



Epilogue

The Blackest Night Must End In Dawn



A pale, wintry sun crept reluctantly over the Rim of the Weyr, spilling watery light into the Bowl and washing out what little brightness Madellon had to offer. Frost still silvered the grass and the thinnest rime of ice clung to the sheltered edges of the lake. A fitful breeze made small stones rattle along the ground, and picked up dust in its chill embrace, carrying it a little distance before dying away. Winter was coming to Madellon - slowly, inexorably - and it would not be ignored.

The crunch of footfalls on the frozen grass should have alerted Sarenya but, lost in her thoughts, she wasn't aware of M'ric's approach until he had stepped over the bench to sit beside her. He didn't quite smile, and he didn't touch her, but he rested his forearm on his thigh with his hand upturned. Sarenya took it after a moment, and M'ric enfolded her fingers lightly in his. He had seldom been farther than a dozen paces away in the last two days, shadowing her from a slight remove that made his presence reassuring rather than intrusive. The brown rider seemed to know instinctively when more distance was needed. Or less.

Sarenya shook her head slightly, an unconscious motion to flip back the long locks of hair that kept falling forwards into her face. No one had commented on the uncharacteristic style, and M'ric, certainly, knew why she had been leaving her hair loose. The unruliness was only mildly irritating.

"The weyrlings will have it hard, so close to winter."

Sarenya followed M'ric's gaze to where the new riders were half leading, half coaxing their dragonets towards the water: the most visible proof that life had to go on. Near the back, L'stev walked with Leah and Jagunth. Carleah, Saren corrected herself. C'los' daughter was adamant that she should be known by the full name she had once resented. She walked close to her dragonet, the green's head pressed against her side, under her arm. Sarenya couldn't see her expression. She didn't need to. "Better to get it out the way while they're small, perhaps."

They watched the weyrlings for a time without speaking. Most of the dragonets seemed to have forgotten the tragedies of two days ago already: they gambolled with the carefree energy universal to all young animals. Even the queen was playful, splashing her clutchmates in the shallows of the lake. The weyrling riders kept a cautious distance, understandably reluctant to join in.

Sarenya suddenly heard herself speak. "I didn't like him, you know."

M'ric's fingers tightened fractionally on her hand, but he didn't say anything. Saren was glad. Spoken aloud, the sentiment sounded cruel, and she wasn't sure she could have borne M'ric's reproof. That his opinion mattered so much was only one of the things that had changed in recent days.

"I don't think he liked me much, either," she went on. "He always had to have the last word, and sometimes I didn't let him. I can't remember ever having a conversation with him that wasn't an argument, or at least a chance to score points."

M'ric still didn't reply. Saren shot him a sideways glance, to reassure herself that he was listening. The look he returned was compassionate and alert and wholly undemanding.

"And the way he took C'mine for granted always sat wrong with me," she continued. "He just walked all over him. He could be incredibly selfish. And he always had to be right. Even when he obviously wasn't, he'd keep arguing until you got fed up trying to retort. As if he had something to prove. Shard it! If he hadn't had to be such a bloody smart-ass, maybe he wouldn't have gone and got himself...."

She stopped, and then said, more quietly, "Got himself killed. Faranth, M'ric, I didn't like him, but he didn't deserve to die. He didn't deserve to be killed by that murdering piece of filth."

M'ric reached around and took the hand with which Sarenya realised she had been rubbing the abrasion that encircled her throat. "Don't do that."

But Sarenya could still feel the mark, just as she could still feel the fear it represented, a reminder almost as awful as C'los' death of her own mortality. Isnan had assured her that the welt would heal and fade to nothing, but Saren knew she would always feel it there. The confidence she had built up over the Turns, the self-reliance so crucial for a woman making her way in a male-dominated field, had been rattled by her abduction. Katel had been a colleague: she had worked with him, trusted him, if never counted him as a friend. Sarenya had always thought herself capable, resilient, but that had been proved a conceit. The memory of the ghastly blind ride across Madellon's plateau, then the descent into the gorge, with Katel's belt wrapped around her neck, C'los' blood drying on her hands, and the torn and filthy ruins of her Gather-best dress tangling her legs, would never leave her. Nor would the knowledge that, in her fear and shock, her only recourse had been to call for help.

Tarnish hadn't come back. Sarenya had heard and felt him scream, but she didn't know what had happened to him after that. Augusta, when she had returned to M'ric, hadn't offered an explanation. Saren still hoped that her faithful bronze was licking his wounds somewhere and would return when he was ready, but something told her he wouldn't. His loss paled in comparison to C'los' death, but Sarenya mourned her loyal fire-lizard. Tarnish had contributed to her rescue as surely as T'kamen and M'ric: her champion, her companion. There was reason enough already to despise Katel, but Sarenya harboured her own private resentment of him too: he had humbled her, and she wasn't sure if her confidence would ever recover.

"I'm glad T'kamen didn't save him." It was the first time she had spoken of the circumstances of Katel's death, and her own vehement approval of T'kamen's methods shocked her.

After a long moment, M'ric said, "I would have done the same, in his place."

The brown rider's voice carried the odd note of finality that indicated he would say no more on the subject. The steel in M'ric was well hidden by his disarming manner and self-deprecating charm, but no less central to his personality. Sarenya seldom liked being told what to think, but she knew he was right. They would not speak of Katel's death again: not to each other, not to T'kamen, and certainly not to anyone else. No one who had not been there could have understood why the Weyrleader had done as he had.

But T'kamen's actions had frightened Sarenya, too, on a subtler, more insidious level than Katel's overt malice. The man who had attacked C'los' murderer so brutally was not the rider Sarenya had loved and lost and loved again. The T'kamen she knew was fierce but not violent, angry but not brutal, and violence and brutality had been the least disquieting of the characteristics he had manifested during that awful struggle. In the eight Turns Sarenya had known the bronze rider, even at the height of their first estrangement, she had never believed him capable of killing a man, however deserving. The T'kamen she knew had a dragonrider's hands, a lover's hands, an occasional musician's hands. The T'kamen she knew was controlled intensity. But those hands had nearly choked the life from a man, and the intensity had been anything but controlled. It hadn't been difficult to avoid the Weyrleader since, and though Sarenya was ashamed to admit it, even to herself, she was glad.

M'ric looked up; a moment later, the wind of wingbeats overhead accompanied Trebruth. The brown folded his wings tight to his back and plunged into the deepest part of the lake with his normal flamboyance and barely a ripple. Sarenya watched as he surfaced and arched clear of the water before splashing back in to chest-depth. She didn't laugh, as she once might have. She owed too much to Trebruth's skill and daring.

Sarenya hadn't let herself think about what could have happened had M'ric and Trebruth not transferred to Madellon. But she was aware, however peripherally, of the rumours surrounding Sh'zon and the new queen weyrling, and she couldn't help wondering. "M'ric, why did you leave the Peninsula?"

He frowned, and Sarenya wondered if she had stepped over an invisible line on territory she had never broken. But the expression seemed directed internally rather than at her, and there was sadness rather than reproach in his voice when he spoke. "I would have anyway, sooner or later, but once H'pold made the deal to exchange Sh'zon for L'dro, there wasn't much point in me staying any longer. I was only staying for Sh'zon's sake, anyway." He paused. "My daughter would have been finishing weyrling training about now. Ten months ago, her dragon lost control over the southern Peninsula ranges."

Sarenya gripped his hand more tightly.

"It happens sometimes," M'ric continued in the same quiet, even, but terribly sad voice. "It's one of the risks we all accept when we choose to stand for Impression. Temmal was old enough to make the decision for herself." The brown rider hesitated again, then said slowly, "Her mother died the same way when Tem was four, overflying her dragon."

“Oh, M’ric.”

“I’d spent twelve Turns being reminded of Artema every time I turned around,” he went on, as if determined not to let himself dwell on it. “I couldn’t stay there.”

“Why didn’t you leave straight away?” Sarenya asked.

M’ric raised his shoulders in a shrug. “Sh’zon. Not that he asked me to stay, but it would have undone Turns of hard work for me to abandon him then. I said I’d stay until Ipith rose. But then H’pold made an issue of his family’s exile, and that was all the leverage it took to get the other senior riders to force through the exchange with L’dro. Conveniently for H’pold. So when Sh’zon was ordered to Madellon, I came too.”

The alacrity with which the brown rider moved the conversation on reinforced Sarenya’s understanding of him: M’ric never actually refused to answer a question, but he always replied on his own terms, and reserved the right to change the subject, or redirect the original query, as rapidly as possible. It was a subtle form of guile, but effective nonetheless. And a defence mechanism, too: M’ric applied his brisk control as much to himself as to anyone else, preventing himself from wallowing in grief or self-pity. It was an enviable characteristic.

Trebruth emerged from the lake some distance down the bank, shaking himself, but his normal exuberance was not in evidence as he raised his head to the sky, the speed of his eyes decreasing. Sarenya recognised the change in his demeanour, and shivered from more than the cold. “It’s time, isn’t it?”

M’ric nodded. “We should go.”



With a muffled curse, H’nar recoiled from his dragon. “Don’t do that, Ell!”

Ellendunth jerked back apologetically. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry! What did I do?*

The young bronze’s affectionate nuzzle would have been endearing but for the fact that he had just waded, dripping, from the freezing shallows of the lake. H’nar gritted his teeth as icy water seeped through his trousers, leaving an embarrassing damp patch. He tugged his shirt down to hide it and scratched under his dragon’s chin to soothe him. “You’re just cold and wet, that’s all.” Then, because Ellendunth was still drooping with chagrin, H’nar sighed and hugged the dragonet’s head to his chest, screwing up his face as lake water soaked his shirt, too. “It doesn’t matter. Really, it doesn’t.”

And it didn’t, as the still new and indescribable glow of Ellendunth’s love washed over him, warming H’nar in a way that no amount of water could cool. It still brought a lump to his throat to think that such a marvellous dragon had chosen him. Misty eyes had been common amongst the weyrings in the scant two days since their dragons had Hatched.

“Come on now, Ell,” he said, releasing Ellendunth’s upturned head. “We need to get you oiled, and then you can have a sleep.”

The bronze dragonet was quite steady on his feet now and needed no assistance to sustain his somewhat awkward loping gait, although his tail still dragged until he remembered to hold it up. H'nar walked with him to the buckets of oil they had brought from the barracks. About half of the other weyrings were already there, and he led Ellendunth to where M'rany was tending his blue.

The former forester grinned at him over Rementh's back. H'nar returned the grin as he reached for the brush sticking out of the closest oil bucket. M'rany had smiled more in the brief time since the Hatching than he had in the entire period of his candidacy. Rementh seemed to have lifted the sadness M'rany had carried with him over the death of his wife and child. H'nar was certain that the Kellad-born weyring would never forget the ones he had lost, nor ever stop mourning them in his heart, but his permanent melancholy had evaporated in the instant of the blue dragonet's choice.

Ellendunth squirmed as H'nar began to apply oil to him with the broad brush. His most recent meal had visibly distended his belly, and the resultant stretching of his hide was making him twitch. H'nar coated the bronze's underside first, feeling Ellendunth's relief as well as hearing his sigh, and admired the handsome green-gold sheen that was intensified by the gloss.

There was little conversation as the twenty-five weyrings attended to their dragons. The riders spoke to their dragonets more often than to each other, but even vocal communication was limited. H'nar knew why, although he was careful not to dwell on it, for fear of distressing Ellendunth. The entire Weyr was subdued: even the weyrings, isolated as they were from the rest of the community, could feel it. The Weyrilingmaster had spoken to them about the events that had followed the Hatching – only briefly, but there was more than enough horror in the sparse details he had provided. H'nar preferred not to think about it at all. L'stev had emphasised that the affair was none of their concern, and no longer anything for them to worry about, and H'nar agreed. But twenty-four of the weyrings could neither ignore the existence of the twenty-fifth nor be dumb to her anguish. Carleah moved woodenly through the motions of caring for her green, not neglecting Jagunth, but barely conscious of anything else. H'nar couldn't imagine how it must feel to gain a dragon and lose a beloved father within the space of an evening. L'stev lurked around her almost as protectively as if he himself were her father, but the other weyrings were keeping a discreet distance between themselves and Carleah. Whether they were afraid of saying something to hurt her, or if her presence simply made them uncomfortable, H'nar didn't know, but he felt a little ashamed of himself for doing the same.

One other weyring stood apart from the others, for quite different reasons. Tarshe seemed as unconcerned by being snubbed as she ever had before Impression, but to H'nar's eyes, at least, there was something lonely about the Peninsula girl's ostentatious indifference. He supposed that any queen weyring would feel a certain remoteness from the others – H'nar, at least, had two other bronze riders in the class to gauge himself against. Some of the girls who had eventually Impressed greens were still resentful of the one who had Impressed the golden hatchling they had coveted, although none of them would have swapped their greens for Berzunth.

But it was the gossip that had filtered down to the segregated weyrlings that was really making them wary of the new queen weyrling. Tarshe had not said a word, and neither had L'stev, but everyone had heard whispers of the horrible crimes her father had committed and the subsequent exile of the entire family.

H'nar finished coating Ellendunth with oil and came to a decision. The little bronze was beginning to sag with weariness. "Can you still walk, Ell?"

I'm tired, he said piteously.

"I know, but it's not far, really. Just as far as Tarshe there."

Ellendunth broke into a reluctant walk, dragging his feet. By the time he flopped down next to Berzunth he was visibly exhausted.

"Taking pity on the outcast, eh, muck boy?" asked Tarshe, without rancour.

"You're not an outcast," said H'nar. "Everyone's just wrapped up in their dragons."

"Of course," she replied, with heavy irony. But there could be no doubt, from the way she rested a tanned hand lightly on her queen's pale neck, that she was as enthralled as any of them.

H'nar cast about for something to say. "I never had a chance to tell you...I liked your dress, at the feast."

Tarshe laughed shortly. "Sh'zon's idea. And paid for in blood, if you believe all the rumours. Babies' blood."

"I don't believe the gossip."

"You should," the queen weyrling said coolly. "I might murder you in your sleep."

"You're not going to murder me in my sleep."

"How do you know?"

"I just.... Well, are you?"

Tarshe looked at him, and then slowly shook her head, almost smiling. "Probably not."

H'nar relaxed, glad he'd broken through her stubborn façade. "What I mean is that we're all weyrlings, now. What's in the past is in the past. We're not the same people we were three days ago, not any of us."

"Perhaps you have a point," Tarshe conceded.

"You two."

The low growl belonged to L'stev. The Weyrlingmaster approached wearing his normal suspicious frown, but then he always seemed to suspect that something untoward was happening. "Think you can get this lot back to the barracks without tripping over yourselves or breaking something?"

"Yes sir," H'nar replied automatically.

L'stev looked at Tarshe. "And you, weyrling?"

"Yes, sir," Tarshe said slowly.

"Get the dragonets bedded down, and then you can all start tidying up the mess you've made the last two days. I don't want to hear that there's been any fooling about while I'm gone."

“Excuse me, sir, but where are you going?” asked H’nar.

The old brown rider’s expression was briefly tinged with genuine pain. “I’ll be with Carleah, weyrling. Go on now.”

“You’re right,” Tarshe said quietly as L’stev walked away.

“Am I?” asked H’nar.

“We’re not who we were three days ago.” Tarshe looked at Carleah. The green weyrling made a forlorn sight: her shoulders slumped, all the characteristic energy sapped from her body. “And some of us more so than others.”



Valonna finished the last entry in the Hatching register, double-checking it with the scroll she had received from L’stev, and set the page carefully aside to let the ink dry. She could see her next task from the corner of her eye, but her gaze lingered for a long moment on the document she had just completed.

With a sigh, the Weyrwoman reached for the bulky black-bound volume that she had taken from its shelf with such a heavy heart. The Madellon death record had been created at the founding of the Weyr, almost a century ago, of hide cured and treated to withstand the passage of decades. Valonna turned to the page with the black ribbon that marked the most recent entries, and looked at her own handwriting.

In the five Turns since she had been Weyrwoman, Valonna had recorded perhaps three dozen deaths. Of those, most had been elderly Weyrfolk, gone to their deserved rest at the proper time. Fewer than one in three were dragonriders. And yet with the fifth month of this Turn barely begun, three dragonpairs were already no more. First E’rom and Sigith, then K’ston’s Bronth, and now the partnership Valonna so dreaded placing down on the page. The Weyrwoman looked at the notes T’kamen had given her, then took up her pen, dipped the nib in ink, and bent over the stiff page to write.

Deceased this Ninth Day of the Fifth Month of the Ninety-Ninth Turn in the Seventh Interval: a Green Rider, C’los, rider of Indioth. Born Carellos of the Harperhall on 67.06.21. Impressed 85.05.01 of the Second Clutch Hatched of golden Cherganth and bronze Staamath. Father of a Green Weyrling, Carleah, rider of Jagunth. Beloved weyrmate of a Blue Rider, C’mine, rider of Darshanth.

His Murder at the hands of Katel, a journeyman Healer; with a knife to the Heart.

Below it, she wrote:

Deceased this Ninth Day of the Fifth Month of the Ninety-Ninth Turn in the Seventh Interval: a journeyman Healer, Katel. Appointed to the Staff of Weyr Master Isnan 99.01.13. His Professional Rank and all Privileges Revoked by order of Masterhealer Barraky 99.05.10.

The Foul Murderer of a Brown Rider, E'rom, and his Sigith; a Blue Dragon, Bronth, once beloved of K'ston; and a Green Rider, C'los, and his Indioth.

His Death in flight from Justice, by Water.

Valonna read back over the entries, and then noticed how the pen trembled in her hand. She placed the tool hastily in its stand before ink dripped onto the page, and then she was forced to wipe her eyes, to prevent tears from doing the same. The words blurred, and she looked away, fumbling for a handkerchief in the pocket of her sober grey skirt.

"Here."

She looked up. The cloth T'kamen offered was square and white but otherwise unadorned: a man's handkerchief. Valonna took it gratefully, dabbing at her eyes. "I didn't hear you come in."

T'kamen leaned over to look at the records Valonna had been amending. He nodded slowly, apparently approving. "If you're finished here, it's time for us to go."

"Yes, let me just..." The ink on the Hatching document was dry. Valonna closed the file and put it on the shelf above the desk in the Archive office reserved for current records. The death record would have to be left a little longer. She looked around, but there was nothing else to be done.

"Keep it," T'kamen said, when Valonna offered the handkerchief back to him. "I have others."

Valonna couldn't imagine the Weyrleader ever needing a handkerchief himself. The countenance that was normally so fierce and grim just seemed tired, sad. There was a dullness in his eyes that spoke of his grief more eloquently than tears. She wrapped her fingers around the cloth. "Thank you."

As she walked beside him towards the Bowl, Valonna noticed that the bronze rider was wearing all his insignia. T'kamen seldom displayed more than his knots, or his epaulettes if he was wearing his flying jacket, but the full regalia of shoulder cords, silver stars, and Weyr badge would leave no observer in any doubt of his status. They made up for his faded everyday clothes; the black and silver finery he had worn at the Hatching had been ruined in his struggle with C'los' killer. In addition, he wore a scarf tied around his left arm, green to honour the fallen rider. Valonna wore a green scarf, too, and had chosen one of her best gowns, but the muted hue reflected the mood of the occasion.

Valonna herself had made the arrangements for C'los' funeral, directing a team of staff from the lower caverns to set up chairs and benches for the mourners expected to attend. But the

number of people who had assembled out there on that chill autumnal morning took her aback. Seating had been provided for a hundred, but every place was taken, and twice that number again stood to both sides and at the back. Riders and Weyrfolk alike, dressed in their sombre finest with green scarves or armbands, sat and stood shoulder to shoulder, all hierarchies forgotten.

Near the front, Valonna recognised some of C'los' closest friends. The young Wingsecond T'rello sat with two other Wingseconds. H'ned was seated beside Master Isnan, and in the next row, R'yeno sat among what looked to be the whole of C'los' Wing. For all of C'los' politics, it seemed that half the bronze riders in the Weyr were there - not only R'hren and Fr'ton, who had put their support behind the green rider's campaign for T'kamen, but Wingleaders like T'gat and E'dor whose privileges had been reduced following T'kamen's accession.

Half of the very front row remained unoccupied, and T'kamen led Valonna to the reserved seats there. Farther along, the Weyrwoman saw Sarenya with the Peninsula brown rider M'ric who had been her constant companion since her abduction. She nodded to the Beastcrafter but did not smile. The Weyrleader took the chair on the very end.

We're all here, Valonna.

The Rim was lined with dragons. They stood quite still, sentinels to the gravity of the event: at least half of Madellon's complement, and probably more. Shimpath and Epherineth watched from the Star Stones, as silent and still as the others.

The sound of multiple pipes silenced the subdued murmur of conversation. All eyes turned towards the Lower Caverns, and everyone who had been sitting, stood.

Four bearers carried the casket on their shoulders, walking in step to the slow, sad tempo of the pipes. The banner draped over the coffin was of Madellon indigo, edged with green, and like all the other mourners, the bearers wore armbands to honour the fallen.

C'mine and Carleah walked side by side behind the coffin. Both wore black and green; both stared at the ground with reddened eyes, as though they couldn't bear to look anywhere else. Valonna felt her own eyes fill, and she used T'kamen's handkerchief to blot her tears. Behind them, L'stev walked with Robyn, Leah's mother. The Weyr Singer, Jenavally, completed the procession, playing the poignantly simple air on her pipes.

The bearers lowered the coffin to the bier and straightened the flag of Madellon where it hung down almost to the ground. One of them directed C'mine and Leah gently and compassionately to the seats beside Valonna. Robyn and L'stev took the last two chairs in the front row, and prompted by them, everybody else sat down. The Weyrwoman put her hand helplessly on C'mine's arm, but the blue rider was beyond comfort. The scars on his face only heightened his agonised expression, and his shoulders sagged with grief. Valonna had been one of the first to reach the blue rider after the impact of his weyrmate's death had swept Madellon. She would never forget the look that had been frozen on his face.

As Jenavally's music ceased, and the Weyr Singer quietly took her seat, T'kamen rose from his. In silence, the Weyrleader walked to the lectern that had been placed beside the bier. He

looked out at nearly three hundred people, and when he spoke his voice carried without seeming to increase in volume.

“Thank you for coming.”

T’kamen paused for such a long moment that Valonna began to wonder if he would speak again, if he had been choked by his grief. But the Weyrleader lifted his head slightly, as if to remind himself of his responsibility, and at last he went on.

“C’los was a man of extremes, and he only provoked the strongest emotions in the people who knew him: love, hate, exasperation. He was many things to many people. A beloved weyrmate, a proud father, a valued friend. In every way that matters, he was my brother.”

T’kamen took a deep breath, and as he gazed across the assembled riders and Weyrfolk Valonna wondered if the Weyrleader even saw them.

“Carellos was born nearly thirty-two Turns ago, at the Harperhall in Kellad. He never became an apprentice, and never wanted to, but that didn’t stop him getting into trouble, and he was still in single figures when he started dragging his first reluctant accomplices into his schemes. Cairmine was from one of Kellad’s forest holds, but when his family moved to the Hold proper he and Carellos became friends immediately. It wasn’t long after when the Frankon trader train began to make its regular winter overstay at Kellad, and that was when I became associated with them both. Carellos was very sharp, and he always seemed to know the latest news before everyone else. His love of gossip – another passion of which he never tired – frequently landed him into trouble, but as often as not he could talk himself out of it again.

“His friendship with Cairmine had always been very strong, but it developed into much more over the Turns. Their path was often rocky – the Hold is not the Weyr – and it didn’t stop Carellos fathering his daughter, Carleah. But it was during Carellos’ seventeenth winter when a Search Wing from Madellon Weyr arrived at Kellad.

“Carellos was chosen, as were Cairmine and I. At Madellon, Carellos and Cairmine didn’t have to hide how they felt. Their love – and they were always in love, even though they didn’t know it to start with – was accepted in a way it could never have been at Kellad.”

The briefest twitch of emotion betrayed T’kamen’s composure, and his gaze slid in C’mine’s direction for an instant before he went on. “Impressing a green didn’t slow C’los down for a moment. He refused to know his place and never accepted that a green rider couldn’t influence the way the Weyr worked. As during his childhood, his outspoken tendencies frequently saw him in trouble, but C’los shrugged off punishment duties as if they didn’t exist. He made many friends, and not a few rivals, but he always managed to make time for the three most important parts of his life – Indiath, C’mine, and Leah.

“C’los was instrumental in the recent change of Weyrleader, proving wrong everyone who ever said that a green rider can’t be influential. His hard work and support were unstinting. But it was his intelligence and intuition that came to the fore when I asked him to investigate the

suspicious circumstances of Wingsecond E'rom's death. It was that sharp mind that helped him untangle the mystery. And it was his selfless courage that led to his death.

"He shouldn't have died." Now T'kamen's voice was shaking as he fought visibly to maintain his poise, and Valonna's heart went out to her Weyrleader, to the man who seemed so hard and cold. "But his death was not in vain. C'los lost his life in service to the Weyr. He died nobly. His absence will be felt, by his family, by his friends, and by his rivals. His loss diminishes us all. But perhaps it will remind us of the conviction that drove him throughout his life: that anyone, no matter their position, no matter their humble origins, can make a difference. A green rider has no less heart than a bronze rider, and no man is greater than another, save through his own bold actions. C'los' heart, and his boldness, put all of us to shame. His sacrifice will not be forgotten."

Valonna could barely see to know if there were tears in T'kamen's eyes, but the Weyrleader's voice had grown hoarse towards the end of his eulogy. The Weyrwoman dried her eyes on the bronze rider's handkerchief, aware that many others around her were using similar items, or their sleeves, to do the same. There were tears rolling down C'mine's face as he hugged Carleah to him with one arm. The young green weyrling sobbed into his shoulder.

T'kamen looked up at the sky with tortured eyes, and his last words were barely audible. "Go to Indioth, Los."

The massive shadow of a dragon swooped low over the mourners. Epherineth had launched himself from the Rim, skimming low across the Bowl. The bronze plucked the banner-draped casket from the bier and vanished.

The cry that swelled from the assembled dragons was not the keen they raised for the loss of one of their own kind. They honoured C'los not as one of their own but as a man worthy of their respect, a man whose loss would not soon be forgotten. Long after Epherineth had reappeared with empty forepaws, long after the gathering had dispersed, the low requiem for C'los hung in the air, a final lament as he returned *between* to his dragon.



T'kamen looked at the rough spirits that barely covered the bottom of his cup to half an inch, thinking of how good it would feel to get drunk, to be insensible, to forget about the burdens that seemed determined to grind him into the ground, even if only for a short time.

He couldn't – not in any sense. Even if he could have brought himself to behave so irresponsibly, there just wasn't enough alcohol left in the Weyr. What remained from the Hatching feast was barely enough to give everyone who had attended C'los' send-off a drink to toast him on his way.

The Weyrleader was bone-tired in every possible way: physically weary, mentally exhausted, emotionally spent. Everywhere he looked in the dining hall reminded him of one issue or another. A cluster of three Wingleaders – T'gat, R'yeno, and E'dor – made him worry that his

senior riders were conspiring against him. After the events of Hatching day they would have been justified in mounting a serious opposition to his leadership, and H'pold of the Peninsula had made it very clear that he would back any action to remove T'kamen from power.

L'stev made him think of the weyrings, especially Leah, whose grief would surely be affecting her young green. Their hunger still concerned him the most. The Madellon Lords, Winstone in particular, had not been amused by the drama the Weyr had provided in addition to Hatching and feast. It was only a mercy that they didn't know that K'ston and T'fer had been assigned watch positions while under suspicion. T'fer remained at his post, as did the green rider at Blue Shale. The Weyrleader had despatched another rider to Jessaf as a replacement for K'ston. But T'kamen worried that the Lords would reach a consensus against him, too, and renege on the tithe agreement he had so painfully negotiated. The dragonets themselves were rays of light in the gloom, but they represented a severe drain on the Weyr's resources.

And then, not for the first time, or the last, it hit him like a fist in the gut. C'los was gone. The brilliant thinker who had masterminded a campaign to gather half the Weyr behind a disgraced bronze rider with few allies; the insufferable know-it-all who had been irritating T'kamen for two-thirds of his life; the friend who had always been the first to leap to his defence and the last to concede defeat, was gone. He had died unarmed and alone, and the responsibility was a leaden weight on T'kamen's shoulders. Never again would C'los offer his incisive opinion, never again be first with the latest news and rumours, never again aggravate T'kamen with his smug self-satisfaction and loud mouth. One of the cornerstones of T'kamen's life had been destroyed and the Weyrleader felt its absence keenly.

But as devastated as he was by C'los' death, T'kamen knew his grief could not compare to C'mine's. The two riders had been friends for more than twenty Turns and lovers for twelve, and that alone would have been enough to bring C'mine to his knees, but the reality of C'los' indiscretion exacerbated the pain the blue rider must be suffering. Reconciliation would never be possible. C'mine could forgive C'los in his heart, but he would never now have the chance to do so to his face.

Master Isnan had been keeping K'ston sedated since Bronth's death. T'kamen's orders regarding the former blue rider reflected less compassion than pragmatism. He would ultimately have to talk to the dragonless man about his future, especially if K'ston desired an end to his existence without Bronth. For now, though, T'kamen didn't have the time, and keeping the wretched K'ston insensible was the only humane option.

T'kamen downed the harsh liquor in one convulsive gulp. It seared down his throat to his stomach and smouldered there, but he needed the fortification. Putting the empty cup down, he crossed the hall to join C'mine.

The blue rider looked terrible. His eyes were red and darkly circled from lack of sleep; someone had made him change his clothes for the funeral, but by the shadow on his face and the unkemptness of his normally neat beard and moustache, he had taken no other interest in his

appearance. The unassuming serenity that was his normal demeanour hung in tatters around him. He made a pathetic sight, and T'kamen wasn't surprised that few of the people standing around the dining cavern, talking quietly, had approached him. Jenavally was with him, and T'kamen made a mental note to thank her and the rest of the handful of riders who had made it their business to see that he was not left alone.

But the Weyr Singer understood and acknowledged the look T'kamen gave her, and she gently released C'mine's hand, professing the need to go and get another drink. T'kamen nodded his thanks to her as she passed, and slowly lowered himself into the chair she had just vacated.

"I'm sorry, Mine."

The blue rider raised his head to look at T'kamen with bloodshot, haunted eyes. "I know."

T'kamen couldn't think of anything else to say. Nothing could offer the blue rider any comfort. Nothing could divert his mind from the truth. Nothing could bring C'los back.

"Thank you," C'mine said suddenly.

T'kamen looked at him.

"For this. He would have liked this. He would have liked the attention."

"He would have been horrified at the quality of the drink."

If C'mine recognised the irony, he was beyond reacting to it. "He liked to be liked. But he'd rather be hated than ignored. He loved irritating people. He loved irritating you." The blue rider fell silent for a long moment. "I can't imagine life without him, Kamen."

It was a long time before the bronze rider could bring himself to answer. He stared bleakly into the middle-distance, conscious of the people all around, and that he was more alone than ever. In these most difficult times, insignia or no insignia, his status absolutely separated him from those he led.

"Neither can I," he replied, at length.

They sat in a silence that could not be called companionable, isolated by their grief, even from each other.

T'kamen was just thinking that he would like to have Epherineth keep in contact with Darshanth, now that the immediate furore surrounding C'los' murder and Katel's death had abated, when C'mine spoke. "Kamen, do something for me."

"Of course," he said immediately. "Anything."

"Talk to Saren."

T'kamen felt himself tense reflexively before the request had even fully registered. "Mine, that doesn't matter right now."

The blue rider abruptly grabbed T'kamen's shoulder, an almost convulsive grip, and looked at him with complete conviction through the misery. "It matters. If you'd lost her, without making things right..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to. Instead he said, with dulled urgency, "Talk to her now. Don't put it off."

T'kamen cast a covert glance across the room. M'ric was standing with Sarenya, not quite hovering, but a protective presence nonetheless. The Weyrleader couldn't pretend it didn't bother him, but he hadn't let himself think too hard about his former lover or the brown rider since returning to the Weyr two nights ago. It wasn't jealousy, he realised, with sudden insight. Rather, he had felt since first seeing them together that Saren was trying to spite him by spending so much time so ostentatiously with the Peninsula rider. Even when it had become apparent that she wasn't, it had been easier for T'kamen to block her out of his thoughts than to actually resolve the situation. But in that moment when it had become clear that Katel had taken Sarenya as a hostage, for all T'kamen's crushing grief for C'los, his fear for Saren had been greater. If she had died....

"All right," he said, looking around for someone to take his place with the blue rider. A'len was close, and the Madellon brown rider nodded imperceptibly when T'kamen caught his eye before coming over to sit with C'mine.

M'ric noticed his approach before Sarenya did, and that troubled T'kamen. Saren was usually very alert. She seemed diminished somehow, but it was not until T'kamen drew closer that he realised the bronze fire-lizard was missing from his habitual place on her shoulder. He felt a pang of guilt about the blue, absent since his argument with Sarenya. More than the fire-lizards, though, something was missing: perhaps her confidence. T'kamen supposed that abduction at knifepoint would unsettle anyone, but Sarenya's uncharacteristic introversion bothered him.

When she raised her gaze to see him coming the momentary look of apprehension in her eyes almost made T'kamen step back. It vanished almost as soon as he saw it, but that it had been there at all was hurtful. He couldn't really blame her for her trepidation. He didn't remember much about his struggle with Katel, but what he did know was enough to frighten him. Epherineth intervened if he tried to think about it too much, and in any case, T'kamen had no great desire to recall the detail, but Sarenya's reaction still hurt.

She lifted her head, a confident motion, but T'kamen could see it was a front. He could also see the reddish welt that marred the soft skin of her throat, and the deeper crimson where a cut had scabbed over. The marks made him angry, but it was a distant anger, and he could feel Epherineth helping him to keep it at arm's length.

"Saren," he said.

If she was surprised at the familiar use of her name, Sarenya didn't show it. "Kamen."

"Could we talk a moment?"

The glance that passed between Sarenya and M'ric was brief, and yet infinitely expressive: intimately so. With a dignity that T'kamen might have envied, had he the heart, M'ric withdrew a short distance.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Sarenya smiled, but her eyes were still pained. "As well as can be expected." Her gaze flicked to his hands. "You?"

T'kamen had almost forgotten about his injuries, but the reminder made him conscious of the dressings under his tunic, well numbed, but limiting his movements. The scrapes and cuts on his knuckles were the only exterior evidence of the struggle. "The same."

Neither spoke for a moment, uncertain rather than uncomfortable. "C'los would have approved of his eulogy," said Sarenya, at last.

"Thank you," T'kamen replied, almost automatically. Then, because he felt he should say something, he said, "Tarnish...?"

Sarenya shook her head, and an extra shadow of grief touched her brow. "He hasn't come back."

T'kamen hesitated. "He will if he can." It was a blunter sympathy than the assurance that Tarnish would return, but Sarenya had never tolerated condescension. "Is Sleek all right?"

"A bit clumsy in the air, and he's still sleeping most of the time," said Sarenya. "Better, though."

"I'm sorry I hit him, Saren. I'm sorry it came to that." And he was, though not just for the fire-lizard's sake: his outburst then had been a precursor to the terrible anger that had come over him on Hatching night, the anger he had thought long buried.

Sarenya shook her head. "I'm sorry I was so selfish, Kamen. I should never have tried to make you put me before the Weyr."

"I shouldn't have treated you like a convenience," T'kamen insisted.

"And I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"We're both guilty of that," T'kamen said reflectively.

The indirect reference to his rage made him wince inside, but then he felt Sarenya's hand on his arm, and he looked up to see the troubled compassion in her eyes. He had scared her, he realised, but the part of her that knew him as well as any woman ever had still understood.

"We always seem to be apologising to each other," said Saren, but the wryness in her voice sounded forced.

"It seems that way," T'kamen replied, but although the familiar touch of her fingers on his arm was supportive, the fierce passion that had marked their previous reconciliations simply hadn't sparked. "Maybe we're too alike."

And that was it. T'kamen suddenly knew, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, that he and Saren had no future together. Even had their rank been equal, even had she Impressed Shimpath and become his Weyrwoman, they were temperamentally too much the same. They would always fight, always clash, both too stubborn to give ground readily. The same volatility that had created the attraction between them would inevitably tear them apart.

He couldn't help glancing at M'ric, and recognising in the Peninsula brown rider some of what he himself lacked: calmness, composure, good-humour. Disliking him had become a reflexive defence against what T'kamen had perceived as Sarenya's attempt to antagonise him, but in truth, it was hard to find anything specific to dislike. On a day already dominated by

mourning, T'kamen hadn't thought he could be capable of feeling any more grief, but the realisation that his path and Sarenya's had diverged again saddened him.

T'kamen nodded to the brown rider without really knowing why, and looked back at Sarenya. "I'm glad we spoke, Saren."

"So am I." But there was comprehension behind the bland words. Sarenya knew this was a conclusion, and T'kamen wished that the calm empathy of moments like these were sustainable.

He grasped her arm gently, and then let it go, feeling her release his forearm as he did. "Stay well, Sarenya."

"And you, Weyrleader."

Her use of his title was respectful, but it also reinforced the distance between them – a distance T'kamen knew he could never now bridge. He turned away, feeling the lonely burden of his position weighing down on him more keenly than ever.

Valonna stood alone, not shunned by the other mourners so much as distanced from them by the same eminence that T'kamen bore. She was sombre and still in her sober grey gown, her straight-backed poise almost regal, but young, so very young. And she had borne this isolation, this alienation, ever since her Impression of a queen as a girl of fourteen. T'kamen empathised with his introverted Weyrwoman in a manner he had not before.

She had held steady throughout the crisis following the Hatching, co-ordinating the interrogation of every dragon through Shimpath and the visiting queens. By all accounts, she had been a source of calm authority during the enforced confinement of everyone in the dining hall, responding well even to the demands of the other Weyrleaders. Perhaps most vitally, she had been with C'mine in the moments following the keen for Indioth that had signalled C'los, and for the support she had provided then, T'kamen owed her a debt that could not be repaid. In crisis, Valonna had showed the mettle of a queen rider.

T'kamen crossed the dining cavern to join her, observing that she seemed preoccupied, but Valonna had noticed him by the time he was there. She stood a bit straighter, but faced him without lowering her eyes. Conscious of how Sarenya had imposed the distance between them, T'kamen made a point of addressing the Weyrwoman by name. "Thank you for organising this, Valonna."

"It was no trouble, T'kamen." Then, unexpectedly, Valonna went on, "Crauva arranged the refreshments and staff. I believe I'll be asking her to take over the position of Headwoman from Adrissa."

The quiet determination in Valonna's voice surprised T'kamen almost as much as the radical statement itself. She wasn't asking his permission to make the change; rather, informing him of a decision she had every right to make. A dozen questions leapt to mind, but T'kamen restrained his amazement, and simply nodded. "Thank you for letting me know."

He noticed how she lifted her chin at the sincerest approval he could have given: unquestioning acceptance of her authority in the domestic running of the Weyr. T'kamen had been

handling too many of the Weyrwoman's traditional duties, but most of the day to day matters of the Weyr's lower caverns had been left to the intractable Adrissa, and it wasn't the Weyrleader's place to appoint a new Headwoman. The thought that Valonna might start to take on the responsibilities she had been neglecting for so long made T'kamen strangely hopeful. He knew that, if he survived the enormous dent that circumstances had made in his credibility as a leader, he would have to start relying on someone. Making every decision for a Weyr in crisis was simply more than one man could manage. Nor was he in denial, now, of the damage he had done to his own health through too much stress and too little rest. He felt a decade older than his thirty-one Turns, and the fight with Katel had demonstrated just how much of his physical strength had been sapped by months of worrying. Trust had never come easily to T'kamen, but with C'los gone, C'mine incapacitated, and neither really suited to functioning as a Weyrleader's second in any case, he knew it was time to look to his bronze riders for support.

T'kamen's thoughts turned to the former Peninsula bronze rider, Sh'zon. He was mistrustful enough of H'pold to take the Peninsula Weyrleader's comments with a good dose of scepticism, but Sh'zon had made no attempt to deny the severity of the crimes for which his uncle, and most of his extended family, had been exiled some Turns ago. Kawanth's rider simply insisted that he had not violated the oath he had taken never to transport anyone from the island. Clearly, the bronze rider had manoeuvred C'mine into extracting Tarshe from the family exile, but interviewing Darshanth's rider was out of the question. It wouldn't have been so bad had Tarshe not Impressed the queen. The prospect of a weyrwoman with an eight Turn grudge, fierce family loyalty, and, by L'stev's judgement, a streak of steely will concerned T'kamen. The strength of character evident in the young woman was in itself no bad thing, but T'kamen would never have authorised her inclusion in the candidate class if he'd known her background.

But the problem of Tarshe could wait until her queen was older, and by then L'stev's training would probably have instilled some sense of loyalty to the Weyr in the girl. Sh'zon was the more immediate concern. T'kamen had already contacted Masterharper Gaffry. He wanted to know the true circumstances of the crime, and H'pold was unlikely to be forthcoming with information. T'kamen had spoken only briefly with Sh'zon before temporarily relieving him of duty. He hadn't stripped the Peninsula rider's rank from him – too conscious of how it felt to have the privileges and responsibilities of command so ignominiously removed – but the story had spread around the Weyr, and T'kamen would risk mutiny if he left Sh'zon on active service.

His concerns about the foreign rider were, by rights, strictly his own business, involving the fighting Wings as they did, but T'kamen turned to his Weyrwoman nonetheless. "I'll be spending some time investigating the incident with Wingleader Sh'zon's family," he said. "There've been some ugly rumours circulating, and I'm going to need your support in putting them down until the matter has been clarified to my satisfaction. It's not fair on Sh'zon, nor on Tarshe."

“I understand.” Valonna hesitated, then said, “I was speaking to Rallai at the Hatching, before.... Her queen will rise soon, T’kamen. I wondered if that might have been a factor in Sh’zon’s transfer.”

T’kamen nodded curtly. He hadn’t realised that the Peninsula’s senior queen was due to mate, and Valonna’s insight pleased him. It would certainly account for some of H’pold’s animosity towards Sh’zon. He thought, with a pang, that C’los would have been best equipped to unravel the mystery behind the Peninsula man’s transfer.

But C’los was dead, and one way or another, T’kamen, and Madellon, would have to manage without him. The Weyrleader looked out across the room, at L’stev and Jenavally, his oldest supporters; at C’mine, who would need himself some of the friendship that he had always been so willing to give; at H’ned and T’rello, whom he must learn to trust; at Carleah, who represented the young of the Weyr he had to see guided and nurtured through the next few Turns. And finally he looked at Valonna, the young Weyrwoman whose strength was untested, untried, but now undeniable.

Winter was coming to the Weyr. For some, it had already come. But if winter marked an end to some things, it signalled a beginning for others – and if T’kamen, and Madellon, could only endure, spring, and hope, might eventually follow.