



CHAPTER SEVEN



T'kamen was accustomed to the attention by now, but he still didn't like it. He kept his expression impassive as he walked through the dining hall to his place, pretending not to notice the glances that followed him. Since the scene of a fortnight ago, the entire Weyr had seemed to be waiting breathlessly for him to do something dramatic. The most dramatic thing T'kamen ever did in the normal course of events was pass up dessert, but the constant scrutiny was irritating him.

He would have made a point of missing the evening meal altogether if C'los hadn't advised against it. T'kamen grudgingly conceded that he needed to be visible. Retreating back into the reclusive lifestyle he had chosen for himself since losing his Wing just wasn't a viable option for a man trying to win popular support.

There were several empty places at T'kamen's normal table. He took a seat next to L'stev, acknowledging the brown rider's gruff salutation with a brief nod, and looked over towards the Harper platform where C'los and C'mine were finishing a set with the Weyr Singer. C'los and Jenavally had put their instruments aside to sing, tenor and alto respectively, and the deep tone of C'mine's four-string provided a reflective bassline.

"It could have been the summer of my discontent.

But on that night,

the endless dusk was heaven-sent.

Of summer's days it was the longest of them all.

And so I fell,

though I thought night would never fall.

I'd never seen an evening, blinded by the light.
I'd never seen the moons,
enraptured by the summer twilight.
Never knew the solstice power burned so bright.
Never thought I'd live my dream on a midsummer night."

"F'digan's planning another snap inspection tomorrow," L'stev murmured to T'kamen, as the three riders began the second verse.

T'kamen declined the wine passed down the table, opting to pour himself klah instead. "How did you find out?"

The brown rider snorted back a laugh. "L'dro ordered it while F'digan and Benreth were out-Weyr, and he wasn't very careful about who ran the message down to the ready room."

"Who was it?"

"Kasibor. Green rider from the last clutch, which is why L'dro used her. Everyone still treats those kids like weyrings. She's one of T'rello's admirers."

The bronze rider shrugged. "They can inspect all they like. They won't find anything wrong."

"I'd wager they'd like to, and not just so they could haul you up on neglect charges," L'stev growled.

Unconcerned, T'kamen sipped his klah. "The only thing wrong with Epherineth is that the Weyr can't supply enough beasts to fill his stomach."

"That goes for every non-Council dragon," said L'stev. The brown rider looked thoughtfully at T'kamen, and added, "Mind you, you might be best off hunting him lightly anyway. If the queen takes it into her head to mate when Epherineth's just gorged himself, all this will have been for nothing."

T'kamen nodded, making a mental note to put off hunting his bronze out-Weyr for a few more days.

A burst of applause greeted the end of the song, enthusiastic at many of the common tables, although at the Council table only R'hren acknowledged the musicians. T'kamen glanced across at the other bronze riders. Most of them had been pointedly ignoring the music altogether, and L'dro actually had his back to the Harper platform as he conversed with Valonna.

T'kamen studied the Weyrwoman for a moment before looking away. The girl looked happy to be the focus of L'dro's attention, but she seemed smaller and less

significant than ever. T'kamen understood from C'mine that Valonna's work with non-Council riders had continued since the challenge, but none of it had made the least bit of difference to overall conditions in the Weyr.

C'los, C'mine, and Jenavally took their places at the table, completing the usual line-up, and it was not without guarded affection that T'kamen regarded his closest friends. Crowded around the plain table, their conversation loud and unashamed, their table manners as poor as their jokes as they reached across each other for wine pitchers and bread platters, the inauspicious mix of riders could not have contrasted more strongly with the long line of bronze and brown riders arrayed in sullen silence at the Council table.

"Appropriate choice of material there, for the time of Turn," L'stev commented to C'los.

The green rider beamed. "I wrote it for Mine." Then he raised his voice meaningfully. "It's our anniversary."

"Not until the nineteenth," said C'mine, without looking up.

C'los subsided. "Just testing."

"Have you noticed how low the lake's got?" asked Jenavally.

They all nodded: the drought, and its subsequent effect on the Weyr lake, had been a topic of conversation for several days now.

"Never known a summer like this," said L'stev.

"The harvests will suffer if it keeps up," C'los added. "Any of you flown over Kellad or Jessaf recently? The fields are parched."

"And yet there's been flooding across half the North," said Jenavally. The Weyr Singer shook her head. "We might all be tightening our belts come the winter."

Talk centred around the unusual aridity for a time. T'kamen half listened, taking in the conversation for future consideration, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Try as he might, he had not been able to banish Sarenya from his mind since seeing her that morning, and it was bothering him. He usually had better control over his thoughts.

You're doing this, aren't you? he accused Epherineth.

The bronze didn't respond, and for a moment T'kamen thought his dragon was going to profess innocence, but finally Epherineth replied. *You want to talk to her but you won't.*

I don't have anything to say to her.

You don't want to think about her, but you do anyway. The bronze paused, then added, *You're very confused.*

I am not confused, Epherineth.

Epherineth's scepticism needed no words. *I don't understand why you still hurt so much from something that I can't even remember.*

You can't remember the day before yesterday.

Patently, the dragon said, *I know the important things. You think about them, and I remember. I know we once led a Wing. I know you have challenged Pierdeth's rider. But you won't let me see when you think about her. I only feel, and I feel you hurting.*

T'kamen closed his eyes. *It's history, Epherineth.*

Not when it still hurts.

The bronze rider couldn't argue with that kind of logic. *All right. Just don't expect me to go through it all again in a few days when you've forgotten.*



Prising confirmation out of L'stev that Sarenya had left the Weyr had been easy enough: the Weyrlingmaster was more concerned with the day-old dragonets than with breaking the news gently.

T'kamen hadn't stopped to think. Furious, he had vaulted astride Epherineth's neck without even pausing to harness the bronze, and ordered his mount *between* to the Beastcrafthall.

It hadn't taken long to find the journeyman on duty in the porter's lodge, or to intimidate the man into telling him where a certain apprentice was likely to be. Few people would defy a dragonrider, least of all a Wingleader in a bad mood.

Now, as Epherineth glided over the neat fields towards the group of runner-mounted Beastcrafters, T'kamen suddenly regretted his impetuosity. The sight and scent of a fully grown bronze dragon terrified the animals, and T'kamen saw each crafter struggling to control a mount gone suddenly hysterical with fear. Epherineth landed downwind, so at least his scent wouldn't frighten the beasts, but two of the crafters had already dismounted from their fractious animals and were heading purposefully towards them.

T'kamen got down from his dragon's neck, and all his anger returned as fresh and raw as ever as he laid eyes on Sarenya. She was clad once more in the anonymous scuffed and worn wherhide jacket that protected her from most of the general hazards of a Beastcraft apprentice's exploits, but there was sheer fury and outrage in her eyes.

“What under the Red Star do you think you’re doing bringing a dragon here!” she hissed at him. “One of us could have been thrown!”

“Sarenya,” the other crafter, a heavy-set older journeyman, warned her, but his tone was stiff as he addressed T’kamen, his eyes moving over the dragonrider’s visible epaulettes. “Bronze rider – Wingleader – is there something we can do for you?”

T’kamen was in no mood to deal with a self-important journeyman, so he ignored the man entirely and fixed Sarenya with a furious glare. “You thought you’d just go without telling me? Walk in and out of my weyr as if it belongs to you and then leave under the cover of darkness?”

“We had nothing more to say to each other!”

“What about an explanation?”

“An explanation?” Sarenya laughed, shortly and without humour. “What’s to explain? I didn’t Impress.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to leave!”

Sarenya shook her head, as oblivious, or indifferent, to the journeyman’s presence as T’kamen. “You don’t understand at all, do you?”

“What don’t I understand? You left without telling me!”

“It wasn’t meant to be, bronze rider! I wasn’t meant to Impress, and you surely don’t think I’d stay on at the Weyr!”

T’kamen felt that as if it was a physical blow. Exercising almost painful restraint, he said carefully, “You didn’t have to come back here. You could have stayed with me.”

Sarenya stared at him with an incredulous expression. “Don’t you get it, T’kamen? I’d rather be here.” Her blue eyes blazed with indignant anger. “But then you couldn’t understand that, could you? You can’t believe that anyone would prefer anything to you and your precious Weyr. You’re so secure in the absolute truth of your own beliefs that there’s never any room for doubt, but you can’t just leave it at that – you have to convince other people that you’re right too, don’t you? Well, not this time, *bronze rider*. Go back to your Weyr, pursue your ambitions, but do it without me!”

The savagery of Sarenya’s outburst stunned T’kamen briefly, but the moment the apprentice turned her back on him he reacted, lunging to seize her arm and pull her around to face him. “Sarenya!”

“Take you hands off me!” she snapped, wrenching her arm from his grip.

T'kamen moved again to follow, but the stocky journeyman Beastcrafter intervened. "I'm sorry, Wingleader, but I think you should leave."

"Get out of my way," T'kamen snarled.

But the journeyman was resolute. "I think you should leave," he repeated. "Now."

Come, Epherineth said, before T'kamen could physically push the man aside. *There is nothing more to be done here.*

Angrier than ever, hurt, embarrassed, T'kamen stared past the journeyman at the uncaring back of the woman who, for a moment, he had dared to believe he could love.

Then he turned and walked stiffly back to his dragon, vowing never to be so careless again.



Ancient history or not, T'kamen didn't relish recounting the details of that day, even to his dragon. The memory of his humiliation, and his youthful impulsiveness, was still fresh enough to make him squirm. But perhaps more troubling was that, even seven Turns on, with all the change and growth he had experienced, Sarenya still had the power to turn him into that angry young man.

I see, said Epherineth.

Do you?

The bronze paused for a long, thoughtful moment, and then asked, *Why were you angry with her when she didn't Impress?*

I wasn't angry with her.

Epherineth expressed his disagreement with a mental snort.

How would you know? T'kamen asked. *You can't remember.*

You just told me.

T'kamen frowned. Epherineth's fine-tuned perceptions unnerved him at times. *All right, I was angry*, he admitted. *She should have Impressed. I was sure she would.*

You were angry with her because she wasn't what you thought she was?

The bronze rider wrestled with the question. *From the moment I saw her, I knew she'd make a superb Weyrwoman. Darshanth, too, and he's not often wrong. That's why we petitioned for her to be released from her apprenticeship to stand. She was wasted on the Beastcraft.*

Epherineth was silent for another long moment. T'kamen sipped his klah: it was cold now, but finding more would mean passing the Council table, and he wasn't in the mood to deal with L'dro's snipers.

Opposite him, C'mine said softly, "You have that look on your face, Kamen."

T'kamen started out of his thoughts, looking at the blue rider. "What look was that?"

C'mine smiled. "The one that says Epherineth's giving you a hard time."

The bronze rider frowned irritably. "Why is it that everyone thinks they know better than me today?"

C'mine was unmoved by his short temper. "What's on your mind?"

T'kamen exhaled, staring into the middle distance. C'mine was a good listener, and T'kamen would have put his life in his hands without thinking twice about it, but he didn't entirely trust his friend to be impartial when it came to Sarenya. The blue rider had never made any secret of staying in contact with the Beastcrafter in the Turns since she had left Madellon. Besides, it was bad enough that Epherineth knew about his preoccupation: T'kamen didn't need the rest of the Weyr laughing at him as well. "I'm tired of this situation," he replied finally, and then realised how ambiguous an answer it was.

C'mine regarded him for a moment with that patient gaze of his. "Do you mean the situation with Valonna, or the situation with Sarenya, or both?"

"Shard it, Mine, is it that obvious?" T'kamen asked disgustedly.

"Maybe to those who know you, Kamen, but there are few enough of us." The blue rider looked across the dining hall, and T'kamen followed his gaze to where Sarenya was sitting.

He observed the journeyman in detail for the first time since he'd brought her back to Madellon. Seven Turns had done little to change her physically, but it was plain that the girl he had known had matured. It was in her every movement, her every expression, in the greater experience and certainty in her eyes. The journeyman knot on her shoulder was part of it, too, and T'kamen noticed how the other journeymen on the table, from whatever Craft, listened to her with courtesy and respect, for all that she was still new in the Weyr. But Sarenya had always found interaction easy, where T'kamen's patience with people ran so rapidly thin, and her natural rapport with human and animal alike had made her stand out even to one without the benefit of a Search dragon.

"It's been Turns, Kamen," said C'mine. "Maybe it's time to put the past behind you."

“Is that what she’d like?” T’kamen demanded, stung by C’mine’s gently reproachful tone.

“It’s what *I’d* like,” the blue rider replied. “You’re both my friends, and I don’t like having to tread softly around the pair of you because of something that happened so long ago.”

T’kamen picked up his cold klah and brooded over it. The memories were as fresh as ever, even Turns old. “How’s Valonna?” he asked shortly.

C’mine eyed him with resignation at the deliberate change of subject. “Delirious,” he replied, looking towards the Council table.

T’kamen glanced at the Weyrwoman, listening attentively to one of L’dro’s gesture-heavy anecdotes, and then looked away again in disgust. “I don’t know where you find the patience for her, C’mine.”

“She loves him,” the blue rider said sadly. “Misguidedly, but who am I to tell her that?”

“You’re too soft, Mine,” T’kamen grouched. “Pity cases always were your great weakness.”

“So Darshanth tells me,” C’mine agreed. “Like rider, like dragon, and he took pity on *me* that day.”

“As I remember it, Darshanth was one of the first to break shell, and he practically had to fight off two of his brothers to reach you first,” T’kamen replied dryly.

“He claims otherwise,” the blue rider said, with a distant, fond smile. “Not that he can remember, but he does love to make me feel grateful.”

“And I thought Epherineth gave *me* a hard time.” T’kamen pushed his klah mug away, his mood subtly lightened by his old friend’s effortlessly soothing company.

“It’s what they do best, Kamen.” C’mine paused, and then added, “Those of us whose dragons push us, test us, question us – we’re the lucky ones. They make us better people.”

As T’kamen absorbed the blue rider’s typically offhand philosophy, he felt a strange mixture of agreement and reservation from Epherineth.

What was that supposed to mean? he asked.

The bronze took his time answering, as was his wont, but when it came, the reply set T’kamen to thinking, too. *A dragon may change his rider for the better, and that is as it should be. But if he does not, has the rider changed the dragon for the worse?*

C’mine had noticed the look on T’kamen’s face. “What did Epherineth say?”

Frowning, T'kamen related his dragon's words.

"That's profound," said C'mine. "Ask him if he thinks the fault could only ever be with the man? That the dragon would only improve the rider, and the rider corrupt the dragon?"

I heard, Epherineth said, and by C'mine's expression, he had spoken to the blue rider, too. A dragon brings nothing to Impression save what he is. A rider brings a lifetime of experiences, for good or ill. A dragon cannot make a truly bad person good, or a truly good person bad: he can only reflect and strengthen what was already there. The dragon changes the rider, for the man before and the rider after are as different as night and day. But the rider makes the dragon, for without the rider a dragon was, is, and will be, nothing.

C'mine chuckled, but his tone was respectful. "I bet you never knew he was such a philosopher, Kamen."

T'kamen shook his head, slightly thrown by the intricacy of his bronze's thoughts. "Then the rider changes the dragon more than the dragon changes the rider?" he asked aloud.

The rider makes the dragon.

C'mine asked, "But doesn't a dragon choose his rider initially on the basis of a compatible personality?"

Epherineth mused over that for a moment. *Compatible, yes. Identical, no.*

"He has a point there," T'kamen said to C'mine. "Darshanth and you aren't the same."

The blue rider looked pensive. "We are, and we aren't. We think the same way on most things." He smiled. "Darshanth is just more vocal about them than I. We complement each other, like you and Epherineth."

"Do you think we're alike?" T'kamen asked curiously.

"You're both quiet enough, most of the time," C'mine said, with the hint of a tease in his low voice. "Impressing Epherineth eased your temper."

"Not completely," said T'kamen, remembering again with a wince that long-ago fight with Sarenya.

C'mine nodded. "Never completely, but enough. He gave you restraint."

T'kamen considered his dragon's startlingly complex pronouncements. "If the rider makes the dragon, then what did I give him?"

The blue rider smiled. "Fairness, responsibility, and dedication to those he cares about." Then he added, "A little wherry-headed pride and stubbornness, too, although that isn't necessarily a bad trait in a bronze."

“Thanks,” T’kamen said ironically. But his bad mood had lifted now, through the efforts of his dragon and one of his closest and oldest friends, and he felt somehow refreshed for the companionship.

Do you think about this kind of thing often? he asked his bronze.

Epherineth’s tone was amused. *I think about what you’re thinking about.*

Evidently.

Sometimes it’s even interesting.

T’kamen couldn’t help smiling as the last traces of his black humour evaporated. *Ungrateful watch-wher.*

Epherineth snorted, pleased with himself.



Sarenya had opened the shutters wide, but the evening air that circulated sluggishly into her room was hot and dusty and gave her no relief. The Beastcraft cot was a low stone building, and her room was on the corner of the block, adjacent to five other individual rooms for journeymen. The common room provided a buffer between the journeyman quarters and the rowdier apprentice dorm, but even with both her windows open Sarenya couldn’t hear anything: it was too hot even for the noisy junior crafters.

She poured herself another mug of cool juice from the pitcher she had brought from the kitchens after dinner, and struggled against the heat to focus on her notes. Master Arrense had given her leave to continue the studies that would ultimately build to her own Mastery, Turns from now, in the hours immediately after the evening meals, but on oppressive nights like these Sarenya felt as limp and listless as the herdbeast penned outside, too exhausted from the heat even to low their misery.

Even Tarnish, who loved the hottest sun, sprawled with his wings slightly extended, suffering in the humidity. Sarenya guessed that, like her, the bronze fire-lizard missed the offshore breezes that had always made Blue Shale so comfortable, even in the height of summer. Sleek had been making himself scarce since the start of the hot spell, returning only when he wanted attention, but the bronze fire-lizard seldom strayed far.

Saren forced her eyes to the tiny, neat lines of script on the hide before her: notes on runnerbeast digestive disorders that she had copied down at some point in her third or fourth apprentice Turn. At the Weyr there was limited opportunity for her to study runners. There were a couple of riding animals that a Beastcrafter could take to meet the regular drive of food beasts from the lower pastures, or to reach the

more remote pens within the Bowl itself, but they were sturdy old creatures, inured to dragons from Turns of residence in the Weyr. The ancient, lame, or broken-down runners that found their way into the herds intended for dragon consumption were equally unsuitable for in-depth study. Sarenya and the other Weyr journeymen routinely checked each new food animal – runner, herdbeast and wherry – for sickness, and then left them to their unenviable fates.

Sarenya's work with fire-lizards at Blue Shale Hold had been considered an eminently suitable field of expertise for a female Beastcrafter but that was the very reason Sarenya had no desire to specialise in them. As an apprentice at the Beastcrafthall, she and the few other girls had been outnumbered ten to one by boys. Her uncle's Mastery in the Craft had been as irrelevant then as it was now: Sarenya had learned early on that, as a girl, she would have to work twice as hard and get twice as dirty as any of the boys to garner equal respect. Where she had met discrimination she had worked harder, defying even the most misogynistic of her teachers and peers to dispute her competence. Where she had met her own limitations, she had compensated by increasing her knowledge to make up for what she lacked in brute physical strength, reading every Craft journal and record she could find, often in her own free time. In knee-deep mud and appalling weather conditions she had wrestled with sick animals, with those in pain, with difficult births; returning filthy, exhausted and soaked to the skin, but with the satisfaction of knowing she was as tough and competent as any of her classmates.

Her first journeyman appointment had been to a group of four backwoods cotholds looking to Scarp Hold in Southern territory, and Sarenya had spent most of that assignment fighting for the respect she had so painfully won during her apprenticeship at the Hall. Much later, she realised what she had learned from the suspicious and grudging welcome she had received at the Scarp cotholds, but at the end of that awkward Turn she had been glad to return to the Hall and the prospect of a better placement.

The Blue Shale posting had also started out as a single Turn, but the more cosmopolitan Holders had accepted her immediately, and her Master there didn't have a single discriminatory bone in his body. After the end of Sarenya's first Turn, Kaddyston had petitioned the Hall for her to stay on, working with the comprehensive range of stock essential to the running of the Hold.

Sarenya had enjoyed her work with the Hold's fire-lizards, fascinated by their habits, and had even written several observational papers on them, which Kaddyston had sent back to the Hall. But after so many Turns proving her worth as a Beastcrafter with the heavy working animals, she felt that to take the easy,

comfortable option with fire-lizards – useful messengers at best, glamorous pets at worst – would be to betray her own principles. Why should she fall in line with the still prevalent opinion that women weren't tough or strong enough to handle large animals?

She still wasn't sure how she felt about her transfer to Madellon. The knowledge that it had been a political move – and on the part of L'dro, a man she had disliked on sight even seven Turns ago – galled her, and the Beastcrafthall's apparent willingness to agree to her transfer on such spurious grounds was disturbing, but Sarenya supposed she had to make the best of it. The other Beasters were a friendly lot, if under considerable pressure due to the shortages, and Arrense as Weyr Master was a fair man. Sarenya had only vague childhood memories of her uncle, and by unspoken agreement, neither had mentioned their blood ties to any of their colleagues.

The prospect of learning about dragon-healing was intriguing, and indeed Arrense had mentioned that she might spend some time with those most specialised Beasters once she had settled into Weyr routine. The demand for crafters trained to care for dragons was not high. Sarenya had never heard of a dragon getting sick, and the typical ailments an adult dragon might suffer – strained muscles and other injuries from mating flights, broken talons, hide irritations – were mostly minor. Weyrling dragons were prone to a greater range of problems, usually when their inexperienced riders failed to care for them properly, but with no young dragons, the infirmary was all but empty. Threadscore simply wasn't an issue, and accidental burns from careless flaming were infrequent, as most Wings drilled with firestone but rarely. Nonetheless, Sarenya felt that gaining some knowledge of dragon care would be appropriate.

The journeyman loosened the collar of her shirt, but the air was too humid to cool her. The notes on runnerbeast sicknesses blurred in front of her eyes, and with a frustrated sigh Sarenya pushed them away, leaning back in her chair. It was too hot to think, too hot to work. She rose from her desk, opened the door, and then stepped back, surprised.

T'kamen was standing in the doorway. The bronze rider's hand was raised, as if he had been on the verge of knocking, and his expression was as startled as Sarenya imagined her own probably was.

They both stood there dumbly for a moment, and then Sarenya found her voice. "Is there something I can do for you, bronze rider?"

T'kamen looked at her, the muscles of his jaw tensing minutely: subtle but visible evidence of his agitation. "Will you walk with me?"

The lack of a stony edge in T'kamen's voice came as a welcome surprise to Sarenya. She studied his face, but there was not, and never had been, a hint of deception in the velvet-brown eyes that could be so fierce and so gentle, although seldom the latter. "Of course."

Sarenya used the few seconds it took to close and lock the door behind her to wonder what had prompted this most unexpected visit. Had C'mine said something? It wasn't like the blue rider to force a situation.

They walked towards the edge of the lake in silence for a few moments, uncertain but not entirely uncomfortable. Glow baskets, hanging from posts at regular intervals along the bank, cast their yellow-green light on the oily-looking water.

Glancing sideways, Sarenya noticed that the bronze rider was wearing only black and white, as usual. She had never seen him wear another colour, although C'mine had once commented, cryptically, that T'kamen's austerity of dress represented his desire to put the past behind him. T'kamen had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt: another habit of his that Sarenya had forgotten. It was the small things that hurt the most.

T'kamen must have noticed her covert look, for he paused mid-stride. Sarenya halted too, loath to speak first while she had no idea of his intentions.

The rider looked out across the lake, his eyes focusing on a point in the distance, and then back at Sarenya. "I apologise for my behaviour over the last few sevendays."

He spoke stiffly, holding himself quite still. Sarenya immediately realised how much the apology had cost T'kamen. The proud bronze rider did not readily admit that he was wrong.

"It's forgotten," she replied. "I'm...aware...of your situation with L'dro." As if she could be oblivious to it, after the public challenge T'kamen had made in the dining hall on the first night of Sarenya's posting.

T'kamen's rigid stance relaxed fractionally, but there was still tension in his bearing. As if trying to conceal it with movement, he started walking again, placing his feet carefully on the crumbling baked mud, although his shoulders stayed straight and his eyes remained fixed in the distance.

Sarenya paced him, wondering again what had prompted the bronze rider to approach her. She remembered similar instances of trying to read him during that pivotal first month she had spent at Madellon as a candidate. T'kamen always had been heavy on motive and light on explanation.

At last T'kamen stopped again, abruptly, and as Sarenya checked her stride, she saw that the rider was staring straight at Shimpath, resting on her ledge on the other side of the Bowl. Sarenya made herself look at the queen, aware suddenly that she had been avoiding a close study of the dragon she had last seen as a hatchling, passing her over in favour of another.

"Why did you go?" T'kamen asked.

Sarenya's gaze moved over the fine conformation of the queen, over the sunny copper-gilt hide, the graceful lines of neck, wing, tail. "Without her, I could never be your equal."

She heard herself speak, her words calm and reasoned for all that she had no recollection of forming them, or even the thoughts they conveyed. But then quite suddenly she knew, or remembered, or realised, why Impressing Shimpath had been so important, and why failing to do so had wounded her so deeply.

Sarenya looked at T'kamen, vaguely seeing his perplexity, but her thoughts on a time long past. "I still remember the first time I saw you, T'kamen. Standing by Epherineth's shoulder with that look on your face, the look only dragonriders have. *Bronze rider*. You could never have been anything less.

"That was it, you see: you had nothing to prove. You were a Wingleader. A bronze had already chosen you. What better endorsement could a man hope to have? But me – I was nothing. An apprentice – a Beastcrafter – a girl. And I loved you, T'kamen, but I knew from the very moment I agreed to the Search that unless I Impressed the new queen, I wouldn't be good enough. That would be the real test of my worth. When Shimpath judged me for herself, she judged me for you, too."

"Sarenya," T'kamen began, but the journeyman shook her head.

"Everyone was so sure," she went on. "But it was Shimpath's choice, and when she chose Valonna, I knew how arrogant I'd been. How complacent of me, to believe that having always succeeded, I could never fail. How presumptuous, to think I could second-guess a queen dragon."

Sarenya focused on T'kamen, seeing something that might have been sick comprehension in his eyes. "I couldn't have stayed with you as your inferior, Kamen, and you never understood that," she said, almost apologetically, although she didn't know why. "You thought I'd be content merely to be your lover. That's why I left."

The bronze rider regarded her with an expression half of disbelief, half consternation. "Saren, the rank meant nothing. Wingleader of fewer than a dozen riders during an Interval..."

"T'kamen, you've always been ambitious," said Sarenya. "You've had your sights set on the Weyrleadership since long before this business with L'dro, and I

know how much pride you took in your Wing. But the fact that you would always rank me was only part of it.” She paused. “I couldn’t face living with your contempt.”

“What?” T’kamen demanded, his tone instantly incredulous. “I’ve never been contemptuous of you!”

His indignant retort only served to make Sarenya angry. “I’ve never forgotten what you said to me after that Hatching! That I wasn’t even good enough for a green!”

“I never said that,” T’kamen objected.

“*No green would ever choose you,*” Sarenya snapped, savagely quoting the bronze rider’s own words, still painfully fresh in her mind, back at him.

“That wasn’t what...I didn’t mean... Sarenya, I didn’t think a green *would* choose you, but not because you weren’t good enough. Because you were *too* good.” T’kamen shook his head. “I don’t even know if that’s accurate to how dragons choose their riders: Epherineth’s been saying some things about Impression – but Saren, it was never intended as an affront. It was meant to be a compliment, to make you feel better...”

That revelation staggered Sarenya, and for a moment she was at a loss for words. How could she so have completely misunderstood him? But T’kamen didn’t lie... “You humiliated me when I went back to the Hall,” she said, but the outrage with which she had viewed that shocking breach of etiquette seemed insignificant now.

The bronze rider’s dark eyes flashed with suppressed anger. “I followed you because you left without telling me!”

Sarenya shook her head, trying to grasp the apparent greyness of areas that had always been so polarised in her mind. *No green would ever choose you...now* that it had been pointed out to her, she could see the reassuring commiseration that had been inferred in T’kamen’s words, and yet she had instantly jumped to the conclusion that it had been an attack.

“I couldn’t stay,” she said, but even as she said it, she recognised the feebleness of the affirmation.

She hadn’t *wanted* to stay, but only in part due to the reasons she had already given the bronze rider. Yes: she had perceived T’kamen’s reaction to her failure to Impress Shimpath as a slur, but perhaps because she had wanted a reason to resent him, to somehow ignore the immense blow to her pride that the queen’s rejection had dealt. She had focused on his apparent contempt for her in order to protect herself from her own. Hating T’kamen for his slight had been so much easier than having to face her own fallibility.

Sarenya felt dizzy, as if her world had just shifted dramatically. She had run from the truth just as she had run from the Weyr, but now both had caught up with her. She couldn't stand to fail, or even to admit that she was capable of failure. For all the times that she had spoken of that day seven Turns ago, she had never fully accepted it. She had simply made herself believe that Shimpath had been mistaken in choosing Valonna.

So few would ever have suspected Sarenya of conceit. Justified pride, perhaps: an admirably stubborn confidence in her own abilities, but not conceit. She had never needed to be openly arrogant. Now, she wondered if the covert egotism that was at the very centre of who she was had been the very factor that had turned the hatchling queen away from her.

Sarenya looked at T'kamen, seeing the storms in the bronze rider's expression, and knew what a terrible disservice she had done him. For all his many faults, Epherineth's rider had one crucial virtue over her: he had the courage to admit it when he was wrong. Sarenya might be a journeyman now, a position on a par with that of an unranked bronze rider, but she was still a lesser person than he.

"I'm sorry, Kamen," she said weakly. "I got it all wrong...I'm sorry."

The dragonrider frowned, and his eyes went briefly vague. Then, as focus returned to his gaze, he asked in an oddly gentle voice, "What is it, Saren?"

Speak, Sarenya.

The voice that Sarenya heard was like T'kamen's, and yet not, but Epherineth's soft command could not be ignored.

She spoke of what she had realised, her words sometimes halting, sometimes falling over themselves; stripped of her normal confidence, but trusting, perhaps desperately, in man and dragon. T'kamen's expression barely changed throughout her rambling explanation, save for a narrowing of his eyes, and when she finished, it was a long moment before the bronze rider replied.

"You've been carrying this for a long time, Sarenya," he said finally. "Epherineth says since even before that Hatching. A need to prove yourself up to the standard you believe necessary: the standard you keep inside." T'kamen hesitated, and there was fierce compassion in his eyes. "I understand. Before Epherineth, I had it too. You're right: being the rider of a bronze dragon does mean I have nothing to prove – he already judged me worthy of him, and that's enough to satisfy me. I don't know why Shimpath didn't choose you. I don't know why any dragon chooses the rider he does. For all that Epherineth tries to explain, I'm not sure I ever will. But I do know that dragons judged you worthy of a queen, and even though yours never Hatched, you meet *their* standards."

Sarenya struggled with the excess of thoughts and emotions flooding her mind, wrestling them down one by one until something like calm had returned. “So what now?” she asked, distantly aware of the triteness of the question.

T’kamen turned his head, eyes piercing unerringly through the darkness in the direction of his weyr ledge. “Now, maybe my dragon will stop bothering me about you.”

The compassion had left his eyes, but so had the cold hostility, and once more T’kamen was just a man, albeit it a man carrying a heavy burden of responsibility. Sarenya knew that that, too, was something she would eventually have to face.

But when the bronze rider had walked with her back to the Beastcrafter cot, said a brief farewell and vanished back towards his weyr, Sarenya felt strangely light, despite the humid air. The old wound had been cauterised, and if knowledge of its ultimate inflictor was painful in itself, at least she knew now what she had to face. And that now the oldest of breaches had begun to heal, maybe she wouldn’t have to do it alone.