



IX

Free The Flame



Darshanth had already begun to prance a little when his rider emerged from their weyr with his fighting harness. *Come on, hurry up.*

C'mine stopped to look reproachfully at his restive dragon. "If you'd stand still, I'll get this on you much faster."

The blue dragon froze in place.

"Darshanth," C'mine sighed.

Darshanth rolled an eye to look at him, not moving a muscle. *You said still.*

C'mine reached up, took hold of his blue's chin, and dragged his head down. "I can't reach, Darshanth. Now stop acting like a weyrling and help me put this on you."

I only did what you said, the blue protested, but he submitted to his rider's ministrations without further interruption.

C'mine settled the broad chest strap at the base of Darshanth's neck, smoothing the silky hide to prevent it chafing. Darshanth twisted his head around to look. *Is that new?*

"Certainly is," C'mine replied cheerfully. He'd made the new harness in Darshanth's company, and fitted it to him at several stages, but he didn't expect him to remember. He buckled the neck strap. "How's that?"

Darshanth shook his wings and forequarters vigorously. *It's a little loose.*

C'mine cinched the strap in another notch. "Better?"

Much.

The blue rider pulled at the metal eyelets he had sewn to the leather until he was satisfied they were sound. Then he checked the tether straps dangling from his belt, yanking on the sturdy leather that would keep him safe in flight.

Come on! Darshanth implored. *It's fine, let's go!*

"I'm glad to know you have such a high regard for my safety."

The blue lowered his head to look his rider in the eye. *I wouldn't let you fall.*

C'mine placed a gloved hand lightly on the dragon's forehead. "I know you wouldn't."

They stood there for a moment, looking at each other. Then the blue rider turned away to button closed the top of his riding jacket. "You'd better give me a leg up."

Darshanth bent his forearm, and C'mine stepped on it, grabbing the neck strap and pulling himself up to the blue's ridges. After almost fifteen Turns the mount itself was as natural as breathing, but C'mine still moved stiffly when the scar tissue across his torso pulled. Master Isnan had assured him that it would loosen in time, but he had also made C'mine promise not to overdo it. This would be his first Wing drill in almost four months and he wasn't allowed to hurt himself.

He snapped the metal fittings of his tether straps onto the eyelets on Darshanth's harness, fighting briefly with the stiffness of the newly-forged steel. He shortened his straps by a couple of

holes: in Wing drill he didn't want too much slack in his harness, lest Darshanth decide to show off his agility. Then, C'mine leaned down to tug at the two buckles of Darshanth's rig, and the heavy buckle of his own belt, in the final check that L'stev had drilled into him over two Turns of weyrling training more than a decade ago.

"All right, Darshanth, I think we're ready," he said at last. "Let's go."

Finally!

C'mine settled back into the familiar seat of his dragon's neck ridges as Darshanth transferred his weight to his hindquarters. The blue launched himself in a powerful vertical leap, clearing the ledge easily before snapping out his wings to support him. C'mine leaned back against Darshanth's climb, turning his head as the wind made his eyes water. It made the still-tender burn scars on his face sting, too, but that was bearable.

He glanced back as Darshanth made an upstroke, looking at the dragon's flight profile – forearms tucked in, hind legs stretched back to follow the flowing lines of his body, tail similarly streamlined, with the forked tip snaking back and forth in the Bowl's air currents. There was nothing wrong with *him*, at least. Darshanth's burns had been largely superficial – painful but not crippling. He'd favoured his right side until recently, but that bias seemed to have gone. Darshanth was as resilient as he was brave – and no one could ever have questioned his courage.

We'll need to stop at the dump and pick up some firestone, C'mine reminded him.

Firestone? As Darshanth banked fractionally to accommodate the request, he turned his head and dropped his jaw in a grin.

C'mine smiled at his dragon's eagerness, and patted the ridge in front of him.

Several dragons had already landed at the firestone dump. Two greens made room for Darshanth, and the blue bugled a cheerful greeting as he backwinged to land.

C'mine released his straps and eased himself down his mount's shoulder. The other riders who were picking up ready-bagged firestone from the bunkers wore the insignia of three different Wings – T'kamen had called for a drill of the whole of what he called North Flight. He nodded pleasantly to the greens' riders, and waited his turn to collect the firestone Darshanth would need to sustain his flame.

Another dragon, a big bronze C'mine didn't recognise, landed on the other side of the dump. The rider who vaulted to the ground from his neck ridges seemed unfamiliar, too, but the two stripes on the shoulders of the unusually long leather coat he wore in place of a riding jacket clearly marked him as a Wingsecond.

The straight bronze rider cut an impressive figure. Taller than average – his height emphasised by the length of the black coat – with an athletic breadth of shoulder, he towered above C'mine. A slightly crooked beak of a nose dominated fierce, aquiline features, blazing blue eyes, and a shock of golden-yellow hair.



C'mine, though, was more interested in the palpable aura of confidence and charisma that surrounded the bronze rider. Fianine, who had been Weyrwoman before Valonna, had possessed a distinct and domineering presence. L'dro, for all his flaws, had charisma and charm in abundance. And T'kamen had the same quality, though Epherineth's rider manifested an implacable authority that compelled rather than charmed.

This man, however, had the tangible magnetism that won admirers at a glance. Heads turned as he strode towards the firestone bunkers, and when he made eye contact there seemed nothing false about his grin. Those remarkable blue eyes swept across C'mine, and the tall Wingsecond halted, scanning his insignia. "Not seen you before, blue rider."

Despite the unfamiliar accent and abrupt words, the bronze rider's tone exuded warmth. C'mine inclined his head in respectful recognition of the other rider's rank. "C'mine, Darshanth's rider, of the Weyrleader's Wing."

"You'd be the hero of Kellad I've heard so much about!" A strong hand thumped down on C'mine's shoulder, and he tried to conceal a wince. "First day back drilling, eh, pal?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Second in North Central Wing now, C'mine. Sh'zon, and that's Kawanth." The bronze rider nodded at his dragon.

Of course – the new Wingsecond from the Peninsula. C'mine would have liked to learn more about him, but it was his turn at the firestone bunker. He looped the thong of a sack around his wrist before hefting it to his shoulder. "He looks in great health, sir."

"Aye, that he is." Sh'zon looked back at C'mine, fixing him with that penetrating gaze. "I'll not keep you, C'mine. Let me shake your hand."

C'mine shrugged the heavy sack of firestone into a more comfortable position on his shoulder, then extended his right hand. Sh'zon enveloped his wrist in a powerful grasp. "You're a good man, C'mine, I've heard good things. Look forward to working with you."

"Thank you, sir," C'mine replied dutifully.

Sh'zon released his forearm. Then the bronze rider seized up two sacks of firestone, one in each hand, and slung them over his shoulders as if they were weightless before striding back towards his dragon.

C'mine shifted his own firestone sack again and walked back towards Darshanth. Comfortable with his own physical limitations, the show of strength didn't intimidate or impress him. But he wondered why the bronze rider, a Wingsecond only of his Flight, not even his Wing, had approached him. He'd heard a certain amount of discreet gossip regarding the two newcomers from the Peninsula. Most of what he'd heard said about M'ric – barring Sarenya's early, and most comprehensive, report – had focused on the brown rider's unusual dragon. By contrast, there seemed to have been more speculation than facts about Sh'zon. Everyone wanted to know why a bronze rider from the largest and most influential of the Southern Weyrs had come to Madellon.

His immediate elevation to Wingsecond status had provoked a few indignant and angry comments from riders who had themselves been demoted in T'kamen's reorganisation of the Wings.

But C'mine recognised that Sh'zon had an experienced leader's flair. Darshanth had the rare sensitivity that allowed him to identify those young people best suited to Impressing dragonets, and C'mine shared some of that indefinable instinct. The potential of some youngsters fair radiated from them, and C'mine sensed that Sh'zon had been one of those conspicuous finds: a bronze rider born. He would thrive on the challenges and responsibilities of leadership – probably to the extent that being denied authority would make him a hazard to his wingmates. As an outsider in an established Weyr, Sh'zon couldn't have expected to walk straight into the command of his own Wing, but C'mine doubted that the bronze rider would be content as D'feng's subordinate for long.

That was interesting, he commented to Darshanth, fastening the sack of firestone to the left side of his dragon's chest strap.

The blue shifted the weight of the bag. *Get another one, I'm unbalanced.*

I've always known that. He went back for another sack, and tied it to the other side of Darshanth's harness.

That's better.

The blue rider checked to make sure both sacks were secure, then climbed back up to Darshanth's neck, putting his safeties back on. *What do you think of Kwanth?*

He's a bronze.

I noticed that. You can go.

Darshanth sprang into the air, and C'mine felt him roll his shoulders slightly to settle the firestone sacks. *I mean he knows he's a bronze, and I'm only a blue.* There was more than a hint of irony in the dragon's voice.

Oh. C'mine patted the blue's neck, in reassurance. *Don't worry, Darshanth. Not all bronzes are as broad-minded as Epherineth.*

I'm not worried. Kwanth's rider isn't the Weyrleader.

C'mine laughed as Darshanth glided to where the three Wings of North Flight were assembling near the lake.

A full quarter of Madellon's fighting roster had gathered for the drill: nearly fifty dragons, gleaming in all shades of green, bronze, blue, and brown under the grizzled sky. Epherineth, his hide showing green-gold, crouched watchfully by the group on the left. C'mine directed Darshanth towards T'kamen's sleek bronze. He'd been honoured, if not surprised, by the Weyrleader's request that he and Darshanth fly in his Wing. C'mine knew his old friend still felt responsible for the injuries he and Darshanth had sustained at Kellad. T'kamen had no need to feel guilty, but if it made him feel better to have the pair of them in his Wing – well, C'mine wasn't going to object.

Of all the changes T'kamen had implemented since becoming Weyrleader, the renewed emphasis on Wing drill was one of the least controversial. Oh, some complained that intensive

drilling in Threadfighting manoeuvres halfway through an Interval was pointless. Others fretted about the risks of dragons using live flame unnecessarily. Still more pointed out that expending the Weyr's supplies of firestone and harness leather wasted their already tight resources. But the riders, both young and old, who relished the chance to put themselves and their dragons through their paces, to practise the formation flying and flaming that made them feel like dragonriders, drowned out the dissenters. They would never get a chance to prove themselves against Thread. Everybody knew that. But it did a dragonpair good to feel that they would be capable of meeting Threadfall, had they been alive during a Pass. Besides, as the Weyrleader had frequented complained during L'dro's tenure as Weyrleader, if today's riders didn't know their arses from their elbows, how would tomorrow's riders learn?

T'kamen's reshuffle of the Wings had been unpopular at first – especially amongst the bronze and brown riders who'd been demoted. Gradually, though, the Weyr had adjusted. Indeed, many of the Wingleaders who had retained their rank now praised it – a Wing of sixteen or seventeen dragons offered far greater flexibility in formation than one of ten or eleven. Privately, C'mine suspected that many of the Wingleaders whose commands had almost doubled enjoyed the greater power and prestige, but since T'kamen had filtered out the worst offenders from the old bronze rider Council, there was little harm in that.

Darshanth landed next to a brown and folded his wings. The other dragon turned his head, rumbling a welcome, and his rider ducked under his neck to call up to C'mine. "Good to have you back, Mine!"

C'mine dismounted, nodding to the brown rider's epaulettes. "New stripes, F'halig?"

"That's Wingsecond F'halig," the brown rider growled, and then he grinned, catching C'mine's forearm. F'halig was a big man – a full head taller than C'mine, and burly more than muscular – with steady blue eyes and untidy, mostly grey hair. "You're both looking well. Feeling up to it?"

"I am, and Darshanth's raring to go," C'mine replied. F'halig's informal manner had irritated a string of Weyrleaders, consistently denying him a ranking position. T'kamen had always liked him, though, and with L'stev resuming his duties with the soon-to-be weyrlings, the Weyrleader had taken on this experienced brown rider as his senior Wingsecond.

"T'kamen says you're both to take it easy today, and let one of us know if either of you are getting tired," F'halig advised him. "No going being a hero again."

"I'll try," C'mine said dutifully.

"Good!" The brown rider joshed him in the shoulder. "You'd better get Darshanth stoked."

C'mine turned back to his dragon, shaking his head. "Am I going to be treated like an invalid for the rest of my life?"

Probably, said Darshanth, with the air of one who wasn't really listening. The blue nudged at his rider with his nose. *Where's that firestone, then?*

"You're pushy today, Darshanth," C'mine observed, going to the left-hand firestone sack.

Pushy!

“Well, you are.” The blue rider opened the neck of the bag. “You do remember how to chew this, don’t you?”

Carefully.

C’mine tossed him a lump of firestone. The blue watched the rock arc towards him with gleaming eyes, and then snapped it out of the air. C’mine took another chunk of the foul-smelling rock out of the sack while Darshanth chewed, eyes closed. “You look like you’re enjoying that.”

I’m a dragon. Dragons chew firestone.

“Most dragons don’t enjoy it.”

I’m not most dragons. Darshanth opened his eyes. *And I didn’t say I was enjoying it.*

More, please.

C’mine threw him the second piece, and again, Darshanth tracked it with his eyes before catching it in his teeth. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to play with your food, Darshanth?”

I never play with my food. The blue crunched the second rock between his strong back teeth, and gulped it down. *Another.*

C’mine found a third hunk and held it out. Darshanth looked disappointed. *Spoilsport*, he said, picking the rock delicately out of his rider’s hand.

Other dragons were chewing too, the noise rather like a distant rumble of thunder. Dragons produced, and quickly suppressed, spits of fire. Darshanth abruptly turned his head away from C’mine and opened his mouth. A tongue of flame issued from between his jaws, and then the blue clamped his mouth shut, holding the rest in. *That’ll do. Knew I hadn’t forgotten.*

“I’d never suggest you had.” C’mine brushed his hands clean of the debris of firestone. He walked back along Darshanth’s side and placed a hand lightly against the dragon’s stomach, feeling the stored gas grumbling and growling there.

Stop it.

“Sorry.”

Tickles.

“I said sorry.”

With most dragons primed for flame, the riders of each Wing began to assemble around their leaders. C’mine greeted those of his wingmates he knew and nodded or smiled to the others.

T’kamen’s Wingseconds flanked him at the front of the group. B’ward, the younger of the two brown riders, was sketching their starting formation in the sand. C’mine found his position on the chart, and made a mental note of the two riders who would be diagonally fore and aft of him.

The Weyrleader looked as grim and austere as usual, and the parallel scratches on his face, beneath his left eye, only enhanced the impression. It was a measure of the respect he commanded that no one had uttered a word of speculation. C’mine had coaxed most of the story out of Sarenya, although the journeyman had still been far too angry to give a clear account. Now,

though, was neither the time nor the place to be worrying about their relationship, and he focused on T'kamen as Weyrleader, not friend.

"We're flying a full flaming rope drill today, riders," T'kamen said, when everyone had gathered around. "Two Wings flaming and one dropping. I want to see precision, and if any one of you, dragons or riders, comes back with so much as a singe, Epherineth's going to do some singeing of his own."

Several riders chuckled, and almost everyone smiled, though it was a serious warning. Flaming drills were dangerous.

"Duties will be rotated, so each Wing will drop once and flame twice," T'kamen continued. "It'll also give each Wing a chance to work with the other two, and we'll see which pairings work best. We'll be dropping red rope, D'feng's Wing will drop black, and P'keo's yellow, and that's wet paint, so I hope none of you had plans for this afternoon. F'halig."

The veteran rider stepped forwards. "Those of you that don't know, C'mine and Darshanth are back flying with us today. They've been lazing around for about half a Turn, so take it easy on them today."

Even T'kamen smiled at that. A few of the closer riders slapped C'mine on the back, and several more broke into a ragged round of applause. C'mine looked away, smiling but embarrassed.

"Check your positions on B'ward's chart," F'halig went on. "When we're done today, P'keo's Wing will be doing the final low sweep to check for any stray ropes that could start fires. We're flying this drill out west, over the scrub, but try not to let anything through anyway." He glanced at B'ward, and then at T'kamen. "I think that's it. Mount up!"

Darshanth ducked his head to aid his rider's remount, bouncing on his forepaws in eagerness. *Steady, now*, C'mine cautioned him.

I am steady. But Darshanth didn't settle until he'd reached altitude in pattern.

The dragons of Madellon typically drilled over a desolate, arid wasteland some distance beyond the frontiers of inhabited southern Pern. Scraggy bushes, stunted trees, and acre upon acre of stony dirt were broken up only by occasional rock formations, shaped and worn by centuries of wind and rain.

The visualisation Darshanth received from Epherineth, and shared with C'mine for verification, was of one of those outcrops. *Happy with it?* C'mine asked.

Yes.

The blue rider raised his arm in the signal to confirm their readiness, and down the line, the other riders of North High Wing did the same.

The Wing went *between* on Epherineth's command. In the utter dark and cold, C'mine wondered, as he often did, if Darshanth was aware of the other dragons around him. He didn't ask, though. He never disturbed the blue's concentration when they were *between*. It wasn't worth the risk.

They emerged over the scrubland, into the raw wind that habitually blew across the stark terrain. C'mine hunched his shoulders, and turned up the collar of his riding jacket.

All right? asked Darshanth.

I will be, once we get started.

Above and upwind, D'feng's Wing spread out along a broad front, preparing to drop the first fall of ropes. Below, P'keo's Wing had taken up a loose formation, to catch the strays that North High missed. The precision of the pattern made C'mine momentarily wistful. This was the closest they would ever come to fighting real Thread.

Then North Central dropped the first wave of dyed rope, and Darshanth rose with the rest of the Weyrleader's Wing to meet it. Glistening black strands descended like racing tunnel snakes, blowing into snarls and tangles, buffeted by the wind. The leading dragons of the Wing bisected that first fall at a rising angle, bronzes and browns burning a wide swathe through the inky cord. On the western edge of the second rank, C'mine leaned back with his blue's powerful climb. While the big dragons turned, out beyond the leading edge, Darshanth and the other blues and greens picked off dozens of individual ropes, then turned almost in place. The five larger males resumed their place at the head of the Wing, and led the second attack from the reverse angle.

L'stev had once said that the smallest dragons had the biggest hearts. C'mine barely had time to concur with the Weyrleader's opinion as Darshanth darted and flamed and nipped back into formation again. The blue jinked impossibly quickly to avoid a half-incinerated rope that was falling like a comet, its tail on fire, and then banked hard right again to catch a piece blowing towards the neighbouring green.

Spots of dye spattered down from above, leaving a greasy slick when C'mine wiped his goggles. Occasionally a dragon would bellow, in surprise rather than pain, and vanish *between* in simulation of Threadscore, re-emerging with the distinctive stripe of a hit on wing or body or neck. Darshanth ducked *between* to dodge a rope, appeared again in time to burn it to ash, and then nipped *between* again on C'mine's warning as a fresh tangle plummeted onto them.

After a time Darshanth's flame started to flicker, but C'mine was ready when the dragon demanded more firestone, curving his neck back with jaws gaping. C'mine tossed rock into the maw, and noticed the crimson combat hue of his dragon's eyes before Darshanth snapped his mouth shut and turned back to face the mock fall. The blue's flame improved visibly after the first swallow.

Combat continued, the formation altering to suit the pattern of the drop as T'kamen and his Wingseconds directed, until suddenly no more ropes fell. C'mine looked down, seeing flame blossom briefly from the dragons of P'keo's low-level Wing as they mopped up the strays, and then up. D'feng and his Wingseconds were signalling that they had run out of rope.

Epherineth says stand by to pick up our rope, Darshanth reported. He coughed several times, expelling the last of his flame. *That's better.* His mental tone sounded breathless, and C'mine slapped his neck hard in encouragement.

You didn't get hit? he asked, glancing back. Drops of black paint speckled Darshanth's hide, but C'mine couldn't see a strike.

Of course not. The blue proffered an image of Madellon, modified from their usual image to compensate for the rest of the Wing, before going *between*.

Back at the Weyr, the black-marked dragons of North High wheeled down into the Bowl to pick up bags of red-painted rope. Much lighter than firestone, Darshanth took two bags either side of his neck.

Before the Wing relaunched, C'mine looked at the other dragons for hits. A green had a long smear of black across her off shoulder and neck that would surely have been a fatal hit of Thread. Several dragons had wing and tailtip marks.

Amateurs, Darshanth commented.

They're older than you, C'mine told him.

Old amateurs.

As they took off to return to the drill, C'mine mused that Darshanth, in the prime of his life at almost fifteen Turns old, occupied that optimal zone between youth and experience. He patted the blue's neck again, wordlessly proud.

By the time they arrived back at the drilling area, P'keo's Wing had climbed to take up the higher altitude position, and D'feng's riders had reformed beneath them. C'mine acknowledged B'ward's signal to head east, and Darshanth slipped easily into his new position.

On Epherineth's mark, C'mine hauled up his first bag of rope. There was a trick to dropping rope to simulate Thread. With Darshanth quartering into the wind, like all the other dragons, C'mine draped the oilskin sack over his knee and loosened the neck thong. The ropes spilled from the bag a few at a time, and were immediately blown back towards the dragons below.

It was fascinating to watch the high-level Wing in action, although looking back and down proved hard on the neck. C'mine found that the bitter wind bothered him more without the immediacy of flying and flaming to occupy his mind. Halfway through the drop, Epherineth came along the line, his eyes gleaming scarlet, and C'mine heard Darshanth assure T'kamen's bronze that he was comfortable.

When the last of the red-soaked rope had flowed out of the fourth sack, C'mine tied it onto Darshanth's harness and looked down. Several of P'keo's dragons showed paint streaks. *You'd better have some more firestone.*

As Darshanth accepted a fresh supply of stone, P'keo's Wing winked *between* to the Weyr, and B'ward made the hand gesture that indicated they should drop beneath the level of the third Wing. Darshanth lost height at a leisurely pace, spiralling down to North High's new position.

In the clean-up pattern, Darshanth flew just off Epherineth's right flank. C'mine could see T'kamen signalling to D'feng on the level above in between tossing lumps of firestone to his bronze. Then the Weyrleader turned to the Wing, indicating that they should spread out.

Sejanth's rider wants to try something, Darshanth said as he complied with the order.
Epherineth thinks we'll have more to mop up.

Flaming ropes on the low level was a more sedate business than the frantic duck and dive of meeting the mock fall in the front line. Darshanth charred some pieces, left others to dragons better positioned to catch them, and occasionally warned off a wingmate going for a length that he had covered.

Epherineth's pessimism regarding the effectiveness of D'feng's new formation proved justified. More rope was getting through the top level than it should – great sheets of it, sometimes, that the big males should have destroyed. Conversely, though, there seemed to be far fewer individual strays than usual. North Central's greens and blues must be working hard.

C'mine happened to be looking up, keeping an eye on an errant strand of rope that might or might not blow into Darshanth's range, when Sejanth made his mistake.

D'feng's bronze had been leading the eastern point of the Wing, meeting the bulk of the rope fall with one of their browns in support. On the western edge, the bigger bronze that C'mine now recognised as Sh'zon's Kawanth maintained his position easily, with another brown backing him up. The pincer approach of the four biggest dragons effectively contained the edges of the fall, leaving the lighter dragons responsible for the centre. But it depended solely on the stamina and courage of the two lead bronzes, and Sejanth was struggling.

C'mine didn't see exactly what happened, but he did see Sejanth turn his head back, as if for firestone, and the spray of yellow as a paint-soaked rope struck the side of the bronze's head. If Sejanth had just hopped *between* he would have escaped with no more than a lecture for being careless. But the bronze, half-blinded by the strike, panicked – and a surprised gout of flame erupted from his mouth.

Sejanth's wing went up in flames.

C'mine saw D'feng's fire-bathed form, dark against the incandescent flames, writhing in agony. Sejanth's scream of agony cut through every dragon and rider in the sky. C'mine dragged his eyes away from the awful sight. He felt Darshanth shudder, and he realised he'd seized the blue's fore neck ridge in a convulsive grip. *Has he...?*

Burned himself. The blue's tone betrayed his distress, but even without C'mine's direct guidance, he retained the presence of mind to dodge and then char a loose rope.

C'mine glanced back up at the sky, seeing the gap in North Central's formation, and dreading tragedy. *They've gone between?*

It seemed like hours before Darshanth replied. *They're alive. Sejanth went between to the Weyr.*

Are they going to be all right?

I don't know. Shimpeth's with them. Then the blue said, *Epherineth is furious.*

C'mine looked over at the bronze. Epherineth looked like he was ready to breathe fire without the aid of firestone. *Are we carrying on?*

Epherineth says yes, North Central's Wingsecond is taking command. Darshanth banked sharply to avoid a yellow rope, then chased it down. *We would not stop in a real Threadfall,* he added.

The flow of rope to the lower level increased suddenly as everything that had escaped D'feng's Wing during the accident descended, and C'mine devoted his attention to helping Darshanth meet it. T'kamen commanded a tighter formation to compensate for the heavier fall, and North High kept busy for several minutes. C'mine welcomed the distraction from contemplation of the ghastly injuries D'feng and Sejanth must have sustained.

Then, as suddenly as it had intensified, the density dropped off, and hardly any ropes reached the lower level. C'mine looked up, trying to see if P'keo's Wing was still dropping ropes. *Have they run out?*

But D'feng's reformed Wing still flamed steadily, and it only took C'mine a moment to see the efficacy of the new pattern. Under the lead of Sh'zon and his bronze, North Central met and demolished the rope fall as if there were twice the number of dragons in the air, not one less. C'mine wiped stray spots of black and yellow dye off his goggles as he stared up at the fighting Wing, and then recognised the key to its performance.

One dragon weaved over and around and under the main pattern, unconfined to a fixed place in the formation. He moved with the breakneck agility of a green, but his hide showed almost black against the grey sky. He darted in and out of the other dragons with incredible speed and precision, making impossible turns, performing death-defying barrel rolls, incinerated broad sheets and tricky individual strands with equal skill. This, then, must be Trebruth, the Peninsula brown. He flew with fearless ease, crisscrossing the sky with style and daring, and little escaped him.

C'mine wasn't the only one watching. In the lull, most of the other riders of North High had stopped to gaze up at the remarkable display. Epherineth barked a reprimand at one of the other blues, whose interest in the other Wing had distracted him from the task at hand. Admonished and paint marked, the guilty dragon renewed his duty with added fervour. It was hard to look away from the Peninsula brown's acrobatics. But C'mine noticed T'kamen and Epherineth looking up, too, and wondered what the Weyrleader made of the display.

At last, the signal came down from above that the ropes had all been dropped: the fall was over. All around, dragons exhaled the last of their flame. As Darshanth let his surplus gas burn off, C'mine checked their firestone sacks: they had more left than he would have thought possible.

He didn't let much through. Darshanth didn't have to name the dragon he meant, nor say any more than his tone implied. *Epherineth's ordering us back to the Weyr.*

C'mine reinforced the visual. *When you're ready, my friend. You flew well today.*

We did, Darshanth corrected, and went *between.*

Epherineth ordered the dragons of North High and North Central to land near the lake, but every head turned towards where Sejanth was being attended by the dragon-healers. The bronze's right wing was a charred mess, and C'mine looked away, reminded too forcefully of the

burns he himself had suffered at the beginning of the Turn. Darshanth's wings could have been burned to bone and ash.... He forced the thought aside. Mercifully, his dragon's injuries had been fairly minor. But he couldn't help feeling a wrench, deep in his gut, of complete and comprehensive sympathy for D'feng.

Darshanth landed not far from Epherineth, and as C'mine released his fighting harness, feeling his muscles and bones complaining now that the excitement of the drill had passed, he saw T'kamen dismount from his bronze. The Weyrleader looked angry, in that ominous, introverted fashion of his.

As Trebruth glided in to make a landing that, in contrast to his bold fighting style, seemed positively sedate, riders from both Wings converged on him, cheering the brown's skill, and thumping M'ric hard on the back.

"That's enough! Get over here!"

T'kamen's bellow had always made people move quickly, and this was no exception: the riders of the two Wings assembled rapidly before the Weyrleader, sobering as, to a man, they anticipated a dressing down.

"What in Faranth's name do you think you have to cheer about?" T'kamen motioned towards Sejanth with an angry jerk of his head. "You think that's something to celebrate?" The Weyrleader yanked off his helmet, sweeping a hand through sweat-spiked dark hair. "What happened to D'feng could have happened to any of you – and you'd all better be bloody grateful that we're not in a Pass right now, or half your dragons would be crippled, and the other half riderless!"

Several riders muttered amongst themselves, ashamedly shifting their feet, and C'mine noticed for the first time the stripes in yellow, red, and black that marked dragons and riders alike.

"See to your dragons," T'kamen told them. "Wingseconds, I want an accurate tally of who took hits, and the same goes for P'keo's Wing when it gets back. Flight dismissed."

The Weyrleader turned to head for Sejanth, and the riders started to disperse. Then T'kamen turned back. "Sh'zon, M'ric, J'tron, I want to see you after you've settled your dragons."

The blonde Peninsula bronze rider who'd assumed command of D'feng's Wing was standing with M'ric, but of the three T'kamen had named, only J'tron, D'feng's other Wingsecond, looked alarmed.

"Aye, pal," C'mine heard Sh'zon mutter. "I'd say as you do."

Darshanth nudged C'mine in the back with his nose. *I'd really like to get rid of this ash, Mine.*

"Of course you do. Sorry, Darshanth."

C'mine started stripping off the blue's harness, stippled with three colours of dye, and a thin film of charred rope dust, and noticed with satisfaction that the new leather had withstood its first real test without suffering any stretches or unravelled stitching. He wondered how much of T'kamen's displeasure with the Flight stemmed from his concern for D'feng and Sejanth – and how

much from the incident with Sarenya and her fire-lizard that had left him with the scratches on his face. His tone with the Peninsula riders seemed excessively harsh. But then T'kamen looked so gaunt and tired, more so even than usual; that must be a major factor. Everyone in the Weyr seemed to be suffering to some extent since E'rom's death.

That was something else C'mine couldn't afford to worry about. He was stiff, sore, and aching in places that he'd forgotten existed. "Let's get you sorted out, Darshanth."

But for a moment, careless of the firestone pungency of his dragon's breath, C'mine wrapped an arm around Darshanth's lower jaw and leaned his head against his cheek, glad, but guiltily glad, that the blue dragon had been lucky where Sejanth and D'feng had not.