forget the sense of dread he had felt almost fifteen Turns ago when an arrogant young Leddrome had Impressed a bronze so burly as to be almost deformed. Madellon was still suffering from the ill luck that had seen Pierdeth Hatch last, with so little choice remaining. But then, a bronze from that very same clutch had transformed a ragged and rebellious Trader lad into one of the most responsible and fair riders L'stev had ever known. In fifteen Turns' time, L'stev vowed, Rastevon would be more T'kamen than L'dro.

But if there were any member of the class L'stev would be watching even more keenly, it was Tarshe. Any queen weyrling bore close scrutiny, but the girl from the Peninsula had resisted all attempts at analysis in her brief time as a candidate. She had shown little interest in making friends with the other girls, and that would most likely lead to friction as the class settled in. The Weyrlingmaster's greatest concern was her relationship to Sh'zon. Valonna had been ruined as a queen rider by her dependence on L'dro, and Madellon couldn't afford a second weak weyrling. Tarshe was five Turns older than Valonna had been at Impression, and infinitely more self-possessed, but L'stev worried that her overbearing cousin would exert too great an influence on the girl. The obvious solution was for him as Weyrlingmaster to cultivate Tarshe's broad self-reliant streak, pushing her to take responsibility for her own decisions rather than deferring to Sh'zon, but in practice there was a fine line between independence and insubordination. Manipulating any weyrling was a delicate business, but the rider of a queen much more so than any other.

The tortured shriek of hinges made L'stev turn sharply, attuned to the sound he instinctively associated with misbehaviour, but he soon relaxed. "Sarenya," he greeted the journeyman Beastcrafter as she entered the barracks through the noisy door.

"Hello, L'stev." Sarenya made a face. "Sorry about the noise; I forgot about that door."

"That's what they all say." The Weyrlingmaster raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think they were letting anyone out of the dining hall yet."



"They're not," the journeyman told him, looking at the new dragonpairs with the slight tightness of regret around her eyes that L'stev thought was completely unconscious. "It took M'ric and Master Vhion to get me permission, and even then the Wingsecond on the door didn't want to let me go."

"I can understand that," said L'stev, giving her his most lecherous grin as he looked her up and down.

"You're a dirty old man, L'stev," Sarenya told him.

L'stev grinned even more. "I don't think I've ever seen your ankles before. Is that your best frock?"

"It's my only frock. How are your weyrings?"

"Upset," the Weyrlingmaster grumbled. "It's a big shock, for a hatchling. Any news on what happened?"

"Not that I've heard, except it seems that K'ston's still alive."

L'stev frowned. "Then what in Faranth's name happened to Bronth? I was guessing that his rider went and choked on something, or tripped up and cracked his head open."

Sarenya shook her head. "Bronth was in the infirmary when I came off duty there, looking a state. He hadn't been eating, hadn't been drinking. But I didn't think for a moment he'd just up and die. I thought dragons were more robust than that."

"They are." L'stev scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Don't say anything to the kids."

"I won't. I'd like to check on Nerbeth, though."

L'stev nodded towards S'terlion, who was sitting with Maris' group, his dragonet's head resting on his knee. "Go ahead."

The journeyman had a way about her, L'stev mused idly, as Sarenya crouched to look at Nerbeth's foot. She seemed casual, but her hands were professionally deft and gentle as she removed the dressing on the green's hind foot to examine the injured pad, and she kept up a flow of conversation with both S'terlion and Nerbeth that made weyring and dragonet relax.

Sarenya rose from the green hatchling, smoothing the fine fabric of her dress. "That foot's more swollen than I'd like," she told the Weyrlingmaster. "Puncture wounds are prone to infection, so I'd like to flush it out again, but I'll have to go and get the right solution of redwort."

"These are going to be asleep again in a few minutes," L'stev warned her. "I don't want to be waking her up again."

"I won't be long," Sarenya promised. "I left M'ric looking after my wine, and if I don't get back to it quickly he'll drink it."

"Will he, now," said L'stev, eyeing her knowingly.

"You're the third person today who's made a comment like that," Saren said indignantly, but there was too much of a glint in her eye for it to be convincing. "I can't imagine what you're trying to say."

L'stev laughed. "Don't play me the innocent, Sarenya. A brown rider! You of all people should know better."

"I know," Sarenya sighed as she turned for the door. "I mean, they're a shady lot, brown riders. Present company most definitely included."

The Weyrlingmaster chuckled maliciously as the door hinges shrieked again, then called helpfully, "Mind the door."

The weyrings seemed calmer, their dragonets less agitated. L'stev let them talk for a few minutes more. "Right then," he said finally. "Give me your slates. Let's see what you've learned."



C'los willed himself to keep his pace steady. There was time. The dragons on the Rim were calm, still, expectant. The Bowl was deserted. The masses hadn't been released from the dining cavern. T'kamen would be talking to his Wingleaders. There was time, and no need for him to hurry, no need for him to get out of breath. The cold night air was crisp in his lungs; both moons were large and bright; the stars were incandescent.

Finally, everything had fallen into place, and T'kamen's faith in him would be restored.

Instinct was not the only reason for his destination, although it was strong; nor logic, although it was sound. The green rider fixed his gaze on the dimly lit entrance to the dragon infirmary with a piece of Valrov's wisdom echoing and re-echoing in his mind. *The criminal will often revisit the scene of the crime.* Both relief and regret had accompanied understanding: relief that, at last, he had made the connection; regret that he had not been able to do so in time to save Bronth. But mostly relief, and satisfaction, and reassurance: a renewed confidence. C'los had begun to doubt himself in a way he never had before. It was no wonder he'd been so hard on C'mine.

The green rider paused in his stride just long enough to inhale deeply before crossing the threshold into the infirmary.

Victory bubbled up inside him. Valrov had been right. The killer was there, drawn back to the scene like iron to a lodestone. He was sweeping the rush-strewn floor. C'los was reminded of the telltale trench in the sand where E'rom had been dragged to his death, the mark that had been partially obscured. Whatever evidence was being covered now no longer mattered. C'los had finally tracked E'rom's killer down.

"C'los." He looked genuinely surprised - convinced, perhaps, that there was no evidence to point to him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for someone," said C'los. Calm had overtaken him; he was glad he hadn't run. Needing to catch his breath would have been a nuisance. "Maybe you've seen him."

The murderer shook his head, leaning on his broom. "I haven't seen anyone."

"Are you sure?" C'los stepped nearer. "Maybe if I describe him to you...you see, I'm looking for a murderer."

He froze, all his muscles tensing for an instant, before shaking his head with a half smile. "Sorry, green rider? What do you mean?"

"I think you know." C'los moved closer, slowly circling his quarry as he stalked him with his words. "He killed a man, a while ago. He killed a dragon tonight. Right there, where you're standing."

The murderer was still smiling, but the expression hadn't reached his eyes. "That's ridiculous. How could anyone kill a dragon?"

"Oh, I don't know," said C'los. "Maybe...fellis juice? If there were enough, and nearby..." He saw the killer's eyes slide past him, to the Healer-stamped barrel that still stood against the wall. "See, now you're catching on."

"You must have been drinking, C'los," said the murderer, but there wasn't the confidence in his voice any more. "You're talking nonsense."

"Did you really think you'd covered your tracks well enough?" asked C'los. "The first time, at least. Because it didn't go the way you planned, did it? The fellis wasn't enough, was it?" His quarry didn't reply; the smile had drained away altogether now. "Did you plan to kill Bronth, or was that just a bonus?"

"You don't have any proof," the killer said hoarsely. "If you had proof, you'd have called me out on it."

"Actually, it was the motive I was missing," said C'los, advancing on the murderer. "That's what took me so long. I just couldn't understand why.... You've really been bitter all this time? Harboring this grudge all these Turns, because K'ston Impressed and you didn't?" He took the folder he'd brought from the archives from under his arm, and tossed it at the other man's feet. "It's all here, if I'd just thought to look for it before."

The killer stood his ground, shaking his head. "You don't have any idea what you're talking about, rider. You don't have any idea."

"You'll have plenty of time to think about it for yourself," C'los said triumphantly. "You'll have plenty of time to do a lot of things on your own when the conclave exiles you – if the Weyrleader doesn't tear you apart first. If / don't."

"I don't think you'll be doing that," said the killer.

C'los opened his mouth to retort, and felt the breath leave his body as if he had been punched in the chest. Stunned, the green rider struggled to grasp the reality of what his intellect, his training, and his instinct had failed utterly to predict. He looked down in disbelief at the handle of the knife that E'rom's murderer had thrust through his ribs with surgical precision, and just before his legs turned to water he heard Indioth scream.

The green rider crumpled to the floor. *Indioth*. He clutched at the knife hilt. It was slippery, or his hand was. He couldn't hold on. He could barely speak his dragon's name in his mind. "Indioth," he tried. Blood filled his throat, drowning him. The pain was so shocking he couldn't feel it.

He could feel Indioth trying to wrap her thoughts around his, trying to hold on to him, but like his hand on the knife handle, she kept losing her grip. *C'los, don't leave me, C'los, C'los, C'LOS!* But as her grasp slipped for the last time, so did his.

The breath and the life went out of C'los all at once. He was still trying to say his dragon's name when he died.



The piercing scream of loss rocked Sarenya back as she stepped into the infirmary. The journeyman seized the wall to steady herself, shaking her head as the high shriek from outside was joined by Sejanth's bass roar, deafening in the confined space.

"Sejanth, what's -" she began, hurrying forwards to where the grounded bronze had reared from his wallow, spreading his ruined wings to the fullest extent of the cavern.

She was nearly knocked off her feet as someone ran into her at full tilt. Katel staggered back, as surprised as she, but Sarenya's gaze had already gone to the figure sprawled on the floor behind the Healer, and she was moving before her mind had even grasped the horror of it.

"C'los!" She tripped on her skirt, falling hard to her knees beside the green rider's supine body. There was blood on his mouth, and the pristine white linen of his new shirt had blossomed wetly crimson. His eyes were wide open, as if in surprise, and a part of Sarenya knew he was gone before she became aware of the dragons' keen, but she pressed her hand over the ghastly wound in the side of his chest anyway, and grabbed his shoulder, and shook him, as if she could shake the life back into him. "C'los, oh Faranth, Los, what have they done to you?" She looked over her shoulder, half-blinded by tears. "Katel, you've got to help him, please!"

But there was something shining dully in the Healer's hand, and before Sarenya had registered that it was a knife, the blade was at her throat.

"Katel," she gasped.

She heard, but did not see, Tarnish burst out of *between*, screaming with rage. "Send it away!" Katel ordered harshly. Sarenya hesitated for the briefest of instants, and then felt hot blood trickle down her throat as the keen steel bit into her skin. "Send it away or I'll cut your throat!"

It could have been a bad dream: C'los lying on the floor, the blade nicking the soft skin of Saren's neck, and Katel.... "Go!" Sarenya rasped, willing Tarnish to obey. *Go now, go to Augusta! GO!*

The bronze's shrieks cut off abruptly. Katel relaxed the pressure of the knife at her throat. "Good girl."

"I don't -" Saren began, but then the breath choked from her as Katel looped something around her neck and pulled it tight. The Beastcrafter scabbled desperately at the noose, but it was thick leather, a belt, and when Katel eased the tension she gulped raggedly for air.

“Do as you’re told and I won’t kill you,” said the Healer. His voice was chillingly matter-of-fact, and he tightened the noose again for a moment, as if to show her how easily he could use it to throttle her.

Sejanth lurched from his bay, bellowing, but the bronze’s injuries slowed him, and his own size impeded him in the cramped quarters. Unmoved, Katel used the belt to jerk Sarenya to her feet, and forced her ahead of him, well out of Sejanth’s range.

*Get help*, Sarenya pleaded of D’feng’s crippled bronze, hoping he could hear her. *Please, get help!*