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CHAPTER SIX



It was just after dawn when T'kamen was roused by the sound of Epherineth shifting his weight on the ledge outside.

The bronze rider rubbed a hand over his face, wincing at the rasp of stubble, and threw off his light quilt. *Something the matter?*

I didn't mean to wake you.

T'kamen felt around for clothes in the darkness of his weyr, pulling a shirt over his head before drawing back the heavy hide curtain that separated his sleeping space from Epherineth's chamber. Enough light filtered in from the opening at the far end of that great cavern for the bronze rider to locate the rest of his clothes. *Is the morning watchdragon on duty yet?*

No. It's very early.

T'kamen poured himself a cup of water from the flask beside his bed, and walked out through his dragon's cavern, onto the ledge, to drink it. He ran his hand lightly along his bronze's side as he moved to stand beside him. *What's wrong? Is it Shimpath?*

Epherineth nuzzled his shoulder briefly. *It is and it isn't.*

T'kamen sipped his water, looking out at the peaceful Weyr as he gave the bronze a chance to elaborate in his own time. Few dragons were awake yet: most of them still within their weyrs, a few others asleep on their ledges. It was early, despite the midsummer sun. Epherineth's favourite time of day.

Eventually, the bronze said, *She is awake but will not leave her weyr, although she wishes she could.*

What's stopping her? T'kamen asked.

Something that might have been a growl escaped Epherineth's throat, and he turned a pointed gaze on the queen's ledge, far below across the Bowl. Pierdeth lay asleep there, his massive bulk sprawled across the entrance to Shimpath's weyr. *She doesn't want to wake her rider by making him move.*

T'kamen fixed the sleeping bronze with a sober gaze. Pierdeth had been ostentatiously resident on Shimpath's ledge every night since the challenge, compared to perhaps one night in a sevenday before. L'dro wasn't going to let his position go without a fight, and from C'mine's increasingly frustrated reports, the Weyrleader's renewed solicitude of Valonna was having the desired effect.

The bronze rider leaned against Epherineth's shoulder, letting his dragon's understanding presence ease his own frustration with the Weyrwoman. The girl was even more vapid than he had initially imagined. For all C'mine's assertions that she had begun to shake off L'dro's conditioning, she'd welcomed Pierdeth's rider back into her bed quickly enough. That she could be duped by L'dro's pretended affections spoke very poorly of Valonna's judgement, queen rider or not.

For the hundredth time, T'kamen wished that someone else – anyone else – had Impressed Shimpath. Or that Fianine hadn't died and left such a poorly prepared girl to assume the political mantle of Weyrwoman alone. Or even that one of the other Weyrs had been charitable enough to transfer a junior queen when Fianine's death had left Madellon with only one. The Peninsula had boasted three queens at the time of Valonna's accession to Senior Weyrwoman: had T'kamen been Weyrleader, he would have petitioned for one of them to take over Madellon, rather than leave it to the incompetence of a girl not yet out of weyrling training, and in L'dro's thrall to boot. But R'hren had been too easily swayed by the arguments of the majority of the Council that a Weyr should keep its population down during the Interval, and nothing had been done.

T'kamen had been more concerned about the severe inbreeding represented by a Weyr with only one queen, but his voice had been but one among many even then. The negative effects of bad inbreeding would not be seen for many Turns with infrequent clutches, by which time the bronze riders of this Council would long since have gone *between*. Their selfish complacency made T'kamen seethe. The heroic lustre of bronze riders dimmed in these peaceful, Thread-free times: men who might have made brave leaders during a Pass grew fat and lazy on an Interval lifestyle where the greatest threat was that of stingy tithes from equally short-sighted Holders. Thread, T'kamen believed, brought out the best in dragonriders.

But the Red Star would not draw close again for another hundred Turns, when even the youngest of Madellon's riders would be no more. Was Pern to face

another century of worthless dragonriders with nothing better to occupy them than petty internal politics? Were all Interval Weyrs as facile and corrupt as Madellon? Could any rider be heroic without ever facing Thread?

I'd like to eat, said Epherineth.

His dragon's immediate concerns disturbed T'kamen's train of thought. *How hungry are you?*

Quite. The bronze gazed at the herdbeast pens, far below. *I could eat three or four of those.*

Have two to take the edge off, and we'll hunt out-Weyr later.

Epherineth crouched low, and T'kamen settled between the dragon's neck ridges, bracing himself against them in lieu of straps. *Go ahead.*

The bronze launched himself from the weyr ledge at a half run, caught the air with his wings, and glided towards the beast pens. With the wind in his face, ruffling his hair, T'kamen closed his eyes, feeling momentarily free of the burden that had become his, no more than a dragonrider with his beast. When he let himself submerge in Epherineth's thoughts, he could hear the cool flow of air over and under his wings, smell the tiny changes in air pressure and current, see through his far-sighted eyes, taste the sunlight on his hide, even sense the distant presence of what might have been the other dragons of the Weyr. Epherineth's enduring love and companionship wrapped around him, and T'kamen took strength and joy from the link he had never doubted, even for a moment, ever since Epherineth's Hatching. Not for T'kamen the startled disbelief of most boys newly Impressed: instead, the certainty, full and unquestionable, that in the eyes of the dragonet who had chosen him, he had found himself.

It was with regret that T'kamen withdrew from that most absolute contact with his dragon: a closeness matched only by the merging of their minds when Epherineth flew to mate, both more and less intimate, for in mating they were one being and single of mind, but in total sensory contact they were individuals freely sharing everything they were, hiding nothing.

T'kamen picked through the rush of urges and sensations and emotions that filled his bronze's mind. Epherineth was hungry. That basic need was pre-eminent in his thoughts, and his desire to gorge himself on sweet, hot flesh was a maddening temptation, despite his rider's caution that he could take only two. With the hunger came a consciousness of his own physical fitness to hunt and kill: the flex of shining, silvery talons that could end a creature's life with a single swipe, the wicked sharpness of his fangs to the experimental touch of his tongue, the powerful muscles of his neck and jaws that would let him shake the life from his prey, then rip and rend

flesh and bone, or fasten his teeth inescapably to the throat of a victim, to drain its blood. T'kamen hesitated over that last thought, wondering if Shimpath's time was near, but Epherineth desired meat, not blood.

The awareness of Shimpath lay just beneath Epherineth's immediate needs: respect, protectiveness, and desire, but no urgency. The bronze's instinctive knowledge of the queen's readiness to mate lay quiet. But his need to make her his when she flew was strong, made fresh by T'kamen's own frequent thoughts of Shimpath's next mating. Epherineth knew what his rider wanted, and with the constant reminder that the queen would soon rise, the bronze was well prepared for what lay ahead.

T'kamen sensed his own preoccupations in Epherineth's thoughts, subtly altered by the dragon's perspective. His quest for the Weyrleadership equated with Epherineth's driving ambition to win Shimpath. His reliance on C'los and C'mine translated to the bronze's fondness for Indioth and Darshanth. His hatred of L'dro was matched by Epherineth's unwavering dislike for Pierdeth, and his respective reluctance and refusal to refer to bronze or rider by name. His frustration with Valonna...

You think too much, Epherineth said, with an odd note in his voice, interrupting T'kamen's concentration again.

So do you, T'kamen replied, half irritated, half amused. *I was thinking your thoughts.*

Then you know that I'm hungry. Epherineth landed a short distance from the herdbeast pens and dropped his shoulder meaningfully.

T'kamen dismounted, throwing a curious look at his dragon. *Don't get overexcited.*

The bronze indicated his disgust at that notion with a low snort as he took off to break his fast.

T'kamen walked up to the fence of the enclosure, watching the herd begin to stampede in terror as Epherineth flew over it. The bronze banked one way, then the other, using his shadow to break up the pack, until two or three beasts separated from the rest. That was when he struck, stunning a bullock with a negligent sweep of his talons, then lunging towards a second animal, sinking his fangs into its hindquarters and dragging it, still screaming and struggling, within range of his claws. Two deft slashes dispatched both beasts, and grasping one in each forepaw, Epherineth surged aloft, to deposit his kills away from the paddock and devour them at his leisure.

The entire operation had taken the bronze less than five minutes. T'kamen admired his dragon's deadly skill, the experienced eye that had selected prime beasts from the herd and broken them away from the others. An unskilled dragon could kill or injure a dozen beasts with an ill-timed strike, but Epherineth's accuracy was exquisite.

"He's very precise."

The voice startled T'kamen, but even as he turned quickly from contemplating his dragon to face the speaker, he knew who it was.

"Journeyman," he said shortly.

Sarenya regarded him steadily for a moment, then took a bedraggled piece of hide from one of the pockets of her heavy wherhide tunic and made a note on it: undoubtedly, confirming that Epherineth had killed his quota of Weyr beasts for the sevenday. "Will two be enough for him?"

T'kamen would have liked nothing more than to walk away, but talk of Epherineth, and the Weyr's inability to meet his needs, was more than he could resist. "We'll hunt out-Weyr later today. He could take as many as three more."

Sarenya made another note. Her composure in the face of T'kamen's brusqueness annoyed the bronze rider. "Then five beasts is his normal consumption in a sevenday? Is that standard?"

"For a bronze. A green or small blue might only need two. A green who's close to rising might take more, or less. Consumption is seasonal: dragons eat more in cold weather. Or if they've been exerting themselves with trips *between* or long flights."

The journeyman nodded, still making notations on her grubby bit of hide. "And does Eph ... does he favour one type of beast over another?"

The verbal slip was not lost on T'kamen: he narrowed his eyes, studying Sarenya's expression. "He prefers herdbeast, like most dragons. More body fat than wherries. More energy."

Sarenya finally tucked away her notes. "Thank you, bronze rider."

She turned without further remark, heading for one of the far paddocks. T'kamen watched her for a moment, then rapidly turned his attention back to Epherineth.

The bronze was poised over his first kill, the eviscerated carcass pinned beneath the talons of one forepaw, but his eyes, still showing agitated glints of hunger, followed Sarenya.

What are you doing? T'kamen demanded, irritated by his dragon's candid interest in the woman he himself was trying so hard to ignore.

Epherineth turned his attention back to his meal, pulling another mouthful of flesh from the dead herdbeast, before replying, *I was thinking your thoughts*. Then, with a thoughtful certainty that made T'kamen go cold, the bronze added, *And I know you're hungry*.



"It's like talking to a bull herdbeast," said Sarenya, scrubbing sand into Darshanth's hide a little harder than necessary. "Except a bull herdbeast reacts more."

C'mine ducked under his dragon's neck, wading around to join her on the blue's left side. "He's got a lot on his mind, Saren."

She shook her head. "No, he's always been like that when he's confronted with something he doesn't want to face. He just puts those defences up, and nothing gets through them."

"More gets through than he'll admit, or show," said C'mine. "Go and rinse off, Darshanth."

They both stood back as the blue lumbered out into deeper water. As he submerged to wash the soapy sand from his hide, Sleek and Tarnish took off from where they had been perched on his back, chirping indignantly, before diving in themselves to join him. Under the surface of the lake, Darshanth's vibrant colour was enhanced with the lighter blue of sunlight through clear water.

Sarenya felt hot and gritty from the exercise of helping C'mine scrub up his dragon. The sun beat down fiercely, and waist-deep in the lake, with the water reflecting the glare back up at her, she could feel it burning. With his darker skin, C'mine probably didn't notice as much, but the hot weather of the last few sevendays had been draining on man and beast. Even the lake's level had dropped, and sun-baked mud and withered plants marked areas that had been underwater until recently.

"I'm just going to swim a bit, to wash off," she told the blue rider.

C'mine nodded. "Go out to Darshanth, and he'll bring you back."

Sarenya sank to her neck in the cool water, enjoying the feel of it against her overheated skin. She swam out with lazy strokes, feeling the water wash away the tension of a long day's work with the herds, and the additional exertion of washing half a full grown blue dragon. It was no wonder dragonriders had to be so fit.

When Sarenya was within thirty feet of Darshanth, the blue vanished beneath the surface again. The Beastcrafter took a breath and dived down herself.

The lake was deep in the centre, easily deep enough for a dragon to swim freely. Sarenya watched Darshanth's graceful movements, noticing how he had

streamlined himself, all four legs tucked back in line with his body, wings tight against his back. His powerful tail snaked from side to side, propelling him easily through the water, and his eyes shone like muted gems under his filmy first set of eyelids.

Sarenya could have watched him for hours, fascinated by how the dragon adapted a body designed for flight to an underwater environment, but she needed air. She broke the surface and gulped in a great breath, shaking her wet hair.

Underwater, something touched her foot, and then Darshanth came up underneath her. Sarenya half laughed, half gasped in surprise as the blue emerged from the water beneath her, and grabbed at one of the stubby ridges of his back, between his wings, for balance.

Darshanth turned his head to look back at her, his eyes gleaming blue and green. *You swim well, Sarenya, but not as well or as fast as I.*

Sarenya scrambled forwards to the familiar security of the blue's neck ridges. "You're so full of yourself, Darshanth," she scolded him.

The blue dragon snorted playfully, and began to swim back towards the shore.

The hot sun had already half dried Sarenya by the time they reached the edge of the lake. She slid down Darshanth's shoulder, patting his forearm in thanks for the ride, and made her way up the bank to where C'mine was sitting.

The blue rider handed her a towel. "He was showing off again, wasn't he?"

Sarenya dried off quickly, then started to pull on her clothes. "Just a little."

C'mine got to his feet, picking up the bucket of oil he had brought out. "He just has a few itchy places, then he's done."

"Can I help?" Sarenya asked.

"Thanks, but he can show me exactly where he needs it, and it won't take a moment." C'mine touched a place on his dragon's neck, his fingers finding the slight roughness, then dipped his other hand in the oil and smoothed it into the soft hide.

"Does he need it all over?" she asked.

C'mine shook his head, moving on down his dragon's side. "He did when he was growing. But once dragons reach maturity, they aren't growing all the time, so the hide doesn't stretch so much, and since we aren't fighting Thread, we don't *between* enough for problems to develop. I look after his itches, and he gets full oiling on special occasions." C'mine moved to Darshanth's off hind leg. "Can you imagine how much of this the Weyr would need if every dragon needed oiling all over every day?"

Sarenya watched her friend caring for his dragon, and the tenderness of their bond made her stomach knot with regret and frustration. To be a dragonrider, to

share that most magical communion of heart and mind, was a wonder she would never know.

Darshanth rumbled, low in his throat, and Sarenya saw the compassion in the blue's jewelled eyes. *We understand.*

C'mine was looking at her too, from underneath Darshanth's half-spread wing. He picked up his bucket and came back to Sarenya, rubbing his blue's neck as he passed. "Darshanth speaks to you because he likes you, not because I ask him to. You know that."

Sarenya nodded, unable to speak for the sudden lump in her throat.

C'mine wiped his oily hand on the dry grass, then touched Sarenya's shoulder. "I know. It's not the same."

"But Shimpath chose Valonna," said Saren, and she knew the old pain and resentment she had never before voiced was in her tone.

"We all regret that," the blue rider said softly. "Me, Kamen, Los. But we're glad you're here now."

"Kamen isn't," she said bitterly. "Without a queen dragon, what use could I possibly be to him? C'los told me: L'dro asked for me to be posted here to make Kamen angry, to upset his chance at the Weyrleadership. I'm a thorn in his side. This morning proved that."

"That isn't why he is the way he is, Saren," said C'mine. "But he hasn't forgiven you for leaving, seven Turns ago. He hasn't forgiven himself for that." The blue rider paused, and then asked quietly, "Have you?"

Sarenya looked away from the blue rider. For a long moment she said nothing, forced to think about things she had been glad to leave untouched for Turns.

"I had to leave," she said finally. "I couldn't stay, C'mine. How could I have stayed, after what happened? How could I?"



Two girls were sobbing, and a third sat curled up on her cot, staring listlessly into space, still wearing her white robe.

Sarenya had already taken hers off, bundling it into the laundry basket in the corner of the chamber. The nondescript leathers of an apprentice Beastcrafter would draw less attention. She glanced around the space that had been hers, checking for anything she had overlooked, but she had brought few possessions, and spent barely two

whole nights in this room. Sarenya hefted her pack to her shoulder and left without looking back.

The distant sounds of celebration from the direction of the dining hall made her grit her teeth. Sarenya took an indirect route to the outside, preferring to avoid any possible contact with people. She had successfully escaped note on leaving the Hatching Sands: not that it had been difficult, with a Weyr single-mindedly ecstatic over its new queen.

The memory of those brilliant eyes meeting hers was too fresh, and Sarenya forced the thought away as she emerged into the Bowl of the Weyr. Her steps led her to the weyr whose ledge was occupied by a single great bronze, and she steeled herself to enter.

He's looking for you.

The dragon's voice was soft, but Sarenya couldn't respond to the unspoken plea. "I'm sorry, Epherineth. I just want to get my clothes and go."

The bronze didn't reply, but neither did he block the entrance into his weyr, and Sarenya quickly entered the cavern.

She made herself focus, finding the items of clothing she had left there and stuffing them into her pack. When she inadvertently picked up a shirt from the end of the bed that was not hers she almost wavered: his scent clung to it, evoking thoughts of the happy times she had spent in this room, in this bed.

The queen chooses, Saren, and she'd be a fool to choose anyone but you, you have nothing to worry about...

Sarenya threw the shirt away from her, the memory of T'kamen's quiet assertion taunting her. The disappointment in his eyes today had hurt her; the frustration in his voice had angered her. She couldn't be the Weyrwoman he wanted. And by the bronze rider's own vehement statement, *no green would ever choose you*, she wasn't worthy to ride any dragon.

She had walked away from him then, as she intended to walk away from him now, a disappointment to him and a failure to herself, a mockery of the dragon whose instincts had judged her worthy to Impress a queen. An ironic laugh welled up from somewhere. How sure they had all been! T'kamen, C'mine, C'los; even the other candidates had recognised the inevitability of it. Sarenya of the Beastcraft would Impress the queen, T'kamen and Epherineth would win them in flight, and when Fianine had

the courtesy to die of her wasting sickness, they would take over the leadership of the Weyr and live happily ever after. A Harper couldn't have spun a less likely tale, but like the fools they were they had believed it – and now the joke was on Sarenya.

So it was back to the Craft for her: back to the dung and the mud, back to birthing cows and shearing wool, to anatomy and dissection, to selective breeding and preventative medicine. Back to what she knew, and the sooner thoughts of Impressing dragons were out of her head, the better.

She tried to buckle her pack but, hastily filled, it was overflowing. Sarenya struggled with it for a moment and then gave up. She didn't want T'kamen to find her here.

She hurried past Epherineth, hoping he wouldn't speak, hoping that he wouldn't know what she was thinking and ask her to stay. But then why would any dragon ask her that, when she had failed the task his rider had set her?

Sarenya glanced around the Weyr that could have been her home, and went in search of the only rider she knew she could trust to take her away from it.



"I had to leave," Sarenya said again. "There wouldn't have been another clutch for Faranth knows how long – what would I have done? I was in my final Turn of apprenticeship; I couldn't have continued my studies here. I had to go back to the Hall."

C'mine just nodded. He knew when not to push Sarenya. In her own way, she was just as hot-tempered as T'kamen: that was part of the attraction, and accounted for most of the volatility.

"He doesn't blame you for being part of L'dro's intrigue," he said instead. "Kamen's a lot of things, but he isn't completely unreasonable."

Sarenya shrugged, staring at Darshanth. C'mine observed her with the same mixture of regret and sympathy as before. He was still convinced that Sarenya would have made a good Weyrwoman. He had seen the way she handled difficult animals and difficult apprentices with equal ease, demonstrating a natural authority over both that would have suited a queen's personality perfectly.

The blue rider appreciated how difficult it must be for her to have the shadow of her failure to Impress seven Turns ago hanging over her. Even within the Weyr, the divide between riders and non-riders was marked: those who had stood and

failed could contribute to the Weyr, but they would never have the prestige of one who had been deemed worthy by a dragon. Failed candidates occupied a class of their own, somehow diminished by what might have been. It didn't seem fair to C'mine. Sarenya deserved a dragon far more than half the dragonriders C'mine knew. Certainly, riders like L'dro and D'feng called a dragonet's judgement into question. A dragon's choice wasn't always good for the Weyr.

What dragonet has the sense to look ahead? asked Darshanth.

You don't think the dragon is always right?

The blue rumbled. *Not even I am infallible. I chose you, after all.*

I love you too. C'mine looked at Sarenya, lost in her own thoughts. *Why didn't a dragon choose her?*

Darshanth regarded Sarenya with the peculiar, thoughtful gaze that indicated he was assessing her with his natural sensitivity. *A green would not...* The blue hesitated, and C'mine knew that his dragon was struggling to put difficult, instinctive concepts into words. *A green would only have chosen her if there was no other. I would not have chosen her to Impress a green. A green would be...not right. Not a match.*

Intrigued, C'mine asked, *If I hadn't Impressed you, would another colour have chosen me?*

No other dragon would have chosen you.

Seriously, C'mine pressed. Is there something about me that makes me a blue rider?

You're my rider, Darshanth said firmly. *What else matters?*

C'mine gave up on that line, and asked instead, *What about Valonna? Would you have Searched her for a queen?*

Darshanth barely shrugged, disinterested. *Another did. I did not. Shimpath chose her: she was right for Shimpath.*

Do you think Shimpath would have chosen Sarenya if Valonna hadn't been there?

She was there. Why do you ask about things that have already happened?

I'm just curious.

Darshanth stretched his wings. *I'd like to sun up by the Star Stones. It's warm here, but warmer there.*

Go on, then.

The blue extended his neck to Sarenya, touching her shoulder with his muzzle, and startling her out of her thoughts. C'mine heard his dragon's remark. *Thank you.*

“You’re welcome, Darshanth,” Sarenya replied, stroking the blue’s nose.
“Glad to help.”

Darshanth ambled a few paces downwind, then sprang aloft and beat steadily up to the level of the Rim. C’mine watched until his dragon found a place between two greens, then looked back at Sarenya. “He says he wants to sunbathe, but he’s probably just gone to cosy up to the ladies.”

Despite her obvious distraction, Sarenya smiled wryly. “He still loves to charm, doesn’t he?”

C’mine nodded. “He’d try for Shimpath if he thought he could get away with it.” The mental image amused the blue rider: Darshanth was barely more than half Shimpath’s size – but Sarenya was frowning again. “What is it, Saren?”

The journeyman squinted up at the blue, then at C’mine. “If Darshanth could fly Shimpath, would you want him to?”

“Me?” C’mine smiled. “I’d be a terrible Weyrleader. I’m just not built for that responsibility.”

“You’ve always taken responsibility for your friends, Mine,” Sarenya said quietly.

C’mine shook his head. “Any idiot can listen.”

“Not everyone understands, or cares like you do.” Sarenya touched his arm.
“C’los is lucky to have you.”

The blue rider chuckled. “Now you’re making me blush.”

“Really, Mine. You’ve been such a good friend to me. Even when I left.”

“You did what you felt you had to, Saren,” he said.

“You think I was wrong?” Sarenya asked.

C’mine sighed. “It wasn’t for me to decide.”

“But I know what you risked losing by helping me.” The journeyman paused.
“Did C’los know?”

“No.” C’mine smiled sadly. “Even weyrmates have to keep things from each other sometimes.”



Darshanth’s summons had been cryptic, but C’mine had been happy to excuse himself from the celebration to answer it. He didn’t feel like celebrating, although the queen’s Impression should have been a joyous occasion for everyone. C’los had gone to do his duty by a distant cousin who had Impressed a brown, leaving C’mine alone to worry about where

Sarenya had gone after the Hatching, and what would happen if she and T'kamen ran into each other with both in such an emotional state.

So it was with both concern and relief that the blue rider recognised the Beastcraft apprentice, half hidden in his dragon's shadow, when he reached the weyr. "Saren, are you all right?"

"I asked Darshanth to call you, Mine, I'm sorry if I was presumptuous."

"No, of course not." C'mine peered more closely at Sarenya: there was an odd note to her voice that he couldn't decipher. "Are you all right?"

The apprentice emerged into the dim light so he could see her. "T'kamen isn't with you?"

C'mine shook his head. "I haven't seen him since the Hatching."

"Good." Sarenya took a deep breath, then looked directly at the blue rider. "I need to go, Mine."

"Go? Where?"

"Back to the Craft. Back to the Hall."

That took C'mine off guard. "Saren, you don't have to leave. You didn't Impress today, but there'll be other chances..."

"C'mine, I'm nineteen. This was the first clutch in more than three Turns; L'stev told us that. In another three Turns, I'll be too old." Sarenya shook her head. "I didn't Impress, and there's no place for me here anymore."

"You say it as if you're in disgrace," said C'mine. "Saren, there's no shame in not Impressing."

"Why don't you go and ask T'kamen about that?" Sarenya demanded hotly. "He made it pretty clear how disappointed he was in me for upsetting his ambitions to become Weyrleader! I wasn't good enough to Impress the queen; I'm not even good enough for a green!"

"That's not true," C'mine insisted.

But Sarenya was not to be soothed. "He said I would Impress, and I believed him, C'mine. How could I not have believed every word he says? Wingleader T'kamen, Epherineth's rider, perfect in everything he says and does...but he was wrong about me, wasn't he? He thought I had it in me to Impress the queen, and I let him down. And he wasn't shy about telling me so!"

The blue rider couldn't believe T'kamen had been so blunt: the bronze rider was candid, certainly, but not totally insensitive. "He's not angry with you – he's upset for you. We all are."

"I can believe that from you, Mine, but not from him. Don't think I didn't see how all the other bronze riders were treating their candidates. What made T'kamen any different?"

"He loves you," C'mine replied frankly.

The words visibly affected Sarenya, but she brushed them aside. "He deigned to let me in his weyr, just like all the other bronze riders who wanted a head start on the future Weyrwoman."

The blue rider persisted, "Kamen's not a good enough actor to fake it, Saren. He might not be the best communicator, but he's always been honest with the feelings he cares to show."

"He was honest about his disappointment in me, too!" Sarenya looked at C'mine with regret in her eyes. "Mine, I'm sorry, I'm not angry with you."

"You don't have to apologise," he told her gently. "It's all right."

The apprentice Beastcrafter looked away. "Will you take me back to the Hall?"

"Now?" The immediacy of her request alarmed the blue rider. "Saren, you're upset. You should give it until the morning, at least."

"I don't want to have to face Kamen again."

"Sarenya..."

Softly, Sarenya said, "I'm serious, Mine. I don't want to see him. I can't face that look in his eyes again."

C'mine empathised with her so strongly: her own keen disappointment at failing to Impress had been compounded by T'kamen's attitude, and he could hardly blame her for wanting to run away. They should never have built up her expectations so. "Saren, I don't want you to leave. What can I say to convince you to stay?"

Sarenya shook her head. "C'mine...please."

There was a note of pleading in her voice that C'mine hated to hear. If he took her back to the Hall, T'kamen would be incandescent. The blue rider could lose one of his oldest friends. But Sarenya did not beg lightly, and the desperate entreaty in her eyes was more than C'mine could stand to deny. "If that's what you have to do..."

Sarenya gripped his hands. "Thank you, Mine."

The blue rider took Darshanth's harness off the rack just inside the weyr and started to rig it on his dragon's neck. "T'kamen will kill me if he finds out I helped you."

"He doesn't have to know."

"No one will have to know." C'mine glanced up at the dragon on watch: on a Hatching night, the green would surely never remember every pair coming and going, but it might be wise to evade her notice anyway. *Are you feeling up to going between low?* he asked Darshanth.

Omyath won't see us.

C'mine pulled himself up to his dragon's neck and reached down to give Sarenya a hand. "We're going *between* early, so don't be alarmed," he told her as he passed the fighting strap around her waist.

Sarenya just nodded. "I'm ready."

The blue rider concentrated for a moment, forming the visual of Peninsula South Hold. *It'll be darker there, Darshanth.*

I know where we're going.

When you're ready.

The blue took off immediately, leaping at a shallow angle and scarcely ensuring that there was clear air around him before transferring *between* in the sort of risky manoeuvre that would have guaranteed them a reprimand from L'stev in their weyrling days.

When they reappeared above the dark bulk of Peninsula South, C'mine could feel Sarenya's arms around his waist, her cheek resting against his back, and he felt a wrench at the prospect of losing the intelligent, independent apprentice who had so naturally integrated into his closest circle of friends.

Darshanth landed close to the long, low form of the main Southern Beastcrafthall, slightly to the west of the Hold, and C'mine turned to unbuckle Saren's straps by feel in the darkness.

Sarenya tossed her pack to the ground, then hesitated. "Thank you, C'mine. I'll miss you."

"We'll visit," C'mine promised. "And any time you need us, whatever it's for, just send a message."

They hugged for a long moment, awkwardly. C'mine could hardly see her in the darkness, and he was sure she blotted tears on his shirt, but he wouldn't have embarrassed her by commenting. "You take care, all right?"

“You too, Mine.” Sarenya dismounted, and C’mine heard her murmur thanks to Darshanth. Then she called softly, “You’d better get back to the Weyr before you’re missed.”

C’mine looked down at her, still unsure if he had done the right thing. “You’re certain about this, Saren?”

“Yes.” Then, with forced lightness, she added, “I’d better go and see if they’ll let me in at this hour.”

C’mine stayed just long enough to see Sarenya gain admittance at the porter’s lodge of the Hall, and then with a heavy heart, he directed Darshanth aloft, and home.