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# CHAPTER FOUR



“T’kamen, report to the Weyrleader.”

T’kamen had barely taken his seat in the Wing ready room when F’digan issued the peremptory command. “Excuse me, Wingleader?”

F’digan glanced up from the hide he was reading, his expression slightly bored. “I said you’re to report to the Weyrleader, wingrider. Do you need directions?”

T’kamen stiffened, rising half out of his seat at the insult, until a heavy hand on his shoulder stopped him. L’stev glowered at him from under thick dark brows, but spoke softly. “Easy, Kamen. Nothing to be gained by rising to it. Just go – I’ll mind things here.”

Fuming silently, T’kamen walked out of the room. *F’digan! A brown rider! Not all brown riders are bad*, Epherineth commented from their weyr ledge.

That was true, and T’kamen felt briefly contrite for the sweeping condemnation. F’digan was just the worst of his kind, one of L’dro’s favourites. *I swear, Epherineth, if things don’t change soon, I’m putting in for a transfer.*

*Things will change.*

The bronze’s certainty steadied T’kamen a little, and he had regained his normal outward impassivity by the time he reached the Weyrleader’s office.

L’dro wasn’t there, but D’feng was, and the Flightleader wore a blandly expectant expression. “I have a small assignment for you, wingrider.”

T’kamen stared at the older bronze rider. “I was told to report to the Weyrleader.”

“You will receive your orders from me. You’re to go to...”

“You aren’t the Weyrleader, D’feng,” T’kamen interrupted. “I was told to report to him, not you.” *Epherineth, where’s Pierdeth?*

*Not in the Weyr,* Epherineth replied immediately.

D’feng’s thin face had lost its bland expression. “The Weyrleader is otherwise engaged, rider. I act in his stead.”

“If L’dro’s out-Weyr then why did my Wingleader tell me to report to him?” T’kamen asked coldly. He already knew the answer. This wouldn’t be the first time in the last seven-day or so they had tried to catch him out for taking orders from the wrong rider.

“You must have misunderstood the message,” D’feng replied.

T’kamen clenched his teeth to hold back the angry retort, feeling his blood heat with withheld fury. “Then next time relay it straight through my dragon rather than my Wingleader.”

D’feng dropped his gaze to the hides on L’dro’s desk, then shoved a slip across to T’kamen. “Go to Blue Shale Hold and pick up a special order there. Deliver it to its destination intact, or you’ll be paying for breakages out of your own time and marks.”

“You pulled me out of a Wing meeting for a job any weyrling could do?” T’kamen asked incredulously.

“We have no weyrings,” D’feng reminded him piously.

“Any off-duty rider, then.”

D’feng smiled thinly. “This errand is very important. It requires the prestige of a bronze dragon.”

Fighting to maintain his composure in the light of D’feng’s insulting tone, T’kamen ground out, “My Wing is drilling today. Why don’t you send T’rello or Fr’ton?”

“I’m sending you, rider,” D’feng said coldly. “You have your orders.”

*Not now,* Epherineth cautioned, anticipating the refusal on T’kamen’s tongue. *We can go and be back quickly.*

*How can you...?*

*He’s provoking you. Don’t let him.*

T’kamen gritted his teeth at his dragon’s attitude, then snatched up the slip of hide and strode from the office, rigid with fury.

Epherineth was already angling down from their ledge, his flying straps dangling from one forepaw. He landed a length away from his rider, turning his great head to regard T’kamen with a calming gaze, ignoring his accusatory glare. *Things will change.*

*They should never have got this bad in the first place.* T'kamen took the harness his dragon had pulled off the rack and slipped it onto the sleek bronze neck, tightening and adjusting the fit before vaulting to his place.

Only then did he glance at the piece of hide D'feng had given him. T'kamen's grip tightened on Epherineth's neck until the bronze shook himself slightly in protest.

*Faranth's teeth, L'dro and D'feng are Threadbait!*

*There's no Thread,* Epherineth reminded him.

T'kamen bit back an irate rejoinder to his dragon's apparent nonchalance, and read aloud, "Report to Eastan, Steward of Blue Shale Hold, and journeyman Sarenya of the Beastcraft to take delivery of the cargo'." Then, softly, he added, "Journeyman."

*Who is she?*

T'kamen stuffed the hide into the inner pocket of his flying jacket. *She's who Shimpath should have chosen.*



She rode like a natural. T'kamen had noticed that the day he and Epherineth had brought her back to the Weyr, and even now, astride the great bronze's neck in no more than a flimsy white candidate robe, Sarenya seemed comfortable and confident and entirely at home.

He kept his arm around her waist anyway.

Epherineth landed cautiously, half folding his wings to keep down the dust, and his hind paws sank deep into the soft sand of the Hatching ground. The bronze settled to his forearms and dropped his shoulder, unasked.

Sarenya looked back at T'kamen. "This is my stop."

The remark made the Wingleader smile. The expression still felt strange to the bronze rider. "Watch that sand. It's hot."

"I think it's meant to be." Sarenya's strong fingers squeezed his wrist lightly, then let go. She slipped down Epherineth's shoulder easily, touching the bronze's forepaw in thanks, then glanced up at T'kamen with a wince, shifting her feet. "Well, you did warn me."

T'kamen looked down at the girl, wishing he could put what he felt into words. "Good luck," he said finally, lamely.

"Thank you, Kamen."

Sarenya turned and walked across the sands towards the other girls, bearing the heat without complaint. Epherineth rumbled softly. *We should go.*

The bronze let his rider dismount at the top of the stands before finding himself a vantage point with the other dragons on the high ledge circling the Hatching ground, and adding his soft voice to the hum. T'kamen kept his eyes fixed on Sarenya as he walked down through the rows of people, lost in thought, until he felt a hand tug at his jacket.

“Hey, you nearly walked right by us. Come sit.”

The bronze rider focused distractedly on C'los. “Of course. Sorry.”

“What’s the matter with you?” the green rider asked. “It’s a Hatching, not a funeral.”

“Leave him alone,” C'mine interjected, then asked T'kamen, “Was Saren all right?”

“Yes.” T'kamen thought about the girl’s poise. He didn’t remember being as calm when he had stood to Impress. “Confident.”

“They’ve shortened the odds on her again,” C'los said. “I’m glad I put my mark in early.”

“It’s no surprise, with Fianine’s approval,” said C'mine

“I mean, just *look* at some of these girls,” C'los went on. “That skinny one H'ned brought in – she’d break just to look at her. And that pretty thing of T'gat’s couldn’t Impress a fire-lizard, let alone a queen dragon.”

T'kamen wasn’t really listening, still watching Sarenya, the apprentice Beastcrafter he and his friends had found almost five sevendays ago. At nineteen Turns she had the maturity to handle the responsibility that would be thrust upon her; the strength of will to cope with a headstrong queen dragonet, and a background in animal care that would stand her well in caring for a young dragon. Sarenya couldn’t compete with the true beauties – striking rather than pretty, her blue eyes dominated regular features, and her dark hair was confined in its usual practical braid – but her easy smile, intelligent manner, and confident poise was worth so much more to T'kamen.

C'los’ commentary intruded on his thoughts again. “L'dro found someone? Blonde, young, jumping at her own shadow – just his usual type, then.”

“Cherganth’s looking calm, all things considered,” C’mine remarked, nodding towards the adult queen.

“She’s been through all this before,” his weyrmate shrugged.

“Never a queen egg, though. And never with Fianine so sick.” The blue rider glanced towards where the Weyrwoman was standing in the bottom tier near her dragon, proudly refusing R’hren’s offers of assistance, but clutching the barrier for support.

“Oh, here we go,” C’los said eagerly as the humming stopped and the first egg cracked to spill its occupant onto the hot sands.

*Don’t let it be a green,* T’kamen thought, irrationally. It wasn’t: the gangly little creature was darker, a brown or a bronze, although he couldn’t tell which. As it staggered into its chosen partner, and the crowd roared with one voice, T’kamen wondered why he was worried about greens.

*You don’t want a green to choose her before the queen has a chance,* Epherineth commented, amused.

*Maybe that’s it.*

More eggs were cracking: two blues and a green had stumbled into the world. T’kamen held his breath, but the green chose a girl a long way down the line from Sarenya.

“Hey, that’s Lenjando who just got a blue, O’pendro’s youngest,” C’los exclaimed. “Good lad, Lenjy!”

“Nice bronze,” C’mine observed of a closer dragonet. “Looks like yours, Kamen.”

Despite himself, T’kamen tore his eyes away from Sarenya and the rocking queen egg to look at the squalling bronze hatchling.

*I was never that small,* Epherineth commented.

A boy T’kamen didn’t recognise was standing in front of the young bronze, his expression filled with a mixture of astonishment and joy and adoration. “Zintyrath,” he breathed, his eyes flooding with tears. “Zintyrath...oh...you’re so beautiful...and...mine?”

*You were,* T’kamen said, looking away from the Impression, feeling a lump in his throat at the memory of the moment when a softly crying bronze dragonet had struggled to meet him, remembering how he had instantly known that the dragon had a name, and that name was Epherineth.

“V’stan’s going to be weeping into his ale tonight, his girl got a green,” C’los crowed.

“Queen’s showing,” C’mine observed, and there was excitement in the normally calm blue rider’s voice.

The glowing shell of the golden egg had fractured, and its occupant was struggling out. T’kamen felt his dragon’s instant love and respect go out to the new queen, even as she wailed with her need to find a partner. The girls quickly moved closer to circle the hatchling, obscuring her from view. T’kamen couldn’t see Sarenya any more. *What’s happening?* he asked Epherineth.

*She chooses.*

The queen’s voice took on a note of incredible joy as she made her choice, and a great sigh of regret washed through the rejected girls.

They fell back, away from the queen and her partner, to reveal the young blonde girl L’dro had brought in, her face alight with happiness, her arms wrapped protectively around the golden dragonet’s shoulders.

*Her name is Shimpath,* said Epherineth.



Sarenya had just finished wrapping the last fire-lizard egg in a cushioning layers of furs when all but one of the four adult lizards in the room chattered excitedly and vanished *between*. Only the little bronze kept his vigil on the edge of the basket of wrapped eggs, rustling his wings slightly. Sarenya smiled indulgently at him. Tarnish had always taken himself rather seriously.

The apprentice making a painstaking inventory of the herb locker looked up from his work but didn’t venture to speak. On the other side of the room, Kaddyston rose from inspecting one of the herd canines, close to birthing her litter. “That sounds like your ride, Saren.”

Sarenya ran a gentle hand over the protected clutch, then glanced down at the three packs that would be accompanying her on her new assignment. Not much to show for more than five Turns of service. But then how could she possibly take anything but the memory of the hundreds of animals she had treated in her tenure here, the runners and herdbeasts she had helped birth, the sick creatures she had nursed back to health, and the fire-lizards – especially the fire-lizards.

Two of those, though, would accompany her – the bronze Tarnish, and Sleek, his more excitable blue brother. Sleek had resisted all attempts at schooling, prone to long periods of truancy, but he always came back eventually. By comparison, Tarnish had responded well to his training, and he was a helpful partner

and valued companion. Both had been given to her as eggs, part of Sarenya's own training in the speciality of Blue Shale Beastcrafters. Fire-lizard eggs were a major export of the coastal Hold, especially to the North where wild clutches were seldom found. Most of the Southern coastline came under the jurisdiction of one Hold or another, but Blue Shale's careful monitoring of its beaches and indigenous fire-lizard populations gave it the most reliable self-replenishing source of eggs for trade to the North and inland.

Sarenya had spent her fair share of time on the beaches during her posting here, logging green and gold clutches and monitoring the hardness of the eggs, then selecting some from each viable clutch to bring back for trade. Some Holds simply plundered every egg in every nest they found, leaving the local population depleted. Blue Shale's more cautious husbandry kept the wild fairs healthy. Any eggs thought to hold queens were never traded, and most were left to mature in the wild. The few queen fire-lizards looking to humans instinctively returned to their birthplaces to clutch, but Blue Shale had no desire to destroy its market by giving a breeding female to someone who might train it to lay elsewhere. A few chosen Blue Shale Holders with queens had been trying to train them to do just that, but with little success. Instinct, it seemed, was a powerful motivator when it came to fire-lizard breeding habits.

Sarenya would have liked to try training a queen to lay on demand, but fond as she was of the creatures, more hands were needed to care for the working beasts of the Hold. Fire-lizards were pretty pets, and could be trained as useful messengers, but their practical importance paled in comparison to the meat and milk herds, the wool-producing ovines, and the working runners and canines.

The notification of her new posting had come as a complete surprise. Sarenya had expected to stay at Blue Shale for another two Turns: the senior of two journeymen, she was second in experience only to Master Kaddyston himself. Golirien was a competent crafter, but they would be scrambling to cover Sarenya's duties until such time as the Hall assigned another journeyman to Blue Shale. None of the seven apprentices were ready for promotion.

Handing over this clutch of fourteen lizard eggs was the last duty Sarenya would perform as a Blue Shale journeyman. It was only a few days from hatching, and since a rider was coming to convey her anyway, a short side-trip to Kellad Hold to deliver the clutch would be an economical use of his time.

Sarenya picked up the first of her packs, slinging it over her shoulder. "Tarnish, come," she called to her lizard as she hefted the second pack. The bronze

swooped over obediently to alight on her shoulder, digging his talons into the well-worn leather of Sarenya's jacket.

"Fajon, leave that and help bring out this clutch," Kaddyston told the diligent apprentice. He himself leaned down to pick up the last of Sarenya's bags as Fajon carefully lifted the basket of fire-lizard eggs.

Sarenya glanced around the room once more, but the office bore few memories. Most of her time had been spent in the stables and the fields. "Better not keep the rider waiting."

The three crafters filed out of the Beastcraft office, attached to the stable block, awkward with their burdens. The three errant fire-lizards returned in a flurry of wings. Kaddyston's brown and Fajon's green made for their respective masters, and Sleek dived for Sarenya's shoulder. Tarnish barked at him, a sharp reprimand for the reckless flying. The little blue chirped in chagrin and settled on one of the backpacks instead.

Fajon, in the lead with the basket of fire-lizard eggs, turned the corner to the main courtyard first. "Shells, they sent a bronze!"

Sarenya felt her stomach turn an awkward cartwheel as she rounded the corner and saw the massive bulk of the bronze dragon filling the yard, and she was distractedly glad that she wasn't carrying the eggs. She was sure she would have dropped them, for the dragon was Epherineth. The flowing muscles, lean and smooth under the distinctive green-gold sheen of his glossy hide, the quiet dignity of his bearing, the proud sweep of his wings – all were unmistakable features of that most familiar bronze.

The journeyman let her burdens slide to the ground from suddenly weak hands, ignoring Sleek's protests at being dislodged, as she turned to regard Epherineth's rider.

T'kamen was standing with Eastan, the little man who served as steward to the Hold. Sarenya's eyes ran over the bronze rider rapidly, taking in all the details even more deeply engraved on her memory than those of the great bronze. T'kamen had barely changed: his frame was as spare and his stance as alert and resolute as she remembered. But there was a greater hostility in his demeanour, more tension in the new lines that marked his lean face, and if the fierce intensity of his gaze was the same, it spoke of contained frustration, an aggression boiling up from deep inside. The bronze rider had the look of an angry bull, goaded almost to the point of a charge. The shoulders of his riding jacket bore epaulettes with the single gold stripe of a mere wingrider. Sarenya had known about T'kamen's demotion for Turns, but somehow, seeing him without the three bars of a Wingleader was shocking.

“Get back and check on that bitch, Fajon, she’s very close now,” Kaddyston told the apprentice, who was still staring admiringly at the huge dragon, the basket of eggs left forgotten with Sarenya’s packs. Then, in a more covert tone, he asked Sarenya, “Old friend?”

Sarenya nodded. Her Master knew about her brief stay at Madellon Weyr seven Turns previously, and his sense for her discomfort was as delicate and accurate as the skill with animals that made him such a fine Beastcrafter. But keeping a dragonrider – any dragonrider – waiting was an unforgivable breach of etiquette. Sarenya steeled herself as she approached T’kamen. She took a deep breath, let it out, then spoke in what she hoped was a level tone. “Bronze rider.”

T’kamen froze almost imperceptibly for a fraction of a second, then slowly turned to her. His face wiped clean, an expressionless mask of harsh lines, even his eyes suddenly empty, and when he spoke his voice was dead. “Journeyman.”

The silence that followed stretched out uncomfortably. Sarenya could not speak, nor move, nor take her eyes from T’kamen’s emotionless face. On her shoulder, Tarnish remained still; even Sleek ceased his normal antics and perched soberly on one of the packs.

Finally Eastan cleared his throat meaningfully. Sarenya looked at the little steward in surprise. She had forgotten he was even there.

“You have the eggs for Kellad Hold, journeyman?” asked Eastan.

“Yes.” Glad for the distraction, Sarenya looked down at the wrapped clutch, still radiating a faint heat from the warm hearth. “Fourteen, as arranged.”

“Would you like to count them, bronze rider?”

“That won’t be necessary, Steward.”

T’kamen’s flat reply surprised Sarenya, but she was too troubled to try to decipher his meaning as he signed for the clutch. Suddenly she just wanted to get *between* to Madellon and get away from the expressionless stranger T’kamen had become. “My packs are ready; I’ll just take leave of my Master...”

“What?” T’kamen demanded, a sudden hardness to his voice. “I was sent here to pick up a fire-lizard clutch.”

His reaction went beyond mere irritation with the menial task he had been assigned. “I’ve been posted to Madellon Weyr, bronze rider,” she said, not understanding his demand.

T’kamen’s eyes flared suddenly with renewed anger. “I was only told about the clutch.”

Kaddyston stepped up at that moment. “I think there’s been a miscommunication, bronze rider,” he said. “My journeyman has indeed been posted

to Madellon; the message we received from your Weyrleader indicated that the rider detailed to deliver the clutch to Kellad would also convey Sarenya to the Weyr.” The Master paused, then added peaceably, “I’m sure if you speak to your Weyrleader this could be resolved, or another rider could be sent...”

“No.” T’kamen’s negative was too abrupt to be polite. “Take your leave, journeyman.” With that, the bronze rider picked up two of Sarenya’s packs and turned to secure them to his dragon’s riding harness.

Kaddyston drew her aside. “I wouldn’t normally interfere, Saren. But this rider obviously knows you, and wasn’t told he would be expected to convey you. And why has the Weyrleader sent a bronze? What’s going on here?”

Sarenya glanced at T’kamen’s back. The rider’s anger and embarrassment at being made to look a fool was tangible. “It’s a long story,” she explained, a little awkwardly. “But he’s not been sent to honour *me*.”

“Watch your back at the Weyr, Saren,” Kaddyston cautioned her. “You’re a fine Beaster, but something tells me that things are not right there.” He pressed a rolled and sealed hide into her hand. “Your reference for Master Arrense. I hope he appreciates your skills.”

Sarenya clasped Kaddyston’s strong, callused hand firmly. “Thank you, Master.”

There were no other farewells to make. The other Beasters were out in the fields or on the beaches; Sarenya had said her goodbyes to them last night. Resolutely, she turned to the bronze dragon, buttoning her jacket closed against the cold of *between*. Tarnish took off from her shoulder and joined Sleek, hovering slightly above Epherineth.

T’kamen had already settled on his dragon’s neck. He looked down at her, his eyes invisible behind the dark-tinted goggles. “You remember how to mount?”

Before Sarenya had a chance to answer, Epherineth had cocked his forearm and angled his shoulder. Sarenya stepped on the bronze’s arm and then reached up to take the hand T’kamen offered. Once she was in place behind him on Epherineth’s neck, the bronze rider secured her with the fighting strap. Tarnish and Sleek landed on her shoulders.

Despite the tension, Sarenya admired the enormous strength of the dragon beneath her, feeling the great beast’s muscles bunch as he prepared to take off. She noticed Eastan and Kaddyston moving well back, to give the bronze dragon space, and all the curious faces watching at the windows of the Hold.

Then Epherineth sprang, his wings catching the air and lifting them easily. Within three strokes they were high above the Hold. Sarenya turned her face away

as the wind rushing past made her eyes stream, but out of T'kamen's sight, she was smiling at the exhilarating power of Epherineth's flight.

She saw T'kamen's signal, and then they were *between*. The darkness held no fear for Sarenya, save the memory of the last time she had ridden dragonback. She could not feel herself shiver in the icy cold, but she knew she had, and that the shiver, like the memory, would stay with her long after she emerged into the light.



*Between* had done little to cool T'kamen's fury by the time Epherineth emerged into brilliant sunlight far above Kellad Hold's fire-heights. If L'dro and D'feng had set out to provoke him, they had succeeded. Sending him on an errand – an errand! – delivering fire-lizard eggs was insult enough. Neglecting to mention that he was also expected to convey a journeyman back to the Weyr had humiliated him in front of Hold Steward and Craft Master. But when that journeyman was Sarenya of the Beastcraft... T'kamen seethed with impotent rage.

Epherineth had withheld comment, demonstrating an excess of reticence even by his taciturn standards. As he adjusted his speed to make a controlled descent to the courtyard of the Hold, he said simply, *Be calm*.

The bronze's admonition was quiet but forceful, and dispersed the intensity of T'kamen's anger. T'kamen felt a brief surge of irritation at his dragon's effortless management of his emotions, but he had been grateful for Epherineth's moderating influence on his temper more than once in the past. The bronze rider forced himself to breathe deeply, accept Epherineth's caution, ignore his passenger, and focus instead upon the Hold.

The great courtyard was as familiar to T'kamen from the ground as from the air. He had spent the first seventeen Turns of his life travelling with one of the oldest established Southern trader trains, so Kellad Hold was the closest thing T'kamen had ever had to a home before the Weyr. Each autumn the wagons of his family, and the other families that made up the train, would return here to weather the coldest months of the Turn. Each winter Taskamen had renewed his friendships and rivalries with the boys of the Hold and of the Harperhall that defined one side of the courtyard. Here, in the bitter cold of winter fourteen Turns ago, Taskamen of the traders, Cairmine of Kellad, and Carellos of the Harperhall had been Searched by a blue dragon of Madellon Weyr.

T'kamen seldom had reason to visit Kellad, but the place was little different to how he remembered. Harper crafters in blue numbered almost the same as holders, with the brown and green colours of Kellad woven into their shoulder knots. Smoke

rose from the furnaces in the Hold smithies, and the rasp of file and saw sounded steadily from the workshops of Kellad's carpenters. The fragrance of fresh sawdust attested to the Hold's most prosperous industry: great swathes of hard- and softwoods had been planted immediately after the end of the last Pass, so as to maximise timber production while no Thread fell to destroy the trees. Almost a hundred Turns on, the foresight of those long-dead foresters was paying rich dividends for the holders of Kellad.

As Epherineth settled to the flagstones, T'kamen glanced over at the main doors of the Hold to see who had been sent to take delivery of the fire-lizard eggs. He narrowed his eyes as he recognised the brawny man standing among a cluster of women on the steps of the Hold. What was so significant about a clutch of fire-lizard eggs to merit Lord Meturvian's personal attention?

"Dragonrider!" the big man bellowed up at him.

T'kamen dismounted, pulling down his flying goggles and wondering bitterly what oversight he'd made this time. "Lord Holder Meturvian."

Kellad's Lord halted his approach, looking more closely at the bronze rider, then at Epherineth. "My apologies. I took you for L'dro."

T'kamen inclined his head curtly in acknowledgement of the apology. "T'kamen, Epherineth's rider. I have fire-lizard eggs for you."

Behind Meturvian, the young women – the Lord's daughters, by their resemblance to him – pressed forwards eagerly. "L'dro said fourteen," he said suspiciously.

Behind him, T'kamen heard Sarenya slither down Epherineth's shoulder. "Fourteen Blue Shale fire-lizard eggs, my Lord," she said in a clear voice. "They've been well protected against *between*, but they need heat – a warm hearth would be ideal."

T'kamen untied the basket of fire-lizard eggs from Epherineth's harness and handed it wordlessly to Sarenya. The journeyman unwrapped the first egg, showing Kellad's Lord the pale, mottled shell and giving him a chance to count the clutch.

Satisfied, Meturvian nodded. "Javiann will show you to the hearth in my office, journeyman."

One of his daughters led Sarenya into the Hold, but Meturvian folded his arms, staring at T'kamen. "Tell your Weyrleader that lizard eggs are a pretty gift, but no compensation for the shame he has brought on my family." The burly Lord turned a hard glare on one of his remaining daughters.

The bronze rider noticed the telltale swell of the girl's belly, and the way she cast her eyes down at his scrutiny. So, L'dro had been careless enough to get the

daughter of a powerful Lord pregnant. T'kamen would have laughed, but the significance of the fire-lizard clutch was now all too plain. The transaction he had assumed to be between Blue Shale and Kellad involved the Weyrleader directly. L'dro must have waived a significant portion of the Weyr's tithe from Blue Shale in exchange for these eggs to pacify Meturvian. No wonder things were so tight at the Weyr, with L'dro spending half its resources to gloss over his own indiscretions. And by Meturvian's avaricious tone, he wouldn't be satisfied with one clutch of eggs as compensation.

"I'll see that he gets the message," T'kamen said coldly, as disgusted by the Holder's greed as by L'dro's corruption. He was doubly keen to get back to the Weyr now, to discuss these new revelations with C'los, and to leave this place. He longed for the comfortable quiet of his own weyr.

Then, too, as Sarenya returned, T'kamen felt his indignation at L'dro's dishonesty fade into insignificance. He yanked his darkened goggles up to cover his eyes and vaulted to Epherineth's neck: ostensibly because he had no desire to tarry here any longer than necessary, in truth because even looking at the journeyman Beastcrafter stirred up memories and regrets best left forgotten. T'kamen waited while Sarenya bade Meturvian a polite farewell, no longer caring that he was playing the menial role D'feng had set for him to the hilt.

When Sarenya turned to mount, T'kamen gripped her forearm with such strength that she winced as she settled into place behind him, and massaged her wrist gingerly with the other hand. The journeyman's two fire-lizards chattered indignantly, and under her breath, Sarenya muttered, "Kamen!"

The familiar use of his name was as startling to Sarenya as it was to T'kamen, if the surprise in her eyes was accurate. T'kamen froze, searching her astonished gaze for calculation, guiltily glad that his own eyes were hidden. Then, before he could say anything inadvisable, he turned back, staring forwards at the back of Epherineth's head. *Get us out of here.*

The bronze gathered his weight, easing back onto his haunches before leaping aloft with all the gigantic power of his massively muscular hind legs. T'kamen leaned into the steep climb, blocking everything out of his mind save for a crystal clear visualisation of Madellon, far more detailed than Epherineth required.

But as he signalled the imminent jump, T'kamen felt Sarenya tuck her hands into his belt, and as the perfect image of Madellon fled his mind, the bronze rider was glad of the knowledge that Epherineth's unerring instinct would always guide them safely home.