



XXI

Those Dangers Dragon-Braved



T'kamen had assembled his Wingleaders in one of the storerooms not far from the dining cavern. The chamber had been emptied of its normal stock of folding chairs and trestle tables, but the combined personalities of T'kamen's eleven Wingleaders filled the space to the point of discomfort.

It didn't help that half of them had been drinking enough to make them belligerent, and that H'ned and P'keo, with their prior knowledge of the situation, were both as sober as T'kamen. Factions had formed before the Weyrleader had been able to curb them, with Wingleaders on all sides pigeonholed into one or another by the most vocal protesters. F'yan was chief among those. Flushed and sweating, with his sparse strands of hair stuck to his scalp with perspiration, he would have made a ridiculous spectacle had his stance not been so strong. The Weyrleader had no right, he argued, to conceal a danger from the Weyr. At the very least the council should have been informed of the facts surrounding E'rom's death. And to entrust the investigation of something so critical to a *green* rider....

Several other Wingleaders had spoken up against that bigotry, thank Faranth. T'kamen had let them argue over whether or not riders of the smaller dragons should be given an equal voice to the bronze riders: as an issue it bore scrutiny, but not today. Enough that it undermined F'yan: he was sufficiently outspoken, albeit emboldened by too much wine, to be dangerous. T'kamen had few illusions about the loyalty of his Wingleaders. Few had any great love for him, and none had truly benefited from his policies. Only the reality of a queen's infrequent mating urges in an Interval guaranteed him any kind of longevity in his position: had they been in the middle of a Pass, with Shimpath rising twice a Turn, T'kamen doubted he would have been suffered to wear the Weyrleader's stars for more than six months.

Having agreed to keep the knowledge of E'rom's murder to themselves, H'ned and P'keo were his allies by default. L'mis' deep frown of concern placed him second only to F'yan of those condemning the deception, but T'kamen never expected L'dro's sire to condone anything he did. A'keret was similarly aligned in the opposing camp, but the second youngest Wingleader, at not quite thirty Turns, seldom made a great impression on the others. E'dor, the youngest, usually took T'kamen's part, but his opinion carried even less weight. Of the moderate Wingleaders only R'yeno, C'los' commanding rider, was tentatively supportive of T'kamen's decision. That left four undecided, and while D'sion and V'stan were notorious for being slow to take sides, the Weyrleader had hoped for T'gat's support.

Conspicuous by his reserve was Sh'zon. In this, the first significant assembly of Madellon's bronze riders since his promotion, T'kamen would have expected the Peninsula man to make his voice heard. Instead, Sh'zon simply listened to all sides of the argument, without displaying so

much as a flicker of emotion on his face to suggest where his loyalty lay. It was the last thing T'kamen would have predicted.

The initial debate – whether T'kamen had been justified in keeping the truth under wraps – had long since degenerated into a slanging match between F'yan and P'keo. The ancient enmity between the two most senior Wingleaders was a weakness in the council that T'kamen knew to exploit. While the two bronze riders persisted in disagreeing, the council would be too divided to ever face down the Weyrleader. T'kamen had borrowed the tactic from Fianine, the Weyrwoman before Valonna: an expert at maintaining her own authority by manipulating bronze riders into conflict. But the Weyrleader was painfully conscious that there were still close to a thousand people being politely but firmly confined to the dining hall, and it was only a matter of time before tempers wore thin.

“Enough,” he said, realising as he spoke that his own patience was almost depleted. “You can argue about whether or not to have me staked out for Thread later.” He spoke with heavy irony. “Right now we have a Weyr full of visitors.”

“Well, you have to tell them,” said A'keret. “They've a right to know.”

“It's not an issue of rights,” H'ned disagreed. “It never was and it still isn't. It's about how many people are going to panic when they hear the word ‘murderer’, no matter how well it's explained to them. There are a lot of people out there who've had too much to drink.”

“One or two in here, too,” growled P'keo, with a look of barely disguised contempt for F'yan.

“I don't know how you can even think of maintaining this lie,” F'yan snapped. “How can anyone be expected to protect themselves – or their dragons! – if they don't even know they're at risk?”

“I think you're inflating the situation, F'yan,” said R'yeno. “No one's going around picking off random victims.”

“Maybe not random,” said L'mis, “but who could be next? One of K'ston's friends? Family? Does anyone know if he's fathered any children?”

“If he has, they're probably still locked in the dining hall with half the rest of southern Pern,” D'sion said dryly.

“And who's to say the killer isn't in there with them?” F'yan demanded. “Choosing his next victim? Putting fellis in the drinks?”

The concerned looks that greeted that suggestion were dispersed when Sh'zon muttered, “Couldn't make 'em taste no worse.”

“I don't think this man's out to slaughter half the Weyr,” H'ned insisted.

“How do you know it's a man?” asked L'mis. “It could just as easily be a woman.”

“Shards, did anyone think of that?”

“How many women do you know strong enough to drag a big man like E'rom all the way out of his weyr and off the ledge?”

“I can think of one or two....”

But T'kamen had already stopped paying attention to the conversation, so attuned to Epherineth that he felt the jolt almost at the same instant as the dragon himself, and long seconds before the bronze cried out, *Indioth is no more!*

Dragons wailed.

There was a frenzied note to their cry of loss: bewilderment, anger, and most of all a demand for explanation. *Why is our sister gone? Who has done this? When will the culprit be made to pay?* T'kamen seized his own head with both hands, but inside him shock and fury and anguish combined in a wordless howl that all but drowned out the keen.

Epherineth was abruptly with him, a companion in his grief, muffling T'kamen's awareness of everything external. He felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach, stunned, the breath knocked out of him by a blow he'd never seen coming. He heard himself thinking *it can't be true*, over and over again, but there could be no denial of Epherineth's horror, or the immediacy of his support.

You have to breathe, T'kamen, the bronze urged him, and only then did the Weyrleader realise that his breath had caught in his chest, a doubled fist of pain, sharp and dull at the same time, as if his heart had been gouged out with something blunt. He breathed, but the constriction in his chest and throat didn't ease. He felt sick and light-headed and only Epherineth's iron support kept him on his feet.

"Weyrleader. Weyrleader! T'kamen!"

T'kamen pulled himself together with an enormous effort of will, realising dazedly that H'ned was trying to get his attention over the other Wingleaders. "Take a register," he said, not really hearing or seeing the other bronze riders. "Account for everyone."

Shimpath is talking to the others. Grizbath and Ipith too. No dragon may leave. No dragon may lie. Epherineth's voice was terribly grim.

T'kamen understood that, with the other queens involved, keeping the truth a secret was no longer either possible or necessary. Neither did it matter. The opportunity to take action had been eliminated: now he could only react. And while T'kamen the man was staggered by a tragedy whose full implications he had yet to grasp, T'kamen the Weyrleader had to respond to the escalating crisis.

Is there any word on what happened? he asked Epherineth numbly.

Not yet. Indioth followed her rider.

The depth of sorrow in the bronze's voice shook T'kamen's enforced composure. *I need something, Epherineth!*

All right. All right. T'kamen made himself focus on the Wingleaders. Surprisingly, they were all still there, looking to him. Even sour F'yan wore a mixture of shock and sympathy on his face. The Weyrleader supposed he shouldn't be surprised: his friendship with C'los was well known. "Go back to the dining hall," he said to no one in particular. "See if they've let anyone out. Reassure them that they're not in any danger." He didn't specify a method. It just didn't matter any more.

“Are you going to make an announcement?” R’yeno asked in a hushed voice.

“I’m going to find C’los.”

“But you....”

“You have your orders,” T’kamen said with more force.

“You’re not thinking of going on your own, T’kamen,” L’mis said sharply. “Bloody fool thing to do. Do you want to be next?”

Sh’zon spoke up without a pause. “I’ll watch your back, Weyrleader.”

“Fine.” T’kamen didn’t even look at the Peninsula rider. He started towards the door and then hesitated, turning back. “H’ned. Find C’mine.”

The red-haired Wingleader nodded, his jaw tightening.

Sh’zon’s aquiline features were even fiercer than usual, T’kamen noticed dully, as he led the way from the storeroom. The other bronze rider was an oddly comforting presence at his left shoulder, physically imposing, but undemanding in his ignorance. Any other Wingleader would have known that the fallen rider was one of T’kamen’s closest friends. Any other Wingleader would have said something. Sh’zon just paced him through the empty, echoing corridors, solid and serious, and T’kamen was remotely grateful for his company.

The Weyrleader didn’t realise that he was heading for the infirmary until they were there. The part of his brain that made decisions seemed to be functioning better on its own than it would have with conscious thought. The infirmary was the last place T’kamen knew C’los had been. He wasn’t certain he would have remembered that if he’d thought about it. “Master Isnan!”

His shout brought the Master Healer hurrying into the waiting room. “T’kamen, thank Faranth – what under the Red Star is happening?”

“C’los isn’t with you?”

“No, he left about half an hour ago. What’s....” Isnan broke off, staring at him in disbelief, and the colour drained from his face. “Not...not Indioth....”

“Where did he go?” T’kamen asked. He felt strangely abstracted in the face of Isnan’s horror.

“I don’t.... The archives. He said he had to check something in the archives.” The Healer shook his head. “T’kamen....”

“Did he say who it is, Isnan?”

“No. But...D’feng said something. Hidebound. That’s what made C’los rush off. T’kamen....”

“Bring what you need,” T’kamen said. “If there’s any chance he’s still alive....”

Isnan hesitated only for a moment before snatching a first aid kit from behind the desk.

It had been a long time since T’kamen had needed to visit the archives. The dimly-lit cavern was extensive, with row upon row of shelves stretching back into the darkness. C’los could be anywhere. “Split up,” he told the others curtly.

Prowling down the aisles, alone for the first time since the dragons' lament for Indioth, T'kamen had to fight to maintain his control. He knew that if he let himself think he'd lose it entirely. He focused on his anger instead, the seething fury he had long kept confined. It flared as he acknowledged it, white hot in intensity, and the Weyrleader clenched his fists. He wanted to hit something, to hurt something, to vent his wrath on something tangible, to let it out without restraint. It had been a long time since he had allowed his once-violent temper to come to the fore. Epherineth's presence had always taken the edge off it, but under these circumstances and with the bronze distracted. T'kamen could feel the old rage stirring sluggishly, like something that had long been denied the light but survived in darkness, waiting for an opportunity to emerge. It should have scared him. It would have, had he not already been so cold, so consciously detached from his emotions. Instead, he took comfort from the knowledge that the anger was there, ready to be drawn upon.

A muffled thump made him swivel on the spot, and he dropped automatically into a defensive stance, his eyes gouging the darkness.

"Sorry, sorry!" Isnan apologised from the next row.

No sooner had T'kamen relaxed than Epherineth barked in his head, *Go to where Sejanth is.*

But C'los....

You'll find him.

Is he...?

You'll find him.

It was enough. "Isnan, Sh'zon!"

T'kamen didn't think as he led the way towards the dragon infirmary at a sprint. He didn't consult Epherineth. He didn't speak to either the Master Healer or the Wingleader racing in his wake.

Sejanth had collapsed halfway out of his wallow, his tattered wings splayed to either side. His head lay on the ground, and his eyes were slits as he wheezed for breath, but he bared his teeth in a snarl at them. The feebleness of the dragon's challenge would have been poignant, but T'kamen had already seen what lay beyond D'feng's crippled bronze.

C'los was dead. T'kamen knew it before Isnan rushed past him, before the Healer felt for a pulse in the fallen green rider's throat, before he looked up and shook his head with the hope dying in his eyes. He looked at his friend's body, strangely unmoved, as if his mind and his emotions had been disconnected.

"Weyrleader."

Sh'zon had stooped to pick up a folder lying on the floor nearby. Still crouching, he handed it to T'kamen. It fell open in the Weyrleader's hands, and he moved his eyes to the tight lines of script on the marked page.

Seventh Interval, sixty-ninth Turn, eleventh month, twentieth day

The clutch can't be more than ten days off Hatching hardness. I'm certain now that the smallest isn't viable, although L'mis won't hear of it. It's just as well, though: one less dragonet is one less to choose a rider from this sorry lot.

I'm not sure I've ever seen a less likely crew. Sirannis and Larpay won't quit scuffling no matter how many times I put them on latrine duties together. I'm certain Pyrea's behind it. If they'd just settle down and share the girl it wouldn't matter, but sense seems to be beyond them. And Faranth help us all if she Impresses. It would help if there were more girls in the group, but of the five Pyrea's like a queen among watchwhers – it's no wonder the lads are fighting over her.

Heromar seems to be perfecting his role as a victim. Dorfeng – sneak that the boy is – reported the incident to me. It seems Kaston and Katel were taunting him about that blue rider friend of his again. It's his own fault – he should know better than to flaunt his inclinations around Holdbreds. That said, those two are as nasty a piece of work as I've known in my days. And it's the younger, not the elder, who's the worse of the pair. The bigoted little sod – if we weren't so short of candidates this time, I'd pack Katel straight off back to Jessaf – and if the rider lost him *between* on the way, so much the better.

It clicked in T'kamen's mind, as it must have in C'los', and with a hideous jolt in his stomach he realised what he'd done. "Katel."

Isnan looked up, but whatever he said was lost on the Weyrleader. As if in a daze, T'kamen turned his head to look at Sejanth. The bronze was breathing hard, his eyes filmed grey. "Sejanth, was it Katel?"

T'kamen felt Epherineth pick up the image from his mind. The next instant Sejanth reared, almost striking his head on the ceiling in his agitation, his snarl reverberating against the rock, and T'kamen didn't need Epherineth to translate. *Him! Yes! Yes! Him!*

"But he's a Healer," Isnan breathed, his face a mask of disbelief.

T'kamen felt sick. He had sent Katel here himself to relieve the distraught Zafandrie following Bronth's death. *Find him, Epherineth. I don't care how.* T'kamen stepped closer to D'feng's bronze, ignoring the dragon's hostile stance. "Where did he go, Sejanth?"

Took her.

"Took who?" *Epherineth!*

Took her. Sejanth's frustration was obvious: he just couldn't communicate clearly with another rider.

"Fire-lizards," Sh'zon muttered.

T'kamen wheeled on the other bronze rider. "What?"

"The woman with the fire-lizards," said Sh'zon. "Kawanth says...." His eyes suddenly snapped into focus. "T'kamen! That's who he's taken! What was her name – M'ric's friend – Sarenya."

T'kamen felt himself go cold, as if a bucket of ice had been poured over him. Epherineth, occupied as he was, sensed the change, and was there for him. *Her lizards*, T'kamen said weakly. *Find out....*

They're with Trebruth. He's been trying to make himself heard. There was a note of guilt in the bronze's voice. *His rider is being held. He tried to leave the dining hall.*

I need him here now.

Epherineth paused. *He's coming.*

Call F'halig and T'rello, too. The Weyrleader hesitated over L'stev for a moment, then discounted him; the weyrings' need was greater.

M'ric arrived first. He must have come from the dining cavern at a dead run, although he wasn't out of breath, but he looked dishevelled, as if he had been involved in a struggle. With a pang of something that might have been jealousy, T'kamen recognised the bronze fire-lizard clinging to M'ric's left shoulder, counterpart to the queen on his right. "Flame it, T'kamen! Trebruth's been trying to get your bronze's attention for the last quarter of an hour!"

"So have half the dragons in the Weyr." It was easier to focus on his dislike of the Peninsula brown rider than on C'los' still corpse. "What happened?"

"Saren's been taken. They wouldn't let me out of the dining hall." M'ric was bristling with fury.

Scepticism crept through into T'kamen's tone. "And she sent her lizard to you?"

M'ric's dark eyes flashed. "Do you think I'd make this up?"

T'kamen ignored the brown rider's demand and looked at the queen fire-lizard. He felt his hands curl into fists. "Is she still in the Weyr?"

"I don't think so. They can go to her, but Trebruth thinks she's been blindfolded. She doesn't know where she is."

"Then find out," T'kamen snapped. "You're the one with the lizards."

The brown rider's expression hardened, but he lifted Tarnish off his shoulder, holding the agitated fire-lizard's head still as he spoke through his dragon. T'kamen stared at M'ric, given an immediate focus for his anger. The Peninsula man was taller than he by a couple of inches, and broader in the shoulders, but T'kamen was younger by six or eight Turns, and when he was angry size and strength didn't matter.

"Dear Faranth, T'kamen – *this* is how you run your Weyr?"

T'kamen turned on his heel. H'pold had stepped into the infirmary, and in the half-light the expression on his face was a sneer. Behind him, his Weyrwoman, Rallai, looked pale and drawn. "How did you get out of the dining cavern?"

"Your riders might not understand the meaning of discipline, but their dragons still know how to obey a queen," the Peninsula Weyrleader replied, with contempt. He raked the scene with a glance, his eyes lingering briefly on Sejanth, and at more length on the still, bloody form of the green rider. "What's happened here?"

"I don't have time for this," said T'kamen, and to his surprise, at the same moment, Sh'zon growled, "None of your mind."

H'pold's eyes narrowed as he looked at the big blonde Wingleader, and T'kamen could hardly fail to notice the enmity that sparked when the two riders locked glares. "I see you're in the thick of this, rider."

Sh'zon took a step towards him. "You're not welcome here, *rider*."

H'pold snorted with derision, but he didn't look away from Kawanth's rider as he addressed T'kamen. "If it's a killer you're after, you need look no further. Sh'zon has the form."

"That's a lie!" Sh'zon snarled.

"You'd be an expert in lies!" H'pold taunted the bigger bronze rider. "Don't think you'll get away with what you've done!"

"I haven't done anything!"

"Liar! Oath-breaker!"

"You filthy snake!"

"Sh'zon, don't!"

Rallai's plea went unheard: Sh'zon rushed the Peninsula Weyrleader. H'pold barely sidestepped in time to evade the brunt of the bigger rider's charge, taking a glancing buffet that sent him reeling. Outside, dragons roared in protest. Before he knew what he was doing, T'kamen had seized the collar of Sh'zon's coat and was dragging him off H'pold. He shoved the blonde rider away and then stepped between the two. "Not here, shard it! Not now!"

Blood trickled from H'pold's nose. He wiped his face with the back of one hand, looked at the smear of crimson, and bared his teeth in a grimace of triumph. "See, T'kamen? What kind of a man attacks another dragonrider?"

"Dragonrider?" Sh'zon shouted in contempt.

"Shut up, both of you!" T'kamen was almost beyond anger. He raked both Peninsula men with a glare that made H'pold shrink back a little, and Sh'zon pale. "This is my Weyr! If you want to fight, you'll sharding well do it somewhere else!"

Silence reigned for a moment. Even Sejanth's harsh breathing seemed to have quietened. Isnan, crouching over C'los' body, didn't move. M'ric's eyes were still distant with the effort of communicating with dragon and fire-lizards. Rallai, standing behind H'pold, was looking at Sh'zon with hopeless eyes.

“Sh’zon,” T’kamen snapped.

“I never killed anyone, and I never broke no oaths,” the big rider insisted.

“Liar,” H’pold spat.

“You...!”

“Be silent!” T’kamen glared at H’pold. “You! What are you talking about?”

“Why do you think I wanted him out of my Weyr?” H’pold blotted the blood that was still flowing from his nose on the sleeve of his expensive tunic. “All of his family are tried and convicted murderers! Wiped out a neighbouring cothold over a land dispute. All of them, right down to the babes! You must have heard about it!”

“That’s not —“ Sh’zon cut himself off, evidently making an effort to control his temper, but his eyes were dreadful.

It was too much for T’kamen. The very last thing he needed was the continuation of what was obviously a long and bitter feud when he had a definite murderer at large at Madellon. It struck him suddenly, with a sense of horror, that unlike C’los and K’ston, the dragons wouldn’t know if anything had happened to Sarenya. “Weyrwoman, control your Weyrleader,” he snapped at Rallai, and then to Sh’zon, “Help the Master Healer. I’ll deal with this later. M’ric, report!”

The fire-lizards had vanished, but M’ric’s expression was still intent, his eyes fixed on some distant point. “They’ve left the Weyr,” he said, after a pause. “Somewhere to the north.”

“On foot?”

“Runnerbeast. Saren keeps telling Tarnish to keep his distance.”

“Is she hurt?” T’kamen dreaded the answer. *Epherineth, can you talk to her?*

She’s not my rider, T’kamen.

“Tarnish isn’t sure. He thinks she’s more afraid than hurt. He thinks.” M’ric’s voice shook with scarcely concealed emotion.

T’kamen hesitated, then asked, “Can your dragon reach her?”

“Only through her bronze.”

“Then tell her help’s coming. Tell her I’m coming.”

T’rello raced into the infirmary, followed shortly by a puffing F’halig. “Weyrleader!” The Wingsecond’s youth was painfully evident as he laid eyes on C’los, but he gulped and continued. “We got here as soon as we could. C’mine’s...oh, Faranth, C’mine’s in a state.”

“He can wait,” T’kamen said, and hated himself. “Our killer’s Katel. He’s taken journeyman Sarenya as a hostage and headed north out of the Weyr on runnerback.”

“North, T’kamen?” F’halig asked. “Then they could be anywhere in the passes and we won’t be able to find them.”

“We’ll find them,” the Weyrleader grated. “We’ll fly a standard search pattern, Epherineth, Santinoth, and Valth. You can....”

“Weyrleader, you’ll cover more ground more quickly with me and Kawanth in the air,” said Sh’zon.

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DRAGONCHOISE II - DRAGONCHOSEN

T'kamen hesitated over the decision for a split-second, then nodded. "Then...."

"And Trebruth and me," said M'ric.

"No." The negative was out before T'kamen could stop it. "You stay here, keep in contact with the fire-lizards."

"I can do that better from the air," the brown rider said obstinately.

"I said no!"

"T'kamen, take him." It was Rallai. The Peninsula Weyrwoman stepped forwards. "M'ric's a rescue rider, didn't you know?"

H'pold looked up from his bloody nose. "We were sorry to lose him," he admitted grudgingly. "Never had a quarrel with him."

T'kamen was almost disappointed. He'd wanted M'ric to be involved in the same controversy as Sh'zon. It would have given him a rational reason to dislike the brown rider. "All right. No more wasting time. They've already had half an hour to lose themselves in that terrain. Standard pattern, and keep the dragons talking to each other."

He couldn't bear to stand around any longer: not to speak to Isnan, not to get rid of H'pold, not even to look at C'los' body again. T'kamen needed to act. Outside, the three bronze and two brown dragons were landing in a broad semi-circle. Their orange-flecked eyes glowed, and moonlight almost as bright as day from the twin satellites shone on their hides. Epherineth lowered his head to T'kamen without saying a word. He wore no harness, but T'kamen didn't remember having any trouble mounting by the time he had braced himself between the bronze neck ridges. His black and silver dress tunic did little to keep out the chill breeze, but T'kamen barely felt it, and there was no time to spare on finding a jacket. Of the others, Sh'zon was wearing his omnipresent long coat, but T'rello and F'halig wore only their best tunics, and M'ric was in shirt-sleeves. Trebruth, though, had his own riding harness; it took his rider a matter of moments to rig the fighting straps, but T'kamen resented the delay anyway.

Let's go, he told Epherineth when all were mounted, trusting to the bronze to pass the command on, and not bothering to make the arm signal.

The five dragons sprang almost in the same instant, but T'kamen couldn't help noticing that Trebruth, all the colour leached from his dark hide by the brilliant white moonlight, was first aloft. The ostentation chafed nerves already strung taut, and T'kamen bared his teeth. He smacked Epherineth's neck, and took some satisfaction from the contrast in size once the bronze had reached the same altitude. Epherineth's wingspan was twice that of M'ric's dragon. Trebruth was scarcely the size of a large green. In the company of four much bigger dragons, he was ridiculous.

No dragon is ridiculous, Epherineth said sharply, glancing back over his shoulder with a baleful amber eye. *Trebruth and his rider are helping. Belittling them achieves nothing.*

The reprimand stung T'kamen, and he clenched a fist on his thigh. *North, Epherineth,* he said shortly. *Be watchful. They can't have gone far.*

Taking point, the bronze veered north. His wings beat a steady course through the night sky, and T'kamen leaned closer against his neck, turning his head aside and blinking his watering eyes. Flying goggles would have helped, but even against the brightly moon-washed landscape, their quarry would be difficult to see. A dragon's eyes were better equipped for the distance, so T'kamen shared the use of Epherineth's sight. The ground raced by below, but landmarks stood out more clearly through the bronze's sharp eyes. They soon left the Weyr's plateau, with its roughly fenced pastures and herds of grazing beasts, behind. Crisscrossing trails snaked north-south on the slopes, pale against the darker rock, curving to bypass sheer outcrops in the mountainous terrain. Scrubby grass and gravel paths gave way to barren rock and dust tracks, and always the ground sloped away, dropping gently in some places, sharply in others. It was perilous terrain for low-flying, but more perilous still on foot for anyone unaccustomed to the switchbacks and scarp slopes, and near lethal in the dark. T'kamen thanked Faranth for the strong light of Belior and Timor, but as they skimmed just above the treacherous passes he steeled himself for the sight of fallen runnerbeasts.

Trebruth says this is as far as they could have come, Epherineth reported. Then, as if anticipating T'kamen's opposition, he added, *Valth agrees. We'll expand the search east and west.*

Against the night sky, T'kamen saw the dark forms of Valth and Santinoth peel off in one direction, Kawanth and Trebruth in the other. *Go west*, he told Epherineth.

The bronze obeyed. One of the others called to him softly, and he arrayed himself with them in a broad triangular formation designed to cover the maximum ground.

The lizards say we're getting close. There was an edge of excitement in Epherineth's voice.

T'kamen renewed his scrutiny of the ground, ignoring the tears being dashed from his eyes and the numbness that had set into his face from the icy wind. *Can you reach Saren?*

No. I'm sorry.

Shard it, Epherineth!

The bronze descended abruptly, and T'kamen felt his ears pop with the change of pressure. *Sorry*, Epherineth apologised. *Have to keep up.*

But T'kamen was less concerned about the rapid dive than he was with the reason for it. North-west of the Weyr, the land that had surged up in some impossible distant past to form the range of mountains and ancient volcanoes in which dragonriders had founded Madellon was as dramatic as in any part of Pern. To the south and east the lofty peaks descended gradually into smaller mounts and then rolling foothills, but the western face of the range was all cliffs and ravines. If the fire-lizards were correct, it was into this most hazardous of regions that Katel had taken Sarenya. Gliding south, and with his eyes adjusting now to the darkness, T'kamen saw the looming form of Madellon ahead, crouching atop its plateau like a watchdragon, and understood the route Katel had chosen. On runnerback the gallop across the high pastures would have taken mere minutes, but once amongst the scree slopes and vertical drops of that ghastly face of the

mountains, only someone with knowledge of the scanty trails trodden faintly by too few feet would have a chance of survival. And if Katel's ultimate route was the one T'kamen feared, then neither runner nor dragon could pass, and on foot a hundred men could take a Turn to explore every gully, every crevice of the rock, and still never find them.

Trebruth roared, his voice darker and deeper than T'kamen would have expected from such a small beast, and Epherineth swung his head around. *There.*

T'kamen grasped the forward neck ridge with one hand to secure himself as Epherineth lost altitude rapidly. Only a dragon could have discerned the dun-coloured runnerbeast from the surrounding rock in no more than moonlight. But even as Epherineth came in to land, Trebruth and Kawanth following suit, T'kamen could see that the runner was wandering riderless.

He slid from Epherineth's neck as soon as the bronze was down. The runnerbeast didn't seem unduly concerned by the presence of the dragons, and did not so much as sidle away as T'kamen approached. The Weyrleader took hold of its bridle and felt for the ear tattoo that confirmed his suspicion: this was one of Madellon's phlegmatic beasts: surefooted, stoutly built, and accustomed to the perils of the mountain trails.

"They're on foot?" Sh'zon asked, striding near, a looming black-cloaked form in the shadow of rocky spires.

T'kamen nodded curtly. "Down there."

The two Peninsula riders looked in the direction he indicated. Sh'zon swore; M'ric said nothing, but T'kamen understood both reactions. He had flown over here, at a cautious altitude, many times in the last dozen Turns. He knew from the air the terrain that was passable only on foot, and then barely.

Millennia ago, a stream had worn the narrowest of paths down through the layered rock. The water had long since dried up, but the gap remained, slicing almost vertically through the cliff for dragonlengths before levelling out into the narrow chasm that a larger river had carved through the landscape.

That chasm was infamous. It was one of the most striking gorges of its kind in Madellon territory, a jagged rip in the fabric of the lands that fronted the Weyr. Weyrlings learned it as a between reference because the bluer-than-blue of the river that still flowed from an underground source along its length, and the banded colours of rock in the sheer cliffs, from a crimson that was nearly black through rusty orange to tawny amber and finally pale gold, were not duplicated anywhere else on Pern. But dragonriders also knew the canyon for the deathtrap it was. Decades before even T'kamen's time, a weyring pair, misjudging the span of the gorge, had flown too low. Fouling his wingtips on the unforgiving cliffs, the young blue had lost control and crashed to a dreadful death on the savage rocks the lined the bottom of the canyon. The account L'stev had related to every weyring classes since was sufficiently graphic that no one had ever taken a chance over the landmark again. But T'kamen remembered discussing it with the veteran brown rider when they had been assigned a sweep over the region some Turns back. "A green could

probably make it," he said aloud, remembering what L'stev had said. "But a green has more sense."

Sh'zon and M'ric looked at him. Then the brown rider turned and walked back towards his dragon.

"Brown rider!"

"Your bronze is too big, Weyrleader." There was no sneer in M'ric's voice, merely a matter-of-factness that was almost chilling.

"Shard it, M'ric!" T'kamen seized the older rider's shoulder, pulling him around to face him. "It's dark and you don't know how dangerous this canyon is! Scorch it, man, I don't like you, but I don't want to lose another dragon tonight!"

"This is what Trebruth does, T'kamen." He shrugged away T'kamen's hand without bravado. "This is what we do."

"It's suicide!"

"Weyrleader." Sh'zon approached, leading the runnerbeast, and extended his hand. The darkness on it could only be blood.

T'kamen touched the runner's neck and felt stickiness matting its mane. There was no way to tell whose blood it was.

"Trust him," Sh'zon urged. "Trebruth knows what he's about."

The moments seemed to stretch out into infinity as T'kamen struggled with the conflicting factors: his dislike of the brown rider, his fear for Sarenya, the danger of what M'ric was proposing.

In the end it was the anger that had barely been dulled by the bitter cold that made the decision for him. He wouldn't let Katel escape. "All right," he said at last. "But I'm coming with you."

M'ric froze for an instant, as if he were about to object. Then he nodded. "You wearing a belt?"

"I don't need harness," T'kamen said stubbornly.

"You will." The brown rider didn't even use his dragon's leg up to mount, vaulting up by main strength alone, but he secured his riding straps with extreme care. "Come on up."

Bestriding another dragon's neck after so many long Turns as Epherineth's rider felt unnatural. Trebruth's much smaller proportions and darker hide were the least of the differences; most unnerving was the absence of rapport with the dragon beneath him. T'kamen was always in tune with everything Epherineth did. Feeling Trebruth's unpredictable shifts and movements was discomfiting. He sensed his bronze's anxiety, and rapidly reassured him. *I'd rather it were you.*

I know. The gorge is dangerous. I'm telling Trebruth what we know of it.

T'kamen might have protested at the heavy safety strap M'ric wrapped around his waist had he not been concentrating on his own dragon. It seemed excessive.

Without warning, Trebruth surged skywards with a powerful vertical leap. T'kamen's head snapped back, and he swore viciously. It was of little consolation to him that M'ric, at least, had not

slammed back. T'kamen hated being crammed onto another dragon's neck, hated the indignity of the extra safety strap securing him in place. He was blind and helpless, no more than a passenger, but he couldn't complain. He had wanted to come.

But Trebruth was barely two wingbeats airborne when he folded his wings back, darted forwards, and plunged over the edge of the cliff in an impossibly tight arc. Thrown back against the brown's aft neckridge, T'kamen found himself looking directly at the rock-strewn bottom of the gorge. Trebruth had launched himself into a headlong dive, his body stretched taut at right angles to the ground that was rushing up to meet him with terrifying speed. T'kamen grabbed for Epherineth, his pride forgotten in the ghastly sight of the fang-like rocks that would rend the brown dragon and both his riders to shreds on impact.

T'kamen would never know how Trebruth managed to pull out of that dive. The brown barely extended his wings - mindful, perhaps, of the proximity of the rock walls flashing by threateningly on either side - then folded them again to skim less than half a dragonlength above the bottom of the ravine. T'kamen was suddenly grateful for his limited human vision. He didn't want to see how closely M'ric's dragon was judging his flight.

Then he recalled the topology of the ravine, how it bent abruptly west, and again he groped desperately for Epherineth's mind. *Warn him!*

It was hard to know if Trebruth reacted in response to Epherineth or simply to his own perceptions. The brown banked sharply left, and T'kamen felt the safety strap pull tight. Some instinct made him turn his head to the right, and although it was disconcerting to see the sky, the massive shapes of two dragons that could only be Epherineth and Kawanth, hovering higher, calmed him.

In brilliant moonlight Trebruth levelled off, but no sooner had he done so than twin streaks of bronze and gold flashed past T'kamen's ear. He didn't need a translation for the lizards' screams, just as he didn't need M'ric to turn and bellow, "Get ready!" as Trebruth checked his forward momentum, dipping so that his outstretched hind paws almost grazed the ground. He felt the impact through the brown's lithe body, and then Trebruth skidded to a landing amidst a massive cloud of dust, his talons gouging furrows into the hard ground as he fought to halt his slide before he reached the sheer river bank.

T'kamen ripped off the flying strap and scrambled off Trebruth's neck. Dust obscured everything, but the moons seemed to blaze down with renewed brilliance, and through the haze he could see what Trebruth had struck; two figures, struggling to rise.

He approached, but before he was close enough to identify either, he heard a choking sound, and then a hoarse voice warned, "Come any nearer and I'll kill her."

As the dust thinned, the sincerity of the threat became apparent. The renegade Healer had something pulled tight around Sarenya's neck. Saren was scratching feebly at the noose that was cutting off her breath, but when T'kamen took an instinctive half step forward, Katel just hauled the stricture tighter. "I said back off!"



M'ric erupted from the dust cloud at a sprint. Startled, Katel fumbled for his knife. But the brown rider's rush was a feint; tearing Katel's end of the noose from the murderer's hand, he grabbed Sarenya around the waist, yanking her away from her captor and pulling her to the ground, to safety.

With screams of fury, Agusta and Tarnish descended on Katel, talons flashing. The Healer's fist was an ineffectual defence against their attack, but then his hand closed around his knife. His first slash elicited a mortal scream from one of the lizards - T'kamen couldn't tell which - but both broke off their attack. Katel clutched at the scratches on his face, but the knife-blade in his other hand, already stained with blood, now dripped green ichor as well.

"Put it down," T'kamen commanded.

Katel should have been afraid. He was a Healer by training, and a cowardly killer, choosing only the unaware or the unarmed. But the gaze that fell upon T'kamen burned in the silvery moonlight, and Katel stepped forwards with a smile or a snarl on his lips. "Make me."

"What do you think you can achieve, Katel? There's nothing you can do."

"Isn't there? How about I kill you, Weyrleader. Dragonriders bleed just like other men." He raised the blade as if it were a trophy.

T'kamen saw the dark stain of blood, C'los' blood, and the black fury began to rise in him. "Put the knife down and you get to live a while," he rasped.

"A while?" Katel mocked. "Is that the best you can offer?"

"You can't fight two of us and a dragon!"

"I've killed two of you and a dragon," Katel jeered. "And you have more to lose than me."

For a moment T'kamen couldn't see past his own rage. "I can still take your life!"

"Come and get it!"

As Katel moved forwards to engage, T'kamen reached for his own knife, but his hand closed on empty air. He swore when he saw that the sheath on his belt was empty. Katel's eyes were deadly, and his teeth were bare in a grin; he had already noticed the missing blade.

Then C'los' killer was on him. T'kamen seized his wrist with both hands, fighting to keep the knife away. Katel's left hand went for his throat. The bronze rider brought his knee up, missing his intended target, but catching Katel in the gut. He folded, but as he toppled he dragged T'kamen with him. Rider and killer fell to the stony ground, still grappling for control of the knife. T'kamen dug his fingers into the tendons of Katel's wrist, trying to force his hand open, but Katel gouged at the Weyrleader's eyes with stiffened fingertips, and T'kamen flinched away with a cry.

Over and over they rolled, first one, then the other gaining the upper hand, but the blade was still clutched tight in Katel's fist, as if welded to it. He was older than T'kamen and not so physically fit, but there was a resilience to his build that the Weyrleader found hard to match. The visceral reserves of adrenaline that had been sustaining T'kamen through the last few difficult months could only go so far. And the knife made him afraid, not just for his own life, but for Epherineth's.

His groping fingers closed on a rock, and T'kamen smashed it into Katel's hand. The murderer howled in pain, and the blade flew from his suddenly limp and bloody grasp. The Weyrleader grabbed for it, but the knife was out of the range of his outstretched arm. Katel slithered away while he was overextended. T'kamen scrambled hastily to his feet.

They faced each other across a ten foot gap, the abrupt drop to the turbulent waters of the river less than half that distance to T'kamen's left. Trebruth and M'ric and Sarenya were somewhere behind T'kamen; he knew he wouldn't be able to rely on them, even if he'd wanted their help. He and Katel were both breathing hard, both throwing covert glances at the knife that lay in the dust between them. Katel made as if to lunge for it; T'kamen moved to block. Both fell back. Katel, T'kamen guessed, was more cautious now that the knife was out of play; for himself, he doubted his own stamina. "Why'd you do it, Katel?" he asked, playing for time to get his breath back. "Why'd you kill E'rom?"

"For Kaston," Katel replied, as if there could be no more obvious answer. "For his sake."

It was the last answer T'kamen could have expected, so improbable, so illogical, and yet spoken as if its rationale was self-evident. "What?"

Katel shook his head slowly. "Because he's my brother, and I love him."

"You killed his *dragon*!"

"It was for his own good!" Katel's eyes glittered with anger, with hatred. "It was the dragon that changed him – turned him. I should have realised it sooner. E'rom needn't have died."

"Died?" T'kamen demanded, incredulous. "You killed him!"

"Hardly! He'd been drugging himself for months. He was bound to have made a mistake with it sooner or later. And when I saw how he was with Kasto – when I realised that he was still as misguided as I remembered – it made it so easy to plan how to get rid of him."

T'kamen felt nauseated by the absence of anything approaching remorse in the Healer's voice. "The fellis didn't work," he grated.

Irritation crossed Katel's face briefly. "I underestimated the tolerance he'd built up," he admitted grudgingly. "I switched the fellisbane, you see. Without that, the straight fellis Kasto prepared should have stopped E'rom's heart. Oh, it put him on the ground fast enough, but I knew Sigith hadn't gone *between*. It would have been so much simpler if he'd just died then."

T'kamen swallowed back the bile in his throat. "K'ston thought he overdosed his own weyrmate. That he was responsible. You let your brother believe he'd killed the man he loved."

"Loved?" Katel made a disgusted sound. "It stopped him asking questions. And answering them. I didn't think there'd be much speculation about how a drunk had fallen from his weyr ledge."

"You know he didn't fall," T'kamen snarled.

Katel laughed shortly. "He did, once I let go of him. But by that point I'd already cleared up the trail. The dragons were screaming as I left; the laundry women never saw me. That should have been the end of it. I knew questions were being asked; Kasto said that he'd been

interviewed, but it hardly seemed as if the matter was being given the attention of anyone senior. And then –“ Katel’s lip curled, as if the very thought revolted him, “- I found that he’d taken up with the very *green* rider who’d been sniffing around asking about E’rom.”

T’kamen didn’t trust himself to speak; his hands were curled so tightly into fists that his fingernails were digging into his palms. The strength of fury was welling up in him again, but he had to listen as Katel went on.

“It became clear that I’d been trying to treat the symptoms, not the cause. E’rom wasn’t the reason for the way Kasto was; he was a result of it. It finally dawned on me that *Bronth* was the root of it. *Bronth* was the corrupting influence. I could have disposed of C’los – I had the opportunity – but it wouldn’t have cured Kasto. It was his filthy dragon that had made him sick. But I couldn’t have contrived a more helpful set of circumstances than those you provided for me tonight, Weyrleader. Did you know that K’ston hadn’t been home to Jessaf in nearly thirty Turns? Did you know *why*? Do you think our parents would have welcomed him back there ever again after the first time he visited them with Bronth?”

“Because he was a blue rider?” T’kamen demanded.

“Because he was disgusting! And he flaunted it, taking his *friends* with him, parading how the Weyr had changed him! Oh, it had changed him, all right. And I’m only glad that I didn’t Impress, and went back home before the Weyr got to *me*, in time to be sure that I’d never become like him.”

A cold shudder went down T’kamen’s spine; a memory, more than fifteen Turns old, of hearing how Cairmine had been thrashed by one of his peers over the summer, his body bruised by fists, his ribs cracked with kicks. A memory of finding out who had done it, and confronting him, and demanding to know why, and hearing, “To beat it out of him, before it’s too late.” Taskamen had done some beating of his own that winter, before the Search dragons had come to Kellad, but he had never forgotten the conviction in Ogharn’s voice when he had explained that he had issued the pounding to Cairmine *for his own good*. And for an instant, just an instant, T’kamen pitied the young Katel, for what he must have suffered at his parents’ hands to be sure that he would never become like his older blue rider brother.

“I’d been racking my brains, trying to think of a way to get rid of the dragon,” Katel went on. “But it all came together so beautifully tonight. Them coming back from Jessaf in such a state – Vhion insisting that Bronth stay in the infirmary overnight to recover – and, oh, best of all, the fellis delivery. If I hadn’t known from sitting in with the candidates that fellis is toxic to dragons, if I hadn’t known that dragons can’t distinguish between tastes, I wouldn’t even have considered it. I only had to wait until Bronth was asleep, and then fill his trough. I didn’t know how much it would take.”

“You must have known that we’d trace it back to you eventually,” T’kamen said hoarsely.

Katel shrugged. His apparent indifference was disconcerting. “So you found me. It doesn’t matter anymore. I told you, I did it for Kasto. He’ll be all right now.”



“He won’t be all right,” T’kamen said, hearing his own voice tremble with fury. “You killed his dragon.”

“He’ll get over it.”

With an enormous effort, T’kamen controlled himself long enough to ask, “Then why did you kill C’los?”

Katel’s eyes were pitiless, and his smile was like poison. “Because he irritated me.”

Wrath flooded through T’kamen in a boiling tide, and he charged Katel with an incoherent roar. Katel threw himself aside, rolled, and came up with the knife in his hand again. T’kamen barely recovered his balance in time to sway back from a vicious lateral slash, and then the flurry of cuts that followed. A thin streak of pain across his collarbone was lost in the blossoming agony of a slash that parted fabric, skin, and flesh over his ribs, and as scalding blood flowed down his side T’kamen heard and felt Epherineth’s scream of outrage.

“T’kamen! Catch!”

M’ric’s shout was all the warning T’kamen had for the dark shape spinning towards him. Somehow he twisted and seized it from the air. His fingers closed on the familiar shape of a belt knife. The Weyrleader yanked it from its sheath. The leather-wrapped hilt nestled into his hand as if it belonged there; the blade was burnished not with the blood of man and dragonkin, but with a tawny sheen of oil on an edge freshly honed. T’kamen turned Katel’s next slice and punched the Healer left-handed in the sternum, driving the breath from him. He aimed a kick at his ankle and then hooked the other leg out from under him, but Katel had a fistful of his tunic. Weyrleader and Healer hit the ground again, each with a knife this time, each grappling to disarm the other. Katel scooped up gravel, flinging it in T’kamen’s face, but the Weyrleader just shook his head. He seized Katel’s knife hand and pounded it against the ground until he let go, then set M’ric’s blade against the killer’s throat, and everything stilled.

Katel’s breath was barely harsher in his chest than T’kamen’s. The Weyrleader crouched over the man who had murdered C’los with a snarl more animal than human hurting his face, and he recognised the fear that had dawned in the Healer’s eyes. “One reason,” he croaked. “One reason why I shouldn’t cut your murdering throat.”

Katel gargled in panic as the knife pressed too hard. “You’re the Weyrleader,” he choked. “Can’t...like...this....”

He has a point, some small, sane corner of T’kamen’s mind mused.

He’s unarmed, after all.

Unarmed.

He threw the knife away. Katel went limp with relief.

Then, gently, T’kamen wrapped his hands around the killer’s throat. Katel’s eyes bulged, first in shock, and then in panic, but T’kamen couldn’t see his face. He could only think of C’los, dead on the floor; C’los, lying in a pool of his own blood; C’los, gone forever. The anger and

frustration of the last hundred days and more were behind him: he had moved beyond them, into an absolute and emotionless calm.

T'kamen!

The voice was distant, faint. It made T'kamen curious, but little more. He was still thinking about C'los, and how he would miss him.

You have to stop!

It was insistent, even desperate. T'kamen wondered where it was coming from. There was only him and Katel, and Katel was in no position to be speaking.

T'kamen! Stop! Now!

And suddenly the calm evaporated as Epherineth's mind ripped T'kamen back to reality. He released his strangling grip on Katel's throat, and the killer gulped raggedly at the air. His face was grotesquely contorted, the colour sapped from it. The red haze faded from T'kamen's eyes. He could feel Epherineth again: confused, afraid, relieved. He pushed himself to his feet, suddenly exhausted. The gouge in his side throbbed steadily. He raised his eyes to the sky, feeling the sweat cool to ice on his face.

M'ric and Sarenya approached. Saren's dress was torn and dusty; there was blood on her hands, and a cruel welt encircled her throat. She was leaning heavily on M'ric. T'kamen looked away, heartsick.

"Kamen!"

At Sarenya's cry, he spun to see Katel charge him at a staggering crouch. T'kamen threw himself aside, but Katel's momentum was implacable, and the bank was close.

As the Healer went over the brink, he lunged for purchase. Impossibly, one bloody hand caught in a crevice of the rock; his other arm flailed, and he hooked his elbow up over the edge, hugging the sheer stone close. But that last desperate grab seemed to have marked the limit of his strength, and Katel hung there, his feet scrabbling frantically for a hold.

T'kamen looked down at the man hanging over the precipitous bank, and Katel raised his head. There was no remorse in his eyes; only the last vestiges of his grim determination to preserve his own skin. It would have been easy for T'kamen to reach down and haul the murderous Healer to safety and justice.

He didn't.

Katel's grip, slick with blood, slipped. He fumbled for a hold, tearing his hands on the rock face, and then he fell.

It seemed to take a long time. T'kamen watched as Katel plunged impossibly slowly towards the foaming surface of the rapids. He saw the last hope of survival wiped from the killer's face, and then Katel hit the water. An arm resurfaced briefly, terribly briefly, and then it was swept away.

The Weyrleader picked himself up. He stood looking at the patch of water where Katel had disappeared, not moving, resisting being moved, until Epherineth called him back.

I didn't kill him, Epherineth.

I know.

But I wanted to.

Epherineth's voice was filled with a terrible compassion. *I know.*