



VIII

Weyrman, Learn



F'yan looked up from what he was doing when C'los entered his weyr, eyeing the green rider at some length. "Sit down," he grunted finally, with the barest of nods towards the bench that, from painful experience, C'los knew to be both hard and cold.

The green rider obeyed, wincing not only at the uncomfortable seat, but at the memories it brought to the forefront of his mind. He'd spent some considerable time on this bench as a young rider in F'yan's Wing – usually awaiting punishment for some smart-mouthed comment or other. The Turns had taught C'los a certain amount of discretion, but sitting in the Wingleader's stark, musty-smelling weyr took him back over a decade.

F'yan had changed very little in the intervening Turns. He was a stout man in his sixth decade, and C'los had always wondered if the Wingleader's sour disposition had anything to do with the baldness that had robbed him of what must once have been a fine mane of black hair. What remained of it was wispy and unconvincing, and had been a convenient target for all manner of unkind remarks even when C'los had been a weyrling.

As the minutes passed, and F'yan showed no sign of addressing him, C'los began to shift his weight impatiently. His discovery of the vessel from which E'rom must have taken his final drink made him certain that he was on the right track, and he wanted to follow it up. Being at F'yan's mercy maddened him. The bronze rider's studied disregard was also, C'los realised, a measure of the contempt in which F'yan held him. C'los had never seen eye-to-eye with F'yan, and even though he'd transferred to another Wing Turns ago, he knew the Wingleader harboured a strong dislike for him. F'yan had been but a moderate supporter of L'dro's methods – a factor that had contributed to his retention of his rank – but he'd never made a secret of his poor opinion of C'los.

The green rider cleared his throat. "Wingleader, I..."

"We'll begin when I'm ready, rider," F'yan interrupted. "Your tardiness compounds the inconvenience of this audience. Don't test my patience any further."

C'los bit his lip to hold in the scornful retort. "I speak for the Weyrleader on this matter," he said instead, imitating the flat force that T'kamen could project so effortlessly. "Would you like me to interrupt him so he can inform you of the importance of this investigation in person?"

F'yan looked at C'los with an expression of such palpable loathing that the green rider almost shuddered, but the veiled threat had its desired effect. No rider in the Weyr who valued his rank wanted to cross the notoriously short-tempered Weyrleader. "That won't be necessary, green rider." He put insulting emphasis on C'los' rank. "What do you want?"

C'los cut straight to the chase. "You were E'rom's Wingleader for seven Turns."

“So?”

“What kind of man was he?”

F'yan shrugged. “Reliable. Dependable. You don't need me to tell you that, even if they are characteristics alien to you.”

C'los ignored the insult. “As a Wingsecond, did you ever have reason to doubt his handling of the other members of the Wing?”

“No. He was a trustworthy man. He took care of all the minor business that I didn't have time for.”

“What sort of minor business?”

“Petty discipline. Keeping the younger riders in line, especially the ones new in from graduation. Organising drills and inspections and the like.”

“Were there any problems with his disciplinary decisions?”

“Problems? Why should there be?”

“Did any rider come to you objecting to E'rom's rulings?”

“No. Even if they had, they wouldn't have found any joy with me. I don't have time for bleaters.”

Again, C'los swallowed the desire to react to the Wingleader's thinly-veiled slight. “What can you tell me about blue rider C'dessa?” he asked.

F'yan looked discomfited at the name. “He's not one of mine any more.”

“But he was for nearly nine Turns,” C'los pointed out.

“Go and ask H'ned.”

“I'm asking you.”

F'yan glowered. The green rider detected something more than mulishness in the Wingleader's reluctance to answer the question. C'los had his own opinion of the blue rider in question, but he wanted to know what F'yan would say.

“Younger than his Turns,” the Wingleader said shortly. “The boy has a great deal of growing up left to do.”

“Why do you say that, Wingleader?” C'los asked, carefully bland.

F'yan looked even more uncomfortable. “He had issues with authority. Nothing that couldn't be handled within his own Wing.”

“By E'rom?”

“That's the purpose of a Wingsecond.”

“You never saw fit to mention C'dessa's larceny to the Weyrleader, then?”

F'yan came angrily to his feet. “You go too far, green rider!”

“Do you deny,” C'los went on triumphantly, “that C'dessa was caught thieving from other members of the Wing, not just once, but several times?”

“He was light fingered,” said F'yan. “Nothing that couldn't be handled –“

“Within his own Wing,” C'los completed for him. He paused. “By E'rom.”

"I told you, his main duty was to keep the riders in line. It didn't need to go outside the Wing."

"E'rom's reports indicate that he asked you to go to the Weyrleader about C'dessa's larceny on several occasions."

F'yan snorted in derision. "And do you think our gracious Weyrleader L'dro would have been interested?"

C'los had to concede the point, and he decided not to press that particular issue. It was of little relevance to his investigations that F'yan had been covering up the thieving ways of one of his wingriders to spare himself the association, but putting the bronze rider on the defensive had always been the best way to handle the man. "Nonetheless, E'rom did want to take the matter higher, did he not?"

"I told him – not while I was his Wingleader."

The green rider nodded wisely. "Tell me, Wingleader, do you know what's happened to C'dessa since T'kamen became Weyrleader?"

F'yan folded his arms. "Why should I? He's not my problem any more."

"When the Wings were reassigned, E'rom reported C'dessa's habits to Wingleader H'ned," said C'los. It seemed clear from F'yan's demeanour that the bronze rider was fully aware of the series of events. "H'ned in turn reported the problem to the Weyrleader. Following an investigation, the Weyrleader suspended C'dessa from active duty and forbade him to leave the Weyr, amongst other restrictions."

"The new Weyrleader takes a more personal interest than his predecessor," said F'yan. "What's your point?"

"Based on what you know of their professional relationship, how do you think C'dessa would have reacted to E'rom's decision to report him?"

"Why don't you ask C'dessa that?"

"I thought you might be in a good position to give me an objective opinion, Wingleader," C'los said. Then, because he couldn't resist getting in at least one dig, he added, "After all, you're an expert on bearing grudges."

That proved too much for F'yan. "That's enough out of you, green rider," he snapped. "I won't be insulted by your like, Weyrleader or no Weyrleader. Get out."

"I'll be sure to tell T'kamen how helpful you were," C'los said gaily. It was worth cutting the mostly pointless interview short in order to get in a few long-overdue jabs at his first Wingleader.

"You do that, rider," said F'yan, suddenly ominous. "I'll be sure to mention how his chosen representative is hiding behind his borrowed authority." The Wingleader's eyes narrowed suddenly. "What's he got you sniffing around for, anyway? What's so unexplained about E'rom's death?"

That question, more than the implied threat, sobered C'los. "That's the Weyrleader's business," he said flatly. "Good day, Wingleader."

As he beat a hasty retreat from F'yan's weyr, giving Vidrilleth a wide berth, C'los felt cold. It was the first time that someone had directly questioned his investigation into E'rom's death. Only two factors had so far kept anyone from guessing, at least openly, that it was a murder enquiry. As a new Weyrleader, T'kamen could be expected to authorise unusual and unexpected measures, and E'rom was the first rider to have died of anything but age during his tenure. But perhaps more significantly, C'los didn't believe anyone in the Weyr would think to consider murder as the cause of E'rom's death. After all, who would want to kill a dragonrider? That, more than anything else, was surely keeping the horrible truth from the Weyr in general. But if a man like F'yan could grow suspicious, how long would it be before someone else realised that C'los' questioning was intended not to discover why E'rom had died, but who might have had the method and motive to kill him?

It had started to rain since he had been in F'yan's weyr. C'los glanced up at the sky, wondering if the drizzle was going to turn into something worse. He'd sent Indioth back to their weyr before going in to see F'yan. His next appointment was in H'ned's quarters, a short walk on from Vidrilleth's ledge that certainly didn't merit a dragon's assistance. Still, as the green rider started towards the second Wingleader's weyr, he wished he'd thought to wear his jacket. He always forgot such practicalities when he had something more important on his mind. C'mine would usually have reminded him, but he had been conspicuous by his absence from their weyr when C'los had left to see K'ston.

The rain was falling in earnest by the time he reached H'ned's weyr. Fortunately, his reception there was warmer than that provided by F'yan. "You look like a drowned tunnel snake, C'los," the Wingleader greeted him, rising from the chair before his hearth.

"Thanks," C'los replied. "I'll just drip on your floor, shall I?"

Chuckling, H'ned found a towel from somewhere and tossed it to him. "I take it you didn't look at the sweep rider's report this morning. There's enough weather coming north off the plains to keep the Weyr wet for a couple of days."

"I haven't been near the dining hall today," C'los replied, rubbing his hair dry. "Too much to do."

"You'd better take a seat, then. Can I mull you some wine?"

C'los sat by the fire, enjoying the warmth. "Thanks, Wingleader."

"Just H'ned, C'los."

As the bronze rider rested the end of a poker in the fire to heat and went to pour wine, C'los considered the contrast between H'ned and F'yan. H'ned's support for L'dro in the months leading up to Shimpath's mating had seemed genuine, but by all accounts of the flight itself his bronze had come within a hair's breadth of catching the queen. Of all the men that remained from L'dro's old bronze rider Council, C'los liked H'ned the most. His bright red hair contrasted oddly with his pale, almost colourless eyes, but since T'kamen had become Weyrleader, C'los had come to appreciate H'ned's understated warmth.



"You mentioned there were a couple of riders in particular you wanted to talk about, C'los," said H'ned, carrying two goblets of wine back to the fire. "I've taken the liberty of asking them to be prepared to come down while you're here."

"That'll save me some time," C'los said. "Faranth knows I wasted plenty with F'yan."

H'ned shook his head as he took the hot poker out of the fire. "He's never exactly been tractable. But then, you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

"He only confirmed what I already knew," said C'los, watching as H'ned heated the wine with the end of the poker. "C'dessa was Searched at the same time as T'kamen and Mine and me. T'kamen knew him best, though. Both Trader born."

"That accounts for his quick hands, then," said H'ned. "Not that I'm making a judgement about Traders, but they do seem to have a dexterity that most Harpers would envy. Don't burn yourself on this."

C'los took the cup of hot spiced wine and sipped carefully. "That's good."

H'ned sat in the other chair and leaned back. "So, the Weyrleader's got you investigating E'rom's problem riders, eh? This is to help him choose a replacement?"

The green rider hadn't thought of that as a possible explanation for his questioning. It would make a convenient smokescreen. "Partly," he said. "How did you find E'rom as a Wingsecond?"

"My initial impression of him was that he was used to taking on a lot more than I would expect," said H'ned. "S'rannis – my other Wingsecond – actually came to me bewildered because he had nothing to do. We sat down in the early days, the three of us, and discussed how we'd handle the Wing. E'rom wasn't afraid of taking a rider in hand, even when that made him unpopular, and that's a great asset for a Wingleader to have."

"Was he unpopular?" C'los asked.

H'ned frowned thoughtfully. "He was never unfair. If he had an issue to take up with a rider, he'd always do it privately. There are some riders in the Weyr who believe in public discipline, but not E'rom. I wouldn't have said that he was the most sympathetic of Wingseconds, but he wasn't vindictive or petty, either. He just knew his job and got on with it."

"I've read the reports he wrote for the three months he was your Wingsecond," said C'los. "But were there any significant incidents with riders in that time?"

"The obvious one is C'dessa," said H'ned. "He must have known he was on borrowed time, but he still took it badly when he was hauled up in front of the Weyrleader. He's only, what, twenty-six? Twenty-seven? I think he was used to having E'rom sitting on his little hobby, and it came as a betrayal when he turned him in."

"Do you think there was a lot of resentment there?"

"It's hard to say. You probably have a better idea than me, but C'dessa seems like the emotional sort."

"He always was a little jittery," C'los admitted.

"I'd peg him as the type to whip himself up into a frenzy one minute, and forget about it the next," H'ned opined. "I'm not sure that he'd hold any long-term grudge."

C'los nodded. "There was another name in the report that I saw come up," he said. "A green rider, Pyrea."

H'ned laughed. "That tickled S'rannis and me. Pyrea was like C'dessa in that they were both in E'rom's old Wing. The incident you're probably referring to is her conduct following her green's flight about two months ago."

C'los nodded. "She missed Wing drill and blamed it on her dragon's flight?"

"That's right. The flight in question had been a day and a half previously. Anyway, it seems that it wasn't the first time she'd used a mating flight as an excuse to skip drills, so E'rom slapped some punishment watches on her."

"That sounds fair enough," said C'los.

"That's what I thought," H'ned agreed. "Except a few sevendays ago – just before Shimpath clutched, I think – Pyrea's green rose again, and both she *and* E'rom missed drill the next day. It turns out that Sigith caught Aprath. Pyrea's obviously enthusiastic about her dragon's flights."

C'los chuckled. "Was that the last mating flight Sigith participated in, then?"

"Probably. I don't think they were all that energetic most of the time. Pyrea was quite upset. Maybe the overexertion of Aprath's flight was what finished E'rom off."

H'ned's tone was facetious, but C'los shivered. "One more name for you," he said. "Brown rider T'fer."

The Wingleader nodded slowly. "Now, if ever there were a rider who's a thorn in my side...."

"His name comes up more often than any other," said C'los.

"T'fer is a piece of work, C'los. A talented and clever piece of work, but trouble nonetheless." H'ned sighed. "I don't suppose it's very obvious from his record."

"All the marks against him seem fairly incidental," said C'los. "Minor insubordination, disrespect to his commanding rider."

"I could live with the occasional insult," H'ned said dryly. "It's the disobedience that concerns me. That, and the one I can't put down on a report – taking initiative."

C'los raised an eyebrow.

"He oversteps his authority," H'ned explained. "Oh, Faranth knows we've all done that at some point, but a slap on the wrist is enough to put most riders back in their place. T'fer doesn't understand the concept of chain of command."

"Why not just order your riders not to follow his directions?" C'los asked.

"Because they're usually very logical commands," said H'ned. "There's no doubt about it, he's got a talent for seeing patterns in drill and marshalling his forces to suit. But you know as well as I do how dangerous it can be for the hierarchy to break down in the middle of a flaming drill."

"It sounds to me like he'd make an excellent Wingsecond," said C'los.

"He probably would," the Wingleader replied. "But when the Weyrleader reshuffled the Wings, he had to be discerning, and you've seen T'fer's disciplinary record."

"I suppose that would make T'kamen disinclined to promote him," C'los conceded. "What about you?"

"I don't know," H'ned replied honestly. "I put his name forward, with six or eight others, for the Weyrleader to consider – well, you know that, or you wouldn't be here. I feel T'fer could either be a brilliant asset as a Wingsecond, or a complete disaster, but I'm not sure I want to make the call."

"Who are the other frontrunners?"

H'ned shrugged. "W'den, H'jan. My old Wingsecond, J'her."

"Jenavally's boy?"

The Wingleader nodded. "He's really too young; he was out of his depth."

"W'den used to be L'dro's shadow when we were weyrings," said C'los. "T'kamen can't stand him. H'jan's been tried out as a Wingsecond before."

"Most of the remaining brown riders in the Weyr have," H'ned agreed, "and the ones that haven't are still wet behind the ears. I've got plenty of respect for young T'rello, but he's the exception."

"I'd say that puts T'fer in a very strong position," C'los mused. "You can't tell with T'kamen, though. He could do something unexpected."

"I've noticed he does that."

"It's not that his ideas are particularly radical," said C'los. "He just doesn't give us any warning when he implements something new."

H'ned smiled. "Are you ready for me to call them in?"

The green rider nodded. "Where are they?"

"The Wing ready room, on the other side of Izath's weyr. He's been sitting with his back to the door so they can't get away."

"Are you expecting them to try?"

"Izath lives in hope."

C'dessa came in first. The slight rider hadn't changed significantly from the furtive boy who had arrived at Madellon nearly fifteen Turns ago. He had the drab, nondescript appearance of a man who wanted to blend in: the eye simply slid across his unremarkable features and coloration, as if he weren't even there. His family was distantly related to T'kamen's, but there was no resemblance to draw attention to the remote blood tie – a fact for which, C'los knew, T'kamen had always been rather grateful.

"C'dessa," H'ned greeted his wayward rider. "You know green rider C'los."

"We've met," said C'dessa, with suspicion, but no hostility.

"He'd like to ask you a few questions about the late Wingsecond E'rom."

The blue rider looked faintly surprised. C'los supposed that C'dessa had been interrogated regarding his misdemeanours so often that it actually came as a pleasant change to be asked about something else. "You rode under E'rom as a Wingsecond for seven Turns in F'yan's old Wing, correct?"

C'dessa shrugged. "If you say so. I don't remember how many Turns it was. Seemed like forever."

"Why do you say that?"

"Do you know what it's like having some boring old man breathing down your neck all the time?" the blue rider asked. "I couldn't even take a piss without him wanting to know about it."

"E'rom was always aware of your..." C'los paused delicately, "...pastime, wasn't he?"

C'dessa's face darkened. "Yeah, he knew. But he didn't have to tell, did he? Faranth, if he'd just have died sooner, I wouldn't be in this mess!"

"Have a little respect for the dead, rider," H'ned said severely.

"You weren't pleased when E'rom reported your activities to the Weyrleader, then?" C'los asked.

"Of course I wasn't sharding pleased! We had an agreement, scorch it!"

"An agreement?"

C'dessa snorted in disgust. "I kept it small and he didn't let on. It worked fine."

"So what was your first reaction to his death?"

"My first?" C'dessa looked askance. "Shock, obviously. Then indifference, since it wasn't as if I could do anything about it."

"Why do you say that?"

C'dessa glared at him. "Because I was in my weyr. That's the only place I'm *allowed* to be, unless we're on a midnight watch, or someone's summoned me on some stupid errand."

The green rider considered that response for a moment. Then, mindful of his purported reason for interviewing C'dessa, he asked, "What would you look for in E'rom's successor?"

"A little integrity," the blue rider replied sullenly. "Sharding turncoat..."

"That's enough, C'dessa," said H'ned, with a sigh. C'los nodded to the Wingleader, and he continued, "You can go back to your weyr, now."

"See?" C'dessa demanded petulantly, even as H'ned ushered him out.

C'los waited until the blue rider had gone, then shook his head with a sympathetic grimace. "I don't envy you him, H'ned."

The bronze rider sprawled back in his chair with a long-suffering groan. "I've been trying to think of a way to fob him off on one of the other Wingleaders. L'mis, or perhaps D'sion."

"They wouldn't have him," C'los told him. "Who's next?"

"Pyrea. I'll have Izath get Aprath to send her in."

The moment the green rider walked into the room, C'los knew he was wasting his time with her. Pyrea was a voluptuous lady in her late forties who carried herself with supreme confidence in

her own magnetism. Something about the coquettish look she flicked both riders from under her lashes convinced C'los that this was a woman more than capable of exhausting herself and her flight partner for a month, let alone a few days. But Pyrea was tiny – barely as tall as C'los' shoulder – and the length of her fingernails, while vaguely intimidating, confirmed C'los' initial reaction. This immaculately-groomed little woman plainly wouldn't have had the strength to drag the unconscious body of a tall and bulky rider like E'rom all the way from his inner weyr to the ledge. Even if she had, her perfect fingernails – more like a dragon's talons, C'los thought – wouldn't have survived. He wondered how she groomed her dragon without scratching the poor beast to tatters.

C'los asked Pyrea several questions about her experience of E'rom as a Wingsecond before indicating to H'ned that she could go. The instant dismissal of the little green rider as a murder suspect made C'los consider a new factor. Whoever had murdered E'rom must have been physically strong enough to haul the body several dragonlengths to the weyr ledge.

When H'ned's final wingrider stepped quietly into the room, C'los didn't need to debate if he was strong enough. T'fer was tall and powerful and broader in the shoulders than any man had a right to be. He carried himself with a self assurance just short of a swagger, and nodded perfunctorily to H'ned before fixing C'los with an interested look.

H'ned began, "T'fer, this is...."

"Green rider C'los," T'fer completed smoothly, with a slight inclination of his head.

C'los couldn't help preening slightly at the recognition – a welcome balm to his ego after F'yan's sneering attitude. "I realise you only flew under Wingsecond E'rom for a few months, T'fer, but can you tell me how you would rate his abilities?"

"Certainly," the brown rider replied. "E'rom was an excellent Wingsecond and a fine rider. That was clear even after only three months."

"What in particular would you say were his strengths?" C'los asked.

"He maintained a very close and caring relationship with his wingriders," the brown rider replied. "I think that's important in a Wingsecond, to act as an approachable buffer between wingriders and Wingleader."

"Did you hope for a Wingsecond position when the Wings were reorganised?"

T'fer smiled. "I hoped, of course, but both E'rom and S'rannis were experienced and capable riders, and they would be the obvious choices."

The brown rider's tone was bland – too bland. "What was your reaction to E'rom's death?"

"Shock, of course. It was a terrible tragedy."

C'los decided to ask a more pointed question. "You didn't think at all about the Wingsecond slot that became vacant on his demise?"

For a moment, T'fer's carefully polite expression faltered. Then he smiled disarmingly. "I can't pretend that the thought didn't cross my mind eventually, green rider, but it certainly wasn't my first reaction."

C'los nodded slowly, filing away that look of indecision for future consideration. "Do you remember the last time you saw him before his death?"

"That morning. I only remember because I was the rest of that day with my weyrmate, preparing for Wing drill."

"And your weyrmate is...?"

"Demmy, Cailleth's rider."

The green rider smiled briefly. "One of my weyrmate's successful Searches. Thank you, T'fer, you've been very helpful." Then, to reinforce the ostensible reason for the interview, he added, "I'll be speaking with the Weyrleader in due course."

"I'm sure the decision you make will be wise," T'fer replied.

"You can go, wingrider," H'ned said quietly.

The brown rider stepped forward to take C'los' wrist in the strong grasp of both his hands, shaking firmly. "Thanks for your time, C'los."

"You can go," H'ned repeated, more forcefully.

T'fer released the green rider's wrist and turned to go. C'los noticed that he didn't bother to take his leave of H'ned.

"Well," said the Wingleader, when the brown rider's footfalls had receded, "that was interesting."

C'los looked thoughtfully into the fire for a moment before asking, "Why do you say that?"

The red-haired Wingleader smiled. "I've never seen him trying so hard to curry favour."

The green rider wasn't sure if he should be amused or hurt. "His approach surprised me, after what you said about him," he admitted.

H'ned shrugged. "He knows you're T'kamen's right-hand man, and he really wants that Wingsecond job."

C'los frowned. Part of him was drawn to the brown rider. There was something indefinably magnetic about his self confidence, and he could see why H'ned considered him such a good prospect for leadership. But the phrasing of his answers had seemed too polished, the answers themselves too ready, as if he had rehearsed the interview, or one like it. "How insincere do you think he was being?"

"Put it this way, C'los: I'd bet Izath's tail that T'fer was thinking about promotion before the dragons had even stopped keening for Sigith." The bronze rider shook his head. "You've seen the reports. T'fer had about as much respect for E'rom as he does for me."

"Does he think that will help his case?" asked C'los.

"I think he takes the opinion that treating me as an equal rather than a superior enhances his standing with me."

"Does it?"

"I have a certain amount of admiration for his nerve," H'ned admitted. "But that's what bothers me. I don't know what he'd be like given actual power." The bronze rider sighed. "It's times like these that I'm glad Epherineth won Shimpath's flight."

C'los smiled. "We're all supposed to be glad of that, H'ned." He got to his feet, handing his empty wine goblet back to the Wingleader. "I won't keep you any longer."

H'ned also stood. "More Wingsecond candidates to interview?" he guessed.

"That's right," the green rider lied easily. "T'kamen wants me to be thorough."

C'los left H'ned's weyr, nodding distractedly to Izath on the way past, reviewing his conclusions. Of the three riders most likely to have held a professional grudge against E'rom, he was down to two. Pyrea couldn't have committed the murder, even if she'd had sufficient motive. C'dessa had the motive, and C'los had no doubt that the blue rider could have stolen fellis juice from the infirmary. T'fer had sufficient ambition to have wanted E'rom out of the way, and something about the brown rider definitely unsettled C'los, but he couldn't say exactly what.

The green rider was about to call Indioth for a lift back to their weyr when he had a better idea. *Indy, would you find out where Vanzanth's rider is?*

After the customary pause, Indioth replied, *He's at the weyrling barracks with the young ones.* Then the green added, *Our young one is there, too.*

"She would be," C'los muttered aloud. *Let Vanzanth know I'm coming.*

It was still raining, but C'los hugged the wall of the Bowl as he made his way towards the eastern end of the Weyr. The weyrling barracks were located conveniently close to the Hatching cavern, but at some remove from the inhabited weyrs of adult riders. Only the Weyrlingmaster's weyr, and a handful of other caverns for the use of his assistants, were close to where the young dragonets would live for the first few disruptive months of their lives.

Vanzanth bulked large on his ledge above and to the left of the big double doors that granted access to the barracks, neck drawn in and shoulders hunched against the rain in a posture so like that of his rider that C'los grinned. "Afternoon," he greeted the old brown. "Nice weather we're having."

The brown dragon stared at him with the expression that always seemed faintly mistrustful to C'los. The green rider shook his head. "Be that way."

The smaller gate set into the right-hand door was large enough for a person, but not for a dragonet of more than a few sevendays old. C'los opened it, and chuckled to himself as the hinges shrieked. How many times had he been woken in the dead of night or early in the morning by that incurably creaky door? Weyrlings trying to sneak in or out of the barracks were always betrayed by it, earning the complaints of their classmates and the scowling rebukes of the Weyrlingmaster, whose ears were finely attuned to the distinctive sound. Attempts had been made to oil the hinges, or muffle them, but to no avail. C'los had often wondered how exactly L'stev contrived to keep them so noisy.

Inside, the barracks opened out: a broad cavern that had been blasted from the rock almost a century ago. It had been designed to accommodate up to sixty half-grown dragons and their weyrling riders, although there had never been so many dragonets at once in Madellon history. The more remote couches had never been used, and heavy screens could be placed to block off the unused areas, conserving warmth. Riders' pallet beds and dragons' platforms alternated in pairs: two cots, then two couches, then two more cots, all around the walls. It broke up the dormitory feel of the barracks, giving the young riders a compromise between privacy and companionship without actually separating them. Girls and boys shared the same barracks, although they were assigned different sides of the cavern. Toilet and bathing facilities were also separate, set further back into the rock of the Weyr and remotely connected to the main lower caverns complex. The classrooms and storerooms were communal, however, as was the seldom-used common room.

C'los remembered his tenure in these serviceable quarters with definite fondness. Weyrling training was hard, exhausting work, and some of his classmates – notably the former Weyrleader L'dro – had been less than friendly, but very little could compare to those early days of his connection with Indioth. The startling impact of his Impression, the pride he'd felt at being fitted out with riding wherhides, the thrill of his first flight with Indioth and then their terrifying first trip *between*, the exhilaration of flaming drills, and finally the honour of graduating into an adult fighting Wing: those were the memories C'los associated with the weyrling barracks.

Those, and L'stev, the gruff Weyrlingmaster whose manner and bearing had changed as little in the intervening Turns as had his appearance. The brown rider was overseeing the young candidates as they worked to clean the dust and grime of several Turns of vacancy from the barracks. With brooms and brushes, soap sand and cloths, the candidates toiled to sweep, scrub, wash, and polish the furnishings they all hoped to inhabit when Shimpath's clutch Hatched.

L'stev beckoned the green rider over with a jerk of his head. "Don't even think about sweeping that dust under the bed, Branvalt," he cautioned one skinny lad. "Shenaz, if that chest isn't gleaming by the time I come over there, I'm going to want to know why."

"I see nothing much has changed in fourteen Turns," C'los said to the Weyrlingmaster. "Abusing candidates still a speciality."

The brown rider frowned at him. "You'll be joining them in a minute," he threatened.

C'los grinned, looking around for his daughter. "One member of the family's enough."

"What did I tell you about nosing around her while she's in my charge?"

"It's not about her," C'los insisted, still looking around. "Where is she?"

"Hiding her face in embarrassment," the brown rider replied, nodding discreetly towards the far end of the row, where Leah was trying to make herself inconspicuous, throwing occasional chagrined glances in the direction of the two adult riders.

"What's her problem?" C'los asked, feeling faintly hurt.

L'stev snorted. "What kid wants her father about the place when she's trying to fit in?" he asked. "It's for her benefit I told you to stay away. Now what was it you wanted?"

C'los composed his thoughts, quashing the feeling of betrayal. "How well do you remember the behaviour of individual weyrlings?" he asked.

L'stev gave him a dark look. "Seems to me there was this green weyrling about fifteen Turns ago who thought he was clever," he said. "Never came to much. Don't remember his name. What do you think?"

The green rider loftily ignored L'stev's sarcasm. "Tell me about T'fer."

"Ha!" The Weyrlingmaster shook his head. "Another smart-mouthed little sod, and just when I'd got rid of you. T'fer. Always considered it a mercy that he didn't get a bronze. Brown's bad enough. Why, what's he up to now?"

"T'kamen's considering him for that promotion in H'ned's Wing," C'los said truthfully.

"I'd make *you* a Wingsecond before giving T'fer that sort of rank," L'stev scoffed. "Adromaka, don't think I'm not watching you!"

The candidate gave a guilty start, and resignedly started to smooth the sheets he had folded sloppily on a cot.

"T'fer has a problem with authority," L'stev went on to C'los. "He was trouble right from the start. Oh, I couldn't fault his care of Wayonth, or their performance in flight, but he never accepted the concept of unquestioning obedience." The Weyrlingmaster frowned. "There was a lot of competition between the older boys in that class. A'keret and T'fer were cronies, and then there were two others who were friends – a bronze rider called W'gar and another brown called C'veron. The two pairs competed against each other like nothing I've ever seen – worse even than L'dro and T'kamen. At least with those two it was obvious who was better when it came to giving top honours at graduation."

"A'keret I know, but I don't recognise those other names," said C'los.

"You wouldn't," L'stev said grimly. "I had them flying under A'keret as Wingleader and C'veron as Wingsecond in drills, sixteen months into training. You know the old remedy of making rivals work together. Well, something happened. C'veron lost concentration, or lost his head, and the next thing I know he's skipped *between* to get back in formation and not come out again. And these lads had been *betweening* ten or twelve sevendays. We lost the one girl that class on her first *between*, and that seemed to have made the others extra careful." L'stev shook his head. "I don't know what happened."

"And W'gar?" C'los asked intently.

The Weyrlingmaster let out his breath in a heavy sigh. "About two days later – and you can bet that in between I'd chewed them up and spat them out – we started drilling again. I put T'fer in command with W'gar under him. It was going fine – T'fer has a talent for knowing how quickly dragons will react in the air." The brown rider paused, and for a moment he looked very old and

tired. "T'fer ordered the Wing to bank left. W'gar's bronze banked right. He collided with the blue flying next to him. They both went *between*."

C'los closed his eyes briefly. "I remember now," he said. "Not the details, but I do remember the two weyrlings colliding."

"It nearly finished me as a Weyrlingmaster," said L'stev. "Losing three of my lads in three days.... If there'd been another rider ready to take over, I think I'd have given it up right then." He shrugged. "Fianine wouldn't have it. She never blamed me for those weyrlings' deaths. Sometimes I wished she would, but..." The brown rider shrugged again.

C'los hesitated a moment, then asked, "Do you think T'fer was responsible?"

"I don't know," L'stev admitted. "There's nothing to suggest it was anything more than a mistake on W'gar's part." The old Weyrlingmaster looked pensive. "A'keret and T'fer didn't stay friends after that, and I was never comfortable putting T'fer in command again. I had to, of course – I had no good reason not to. Just an uneasy feeling about that boy. I still wouldn't trust him, C'los. He was always too slick, always had a smooth excuse."

The Weyrlingmaster's opinion of T'fer troubled C'los. The green rider put his concern aside for a moment, and asked, "You didn't train K'ston, did you?"

L'stev shook his head. "Long before my time."

"C'dessa you did, though."

"Of course. Wasn't he Searched at the same time as you and Kamen and Mine?" At C'los' nod, the brown rider went on. "I'd have sent him packing as soon as I looked at him if I'd had the power to vet candidates that I do now. T'fer was slick, but C'dessa was as slippery as an oiled tunnel snake. Thieving little sod." L'stev sighed. "When I think of how much trouble I had with that class, I almost feel grateful for this lot."

"T'fer and C'dessa were in the same class?" asked C'los.

"Yes," L'stev growled, "and Faranth only knows how I survived those two Turns with my sanity intact."

The green rider frowned. "Were they friends?"

"C'dessa didn't have any friends," the Weyrlingmaster replied. "Stooges and flunkies, but T'fer wouldn't have let himself be seen to be associated with him."

"You think there was a more covert link?"

"If there was, they both hid it very well. But I'd be inclined to believe the worst of both of them."

"You have a refreshingly jaded view of young dragonriders, L'stev."

The brown rider made a sound between a cough and a laugh. "I could tell you what I think of some old ones, too. You're not one of these wide-eyed little brats, C'los. You know just as well as I do that riding a dragon doesn't automatically equate to goodness and purity."

"I'm reminded of that in your company," C'los replied, with a straight face.

L'stev grinned viciously at the green rider. "Somebody has to make up for the absence of our fondly departed former Weyrleader L'dro."

C'los couldn't help grinning at the brown rider's acidity, but L'stev's opinion touched on something that had been concerning him for some time. "But a dragon is always the best part of his rider."

"Granted, but sometimes that's not saying much."

"Do you think a dragon would let his rider be really unpleasant?"

"Depends on the dragon, the rider, and the unpleasantness," L'stev replied. "I train weyrlings to shield from their dragons because there are some things that young dragons shouldn't be exposed to. As I remember, you were always rather good at that."

C'los thought guiltily of how much he'd been keeping from Indioth of late, and sent a brief loving thought in his green's direction.

"I think most dragons would at least be very strongly opposed to their rider doing harm to an innocent party," L'stev continued, "but that's very subjective, and what dragon won't take his rider's side?"

"Even when the innocent party is another dragonrider?" C'los asked lightly, hoping the Weyrlingmaster wouldn't connect the question with E'rom.

L'stev shrugged. "Remember how H'ersto got Alonth to have a go at Epherineth during the mating flight? If a dragon's mind is on something else - or even if he's asleep - a rider has free rein to think and do what he pleases."

C'los considered L'stev's words with mounting unease. The Weyrlingmaster, whose analysis of the dragon-rider bond was both authoritative and entirely unclouded by sentimentality, seemed to be implying that a dragonrider *would* be capable of planning to harm another, so long as his dragon was unaware of the intention. C'los knew from personal experience that sustained and comprehensive shielding of thoughts from one's dragon was possible.

L'stev's account of the tragedies that had occurred during T'fer's weyrlinghood somewhat clarified the uneasiness C'los had felt around Wayonth's rider. The smoothness described by the Weyrlingmaster tallied with the unnatural polish C'los had observed during his interview of T'fer. There was something underneath that brown rider's glossily bland exterior. C'los almost didn't dare to wonder if the deaths of the two weyrlings who had been T'fer's chief rivals had been more than accidental. He didn't like to wonder if the lack of focus L'stev had mentioned in the dead weyrlings might have been a ten-Turn-old forerunner to the fellis drugging that had contributed to E'rom's death.

But C'los was too highly-trained a thinker, too schooled in reasoning, in cause-and-effect, not to wonder, and a very real chill passed through him as he wondered if, that afternoon, he might have shaken the hand of the killer of not one, but three dragonriders, whose only crime had been to stand between that ambitious man and his goals.