



Tkamen

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-05-

XII

Greed Will Bring The Weyr Distress



It wasn't really that bad, T'kamen thought, chewing valiantly. Not really. Not unbearably.

"See what I mean?" F'halig persisted. He had already pushed his bowl away.

T'kamen swallowed, with difficulty. "It's a bit chewy," he admitted.

The brown rider gave him a flat look. "If it were any denser, I'd be regurgitating it for a second go."

T'kamen sighed and looked dourly at his dish of porridge. "It's edible," he said, wondering if his spoon would stand up in it.

F'halig snorted. "I know our supplies are a little low, but I'm sure we can do better than this."

"No one's doing better than this," said T'kamen. "You've flown sweeps since the summer. You've seen what the fields look like."

His Wingsecond exhaled a heavy breath, and reached unenthusiastically for his bowl. "I don't want to think about what this is doing to my digestion."

T'kamen made himself swallow another spoonful of the stuff, coarse and lumpy with the grains that would have been better suited to animal feed. "Consider it a test of your constitution, if you like."

They worked their way through the stodgy cereal in silence. T'kamen looked around the dining hall as he ate, taking in the telling details. There were more gaps at the long tables than he remembered from the last time he'd eaten his morning meal with the Weyr. He did so infrequently, preferring to have his meals brought to where he could eat them without having to stop work. D'feng's accident, besides being the kind of tragedy that no Weyrleader liked to see, had increased T'kamen's workload to the point where there were just too few hours in the day. He could feel things getting away from him, and the fine balance that separated order from chaos seemed more precarious all the time.

It had been manageable at first. With D'feng taking care of much of the number-work, and Valonna handling some of her duties as Weyrwoman, T'kamen had been able to turn his attention to righting some of L'dro's wrongs. He had broken down the rank hierarchy and then rebuilt it, filtering out the least competent Wingleaders and Wingseconds and replacing them with men whose talents had been stifled under L'dro. He had reawakened the fighting spirit of riders grown apathetic under weak leaders and infrequent drills. He had brought in new journeymen and Masters to supplement the skeleton staff of Craft personnel that had been struggling to meet the

Weyr's needs for Turns. He had terminated the agreements L'dro had made with the Lords of Madellon territory, and negotiated new ones.

After that, everything had started to slide.

The deals T'kamen had been forced to make with the Madellon Lords had unpopular repercussions. Without the income from dragon transportation, the Weyr's coffers were low, and it had been necessary for T'kamen to cut the already small monthly stipend paid to each rider. Transporting tithe products in quantity by dragon rankled with some riders, who spoke out against the use of their mounts as burden-beasts. T'kamen was not unsympathetic to their complaints, but if the Madellon Holders were to keep to the deal, the Weyr must fulfil its side, too. He had not yet begun selection or training of the fire-fighting Wing he had promised Meturvian: that, though, was an oversight the Kellad Lord need not know about, and the copious – too copious – autumn rainfall meant that wildfire was a distant threat.

In return, the Holds supplied the bare minimum T'kamen and D'feng had calculated Madellon needed to survive, less what the Weyr could hunt or produce itself. The quality of the morning porridge was an early symptom of the shortages that would strike Pern when the full effects of the arid summer played out, and the conspicuous absence of half the Weyr's riders at breakfast was ample evidence of their discontent. T'kamen suspected that the complaints would continue for some time, right up until the last Hold stockpiles ran out and everyone on Pern started to struggle. There would be fewer objections to lumpy porridge then.

The task of managing the Weyr's supplies – usually the Weyrwoman's duty, and if not then the responsibility of the Headwoman – had fallen to T'kamen. Valonna's contribution had ended with the laying of Shimpath's clutch, and the Headwoman, Adrissa, had neither the intelligence nor the imagination to manage Madellon's store caverns adequately. Under L'dro, D'feng had administrated the storerooms with a steward's efficiency, and he had continued in that capacity when Epherineth had flown Shimpath. Now, T'kamen regretted his lack of patience with the tedious bronze rider. He had taken D'feng's mathematical abilities for granted, not fully comprehending his value until the chore of handling the interminable figures had, like everything else, come to him. T'kamen's private issues with the rider who had been functioning as his default second paled into insignificance against his personal and professional grief for a man whose dragon would probably never fly again, if they even both survived. It was, perhaps, small of him to take D'feng's accident as a personal affront, but the entire Weyr was reliant on its Weyrleader's ability to cope, and T'kamen felt D'feng's loss more keenly than he could ever have imagined.

Loneliness is the price of authority. T'kamen recalled that particular profundity from a long-ago conversation with L'stev. He also remembered being unmoved by it at the time, confident in his preference for peace and solitude over noisy crowds. T'kamen realised now that he had been unqualified to make that judgement. With supreme power came supreme isolation, and not the kind he liked. The friends and allies who'd supported him in the months leading up to Shimpath's crucial mating flight had dispersed to see to their own business: L'stev preparing his candidates,

C'mine recovering from his wounds, C'los tracking down E'rom's killer. T'kamen hadn't seen any of them in an unofficial capacity in sevendays.

Thinking of his friends turned his mind automatically to Sarenya, and T'kamen rubbed reflexively at the healing scratches on his cheek. Nobody had dared ask about them, but Isnan had commented in passing that they'd probably scar. The prospect didn't improve T'kamen's disposition. He'd made a discreet enquiry through Master Vhion, and had been relieved to know that he hadn't done any serious damage to Sarenya's fire-lizard, but he didn't need a permanent reminder of his own quick temper carved into his face. Under other circumstances he might have been more aggrieved by the situation, but Sarenya had been pointedly ignoring him, and T'kamen simply didn't have the time to do anything about it. He worked from the time he roused before dawn until he succumbed to sleep late at night: always busy, always needed. He broke away from his duties only to see to Epherineth's needs, and even then he knew he wasn't giving his dragon the amount of time and attention he should. Eating breakfast in the dining hall was a duty like any other, scheduled in around everything else. It was necessary for him to be seen eating the same unappetising slop as the rest of the Weyr. But it also invited approaches, and T'kamen feared additions to his workload.

"At least the klah's still good," said F'halig, raising his cup in an ironic salute.

T'kamen shrugged. "Kellad has it to spare."

F'halig slurped appreciatively at his drink. "The whole Hold must have smelled like roasting klah for sevendays after the fire."

"The klahbark trees weren't touched," said T'kamen. "Just the timber lots."

"Thank Faranth for small mercies." Then, with a covert glance over his shoulder, F'halig added, "Here's trouble."

T'kamen raised his head to see Madellon's most recent Wingleader approaching the table, cutting a striking figure even without his distinctive Peninsula-style flying coat, and newcomer though he was, Sh'zon's three-bar epaulettes left no room for error when it came to his rank. "Wingleader," T'kamen greeted him.

The aquiline bronze rider inclined his head. "Weyrleader."

T'kamen nodded towards the vacant bench on the other side of the table. "Will you sit?"

Sh'zon straddled the bench and rested his elbows on the table, a casual movement that nonetheless presented an assertive, almost intimidating, front. T'kamen met the other bronze rider's gaze calmly. "Something you need?"

"Aye. The loan of a rider."

The Peninsula rider's directness made T'kamen smile thinly, but tension hung on the air between them. All bronze riders counted each other as rivals, but some more so than others. "A Wingful isn't enough?"

Sh'zon returned an equally guarded smile. "More than enough for almost any Wingleader. But I'm wanting to borrow your Search pair."

T'kamen hadn't expected that, although he supposed he probably should have. D'feng's Wing had no Search-sensitive dragon. He'd arranged it that way in case L'dro's former second ever developed ambitions. "You have someone in mind?"

The blonde Wingleader's fierce expression didn't falter. "Some place."

"There's no rule that says candidates can only be brought in by a Search pair."

Sh'zon's eyes narrowed fractionally. "That I know."

T'kamen regarded Sh'zon thoughtfully, wondering if there was more to the request. He wasn't oblivious to the probable reasons behind the other bronze rider's transfer from the Peninsula Weyr. H'pold had taken as many diplomatic pains over Sh'zon's reference as T'kamen had with L'dro's, but neither Weyrleader had been in any doubt about the significance of the exchange. T'kamen didn't know exactly why H'pold had wanted to be rid of Sh'zon, but he recognised capable leadership, and he'd had no reservations about putting the Peninsula man in command. If Sh'zon had his eye on a girl for Shimpath's queen egg then he was no different to any other Madellon bronze rider. "I'll speak to C'mine," he assented finally. Then he added, "He won't be under orders to Search with you."

Sh'zon nodded and pushed himself up off the bench. "Understood. We'll bring him back in one piece."

T'kamen watched as Sh'zon strode away, wondering if the Peninsula rider had meant something by that parting comment. Someone would have filled the bronze rider in on the details of the Kellad fire, but the faint inference that he, T'kamen, had not brought C'mine home safely on that occasion stung him. At least Sh'zon didn't mince words. His forthright manner was refreshing in comparison to the way in which several of Madellon's Wingleaders tried to ingratiate themselves. Yet T'kamen had no doubt that, had Shimpath's rising been delayed by a few months, Sh'zon would have vied for her as aggressively as any Madellon-born bronze rider. Kawanth was bigger than Epherineth. But then, Pierdeth had been bigger and more powerful, and Pierdeth had almost ruined his wind trying to outfly T'kamen's bronze. Size wasn't everything.

F'halig, who had remained silent during the brief interview, raised his eyebrows as Sh'zon walked out of range.

"Well?" T'kamen asked.

"You've made work for yourself with that one," the brown rider opined.

T'kamen sipped his klah before replying. F'halig's loose grasp of tact was one of the reasons why he'd chosen the brown rider as his senior Wingsecond. T'kamen liked having a rider he trusted around to disagree with him. L'stev had always performed that duty admirably, and F'halig was similarly inclined. "What makes you say that?"

The brown rider crossed his formidable forearms on the table, looking knowingly at T'kamen, as if judging what the Weyrleader expected of him. "Not many riders, let alone bronze riders, transfer from Weyr to Weyr. The fact that the Peninsula took L'dro in return for him is enough to merit watching him. But you know that." F'halig rubbed his chin meditatively. "You

made him Wingleader after less than two sevendays, and that's a lot of trust to put in a rider you don't know from spit."

T'kamen winced at his Wingsecond's candour, but gestured for him to continue.

"He's clearly led before, and that's fine as far as it goes, but firstly you'll have trouble if and when D'feng recovers, and secondly, the very fact that Sh'zon took over so easily should make you wary. L'dro learned first hand that Weyrleaders and career bronze riders are a dangerous mix. But then you know that, too, and Shimpath's next flight is probably three, four Turns off." F'halig frowned for a moment. "I wouldn't have predicted he'd ask to borrow C'mine. He seems like a rider who'd bring a girl in for a queen egg, Search dragon or no Search dragon. I'll have to give that some more thought. But aside from whatever grief he causes you directly, there's the trouble he'll provoke with the rest of the bronze and brown riders in the Weyr." He started to tick points off on his fingers. "With the other Wingleaders, who'll object to having an outsider on equal footing with them; with the bronze riders you demoted or passed over when you reassigned the Wings; with all the brown riders who've been jockeying for E'rom's slot only to see the same position in D'feng's Wing filled by another outsider with no questions asked. It doesn't take a genius to see the potential for strife."

T'kamen weighed each point, but his Wingsecond's analysis hadn't touched upon anything he hadn't already considered himself. "How much evidence have you seen of half the Weyr being up in arms?" he asked, with an irony that was a mild rejoinder to F'halig's bluntness.

"Now that you mention it, very little." F'halig shrugged bulky shoulders. "I don't hear as much as I used to, now I'm your Wingsecond. A lot of riders are still afraid enough of being stepped on that they're careful of remarks getting back to you."

T'kamen smiled mirthlessly, and then regretted it as the expression made him aware of the still-tender slashes on his cheek. "I don't bite."

"You're not too good with second chances, either," said F'halig.

T'kamen thought of D'feng, and tried not to acknowledge the tiny part of his mind that felt grateful the other bronze rider had been incapacitated. Sejanth's rider had been invaluable when it came to the Weyr's daily business, but he'd left much to be desired as a right-hand man in talks with Madellon's Holders. The Weyrleader forced the uncharitable reaction down. "Not really. There's not so much talent in the Weyr that I can always afford to be selective."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing," F'halig said. "There's no harm in keeping those bronze riders on their toes. But that's not a valid reason to let two foreigners walk in and assume rank that any other rider in the Weyr would have to earn. I think you're going to regret it."

T'kamen's patience slipped a notch. Professional disagreement was fine, but F'halig's criticism almost crossed the line into nagging. "Field commissions aren't unusual, and interim rank is easily withdrawn if they don't come up to scratch."

F'halig cleared his throat, sounding uncomfortable for the first time. "You just don't need the Weyr thinking you make calls based on politics first and everything else second."

T'kamen looked at his Wingsecond sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You don't need me to tell you that some of your decisions have been unpopular," said F'halig. "Agreeing to collect the bulk of tithes by dragon, for one. All the conveying jobs for a pittance. There's not been a significant improvement in the quality of life, T'kamen, and I know that's not your fault, but there's a current of dissatisfaction. A lot of blue and green riders came out to support you at the end, and I think they feel like you've reneged on your promises. Things are much the same as they were under L'dro – less widespread corruption, perhaps, but power and privilege is still the sole domain of bronze and brown riders. And there's a perception in some quarters that you're putting the goodwill of Holders before your own Weyr."

"That's ridiculous," T'kamen said, managing his growing anger with some effort. "And I thought you said no one was telling you anything that might get back to me."

"They don't need to," F'halig told him. "It's too generalised a feeling to attribute to any one source. But promoting Sh'zon can only make it worse. They might not be saying it to me, but there will be those who see that as a political move, too. An incentive for a couple of difficult riders to accept a transfer, in return for getting rid of L'dro with the minimum fuss."

"Oh, for Faranth's sake, it didn't happen like that," said T'kamen. "There wasn't even a Wingleader position open until after they got here."

F'halig gave him a meaningful look. "Until D'feng and Sejanth were conveniently put out of action."

T'kamen laughed. "You're not suggesting that was deliberate."

"I'm not, T'kamen. But it's no particular secret that D'feng was on the other side when you were building a following, and you're not exactly known for being forgiving, either. There are still enough riders who preferred life under L'dro to cry foul play."

The Weyrleader shook his head, half in scorn, half in anger. "You've either been listening to too many Harper stories, or you've become paranoid." He reached for Epherineth. *Wake up, you.*

I am awake.

"I'm just trying to keep you informed," said F'halig. "I wouldn't even have brought it up if I didn't think there were some contentious parties ready to make trouble over it."

"F'halig, I have enough to worry about right now without jumping at shadows. Even the suggestion that I'd have any involvement whatsoever in a plot to deliberately harm one of my own riders..." T'kamen turned his head away, disgusted. "I'm going to take Epherineth out. I'll be back in my office within the hour if you've got any legitimate issues that need my attention."

He wasn't blind to the way F'halig bristled at that barb. The brown rider had grown accustomed to being able to speak his mind, but T'kamen took exception to the abuse of that privilege – at least when it came to spinning yarns that questioned his personal decency – and F'halig had to learn that even freedom of speech had its limits. The Wingsecond might resent that:

he might even sulk for a while. But as T'kamen walked away, towards the Bowl and his waiting dragon, he just couldn't quite bring himself to care.



Kawanth's greeting rumble drew Sh'zon from his weyr. He paused, resting an arm on his dragon's neck, and watched as Trebruth came in for a sedate landing.

The hand that slipped caressingly up his back to his shoulder caught him unprepared. Sh'zon recoiled from the unsolicited touch, turning hastily, and blinked at the woman standing behind him. He'd forgotten she was there. "Easy, lassie," he said, in the slightly annoyed, dismissive tone that usually sent her like on their way. "Mind where you put your hands."

The woman – what was her name? Sh'zon was scorched if he could remember – flinched back, looking offended. No matter. He hated it when guests overstayed their welcome.

M'ric dismounted from his dragon's short, powerful neck, looking amused. Sh'zon threw a warning look at his Wingsecond, hoping to intercept the smart remark he knew was coming. "Malric."

"Morning, boss," the tall and dark Wingsecond replied. He nodded to Kawanth, and barely raised an expressive eyebrow in the direction of the woman who was making a hurt withdrawal from the bronze dragon's ledge. "Who's the young lady?"

"Shut up and get in here," Sh'zon told him disgustedly. He led the way back into his weyr, and threw a glare over his shoulder at the unruffled brown rider. "You're late. What were you doing last night?"

"Not what you were doing, that's for sure."

Sh'zon growled something vaguely threatening that he knew would only entertain M'ric further, and sprawled in one of his armchairs. "Help yourself," he said, pointing at the klah pitcher he'd brought from the lower caverns.

M'ric poured klah for himself and leaned back in another chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "You talked to the Weyrleader?"

"Aye. We get to use his Search rider if the man agrees." Sh'zon shrugged. "Don't see why he wouldn't. Seems like the quiet type."

"They're the dangerous ones," M'ric replied.

Sh'zon flexed his fingers thoughtfully. "Now I just have to work out a way to get that blue to the island without him realising where it is."

They sat in pensive silence for a moment, and then Sh'zon rose from his seat and started to pace, covering the width of his weyr in four easy strides. "I could get his dragon to take a visual direct from Kawanth, no questions asked."



M'ric was already shaking his head. "That's not the problem. The issue is the time difference. He'll know by the sun that he's not in Peninsula territory."

The bronze rider furrowed his brows. "How much difference is there?"

"Fourteen hours from the Peninsula, seventeen from here. If you left at noon, Madellon-time, you'd arrive at the island before dawn."

Sh'zon scowled. The trouble with M'ric's intelligence was that the man tended to find big logical gaps in otherwise perfectly serviceable plans. "Give me some options."

The brown rider drained off his klah and set the mug down. "You could fill the Search rider in on the details, but you'd have to be able to trust him, and that would take more time than we have." He hesitated. "I'm not going to break my word, and I know you won't either, so cutting the Searcher out of it altogether won't work."

"Come on, Malric, you're meant to be the smart one!"

"There's a simple solution," M'ric replied. "Potentially more trouble than it's worth."

Sh'zon stopped and looked at his Wingsecond for a long moment.

"How's Kawanth's time sense these days?"

The bronze rider snorted. "That's *your* speciality."

"And Tarshe's *your* cousin."

Sh'zon shook his head. "Kawanth can find his way *between* times well enough on a reference, but seventeen hours back is a tricky jump to get one for. Especially when there's another dragonpair along for the ride." He started to pace again. "I don't want to mess it up."

"We've done it before," said M'ric. "Remember when we were just starting out in the Wing and we knew we were going to be late back from that Gather at Varden Hold?"

Sh'zon grinned at the memory. "Aye, and you had D'lain tie that stupid purple flying scarf of his to the Eye Rock about ten minutes before we were meant to be back."

"We just had to visualise the scarf, and we jumped back about six hours. And then took the thing down, so it was only actually there for a matter of moments." M'ric shook his head. "I always regretted that we didn't have more opportunities to use that trick."

"So you're saying I should go to the island and have Tarshe run up the summons flag as a reference?"

"Exactly that," M'ric agreed. "And we guarantee it with Augusta."

"Eh?"

"If Tarshe can't provide the reference for whatever reason, we'll be going *between* to nowhere," M'ric explained. "We go *between* normally to the island, to arrange a time for her to run up a banner. I'll leave Augusta with her, and then we return here, still in normal time. When Tarshe has the banner flying, she sends Augusta back to me with a note to say it's there. Seventeen hours after I've received that confirmation, you take T'kamen's Search rider and time it back to the island, using the reference that Augusta has confirmed exists. You take the flag down again as soon as you arrive. If the Search dragon's any good it won't take him long to sniff out Tarshe. Once she's

been Searched, you'll have to come forward seventeen hours again. You'll need another time-specific reference for that jump, which is why Trebruth and I will need to stay here."

Sh'zon regarded his Wingsecond dubiously, but M'ric was very thorough when it came to assessing timing risks, and he'd trusted the brown rider too much over the Turns to start doubting him now. "I'll take your word for it, Malric."

The brown rider gazed intently into the middle distance, wearing the slight frown of his default thinking expression. "I can see two catches right now."

"Now you tell me," Sh'zon growled.

"You'll have to jump back to Madellon using Trebruth and I as a reference," said M'ric. "And that means that you'll have to cut it quite fine. I can't guarantee staying in one place, even for an hour. So you'll be coming back with Tarshe to a time very shortly after the moment you leave. That could cause a problem with the Search rider, if he knows he's been gone an hour but realises when he gets back that it's only been five minutes."

"We can get around that," said Sh'zon. "What's the other catch?"

"The calibre of the Search dragon. If he doesn't notice Tarshe we'll have wasted a lot of good planning."

"He'd have to be dead not to notice her," Sh'zon snorted.

M'ric conceded that point. "Who's the rider?"

"C'mine. The blue rider who was hurt in that fire at Kellad."

"I've heard his name," M'ric admitted.

Sh'zon yawned, feeling the previous late night catching up with him, and threw himself back into his chair, crossing one booted foot over his thigh. "Seems solid enough, and he flies in the Weyrleader's Wing."

"You're sure it's a good idea, using someone so close to T'kamen?"

Sh'zon chuckled. "Who'd accuse the Weyrleader's own Search rider of making an inappropriate choice? At least not until after the Hatching, and one way or another it won't matter then."

The two Peninsula riders sat in comfortable silence for a while. How many times had they met to debate a plan like this? Sh'zon couldn't remember, but for a moment, he could almost forget that he had been displaced from the Weyr where his dragon had Hatched. Almost. Sh'zon wrestled with the keen sense of loss for a few pointless moments, then gave in. "Heard any word on Ipith?" he asked gruffly.

"Nothing yet."

Sh'zon exhaled heavily. "Guess not."

"T'kamen," M'ric said unexpectedly, looking up. The thoughtful frown was back in place, and his eyes had gone serious. "What do you think of him?"

Sh'zon considered the question for a moment, rubbing absently at a dull patch on the polished leather of his boot. Then he shrugged dismissively. "Insecure little tyrant."

If M'ric agreed, he didn't show it. "Met anyone who likes him yet?"

"No." Sh'zon thought about the Weyrleader, and went on, "Too new in the job to know his limits, and much too keen to put his mark on the Weyr. He's got respect, mostly, but he's not certain enough of it to relax his grip."

"He won't delegate," said M'ric, half to himself.

"Well, that's what I said," Sh'zon said impatiently, "he won't delegate." He blinked. "Won't he? Who've you been talking to?"

M'ric shook his head. "I hear things."

The movement drew Sh'zon's attention to the single bar of gold braid on his Wingsecond's epaulettes. "Where's your stripes, Malric?"

M'ric glanced at one shoulder. "I haven't picked them up yet."

"Well, go and get them! How do you expect anyone to do what you tell them if you're not even wearing your stripes?" Sh'zon glared at his Wingsecond. "And did you shave this morning?"

The brown rider ran a self-conscious hand over his jaw. "Well, a bit."

"A bit? You've got to smarten up, Malric! You're not some something and nothing rider any more!"

"Sorry, boss," M'ric apologised, without the slightest hint of contrition.

Sh'zon scowled at the other rider with customary ferocity. He and M'ric had never been friends – always allies, and frequently cohorts, but in the main they led quite different lifestyles, with different interests. They had simply discovered, many Turns ago, that they made an excellent team, both in the command of a Wing, and in negotiating the treacherous politics of the Weyr at which they had both Impressed. The Peninsula was the largest of the three Southern Weyrs, boasting more than four hundred dragons – some forty of them bronze. The competition for command of one of the twelve Wings was fierce, and required a bronze rider to have a talented Wingsecond whose loyalty he trusted implicitly. Sh'zon and M'ric had spent seven Turns competing for their own Wing and then, once they had been granted a command, fighting off the ambition of other up-and-coming pairs. It was a bitter irony that the attack that had finally ousted them from their hard-fought position had come from above, not below. Their association had benefited them both over the Turns, despite their very different personalities, and the grudging affection of long familiarity coloured their otherwise professional relationship. They were not friends, but nor was their alliance merely one of convenience.

Clawing back some of the respect and recognition they had earned at the Peninsula would not be easy. That they had assumed command of a Wing so rapidly was pure luck: bad for D'feng and good for them. Sh'zon had limited sympathy for the former Wingleader. A man whose dragon made such a critical mistake when stoked for flame wasn't equipped to lead a Wing, even during an Interval.

It was aggravating that Madellon's queen had flown so recently, but there was more than one way to skin a wherry, and Sh'zon had learned the art of biding his time. The gold egg on the

Sands had been enough temptation for him to agree, however grudgingly, to transfer out of the Peninsula. In the high stakes game they were playing, it was worth taking a risk to secure a valuable prize.

Especially when the prize was a queen dragon.