



IV

Cold Beyond Frozen Things



T'kamen had been waiting a long half hour when C'los finally emerged from the infirmary storeroom. The green rider was rubbing his hands together, and he looked pale with the chill of so much ice stored in one place. "What news, Los?"

"Tomsung says you can come in now," C'los replied. "He's come to his conclusion."

T'kamen followed the green rider into the storeroom. It wasn't an ideal location, as one of the duty journeyman had commented when T'kamen had arrived in the infirmary to find piles of medical supplies stacked untidily in corners and against walls, but the only other option had been to use the food storage caverns, and that, for obvious reasons, had been out of the question.

T'kamen hunched his shoulders and pulled his jacket closed as he entered the frosty room. A thick mist emanated from the great blocks of ice that lined the walls in tubs – some half melted, others newly replaced. The freezing vapour eddied sluggishly with his movement. It felt as cold as the polar waste to the south from which the Weyr mined its ice. But although the frigidty burned in T'kamen's nostrils, he could smell something else, something less clean, but just as elemental.

The dead man lay on a narrow plinth that had been hastily constructed for the purposes of examination. E'rom was covered in a sheet to his neck, and his limbs had been placed in a more natural alignment than that into which they had fallen, but the blue-grey pallor of his slack face made T'kamen want to shudder with more than the cold. The brown rider had been dead for days.

He should have joined Sigith by now, said Epherineth, with an echo of the great grief only a dragon could feel for one of his own kind.

T'kamen agreed with his bronze. The preservation of E'rom's corpse in ice was deeply unsettling.

The two figures made indistinct by the icy fog were Isnan and Tomsung, the specialist Master from Fort who had come at Madellon's behest to examine E'rom's body. T'kamen nodded briefly to the Weyr Healer, and addressed Tomsung. "What can you tell me, Master?"

Tomsung was a tall and portly man of late middle age and, in T'kamen's brief experience, a rather more jovial character than was strictly appropriate given his field of expertise. "We're finished with the body now, Weyrleader. You can send him *between*."

T'kamen nodded, relieved, although he wondered how the Healer knew about the Weyr's traditional alternative to burial. We'll see to it personally, Epherineth. "You've determined the cause of death?"

"Causes, in fact, although technically there can only be the one." Tomsung gestured towards the door. "Let's go into my colleague's office. Had you noticed it's cold in here?"

The joke fell dead in the freezing air. T'kamen saw C'los press his lips tightly together. The green rider looked grim, and T'kamen dreaded the news.

The warmer temperature of the infirmary was a welcome relief. Isnan called to an apprentice to bring wine as he urged them all into his office.

"Over the last four days, I've built up a picture of the subject's physical condition at the time of his death," Tomsung began. "In addition to examining the body in detail, I took several samples of blood, and had them tested at the Hall." The Healer looked up as Isnan's apprentice entered the room, carrying a tray with a wineskin and mugs. "Ah, good, I've worked up a thirst."

The flippancy irritated T'kamen. *He doesn't understand what the death of a dragonrider means.*

He does.

There was certainty in Epherineth's voice. *Does he?*

Epherineth was silent for a moment, and then he said, *Long ago he lost his dragon. This is his way. While he lives, and treats death lightly, Govadith is still with him.*

The revelation threw T'kamen, and he accepted the cup of wine Isnan offered without remark. Epherineth displayed an unusual readiness to investigate the minds of others sometimes. T'kamen would never have marked the bluff Healer as a dragonless man.

"All involved jumped to the immediate conclusion that this man's death was related to the alcohol found on him," Tomsung continued. "One of the blood samples I took was tested expressly to discern if he had imbibed alcohol immediately prior to his death.

"The results of the first test we performed were unclear. It was surmised that the sample had been contaminated, and another test was carried out on a different blood sample. It was similarly inconclusive, and that was when we realised that there was another agent in E'rom's blood that was interfering with the alcohol test."

The Healer paused to sip his wine. T'kamen was struggling to understand the meaning of Tomsung's words. The vocabulary of agents and tests and samples was entirely foreign to him; it had never occurred to him that Healers could take a man's blood and know if he had been drinking. "Another agent?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound ignorant.

"There was no evidence that E'rom was under the influence of alcohol," said Tomsung. "But there was a high concentration of another agent, with somewhat similar properties, in his blood. Fellis juice."

The silence that fell in the room was meaningful, and T'kamen could see that both C'los and Isnan were fully aware of the greater consequences of this revelation. He, however, was not. He frowned, feeling stupid, and not liking the sensation. "Then fellis would have had a similar disorienting effect to brandy?"

Isnan spoke up. "The concentration of fellis we found in E'rom's blood would probably have dropped a runnerbeast, Weyrleader."

Just ask, Epherineth advised his rider.

T'kamen took a deep breath, reminding himself that he didn't have time to mince words. "Fellis or brandy, what's the difference? Either would have made him unsteady, wouldn't it?"

"The point is that E'rom wasn't drunk," C'los snapped. "He'd had fellis."

"And not the sort of dose he'd take for a headache," said Tomsung.

"What are you saying?" T'kamen asked sharply.

Isnan shook his head, as if reluctant to reply. Tomsung spoke in the end, although he didn't answer T'kamen's question. "There can be no doubt that the fellis contributed to E'rom's death. However, I don't believe it was the direct cause. I believe E'rom died when he broke his neck. But from the accounts C'los and Isnan have provided of the placement of his corpse at the scene, and from my examination of the body, he wasn't conscious when he fell from the ledge."

"It means he didn't fall," C'los said, visibly having trouble controlling his agitation. "The fellis had already knocked him out. Kamen, there was a mark in the sand of E'rom's weyr. Like something had been dragged.... I didn't see it at first, because it was half brushed out, and then I thought it was probably just from Sigith's tail. But I got A'len to take Chyilth's measurement – he and Sigith were almost the same size – and it didn't match. Then I realised that it originated right from the entrance to the inner weyr."

C'los explanation was somehow more chilling than anything else T'kamen had heard. The Weyrleader swallowed with some difficulty, finding that his throat was suddenly dry. "Then someone dragged him from his weyr while he was unconscious...."

"And stopped to try to obscure the trail before pushing him off his own ledge," C'los finished for him.

T'kamen closed his eyes briefly, not only at the horrible account, but at the fact that it had happened in the Weyr he was supposed to be leading. "Wait a moment," he said. "You said he wasn't conscious when he fell – for want of a better word – from the ledge. How do you know he wasn't already dead?"

"I assumed he was, at first," said Tomsung. "It was a simple matter to conclude that E'rom was not conscious – had he been awake, he would have instinctively tried to break his fall with his arms. It was quite clear from the injuries on his body that this was not the case. It's much harder to tell the difference between unconscious and dead. But there are too many anomalies surrounding the fall. In the first, why had he taken this massive dose of fellis juice? Under its effects, why then would he have staggered to his weyr ledge – a not insignificant distance. How did the brandy – brandy he had definitely not been drinking – get on his clothes? And even if there were excellent explanations for all these factors, it is highly unlikely that he would have succumbed to the lethal effects of such a high dose at precisely the instant he was teetering on the brink of his ledge."

"Unless he was suicidal," said Isnan, with the air of a man repeating a previously stated argument.

“Not while Sigith was alive,” said Tomsung, and for a fraction of an instant the ghost of the Healer’s dragon was in the room with them.

T’kamen nodded. No dragonrider would take his own life. “There’s other evidence to discount suicide, anyway,” said C’los. “It looked like he’d just bathed, and he’d obviously been in the middle of mending his riding straps. Not exactly something you’d prioritise if you had a mind to kill yourself.”

The sharpness of the green rider’s tone betrayed his distress. C’los, who normally thrived on an intellectual challenge, looked defeated, and T’kamen thought he knew why. “Suicide’s out. I can accept that. Could it just have been an accident?”

C’los shook his head. “I don’t think so. If he’d accidentally taken that much fellis, he’d have realised something was wrong, and I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t have wandered off towards my weyr ledge if I was unsteady on my feet. I’m certain he was sitting down when the fellis started to affect him. One of the chairs in his weyr was damaged – splintered along the back rail, as if it had fallen heavily. There were splinters in the back of E’rom’s tunic that matched.”

“Also an injury to the back of his skull that would correspond with that sort of fall,” Tomsung interjected, “although it’s impossible to tell if that was made before or during the fall from the ledge.”

“But the chair wasn’t on the floor,” said C’los. “It had been put back under the table. As if somebody didn’t want there to be any evidence of a struggle.”

There it was again: that somebody, that someone, the last piece of the puzzle that surrounded E’rom’s death, and the piece that nobody wanted to acknowledge, although they were fast running out of alternatives. “Why didn’t Sigith notice?” T’kamen asked suddenly.

“Asleep, on the Rim,” said C’los. “I talked to some riders straight after it happened. Jenavally said Hinnarioth was right next to Sigith when he went *between*; it seems that they regularly kept each other company up there in the evenings. Sigith only woke up when he felt E’rom die.”

That ghastly thought made T’kamen reach to Epherineth for mutual reassurance. To be woken by the death of your lifelong partner...T’kamen didn’t want to imagine the hideous combination of shock, grief, and agony that E’rom’s brown must have experienced before hurling himself *between*.

They’re waiting for you to say it, the bronze told him gently.

Say what?

What happened to Sigith’s rider.

The Weyrleader found himself gripping his forgotten wine cup. He set it down before it shattered in his hand. Epherineth was right. Neither Isnan, nor C’los, nor even Tomsung wanted to be the one to say it aloud. T’kamen felt the gravity of his rank weighing on him again. They were right: it was his place to voice the conclusion to which they had all come.

“Then you think someone killed him,” he said.

C'los looked away. T'kamen had been hoping that someone would contradict him, that this time he had made a stupid mistake, but the defeated slump of C'los' shoulders was enough to tell him otherwise. The green rider would take it personally that, for all his brilliant mind, he had been unable to come up with a viable alternative. "What are you going to tell the Weyr?" he asked dully.

T'kamen considered it. Whoever had killed E'rom was still abroad at Madellon, but he could hardly announce that the brown rider, a respected Wingsecond, had been murdered. Such a declaration would be met first with disbelief – he could hardly believe it himself - then outrage, paranoia, and panic. If a dragonrider could be murdered in his own weyr, no one would feel safe. Worse, it might send the killer into hiding, and T'kamen wanted him, or her, found. The Weyrleader didn't even know what penalty was attached to the murder of a dragonrider – he'd never heard of such a thing happening – but he felt grimly certain he'd think of something.

"I'll say it was a terrible accident, and in no way E'rom's fault," he said finally. "His friends and family need to know that much. Bad enough that he's dead without the allegation of him having brought it on himself. And that there will be a full investigation into the circumstances of his death, with you at its head, C'los."

The green rider nodded morosely; less at the charge, T'kamen thought, than its reason. Valonna would have to be told, of course. Much as it might distress her, the Weyrwoman had a right to know, and it was time the girl started facing up to the realities of her rank. She couldn't hide in the Hatching ground forever. Besides, Shimpath's influence over other dragons could be invaluable in finding out who was responsible for E'rom's death.

Who else needed to know? C'mine would find out from C'los – he was far too perceptive not to - but the blue rider knew when to keep his mouth shut. D'feng? It was well past the time that he be dissuaded of his own importance. L'stev? No, the Weyrleader had enough to worry about with the new candidates. The other Wingleaders? Madellon was no longer run by the assent of the bronze rider Council; T'kamen had no intention of letting that change.

It would just be the six, then: the four of them in the room, plus C'mine and Valonna. The four dragons involved were unlikely to pass the truth around; of them all, only C'los' Indioth might have gossiped, and T'kamen was sure that the green rider could control his dragon. If necessary, Epherineth would speak to her, but T'kamen doubted that would be required.

"Thank you for your help, Master Tomsung," he said, suddenly feeling very tired. "If you'll come back to my office, I'll settle your fee."

The Fortian Master Healer inclined his head slightly and rose to his feet. "I'm sorry I couldn't deliver a more reassuring diagnosis, Weyrleader."

T'kamen stood up, shaking his head in wordless forgiveness. "My thanks for the use of your office, too, Master Isnan," he told the Weyr Healer. "I'll have arrangements made for E'rom by this evening."

"Of course, Weyrleader," Isnan murmured.

Finally, T'kamen looked at C'los. "I'd like you to come and see me after I've arranged Tomsung's transport back to Fort."

The green rider nodded, visibly too subdued to speak.

The Weyrleader ran both hands back through his hair, trying to order his thoughts. Someone had murdered a man and his dragon in broad daylight, and C'los was still the best man to find out who and why. The highly-strung green rider would get over his dejection. But T'kamen knew he himself would take longer to recover from the shock of having a murder occur in the Weyr for which he was responsible.

It's not your fault, T'kamen.

I know, he replied. But he didn't believe it.



The heavens threatened rain, and several of the riders who had assembled to witness E'rom's last journey were already casting furtive glances at the sky. C'los hunched his shoulders and folded his arms, staring at the ground, but the chill that froze his bones was more than physical.

Isnan stood a short distance away, his hands clasped formally behind his back. The Master Healer looked grim as only a man who knew the truth could. Of the others, Tomsung had already returned to Fort, Valonna was still in the Hatching cavern with Shimpath, and T'kamen was with Epherineth at the other end of the Weyr, preparing to transport the dead brown rider's body *between*.

Not just dead. Murdered.

The thought ran through C'los mind for the hundredth time, and he clamped down on it, blocking it from Indioth. His gentle dragon was so innocent of the potential of man to cause pain that C'los would not willingly subject her to the reality of E'rom's demise. The green rider knew he wouldn't be able to answer her questions. Why would anyone kill a dragonrider? Who would do such a terrible thing? And again, why?

So he kept the truth from her, aware that Indioth's childlike trust in him would stop her asking questions. C'los couldn't keep her from sensing his emotions – what the green lacked in complex thought, she more than made up for with her understanding of his moods and feelings – but for now, he knew she accepted the death of a rider, no matter how distantly C'los had known him, as reason enough for his unhappiness.

But he felt so lonely in his knowledge, so very alone in bearing its weight. C'los had never been unequal to the challenge of keeping secrets when he had to, but nothing so big as this. Nothing so...life or death.

Behind him, Indioth cried out a soft greeting. The deeper voice that responded was Darshanth's. C'los turned as his weyrmate's dragon landed, a reprimand already on his lips. C'mine shouldn't be coming out in weather like this. The caution with which the blue rider

dismounted, and the effort Darshanth made to see that he could do so as easily as possible, confirmed C'los' fears. The green rider hurried over as C'mine leaned briefly against his dragon's side for support. "What did I tell you about coming out in the rain, making journeys you don't need to when you should be resting, making Darshanth sick with worry about you?" C'los knew his voice was rising into an almost hysterical register, but he couldn't help it. "Sometimes I think you don't want to get better, Mine!"

The blue rider took a deep breath and straightened up. "It's not raining, Los, and Indioth's worried about you."

C'mine's quiet assertion took C'los aback. The green rider stooped slightly to put a supportive arm around his weyrmate, ignoring C'mine's mild protest that he wasn't an invalid any more. "Any idiot can see it's going to rain, and what's she been telling you?"

"Darshanth, actually. She knows you're hiding something, and she can't understand why when it's bothering you so much." The blue rider tugged at his riding jacket where it had caught under C'los' arm. "I see her point. We didn't know E'rom."

"Why don't you make yourself useful and come over here so your rider can have some shelter from the elements," C'los snapped at Darshanth.

The blue looked faintly offended, but he loped over, presenting his left side, putting out his forearm, and extending a wing. C'mine sighed, leaning back against his blue's shoulder. "Please don't shout at him, Los, and don't think I didn't notice you avoiding the issue."

"There's not an issue," C'los insisted, leaning beside his weyrmate.

The blue rider stroked an absent fingertip down the thin black line of his moustache and beard, his gaze on one of the groups of mourners who had turned out for E'rom. "Indioth's not stupid, and neither am I. Are you going to tell me what's upsetting you now, or later?"

C'los wanted to tell him. Of course he did, but T'kamen had made it so clear that the news wasn't to get out – and while C'los sometimes disagreed with his friend and Weyrleader, this was one occasion where he concurred wholeheartedly. But this was C'mine, and they didn't keep secrets.

Abruptly, the green rider noticed that C'mine was scratching the silvery scar tissue on his cheek. He slapped the blue rider's fingers away. "Stop it! You'll make it worse!"

C'mine clasped his hands together in his lap, looking chagrined. "Sorry."

C'los stared at the other riders. Chief among them was K'ston, the blue rider who had been E'rom's weyrmate. Sometime weyrmate, at least, as C'los had found no evidence of a second permanent resident of the dead brown rider's weyr. That wasn't unusual, though. There weren't many weyrs large enough to comfortably house two dragons. K'ston's eyes were red, and his expression tortured, but C'los supposed the blue rider would find some comfort in seeing his lover's body decently interred *between*.

Unless K'ston was the murderer.

It was the first time that C'los had dared look at someone and wonder. The green rider swallowed hard and tried to force his mind to consider the possibility. What was it old Valrov had said? The victim sometimes knew his own murderer?

No. The victim *usually* knew his murderer.

C'los grabbed C'mine's arm to get his attention, and gripped it hard to keep it. "He didn't fall off his ledge, Mine," he hissed under his breath. "He was drugged and pushed off. E'rom was murdered."

It was an immense relief to get it out, but C'los observed the shocked expression on his weyrmate's face for a panicky few instants. If Darshanth had been listening, and started talking to Indioth.... Then C'mine composed himself, but there was an uncharacteristic grimness to the set of his jaw. "You're sure?"

C'los was grateful for the blue rider's readiness to accept the almost unbelievable news. Convincing T'kamen had been traumatic enough. "We're sure." Then, anxiously, he added, "You won't let Darshanth know, will you?"

C'mine sighed and indicated to C'los' right with a jerk of his head. Darshanth had been watching and – by the agitated speed at which his eyes were whirling, and the orange flickers of alarm – listening, too. "He won't say anything to Indioth," said the blue rider, "nor any other dragon."

"T'kamen doesn't want it to get out," C'los said nervously.

"I'm not surprised." C'mine shook his head slowly. "Who'd kill a dragonrider? And why?"

The two questions had been chasing each other in circles through C'los' head since before this conversation, before the interview with T'kamen when the Weyrleader had told him to find out the answers. And it was Valrov's wisdom that came back to the green rider now, as it had then. "Money. Revenge. Passion." C'los hesitated. "Insanity."

"You think whoever did it was insane?" C'mine asked.

"No," the green rider replied. "Actually I don't. At least, I think he knew exactly what he was doing."

C'mine fell silent. The sombreness of the blue rider's demeanour was enough to tell C'los that he was shaken, even if he didn't show it otherwise. Finally, he stirred. "Kamen's asked you to find out who did it, hasn't he?"

C'los nodded slowly.

"Has he said what's going to happen to them when you do?"

C'los was gratified, and reassured, by his weyrmate's unquestioning conviction that he would be able to find E'rom's killer. "No. I guess exile." He paused, and then added, unwillingly, "Unless it's a rider."

C'mine reacted with shock, visibly taken aback. "Los, you can't think a dragonrider would have killed him?"

"I don't know," the green rider said unhappily. "I have to consider the possibility."

“Even if a rider wanted to, surely his dragon wouldn’t let him,” C’mine objected.

C’los looked guiltily in the direction of his own green: uneasy, but otherwise calm. “Not if he’s good at keeping secrets.”

The blue rider looked at Indioth, then slowly reached a hand back to touch Darshanth’s glossy shoulder. “I couldn’t be that way with him.”

C’los exhaled heavily. He loved his dragon with all of his heart and soul, and more, but sometimes he wished that they could enjoy the intuitive ease of C’mine’s bond with Darshanth, or the intellectual depth of T’kamen’s with Epherineth. “I know.”

As they sat together, thinking their separate thoughts, there was a stir among the other groups of mourners. The Weyrbred brown rider had been part of a large family, and most of it seemed to be here. Four grim-faced men were carrying the simple casket that contained E’rom’s body out of the infirmary.

“Come on,” C’mine said softly, easing himself to his feet.

In respectful silence, they joined the circle of people as E’rom’s bearers set him down on a temporary bier. As if that was his cue, Epherineth glided down from the other end of the Bowl, landing at a distance to let his rider dismount. T’kamen stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his face an expressionless mask. Nobody approached him.

One of the bearers stepped forwards, a flrid-faced man who, by his physical resemblance to the dead brown rider, must be one of E’rom’s brothers. “Thank you all for coming. I want to say a few words before the Weyrleader....”

T’kamen nodded once, slowly, still impassive.

E’rom’s brother cleared his throat. “E’rom was born Eiromell, the son of H’role and Namelle, forty-eight Turns ago, here at Madellon Weyr. He was the second of four children of his parents, the others being myself, Ironam, our sister Romelle, and our brother Heromar, who’s now called E’mar. E’rom also had half-siblings, including....”

“This is likely to go on for some time,” a wry female voice murmured, close to C’los’ ear.

The green rider looked away from Ironam’s monologue. Jenavally, the Weyr Singer, was dressed in suitably sober clothes for the occasion, but nothing could dull her tumbled mass of orange-red hair, or the natural humour in her pleasant, rather horsey face and genial voice. In her late thirties or early forties – it was hard to say – Jenavally had more experience than C’los as both green rider and Harper, but their similar backgrounds had made them firm friends ever since C’los had Impressed. “If I’d known we were going to get a family history, I’d have come late,” C’los replied, ignoring his weyrmate’s disapproving glance.

“I’d have warned you, if I’d known you were coming,” said Jenavally. “We were here for over an hour when their father passed away.”

“I didn’t know you were that well in with the family,” said C’los.

The Weyr Singer shrugged. "I'm not, but E'rom was dear to me once. It was a terrible shock to Hinnarioth when Sigith went *between*." She paused, her eyes fixed upon the shrouded form on the bier. "Did you find out what happened?"

"Still investigating," C'los evaded.

"I don't believe what's been said about him getting drunk," Jenavally said. "Not E'rom. He liked a drink, certainly, but not before a Wing drill, and definitely not so much that he'd be a danger to himself."

C'los chewed thoughtfully on his lip as Ironam droned on about E'rom's childhood. Jenavally would be a good place to start piecing together the background to the brown rider's death. It might be a challenge to question her in such a way that she didn't suspect, but then while she had a Harper's inquisitive mind – and a thirst for gossip almost as insatiable as C'los' own – she also knew the importance of discretion. "What was he like?" he asked.

"Solid," the other green rider replied immediately. "Solid, stable, and ultra-conservative, even when he was young. That's why it didn't last." Jenavally made a face, then went on. "He was a good sort, C'los. Boring, sometimes, with his habits and routines, but there was a time when I wanted the stability."

"Do you know much about his relationship with K'ston?" C'los asked.

Jenavally thought about it. "They were together for – oh, three or four Turns. They were quite fond of each other, I think. Very different characters. K'ston's the sort who had five or six siblings at home to look after. A bit chaotic. E'rom was totally different – Weyrbred, absolutely fussy about his weyr and his habits. They say opposites attract, though, and so long as K'ston didn't change anything around or interrupt any of his rituals, it worked out. Like I said, E'rom was a creature of habit."

C'los thought back to what he had found in the brown rider's weyr. Jenavally's description tallied with the overall sense that E'rom had been a meticulous, orderly man. "K'ston didn't share his weyr, though?"

"K'ston sometimes did, but never Bronth," said Jenavally. "And I gather that was Bronth's preference."

"He and Sigith didn't get on?"

"Less than the fact that it would have been close quarters for two dragons without a bond of their own," said the Weyr Singer. "I doubt Hinnarioth and Indioth would appreciate being made to share a cavern."

C'los shuddered mentally at the thought of the two greens being forcibly juxtaposed. "I see."

"Anyway, E'rom used to comment sometimes that he'd quite like the arrangement to be permanent, but he'd never have mentioned it to K'ston. Actually, he probably wanted him there all the time so he'd never have to wonder if he'd be there or not. Did I mention that E'rom liked routine?"

“Once or twice,” C’los replied.

Jenavally sighed. “I’ll miss the boring old sod.”

“I didn’t realise you knew him so well.”

“That’s because it was mostly before your time, Los,” she told him ruefully. “I’m talking ancient history. We stayed friends, though, and Sigith sometimes rose to Hinnarioth. When I was pregnant with J’her, I’d specifically ask him to chase. It made it easier on me during the flight. Always knew what you were going to get with E’rom.”

C’los looked at E’rom’s family, studying the similar faces. Ironam was talking about the brown rider’s weyrlinghood now, and showed no discernible signs of flagging. A short distance away, K’ston was standing with a group of riders recognisable to C’los as members of E’rom’s old Wing. The sandy-haired blue rider’s expression was as glazed as C’los’ own. Maybe there was something to be said for numbingly long obituaries. He wasn’t unattractive, despite the redness of his eyes.

“They had a good relationship, then?” he asked Jenavally. “K’ston and E’rom?”

“As far as I know, they did, but it’s hard for an outsider to make a judgement,” the Weyr Singer said evasively.

C’los shot her a sidelong glance. “No strain on it because of E’rom’s rank?”

“Not that I could tell.”

“Come on, Jena, you’re holding out on me.”

The other green rider shook back the tendrils of her hair that had crept forwards across her face. C’los had seen her do that enough times when prising gossip from the Weyr Singer to know that it meant capitulation. “You didn’t hear this from me,” she warned him. “But I get the impression that E’rom’s family never liked K’ston. You can see that for yourself.” She nodded discreetly at the pointed gap between E’rom’s siblings and his weyrmate. “I heard there was an argument the day after he died over who would get to take his body *between*. K’ston wanted to, of course, but then the youngest brother challenged his right. Pushed by Ironam, no doubt. I don’t think E’mar would have made a fuss on his own.”

“Funeral politics,” C’los murmured.

“The fact that T’kamen’s going to do it settled the argument, but not the grudge,” Jenavally went on. “K’ston would still probably rather have done it himself, but I think the family are more interested in the honour of having the Weyrleader’s bronze take E’rom *between*.”

C’los filed the information away for future consideration. “What do you know about his relationship with his Wing?”

“His new Wing, or the old one?” the other green rider asked.

“Both, actually.”

The Weyr Singer put her hands in her pockets, frowning thoughtfully. “I know his old Wingleader was F’yan. Conspicuous by his – oh, my mistake, he is here.” She nodded at the bronze rider, standing stiffly near K’ston. “He was put under H’ned when Kamen shook up the

Wings. I couldn't honestly tell you what his new wingriders thought of him. I think he was well-respected as F'yan's 'Second, though. He was a decent man, a decent rider."

Jenavally fell silent. C'los started to ask another question and then stopped, realising belatedly that the other green rider was more upset by E'rom's death than her bright demeanour suggested.

Ironam's ponderous account of the life and times of Sigith's rider was finally nearing its end, and not a minute too soon: everyone, even E'rom's remaining siblings, was looking glassy, and T'kamen's grim expression was darkening moment by moment. His interview with Jenavally over, C'los was impatient, too. There were things he wanted to investigate, people he wanted to see. This plodding formality was ludicrous when set against the murderous circumstances of E'rom's death.

"...and so we honour the passing of our brother E'rom, sending him *between* to join his dragon," Ironam intoned loftily, and lapsed into much-anticipated silence.

Something very like a collective sigh of relief rippled around the circle of mourners, and Epherineth loped forwards. The bronze looked as relieved as any of the humans.

In a motion as brief as Ironam's speech had been long, Epherineth grasped E'rom's coffin in his claws and sprang aloft. He vanished *between* on the second wingstroke, and when he reappeared, three breaths later and several hundred feet higher, his claws were empty.

C'los felt as much as heard every rider's private sigh. E'rom had gone to Sigith now, joining him in death, the way it should be. The tension of knowing that dragon and rider were apart, even only in body, had been subtly stressful on every dragonrider in the Weyr.

"I'd better go and discharge my duty to the family," said Jenavally, in a voice that was slightly rougher than usual.

"Ah, Jena." C'los put a comforting arm around the Weyr Singer. "It's all right. Having to listen to Ironam drivelling on even more would make me cry, too."

Jenavally laughed, sniffing back her tears, and then punched him in the arm. "You're terrible, C'los."

"I know," he admitted, grinning.

The anticipated rain started to fall as misty drizzle as Jenavally made her way towards E'rom's family. C'los shook his head and turned to C'mine – except his weyrmate wasn't there. It took C'los a moment to locate him. The blue rider was standing near Epherineth, talking to T'kamen. Everyone else was scattering in groups and pairs. Even Isnan had already started back towards the infirmary.

You're not alone, said Indioth, in a mournful voice. *I'm here. I'm always here.*

Of course you are, C'los told his dragon hastily. He felt briefly ashamed that reassurance was necessary. A dragonrider was never alone. Even if it sometimes felt that way.