



#04

VI

Honour Those The Dragons Heed



The Weyrlingmaster, L'stev, strode noisily into the room in the manner that Sinterlion had learned was his custom, even after a scant sevenday in the Weyr. The buzz of conversation gradually died as the old brown rider scanned the ranks of candidates with narrowed eyes, counting. "Kalior," he barked at one boy. "You bunk with Rastevon. Where is he?"

"I don't know, sir," the stout Weyrbred lad replied, exhibiting more composure that Sinter felt he could have displayed under L'stev's withering gaze.

"Then go and find him! And as for the rest of you –" The Weyrlingmaster scowled from beneath the fierce dark eyebrows that dominated his face. "Sit. Listen. Where are the two R'yeno's Wing brought in yesterday?" His eyes lit on the pair in question, Jostakovu and Varthen, and he stabbed a finger at the front row of benches. "Sit here. You've got the most to learn."

Sinter had received the same orders the previous sevenday, on his first morning as a candidate. Sitting under the direct scrutiny of the impatient Weyrlingmaster had been a nerve-racking experience, even with Leah and Murrany either side. Nothing fazed Leah, but Murrany was as new to the Weyr as Sinter. Sharing a small room as they were with two Weyr boys, Sinter felt grateful that he and Murrany got along.

As the class rearranged itself, L'stev's frown intensified. "Now where the shell is..."

"Here, sir."

The words came, with barely masked insolence, from the husky young man who had just sauntered through the door of the teaching room. The Weyrlingmaster glared at the latecomer. "Sit down, Rastevon." Then, as the boy started to move towards the back row, L'stev growled, "Not there. Here."

Someone snickered, although whether at L'stev or at Rastevon, Sinter didn't know. Rastevon glowered at the Weyrlingmaster, and if the similarity of their names had not made it obvious enough, the identical scowls of rider and candidate made it clear that they were father and son. "Yes sir," he said, and sprawled on the bench next to Jostakovu. Sinterlion noticed Kalior edging back to join the class, slipping unobtrusively into the third row.

"Now that you're all here," and the Weyrlingmaster didn't deign to glare at Rastevon any longer, "you're going to recap what we did yesterday. Which was what, Kessirke?"

"Rider hierarchy, sir," replied the Weyr girl.

"Soleigh," L'stev snapped at one of the older Madellon girls, and then tossed her a stick of chalk. "You're scribing."

Soleigh nodded, accepting the task with her normal good humour. "Sir."

L'stev grunted, grudgingly satisfied, as the girl went to the blackboard. He flung himself gracelessly into the chair behind the desk. "Murrany, who's at the top of the heap?"

"The Weyrwoman and Weyrleader, sir," said Murrany.

"Polian, their names."

The Healer apprentice straightened on his bench. "Weyrwoman Valonna and Weyrleader T'kamen, sir."

"And their dragons. Gidra."

"Queen Shimpath and bronze Epherineth, sir."

"You address them how, Carleah?"

Leah replied with nonchalant assurance. "Not at all unless spoken to or taking a message, Weyrleader."

"And then how, Bela?"

"Weyrwoman and Weyrleader, sir," the Kellad girl said nervously.

L'stev's brows furrowed, and he stared at Bela until she added, "Weyrleader or sir, sir."

"Good. Rastevon, who's next important after the Weyrleaders?"

The burly lad stretched his legs out, answering complacently, "Why, who else but you, sir."

Sinter bit back a laugh, although the round of sniggers from half the rest of the class would have masked it.

"You'll find that while you're a candidate or weyring at Madellon Weyr, I'm even more important than the Weyrleaders, my boy," L'stev said ominously. "Dastur!"

"Uh, the Flightleaders, sir?"

The Weyrleader thumped his fist down on his desk, making most of the class jump. "Maris, would you like to explain to our newcomers why it would seem that Dastur's brain has been *between* for the last three months?"

"Yes, sir. The rank of Flightleader became obsolete at Madellon Weyr on bronze rider T'kamen's accession to the Weyrleadership."

"Sinterlion, would you then answer the question: who's next important after the Weyrleaders?"

"The, um, Wingleaders, sir," Sinter replied. He felt certain that he was correct, but intimidated nonetheless, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief when L'stev moved on.

"How many, Martouf?"

"Twelve, sir."

"Deyan, after the Wingleaders?"

"Wingseconds, sir."

"How many, Jardesse?"

"Twenty-four, sir, two per Wing."

"And after that, Larhon?"

"Er, bronze riders, sir?"

L'stev's fist thudded on the desk again. "Goridar?"

“All wingriders, sir,” said the Weyrbred apprentice, throwing a contemptuous look at the Holdbred Larhon.

The Weyrleader leaned forward, fixing each candidate, and particularly the two newest, with a searching look. “When some of you Impress – and it pains me to concede that some of you will – you’ll soon find why in *this* Weyr we don’t treat a wingrider better or worse for the colour of his dragon. Bronze, brown, blue or green – unless they’re wearing more than one stripe on the shoulder, are *wingrider*.” He paused for a moment to let that sink in, and then twisted in his seat to address Soleigh. “Where do Weyr Crafters fit in?”

“Masters are ranked with Wingleaders, journeymen between Wingsecond and wingrider depending on seniority, and apprentices more or less with weyrings, sir,” the girl replied, not pausing as she scribed out the rank structure L’stev had just goaded the class into describing.

“What about everybody else in the Weyr, Palroyan?”

“Sir, the Headwoman is equal with a Wingleader, her stewards are Wingseconds, and the rest are like wingriders.”

“And as candidates and possible weyrings, Harrenar, where do you stand?”

“Right at the bottom, Weyrleader, just below the tunnel-snakes.”

L’stev chuckled maliciously. “I like that, Harrenar. You all need to think in those terms. Now, would someone like to explain the insignia that are unique to Madellon? Korralthe?”

“Madellon’s riders wear shoulder epaulettes denoting rank in gold or silver stripes, chevrons, and stars, sir.”

“Chenda, run through them.”

In a bored tone, the Weyrbred girl recited, “One gold stripe for a rider, two for a Wingsecond, three for a Wingleader. Four used to be Flightleader. Stripes in silver if the rider is retired. Two gold stars for the Weyrwoman, one for a junior weyrwoman, two silver stars for the Weyrleader. Two gold chevrons for the Weyrleader and one silver chevron for a weyring.”

“So some of you *have* been listening,” the Weyrleader said, with grudging satisfaction. “Good. Get in the habit. Are you finished yet, girl?”

“Yes sir,” Soleigh replied, stepping back from the blackboard where she had written down everything they had covered, including sketches of the shoulder insignia. Sinter had been glad for the similar sketches Harrenar had drawn the previous day. He hadn’t known what a chevron looked like.

“Good. That’s going to stay on the board here until tomorrow morning, and you,” L’stev pointed at the most recent candidates, “are going to be sure that you know it all by then. Now, I don’t believe in sitting you indoors for any longer than I have to. Faranth knows, if you Impress from this clutch, you won’t be spending much time on your backsides for a good long while. So you’re going to shift them outside to the lake, where you’ll find something more useful for you to learn.” And with that, the Weyrleader thundered out of the room.

Sinter didn't want to be first out of his seat, but he was glad when Soleigh and Maris led the way towards the door. He glanced around at the other candidates as, singly and in groups, they made their way out. They numbered thirty or so, about half from the Weyr, half who had been Searched from Hold or Craft, with a few more boys than girls, although Krinlen had mentioned that the almost equal split was mostly due to the queen egg. Leah chatted animatedly to the girls she had immediately attracted as friends, and Murrany was talking to Harrenar.

As he hesitated in the doorway, two of the biggest Weyr boys jostled him carelessly aside. "Hey, watch it!" one of them snapped.

"I'm sorry," Sinter apologised, although he was sure the fault had not been his.

"You need to pay attention to where you're going," the other said. As the pair walked away, Sinter heard clearly the expression of disgust they tossed over their shoulders. "Faranth, stupid Holdbreds..."

"I thought they shoved you," a quiet voice said from behind Sinter.

Sinterlion turned around to see one of the new lads. "I thought so too, but..." He shrugged, indicating his slight stature.

The other boy grinned, and slipped forwards. "I'm Varthen, from Jessaf."

Sinter returned the smile, glad for a friendly face. Varthen was taller than he, and broader in the shoulders for all that he looked little older than Sinter's thirteen Turns. "Sinterlion, from Kellad...everyone calls me Sinter, though."

"Have you been here long?" Before Sinter could reply, Varthen went on, rapidly, "I just got here last night. Shells, I'd never seen a dragon except in the high sky, and next thing I knew a whole Wing had turned up at our cot, and they told me I could be a dragonrider!"

"I've only been here a few days," Sinter admitted. "But I helped with a dragon at Kellad, Darshanth."

"There's a dragon at Kellad?"

"No, I mean, yes, there was, but he's back here now. He got hurt in the fire at Turn's End, so I had to help with him. And then C'mine said I could come back here and maybe Impress." Sinter grinned, knowing that he had looked as awestruck as Varthen at that moment.

Both boys shivered as they stepped out into the chilly Bowl. Sinter noticed how Varthen gazed up at the nearest weyr ledges, staring in wonder at the dragons, his attention seized several times as one beast or other glided across the Weyr. The massive wingsails of a bronze cast a shadow over them as the dragon flew directly overhead, and Varthen sighed. "Can you imagine..." And he sighed again.

Sinter watched the bronze, then said softly, in case it was disrespectful, "I wouldn't mind a bronze, but I think I'd like a blue, like Darshanth."

"It was only a green as Searched me," said Varthen dismissively, "but you never hear about greens in the ballads, do you?"

“Nor blues, but there’s not a better dragon than Darshanth,” said Sinter, stout in his defence of C’mine’s dragon. “He rescued him from the fire, dived right through the flames and took him *between*. C’mine says he was glad Darshanth wasn’t bigger, ‘cause a brown or bronze wouldn’t have got through the trees!”

Varthen’s eyes had gone wide again at the story, but then something else caught his attention, and he pointed at the lake. “Say, Sinter, do you think that’s our lesson?”

L’stev waited by the closest of ten dragons, spaced out evenly along the shore of the lake. Their riders stood with the Weyrlingmaster, watching the approaching candidates with amused expressions. L’stev gestured for them to gather round in a half circle, and bellowed, “Get a move on!” at the stragglers.

Sinter and Varthen found a place at one end of the semicircle where the taller boys wouldn’t block their view, although L’stev’s habit of pacing up and down the line, sweeping each individual candidate with a fierce glare, put both boys on their toes. “If you Impress – *if*,” the Weyrlingmaster emphasised, “then each of you will be personally and intimately responsible for the health, happiness, and education of a Madellon dragonet. And as any of these riders will tell you, one of the biggest jobs of all is keeping a dragon clean. So. Three to a dragon, four if he’s brown or bronze, and I want to see each of them gleaming. Questions?”

A brawny Seacraft lad raised his hand. “Can my fire-lizards help?”

“Yes,” L’stev said shortly. “Any more? No? Brushes here, sand in the barrel there, and buckets.”

Some of the boys immediately hurried towards the only bronze. Varthen looked disappointed, but Sinter shrugged. “They’ve got more to clean. Let’s go and do that blue on the end.”

“An excellent choice,” said one of the nearby riders, with a broad grin. “Do you have another partner?”

Sinter glanced back at the other candidates, most of whom were still dithering over their trios. A red-haired girl who had been standing on the outskirts stepped forwards shyly. “I’ll help, if I may.”

“Certainly,” Sinter said politely, although Varthen looked unimpressed.

“I’m P’yom,” the blue rider introduced himself. He looked quite young himself, Sinter thought: no more than ten Turns older than most of the candidates, dark of hair and complexion, with a friendly grin that reinforced Sinter’s favourable opinion of blue riders.

“Sinter,” he offered.

“Varthen,” the other boy said, though he still gazed wistfully after the bronze.

“I’m Jenafa,” the shy girl admitted.

“Aith is looking forward to a good scrub,” said P’yom. “Grab yourselves some brushes and sand while we’re here – none of you are Weyrbred, are you?” When the three candidates shook

their heads, he went on, "Ask me anything you want about the Weyr. I've lived here all my life – and I won't bite your heads off, like old Low-Brow L'stev."

Jenafa giggled at the name, and Varthen sniggered. P'yom looked at them with exaggerated astonishment. "You didn't know he was called that? Let me tell you, by the time Aith and I graduated – and that wasn't so long ago – there were less complimentary nicknames for him!" He stopped by the last dragon in the line, and put a hand on the smooth greeny-blue hide. "This is Aith. Feel free to flatter him."

"Good morning, Aith," Sinter said boldly.

"He says good morning to you, too," P'yom relayed.

Sinter was disappointed: Darshanth had always spoken directly to him. But though Aith glanced in their direction, the blue didn't seem very interested in any of them.

"We'll get started on him, now," said the blue rider. "First thing you want when you're scrubbing a dragon is to get him wet, so we'll send him into the lake."

Aith lumbered into the water with the peculiar ungainly walking gait Sinter had observed in Darshanth. It was the shortness of the forearms, C'mine had told him, compared to the strong, long hind legs. Designed for flight, a dragon proved clumsy on the ground.

Under P'yom's instruction, Aith submerged and then reappeared. "Go ahead and get stuck in," the blue rider told the three candidates.

Sinter started to take off his boots – all the candidates were expected to wear practical, hardwearing garments for their lessons, but he didn't want to waterlog the leather. He glanced back at Varthen, noticing that the other lad looked lost as he stared at the mountain of blue dragon they were expected to scrub. "C'mon, it's not so hard."

Wielding the brush, and a fistful of soapsand, Sinter started to bathe the dragon as he had been taught: back ridges first, then neck and sides. Varthen waded in to attack the blue's forearm, and Jenafa tentatively soaped the near hind leg.

"You've done this before, Sinter," P'yom observed after a short time.

"I helped with Darshanth, at Kellad," said Sinter, unable to keep a hint of pride out of his voice.

"You did?" P'yom grinned. "We were there that day, you know, Aith and I. Second shift of riders on the fireline. Worked until the rain came and put it out."

Sinter slid down Aith's side, wincing at the chill of the water that came to halfway up his thighs, then splashed around to the blue's tail. Along the shore of the lake, he could see the other dragons and candidates in various predicaments: dragons wilfully misbehaving, candidates struggling, or not, to complete their task, riders standing by and laughing as often as helping the hapless candidates.

As he rubbed the soapsand into a lather along Aith's tail, Sinter looked sideways at Jenafa. She looked fit enough to be a dragonrider – L'stev had stressed the importance of that – neither delicate nor heavysset, with her reddish hair cut short to be practical without being severe, but she

wouldn't raise her eyes to meet his gaze. Sinterlion was by nature sufficiently gregarious to be encouraging of a more timid personality than his own. "So where're you from, Jenafa?"

The grateful look in the girl's eyes made up for her quietness. "Blue Shale," she admitted. "My da works on the fishing fleet – crew, not Craft – but we've a space in the main Hold, because he's away so much, and there's just the two of us."

Sinter wondered about the girl's mother, but decided not to ask. "You've not got any rider kin, then?"

Jenafa shook her head, scrubbing diligently at Aith's foot. "I don't know *anyone* here," she said, in a tone just short of despair.

"Well, you know me, now," said Sinter, "and Varthen. And you'll get to know everyone a lot better when we all Impress."

Jenafa nervously tucked a short curl of hair behind an ear. "E'dor said I'm to do my best to Impress the queen, but what if I don't?"

"Then maybe you'll Impress a green, and that's just as good."

The girl smiled timidly. "Do you think so?"

"He's right, you know," P'yom said from behind them. Both candidates twisted around to look at Aith's rider as he went on, "There's no shame in riding one of the smaller dragons at Madellon, not now. In fact, I'd wager that by the time this lot of eggs Hatches, you'll be seeing the first blue rider Wingseconds."

"Blue rider Wingseconds?" Varthen echoed sceptically, sloshing through the water with brush in hand.

"That's right!" P'yom grinned at him. "New Weyrleader, new rules. You just wait! Now, I think Aith's ready to rinse off, so you might want to get back, or he'll flood you."

Sinter waded up the bank with the others as Aith moved out into deeper water. He felt vindicated by P'yom's confidence that blue riders would be entitled to rank. He wondered if C'mine would be made Wingsecond. He was friends with the Weyrleader, after all. Sinterlion straightened up unconsciously at the thought of the terse, unsmiling bronze rider who commanded the whole of Madellon Weyr. He wasn't sure he'd ever want *that* much responsibility. But if blue riders could be Wingseconds – well, then, maybe he'd be lucky enough to Impress a dragon like Darshanth and have a chance at respectable rank, too. And that would suit him very well indeed.



L'stev scrawled the date and his signature – a wildly elaborate notation that no clever weyring would ever be able to forge – at the bottom of the page, and let the record hide roll itself up. Yawning widely, he glanced at the patch of sky just visible from his desk. Pitch black. How did it get so late so fast? Either the nights were drawing in unseasonably early, or he was getting absent-minded. Probably the latter, he thought sourly.

Although when riders over-eager to be the benefactor of Madellon's future new junior weyrwoman

kept dumping more useless girl candidates on him, it was no surprise that he worked long into each night writing up their reports. Pointless toil, since he could have picked out the no-hopers within seconds of meeting them, but protocol dictated that he keep a record of the conduct of each candidate, and L'stev believed devoutly in protocol. If nothing else, he had to set an example to young riders who needed to have obedience drilled into them – however boring or laborious or seemingly meaningless the task. But then, too, L'stev thought, he was too old to start flying a new formation. Forty Turns a rider, and Weyrlingmaster for fourteen of those, he'd had time enough to find out what worked.

The thought of the soft, useless Hold girls whose dubious chances at the new queen necessitated his long hours set L'stev to wondering if he should check up on a few of them. By tradition, candidates ignored their curfew, and after-hours exploits were benignly tolerated as part and parcel of the Weyr experience, but L'stev still liked to keep the youngsters on their toes. With no central dormitory, Hold and Craftbred candidates typically bunked in their Weyrbred counterparts' quarters, but L'stev didn't need records to know exactly who should be in which room at any one time. He savoured the prospect of scaring the dim wits out of some of those girls. A Weyrlingmaster – Candidate Master, he corrected himself pedantically, at least for the next four sevendays or so – enjoyed few pleasures.

There'll be time enough for you to scare them. Let them sleep.

L'stev snorted at the sanctimonious tone of Vanzanth's voice, and spoke aloud. "What are you doing awake? I thought I heard you snoring when I came in."

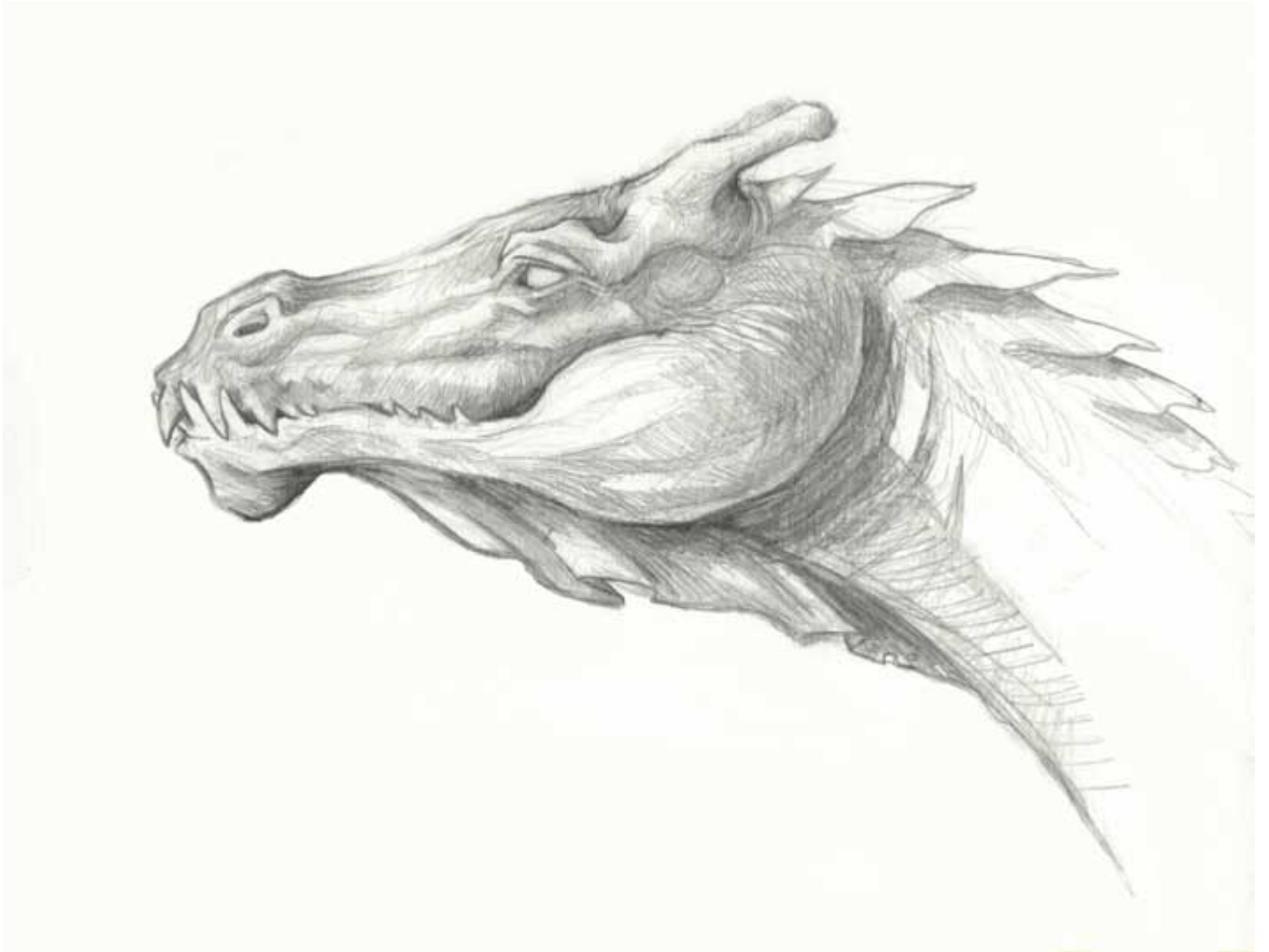
Your malicious thoughts woke me up. L'stev heard the brown stretch and turn on the couch in the adjacent chamber, and then Vanzanth's head appeared in the doorway, blocking out even the tiny scrap of sky that kept the Weyrlingmaster advised of the hour. *You should go to bed.*

"I'll go to bed when I'm ready," L'stev said, although most of his resistance was born of sheer irritation that he hadn't been aware of his dragon's increased consciousness. Maybe he was becoming absent-minded after all.

Vanzanth snorted, but he knew better than to disturb the work on his rider's desk. L'stev rose from his chair, making a face at the stiffness that had set into muscles and joints, and walked to the doorway. "You old wher," he said gruffly, clouting Vanzanth's cheek. "You're the one turning green with age."

I'm not turning green, it's the glow light, Vanzanth objected placidly. But as often as L'stev accused and Vanzanth denied, neither one was ignorant to the fact that they were getting older. L'stev leaned against his dragon's muzzle, giving and receiving the unconditional love and support and understanding that had flowed between them for four decades without words: no longer the Weyrlingmaster and his beast, just a rider, older than most, and a dragon.

With a final thump, he pushed himself upright and turned to make for his sleeping space. Vanzanth withdrew his head from the doorway and nudged the heavy leather curtain across the space on its rail. L'stev heard the brown dragon making himself comfortable once more on his



stone couch as he yanked back the fur on his own bed. Protracted physical contact was important in a young dragonpair, the bond still new and untried, but he and Vanzanth had known each other far too long and far too well for that to be necessary any more. Enough that the presence was there in his mind, the clever, calm personality of his Vanzanth, the infinite layers of love and understanding in the brown's mental touch.

L'stev sat down on the edge of his bed and started to lever the boots from his feet. The night-time peace wouldn't last once the candidates had become weyrlings. Then there would be dragonets waking up at all hours wanting their riders' attention, dragonets with indigestion, dragonets too young and stupid to realise that the night was for sleeping, not knocking around the barracks waking up all the others. If anything, their young riders would be worse. The first few months were always the hardest in terms of lost sleep, and L'stev anticipated losing a great deal in the two Turns to come.

He set his boots aside, for cleaning in the morning, and unbuttoned his shirt. Clothes were always folded neatly and placed in clean and dirty piles. Crauva would be by around midday to take the items for washing and return the previous day's garments, freshly laundered. She'd been looking after his things for the best part of ten Turns and knew what not to touch. L'stev made sure to be absent from his weyr for the two hours after noon. It was pleasant to return to quarters that had been swept and dusted, bed furs aired and sheets changed. One less thing for him to think about.

Finally, L'stev removed his bandanna, the plain black kerchief that he customarily wore to impose the gravity of his position on new candidates. The Weyrbred youngsters would know and tell of his great collection of garish bandannas, but in the main those born to the Weyr respected the Weyrlingmaster well enough. L'stev ran a hand through the straggly long hair that his headwear concealed – another popular myth disproved, for it was generally assumed that his bandannas hid a lack of hair, not an abundance. In truth, they hid his one mild rebellion and hypocrisy: he made new weyrlings cut their hair short, but couldn't bear to part with his own.

The brown rider scratched at the impressive pelt on his chest, pretending not to notice the grey mixed in with the black, and then swung his legs up onto the bed with a grunt. He lay still for a moment, then reached out to turn the glow basket.

"I'll have them running tomorrow," he said into the comfortable darkness.

Vanzanth didn't respond, although he was certainly listening.

"Laps of the Bowl," L'stev continued. "That should shake up some of those little girls who want to ride a queen."

Worse if they Impress fighting greens, Vanzanth commented grudgingly, as if reluctant to be conversing when he could be sleeping.

"Bad all round. Is it better to have useless girls on fighting dragons in an Interval, or the most useless of the lot on a queen who could end up Senior?" L'stev thumped emphatically at a pillow. "Gold egg in a clutch always makes trouble. Oh, if it isn't all the half-baked excuses the

bronze riders come up with for their simpering little pretties, or the floods of tears from the ones who never had a chance, or the ones who got greens instead and don't appreciate how lucky they are, then it's the queen weyrling herself, making trouble in the class, having her head turned by adult bronze riders who are counting the minutes until she's old enough to bed...."

A queen is always an asset.

"From where you're standing, Van, but it's not the dragon I worry about so much as whichever girl she takes it into her head to choose. If queens only had the sense to pick good solid Weyrbred girls!"

Vanzanth rumbled tolerantly. *You say this every time.*

"What do you know?" L'stev scoffed. "You don't remember the last time. The problem with weyrwomen is that they never *are* Weyr women. Now, take young Maris, and Soleigh –"

Greens.

"– they'd make excellent queen riders; sensible, level-headed, know the Weyr –"

Greens, Vanzanth repeated.

"I'm aware that they'll Impress greens," L'stev said, "but the point is that either one of them would make a better Weyrwoman than any of the hold girls who, Faranth save us all, are the ones most likely to get the queen. And do you know why that is, Vanzanth?"

I'm sure you're going to tell me.

"Newly-Hatched dragons don't have the sense they're born with."

Vanzanth's amusement at the comment was aggravating. *Neither do ageing Weyrwingmasters.*

"Full of wit tonight, aren't you? You know what I mean. Fresh out of the shell, starving hungry and convinced they'll die if they can't find riders – hatchlings aren't the most discerning creatures on the face of Pern, are they? And don't give me that 'the dragon knows' claptrap, Van. I've been at this game for too many long Turns to believe in that sort of sentimental nonsense. A dragonet makes a snap decision based on the best of what's available. If they were that fussy about their riders, more would die unmatched. Or choose from the stands, for that matter, and how often have we seen that in our time? Twice in forty Turns?"

What do I know? I don't remember the last time.

"Well, I do, and it was Jenavally twenty-odd Turns back, and she was sitting right down at the front, right in range of that green. Came out later that she'd been spotted on Search before, you know, and passed over because she'd just been made journeyman. No; the best hope a dragonet has of picking a rider who'll be a credit to the Weyr is if the Search riders have done their job properly. An adult dragon who knows he isn't going to die of hunger or loneliness has a much better chance of filtering the good from the bad. Except when there's a gold egg, of course, and then all bets are off."

Vanzanth was silent for a long moment, and then he said, *You still blame yourself for Valonna.*

The perception could not have been Vanzanth's alone. Clever as he was - sharper than most dragons and with a better memory - the brown still could not have recalled for himself the unhappiness with which L'stev had released the young queen rider from his care almost six Turns ago, his lack of conviction in her readiness to take on the responsibilities so abruptly ceded by her predecessor, his frustration at being unable to prevent her immediate flight into the thrall of an arrogant young bronze rider whose motivations were wholly selfish. No: the dragon must have picked the thought from the back of L'stev's mind, where the fear that it would happen again had been harrying him ever since Shimpath had laid her golden egg. It troubled L'stev; not that Vanzanth had access to his fears, for he always had and always would, but that the brown had seen unerringly to the heart of the issue. Valonna had been a child, yes, a young girl of the holders, but did the blame for her inadequacy not fall to her teacher? Was L'stev himself not the one at fault? He had tried so hard with her, teaching her everything he thought a good weyrwoman should know, and yet still she was a disappointment to the Weyr. Was there something more he could have done?

Vanzanth did not respond to that unspoken thought, and L'stev knew that the brown dragon was asking the same questions of himself. He had taken as great a responsibility, a joy, in teaching the young weyrlings as his rider: almost eighty dragonpairs had earned their wingriders' stripes under their joint tutelage. He had mourned those they had lost to accident and injury as deeply as L'stev, recriminated with himself as fiercely, gone on with the survivors as stalwartly. In guiding the young of the Weyr, Vanzanth was as dedicated and passionate as a man could hope his dragon to be.

"We do the best we can, old wher, and hope the new queen is wiser than her dam," L'stev said finally. "And that she breaks shell sooner rather than later, when there's still some choice."

The problem of candidate numbers gave L'stev sleepless nights before every Hatching. Madellon didn't have such a large population that it could always offer a large clutch a decent selection from its own lower caverns. There were usually enough boys; even when the unsuitable had been filtered out, Madellon could muster an easy twenty lads of the right age to Impress. But not all girls chose to stand, and it wasn't good to restrict the choice. L'stev had never seen a dragonet left unpartnered – and he thanked Faranth for that mercy – but he had seen uneasy matches made, at the tail-end of an Impression ceremony when pickings were slim: a blue choosing a boy better suited to bronze, a green accepting a headstrong girl over a sensible lad. A wider range of suitable young people improved the chances of strong bonds and compatible personalities, but the balance between quantity and quality was delicate, and taking on candidates to make up the numbers could have repercussions if those same undesirable youngsters Impressed. Of course, it was one of the first tasks of a Weyrlingmaster to reconcile each new weyrling with the colour of his or her dragon, but there would always be those who resented the restrictions enforced by the colour hierarchy.

L'stev already had his eye on several individuals in the current crop. As the candidates sorted themselves out into friendship groups and rival factions, the Weyrilingmaster gained a sense for trouble. A clique had formed of some of the physically bigger Weyr boys: Dastur, Martouf, Kodam, Goridar. L'stev had seen its like before, and knew he would have to take steps to break the alliance if some or all of them Impressed. A less troubling friendship was developing between some of the girls, ably headed by Soleigh and Maris. The pair had stood unsuccessfully at the previous Hatching, and L'stev trusted them to encourage, advise, and chaperone the younger girls, as necessary. A few of the younger Hold and Hall lads bore watching, if only to protect them from the cannier Weyr boys. And, of course, there was Rastevon.

It was hardly the first time a child of L'stev's had stood as a candidate. He had two sons and a daughter on Madellon dragons: seasoned riders all. But none had stood to Impress in the Turns that he had served as Weyrilingmaster - not until Rastevon, his youngest by more than a decade. He had been fostered after his weaning, and not a day too soon: his mother had died not long after, and by his fourth Turn, L'stev had been wrapped up in the duties of a Weyrilingmaster. The boy had thrived and grown under his foster-mother's care, and L'stev had devoted his pastoral inclinations to the education of Madellon's weyrings.

Five Turns ago, L'stev had been surprised to realise that his son was of age to stand. He had taken pains to treat Rastevon like all the others, and concealed his disappointment when the lad failed to attach a dragonet. A mere twelve Turns old, Rastevon would have other chances. The instruction of the weyring class resulting from that Hatching had taken up the better part of the next two Turns, and L'stev had had little contact with his son since.

The husky youth of seventeen who had strolled, late, into every candidate class since Shimpath's clutch had been laid bore L'stev a striking resemblance, and the brown rider wondered if that was why Rastevon persisted in making trouble. Afraid, perhaps, that his relationship to the Weyrilingmaster would isolate him from the others, he was overcompensating. With more than thirty candidates to keep in line already, L'stev couldn't afford the time to deal with his son's behaviour personally - and nor could he afford drawing attention to their blood bond. Until he had more time, or a better idea, he intended to treat Rastevon like any other truculent candidate. The ultimate punishment would be to bar the boy from the sands, but that was a harsh sentence when clutches were so infrequent. L'stev wouldn't deny his own son a chance at Impression simply to make an example of him.

The brown rider started to ask Vanzanth's opinion of the matter, then realised that the dragon had fallen asleep. L'stev sighed. "Absent-minded old man," he muttered to himself, and closed his eyes.