



III

A Dragon Of Night-Dark Sea



Another steer broke loose from the herd, and Sarenya leaned back in the saddle of her runner, watching to see how her apprentices dealt with it. Tarnish chirped from his perch on her shoulder, asking permission to round up the errant herdbeast. The journeyman Beastcrafter stroked the fire-lizard's chin, but held him back. "Let's see how they manage first." The apprentices didn't like the menial herders' work, but it did teach them respect for the animals they were learning

to treat.

One of Madellon's regular herdsmen, a wiry, weathered little man who sat his runnerbeast as if born in the saddle, grinned at Sarenya as the apprentice lads chased down the loose bullock. "Said ah couldn't see 'em gettin' t'Weyr afore middy, an' a sorry sight they surely are!"

Sarenya edged her mount slightly closer to keep the main herd in line, observing that one of the older lads had the right idea, flanking the stray. A shame that the other four were hampering his efforts. Charging the beast from the inside, they were driving it farther from the herd. "It's not such a warm day that they'll run themselves to skin and bone. The beasts, I mean, not the lads."

The weather had certainly cooled since the scorching summer months, although too late for many farmers across Madellon's territory. Sarenya, like the other journeymen, read the reports that came in from the Farm and Beastcrafthalls, and projections were not good. Crops had failed under the relentless sun, and the drought had sickened too many animals. Even these herdbeast showed the signs of summer exhaustion in dull hides and visible ribs. They would make tough eating. It was just as well that most of them would end up as dragons' dinners.

Finally relenting, Sarenya sent her eager fire-lizard out to goad the rogue bullock back into the herd with a stinging swipe of sharp little claws. Panting and blowing, the apprentices rolled their eyes in relief before slogging back into position around the herd. Their feebly raised staves were enough to keep the demoralised beasts in check.

Sarenya dismissed Tarnish and kicked her runner on up the well-trodden thoroughfare that led to the Weyr. The old gelding was a stubborn, lazy creature, indifferent to almost everything – fire-lizards, dragons, and the commands of whoever was on its back – but it knew its stall was back in the Weyr, and kept to a brisk pace up the track. The yellow-green light of glows bathed the ground entrance to the Bowl in an eerie light that often spooked the animals, and the claustrophobic tunnel even made Sarenya a little uncomfortable, but she would be as glad to get home as her mount. Supervising these drives every sevenday was a thankless task, but the other two Beastcraft journeyman lacked Sarenya's advantage of fire-lizards. She supposed she should be glad that there were food animals enough to warrant the frequent activity, even if most of them were the worn-out dregs of Kellad Hold's herds.

“Beasts coming through!” she called down the passage, as the glow light picked out the dull gleam of the bronze gate that prevented intruders from entering the Weyr unnoticed. A cheerful shout, the words distorted by the narrow tunnel, came back, accompanied by the rattle of chains and groan of windlasses as the gatekeepers raised the grille.

The gelding picked up its pace at the familiar sound, making for the natural light that showed dimly at the end of the passageway. The clatter of many cloven hooves on worn rock reverberated from the outside, and Sarenya let her runnerbeast trot on through the open gate, waving her thanks to the man on duty there.

The Bowl of Madellon Weyr opened up before them, vast and impressive, but even after a mere six months, Sarenya took it for granted. There was only so much wonder one could feel, even for the towering walls of an ancient crater that cast such long, impenetrable shadows, the dark mouths of individual caves that had been enlarged from the rock over half a century, the blue, green and yellow of the water, grass and sand that carpeted the floor. Only the dragons still had the power to command Sarenya’s awe. No amount of familiarity – with C’mine’s shameless, brave Darshanth, whom Sarenya loved best of all, with C’los’ gentle Indioth, with T’kamen’s Epherineth, paramount among bronzes – could dull the reverence she felt for dragonkind, or her regret at being denied the bond her friends enjoyed. At nearly twenty-seven, Sarenya was too old for the clutch that was hardening on the Sands. Her chance had been and gone.

The other Beastcrafters of Madellon had moved the fences, shifting posts and rails to guide the influx of herdbeast directly into their pens. Sarenya nodded a greeting to Tebis and Jarrisam, her opposite numbers, and guided her runner towards the gap they had left in the fence.

“Thought you weren’t going to make it,” Jarrisam joshed her from the back of his own mount.

“Nearly didn’t,” Sarenya replied succinctly. “But after this morning’s exertions, the lads’ll be begging for hatchery duties.”

The swarthy journeyman made a face at the mention of the hated assignment. “Master Arrense said they can hose down and take the afternoon off. You, too.”

Sarenya nodded, relieved. “I’ll stable this old campaigner first.”

“Coming to the poker with the other journeymen tomorrow night, Saren?” Tebis asked. “We need your lucky touch.”

“I wouldn’t miss it, Teb.” Then, at the other crafter’s grin, Sarenya added, “But you can keep your lucky touch to yourself.”

Jarrisam snorted with amusement, and Tebis looked good-naturedly embarrassed. Sarenya took her leave of them, heeling her runner on as the first of the herdbeast began to stream through the tunnel into the Bowl, shaking their heads in the sunlight.

The gelding knew its stall, and stood placidly, tugging mouthfuls of hay from the net, as Sarenya stripped its tack and brushed the dust from its coat. Normally there would have been a lad here to take the animal. Sarenya remembered drawing stable duties from her own time as a

candidate at the Weyr. She wondered if she could coax L'stev into assigning the job to one of his new batch.

Sarenya left the stables, skirting around the beast enclosures on her way back to the Beastcrafters' cot. The four apprentices who had been led such a merry chase by the more spirited creatures were straggling back to their dorm, black with trail dust. Sarenya felt almost as filthy, for all that she'd been on runnerback. Even the best of the trails that wound up through the passes north of Madellon, connecting the lowlands to the Weyr itself, were hard going.

She released the locking mechanism on her door – Tebis, despite his tendency to meaningful winks and double entendres, had warned her early on that she couldn't trust the apprentices with an unlocked door – and stepped inside her room. The chamber was simply furnished: the bed, clothes chest, desk, and chair took up most of the space, but the curtains at both small windows matched the cheerful blue-and-yellow bedspread, and a rug that could have been woven to go with both covered the bare plank floor. Sarenya had known worse accommodation even as a journeyman, and while small, the room had everything she needed. Certainly she spent little enough time here, between work and her various off-duty activities, that the size of the space didn't matter. She eased off her riding boots, leaving them by the door for polishing later, and padded through the second door and down the corridor in her socks. Sarenya paused by the linen cupboard to find a clean towel, and went on into the bathing room.

It only occurred to her after her bath, as she was wrapping the towel around herself in preparation for a quick dash back to her room, that her fire-lizards had made themselves scarce. She had released Tarnish to amuse himself, it was true, and Sleek, the handsome dark blue, was unfaithful at the best of times, but the pair seldom missed bath time. Indeed, Sarenya usually had to bully the lizards into behaving, or else spend an extra half hour mopping up the mess they made.

Sarenya puzzled over the conspicuous absence of her friends as she brushed out and then rebraided her hair. She concentrated hard, touching Tarnish's thoughts and gleaning a rough impression of his state of mind. The little bronze's attention was focused elsewhere, with a definite tinge of excitement. Sarenya slipped a fresh tunic over her head, and put her dusty boots back on. Maybe Darshanth would be able to shed more light on her fire-lizards' distraction.

The journeyman set out across the Bowl, sparing a glance back at the beast pens, where Tebis, Jarrisam, and the remaining five of Madellon's nine Beastcraft apprentices were sorting the new intake. Sarenya suspected that the impromptu afternoon off would be cancelled soon enough if the other two journeymen couldn't manage, and she resolved to enjoy the free time while she could. She lengthened her stride with that in mind, but as she approached the Weyr lake a flash of metallic wings too small to belong to a dragon caught her eye. Sarenya paused on the bank, narrowing her eyes to identify the fire-lizards. The green-hued bronze was unmistakably Tarnish, and his coppery-gold companion accounted for the delinquent male's preoccupation. Amused,

Sarenya put her hands on her hips, and called out sternly, "I knew you were seeing another woman, Tarnish!"

The two fire-lizards broke off their antics, but Tarnish continued to shadow the strange queen as she veered towards the bank. Sarenya shaded her eyes with one hand, trying to identify the newcomer. Fire-lizards of any colour were scarce in a Weyr too far inland to have its own beaches, but unless one of Madellon's score or so had spontaneously changed colour, this queen must be a visitor. She certainly wasn't wild, although the swat that she dealt Tarnish with one wing provoked an outraged cheep from the little bronze. Sarenya winced at the rebuff. "Leave her alone, Tarnish."

Tarnish obeyed sheepishly, backwinging to land on the forearm Sarenya extended for him, but the bronze hopped from there to her shoulder and wrapped his tail tight around her neck. She smoothed his wings, still half-open and agitated, and dug in her belt pouch to find him a snack. "Did she break your heart, lad?"

"She didn't hurt him, did she?"

Sarenya turned in time to see the fire-lizard queen alight to the speaker's wrist, still searching for a consolation treat. "Only his pride, and that's easily healed."

The tall, dark-haired man, a rider by his clothes, yet bare of the familiar Madellon knots, badges, and epaulettes, dipped into a pocket and pulled out two strips of dried meat. He stepped close enough to offer one to Tarnish, who took the titbit gratefully, and fed the other to his queen.

"There, boy," Sarenya told her bronze, smiling as he gripped the snack in both forepaws, and then spoke to the queen's owner. "Thank you. You now have a friend for life."

Deep laughter-lines showed at the corners of the stranger's eyes as he smiled back. "Trebruth will be glad to hear that he's got more company, although Agusta here might be jealous."

That confirmed Sarenya's assumption that this man was a dragonrider. "Tarnish might be more possessive if my blue spent more time with me," she said. "As it happens, Sleek only shows up if he wants something, and this one just feels superior for being loyal!"

The rider laughed, and the queen on his arm warbled imperiously. "She was looking to catch some lunch when your bronze arrived to inflate her opinion of herself," he said. "Is there good fishing in the lake?"

"My boys have been feeding themselves from it since I've been here," Sarenya replied, but the question piqued her curiosity further. A Madellon rider would hardly need to ask her about the lake. "You're new here, then, or just visiting?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, journeyman; I realise I'm not wearing anything to identify myself. I'm M'ric, Trebruth's rider, transferred in from the Peninsula last sevenday. I haven't picked up any of my new insignia yet."

"Sarenya of the Beastcraft," she introduced herself. "I've only been here half a Turn myself."

M'ric nodded. "Excuse me." Then spoke to his fire-lizard, who had been trying to get his attention. "Go on then, go and fish if you're hungry." He launched the queen off his arm, then apologised, "I'm sorry, she's being a real pain. I think she misses the sea."

"I was at Blue Shale before I came here," said Sarenya. "Mine missed the company of other fire-lizards, at first, but they're as happy now being with dragons."

Tarnish begged permission to follow M'ric's queen. Sarenya admonished him to behave and to leave Augusta alone, then let him go. She looked back at M'ric and saw that he had been watching the exchange with an understanding grimace. "Demanding beasts," he said. "Although you should try a young dragon for sheer attention-seeking."

Sarenya masked the surge of regret, determined to put her past behind her. "We'll have a few of those to deal with, soon," she said instead.

"I heard. Twenty-five is a good number." M'ric's eyes moved again to the rank cords on her shoulder. "Though keeping them all fed will make your job a bit harder for a while."

"The drought hasn't left much to go around," Sarenya agreed seriously.

M'ric nodded. "My new Wingleader mentioned that I'll need to hunt Trebruth out-Weyr more often than not."

There was an odd note in the dragonrider's voice, and the slight emphasis on *new* made Sarenya curious. "Where've you been assigned?"

"North Central is the name I've been told, although no one seems to use it."

"Oh," said Sarenya. "D'feng's Wing."

M'ric laughed again: a pleasantly gravelly laugh. "He seems all right."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Well, I've known more charismatic leaders," said M'ric. "But we're new here, Trebruth and I. It'll take us both a while to get used to this Weyr. And a while for the Weyr to get used to us."

Another cryptic comment. Sarenya studied the dragonrider with renewed interest. She liked a man who implied more than he revealed. There was a keen intelligence in his perceptive dark eyes, a finely-tuned sense of humour mapped out in those established laughter-lines, an overall calmness and competence to his demeanour that convinced Sarenya he must have held rank at the Peninsula. M'ric's features were delineated with strong, straight lines, and he held himself with an understated confidence that was reassuring rather than intimidating. "What colour is Trebruth?"

M'ric raised his head, his eyes momentarily distant in the manner of a rider speaking with his dragon. "I didn't mean you to disturb him," Sarenya said, half-scolding.

"It's all right, he wasn't asleep." M'ric nodded across the lake. "That's him."

The casual tone of his voice belied the spectacle of Trebruth's appearance. A shadow in the shape of a dragon dropped vertically from a ledge, dark wings angled back so as not to impede his breathtaking descent, the shifts of muscle and sail that pulled him up out of the drop as imperceptible as the dive had been dramatic. The dark dragon soared low across the lake, his



wingtips delicately brushing the water on each downstroke without ever breaking the surface that shivered with the force of his flight. Stretching out his powerful hind legs, Trebruth checked his forward velocity, the power of his wingbeats holding him in a perfectly controlled hover. His exquisite vertical landing barely raised a puff of dirt from the ground until he folded his wings, which agitated the dust in a spiral that twisted around his body before dying away.

Sarenya realised she had been holding her breath, and exhaled in a rush. She'd never seen a dragon fly with such precision or daring. "Now I understand why you say that Madellon will need to get used to you!"

M'ric's smile was not proud so much as resigned, as if his dragon's daredevil tricks were less an accomplishment than a way of life. "He will show off."

With Trebruth stationary, Sarenya could study him more closely, and in doing so found that M'ric's dragon was unusual in more ways than one. The hide that had seemed shadow-black was brown, the darkest of that hue Sarenya had seen, the colour of rich river silt. The greyish cast of the cloudy sky barely picked out the lighter overtones of a dragon who gave an overall impression of darkness. But more striking even than Trebruth's colour was his size. There could be no doubt that he was a brown, but a brown no larger than a blue. Darshanth was bigger, and Darshanth didn't rank among the largest of his colour.

Sarenya found M'ric watching her again, waiting for her reaction, and saw a guardedness to his eyes; the look of a man anticipating criticism and preparing to defend himself. To ride such an unusual dragon...if M'ric was, as he looked, in his late thirties, and had Impressed in his mid-teens, he would have spent more than half his life defending Trebruth from curiosity, ridicule, condemnation. Sarenya chose her words carefully. "I wouldn't like to see any of Madellon's browns try that. I bet your Weyrlingmaster had a few sleepless nights when you were in training."

M'ric relaxed, and Sarenya knew she'd said the right thing. "We mostly saved the stunts for scaring Wingleaders, once we'd won our knots."

"Mostly?"

The brown rider grinned.

Sarenya laughed, and looked out at the lake. M'ric's little queen had caught her fish and was devouring it on the shore. Tarnish watched wistfully, close, but not so close as to aggravate Augusta. Sarenya wondered what her bronze coveted more: the golden lizard's attention, or her fish.

"Augusta, don't be so greedy," M'ric told his fire-lizard. When the queen ignored him, the brown rider said, "Trebruth?"

The Peninsula dragon didn't so much as cock his head, but Augusta threw the brown a chagrined look, and reluctantly stepped back from her meal. Tarnish swooped in without further invitation, his eyes glowing with gratitude.

"She won't listen to me, but she's doted on Treb ever since he Hatched," M'ric explained.

"Then you've had her longer than him?" Sarenya asked.

“Since I was a scrappy little brat of a sea-holder,” he said. “She’ll never let me forget that she was around for a full five Turns before Trebruth came on the scene.”

“Tarnish’s a baby in comparison, then,” said Saren. “I was given him as part of my training at Blue Shale.” A thought occurred to her then, and she asked, “Have you had any luck getting Agusta to clutch somewhere convenient?”

M’ric shook his head. “She vanishes for a month or so a couple of times a Turn. I used to try to work out where she went to lay, but there are so many beaches around where I grew up, and I don’t know which one she came from. I just leave her to it, now.”

“Would you be willing to try training her to lay here, rather than going back to where she was clutched?” Sarenya asked. “There are a few holders at Blue Shale who’ve been trying to train their queens to lay on demand, but none of them have dragons to help.”

“I can’t see why not.” M’ric paused, eyes lighting briefly on his dragon again. “He thinks it would be interesting.”

Sarenya looked at the golden fire-lizard, admiring the good health evident in her bright hide and sparkling eyes. “When’s she due?”

“She came back from seeing her last clutch through about ten or twelve days ago,” M’ric replied. “I reckon another six or eight sevendays before she rises again. He’ll know.”

The two fire-lizards had made short work of the fish Agusta had caught, but Tarnish, in his eagerness to strip the bones to nothing, worried too hard at the flat tail and tugged the head out of Agusta’s grip. Outraged at the shocking behaviour, the little queen flew at the dinner companion she had grudgingly tolerated, chattering angrily.

This time, Trebruth’s rebuke was verbal, his low grumble somewhere between amusement and reprimand. Tarnish took the opportunity to dart free of Agusta’s furious attack. He clung to Sarenya’s shoulder, talons curling and uncurling in distress, but it was his aroma that made the journeyman shake him loose. “Tarnish, you smell! Go and find Sleek and wash off the fish-stink. Yes, I know she attacked you.” Sarenya shook her head, exasperated. “He’s such a baby.”

“I’m really sorry for the way she’s acting,” the brown rider apologised. “She’s not usually this bad.”

“I’d better clean him up. Haven’t had to deal with a queen in a few months, have you, boy?” Sarenya sighed at her forlorn bronze, then looked up at M’ric, extending her hand to him. “It was good to meet you, M’ric.”

He grasped her wrist lightly. “And you, Sarenya.”

“Saren,” she told him, and indicated Tarnish and Agusta. “I expect you’ll have opportunity enough to call me that, with the start these two have got off to.”

M’ric glanced tolerantly at his glowering little queen. “I’m sure I will, Saren.”

Sarenya let Tarnish settle on her shoulder and wind his tail tight about her upper arm. “Until next time they come to blows then, M’ric. Trebruth.”

“Until then,” M’ric laughed.

The journeyman resumed her initial course across the Bowl towards Darshanth's weyr. Tarnish gazed back at Augusta, trilling a plaintive objection in Sarenya's ear, but the Beastcrafter pulled his head around. "I think you've made enough of a fool of yourself for one day, my lad. C'mine won't mind me rinsing you off in his bathing room."

The prospect of training M'ric's queen, feisty as she was, to lay her eggs where they could easily be found put Sarenya in a good mood, although finding a kindred spirit in M'ric, a fellow friend of fire-lizards, was even more satisfying.

Still, something about the encounter bothered her. Sarenya turned the conversation over in her mind until it dawned on her. Transferred in from the Peninsula.... L'dro, former Weyrleader, the brutish rider of a brutish dragon, had gone to the Peninsula Weyr. Sarenya had heard most of the story second hand from C'los, but the green rider was an impeccably reliable source. Peninsula had only accepted L'dro on the condition that Madellon took two of its riders. M'ric, brown Trebruth's rider, must be one of the pair deemed a fair trade for a volatile former Weyrleader, and Sarenya didn't want to think that that handsome, intelligent man and his unusual dragon were concealing the potential to cause even half the strife L'dro had.

She lengthened her stride, hurrying on towards Darshanth's weyr, hoping C'mine would know more.



"I can't say that I know any more than you," C'mine admitted, passing Sarenya a cup of klah. "Careful, it's hot."

Sarenya accepted the mug gratefully, took an imprudent gulp and then had to suck in air to cool her mouth. "Ow."

"I told you it was hot," the blue rider said with mild reproach, as he stirred his own cup, one of the teas he had been drinking to build up his strength.

"It's meant to be." But Sarenya blew on the surface of her klah before taking another, more cautious sip. "Good brew, Mine."

C'mine touched the klah chest, running his fingers along the lovingly detailed carving of his own Darshanth on the lid with visible pleasure. The little box had been one of several gifts bestowed upon him by the grateful holders of Kellad during his recovery there, and although Sarenya sensed the blue rider's embarrassment at the attention, she knew he loved the depiction of his dragon. "It's a good blend. I'll have to barter for more when this runs out."

"That won't take long," Sarenya laughed. She drank again, enjoying the smooth flavour, then set the ceramic cup down and leaned back, relaxing in the familiar and comfortable environs of C'mine's weyr. The blue rider shared enviable quarters with his weyrmate and their dragons, and though but a few days had passed since his return from Kellad, C'mine's touch was in evidence everywhere. C'los delighted in furnishing their weyr, but C'mine had always been the one who kept it tidy. Already, items of discarded clothing had vanished, dust had been beaten

from every rug and tapestry, and the three-month accumulation of ashes that had made the hearth all but unusable had been scraped out and dumped. The bathing room was clean too, if newly waterlogged from Tarnish's spirited resistance to being scrubbed.

"Los mentioned the Peninsula riders," said C'mine, resuming their original conversation, "but he hasn't got his hands on their records yet. Apparently T'kamen wasn't happy the last time he found some missing documents of his in here." The blue rider's wry tone indicated that, while C'los might have been surprised by T'kamen's reaction, he, C'mine, had not.

"Old habits die hard," said Sarenya. "Did he give you any indication at all of why the Peninsula was so eager to be rid of these riders?"

C'mine lifted one shoulder in the half shrug that betrayed the burn scars still impeding his movement. "When a bronze transfers it's usually political. The Peninsula Weyrleader is still relatively new in the job, only three Turns; maybe this was the soonest he could get him out from under his feet. As for your brown rider...."

"My brown rider?"

"You'll know more about him now than any of us. That'll annoy Los, if you were looking to score an easy point off him." C'mine smiled, adding piously, "Not that I'm encouraging you."

"Of course not." Sarenya picked up her klah again, cupping the mug in both hands. "Definitely an unusual dragon, although I can't see why that would be reason for a transfer."

"I haven't been out enough to notice," said C'mine, with the hint of a grimace.

"Didn't Isnan say you can resume training by the end of the sevenday?" When the blue rider nodded, Saren went on, "That's soon enough, Mine. With the amount of drilling Kamen's been putting the Wings through, you'll miss the leisure."

"We've had enough leisure to last an Interval," said C'mine. "How big did you say this brown is?"

"About the size of a blue, I suppose. A smallish one - he's smaller than Darshanth, although maybe more muscular."

"But in proportion?"

"Oh, yes. He doesn't look wrong - just small."

"I doubt there's anything actually wrong, then," said C'mine. "Could be there were smaller queens and bronzes in his lineage, and the trait happened to come out in him. You're the Beastcrafter, you tell me."

"Could be," Saren conceded. She made a face. "Which brings to mind that we start mating the ewes next sevenday. Everybody's favourite job."

"There's never been much breeding of beasts at the Weyr," said C'mine.

"Well, we'll do it in the lower pastures rather than in the Bowl itself," Sarenya said. "But helping with an intensive breeding programme was one of the main excuses for my transfer here." She sighed. "Unfortunately it's a long-term solution to a short-term problem. There just aren't the

animals to feed the population, especially after the drought, and especially with a clutch on the sands.”

“We’re used to hunting our dragons out-Weyr,” C’mine told her. “And used to doing it more when there are young weyrlings.”

“But twenty-five dragonets – that’s a lot of new mouths to feed,” Sarenya worried.

C’mine regarded her thoughtfully. “You don’t usually fret so, Saren. What’s the matter? Regrets, still?”

The blue rider’s tone was gentle, but Sarenya still winced. She shook her head. “I’m not sure it’ll ever be easy, but it doesn’t crush me like it used to.” The journeyman noticed C’mine’s eyes narrow fractionally. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?” C’mine protested.

“You’ve got your mind-reading face on. It puts me off.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologised. “I won’t guess. You tell me.”

Sarenya shook her almost empty mug, watching patterns form and dissolve in the muddy dregs of the klah. “I think it’s because T’kamen’s Weyrleader now.” She raised her head to meet C’mine’s steady gaze. “When L’dro was in charge it was easy to say, ‘well, what can we do, we’ve got a bad Weyrleader’. Except there are still problems – maybe more now than before – and Kamen isn’t a bad Weyrleader. For me, as a Beastcrafter, I have to take responsibility for the issues in my field – and as me, Sarenya, I’ve also got an obligation to show that the beast shortages aren’t Kamen’s fault. It’s harder under him, you see, because we don’t have L’dro to blame any more.”

C’mine nodded slowly. “If you asked, I think you’d find we all feel that way, all of us who supported Kamen’s bid and helped Epherineth fly Shimpath. Me and Los, T’rello, J’vondan – even L’stev’s edgy. It’s up to us to do everything we can to prove that Kamen is the Weyrleader Madellon needs.”

“He’s weyrmated to the job,” Saren said dourly, and then regretted the tone of her own voice.

To C’mine’s credit, he didn’t pounce. The blue rider rubbed pensively at the healed scar tissue that marred his left cheek. “He’s not happy that he doesn’t have the time to spend with you, either,” he said finally.

Sarenya sighed. “I know it’s not his fault.”

“It’ll get easier after Shimpath’s clutch has Hatched and Valonna’s not confined to the sands,” C’mine assured her. “Kamen’s taking on most of her duties, too.”

“You really think Valonna will take her part?” Sarenya shook her head. “I know you like her, Mine, but I can’t see her being much more effective now than she was with L’dro. Kamen won’t treat her like a drudge, but he’ll lose patience with her if she doesn’t meet his expectations.”

“Give her time,” said C’mine. “And Kamen, too. I’ve hardly seen anything of Los since I’ve been home, you know.”

“Some would call that a mercy,” Sarenya teased. “Has he been fussing around Leah?”

“L’stev had a word with him shortly after we brought her in and made him promise not to interfere. He’s known her since she was a little girl anyway, so it’s not as if C’los is entrusting her to a stranger.” C’mine shook his head. “No, Kamen’s got him looking into E’rom’s death.”

“That Wingsecond?” Sarenya had been in the pastures, checking the health of the animals she had just helped drive up to the Weyr, when the distant keens of mourning dragons had marked the death. “I heard he’d been drinking and fell off his weyr ledge.”

“It seemed like that, but Kamen thought there must be more to it. Los hasn’t said much about it – you know how he is – but he’s started with the charts and the lists and everything else.”

“It’ll keep him out of trouble,” said Sarenya, “and out from under your feet. And with that in mind, Mine, I’ll love you and leave you. When Arrense gives me an afternoon off it means he’s got something planned for my evening, and I’ve got a few errands to run.”

C’mine leaned over from his place, taking Sarenya’s klah mug and setting it on the table with his own. “Always good to see you, Saren.”

“Don’t get up, Mine, I know my way out and you still need the rest.” Sarenya gripped the blue rider’s wrist. “Thanks for helping with Tarnish, and for the klah.”

As she made her way out of C’mine’s weyr, Darshanth, resting quietly on his ledge, raised his head slightly in greeting. Green-bronze and deep blue against the dragon’s azure hide, Tarnish and Sleek uncurled themselves from where they had been sleeping. The little bronze appeared to have recovered from his earlier humiliation, nudging peremptorily at his sibling to move faster. Sarenya reached out to stroke Darshanth’s muzzle, watching as the blue’s eyelids slipped blissfully shut, and feeling his soft thrum of pleasure. “You’ll take rubs from anyone.”

Only if they’re good at it.

“You’re disgusting.”

Of course.

In comparison to the very visible scars on C’mine’s face and body, Darshanth’s milder burns had healed well, leaving his underside only slightly paler where the hide had grown back. Sarenya was very fond of C’mine’s blue, the dragon who always spoke directly to her, and often by name, but prolonged contact always made her melancholy.

“Well, come on, you two,” she said to her fie-lizards

Tarnish took up his normal place on Sarenya’s right shoulder, and the familiar weight of him, his tail hanging down her back alongside her own dark braid, one wing occasionally brushing her face, was comforting. Sleek landed on Saren’s other shoulder, and the journeyman took heart from their presence. They, at least, had deemed her worthy of their companionship.

“What would I want a dragon for, eh, boys?” she asked them. “They’re not exactly portable, are they? Not like you.”

But Darshanth watched her go.