



XIII

The Finger Points



C'los seldom regretted his actions, even when he knew he should, and so it was with few compunctions that he turned from his work to glare at his weyrmate. "Do you think you could maybe make a *bit* more noise, disturb me just a *little* more?"

C'mine glanced up from where he had been going about the business of tidying their weyr – quietly, C'los conceded, but making just enough background noise to annoy him. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise I was bothering you."

The mild reply should have satisfied C'los' need to express his aggravation, but it didn't. Rather, he felt irrationally cheated by C'mine's passive attitude to everything. Why wouldn't the man just show some backbone once in a while, object to something, so C'los could shout him down and work out some of his frustration? Faranth knew the blue rider wasn't giving him any other outlet for it. C'los turned his attention back to the record hide in front of him, forcing his eyes along the scratchy lines of H'ned's abominable handwriting – whichever Harper had taught Izath's rider his letters should have been dropped *between* as an apprentice – but he only recognised the shape of the words, without taking them in. No matter how hard he tried, C'los couldn't concentrate on the text before him, and he'd never been in the habit of taking blame onto himself.

Perversely, he strained his ears until the softest click of the ash bucket on the floor gave him reason – however meagre – to shove back his chair and jump to his feet, seething with the anger and tension that had been building up inside him all day. "I said, would you shut up?"

This time, C'mine didn't even have the grace to look chagrined. He just looked at C'los from where he had knelt by the hearth to sweep out the day's ashes. "I'm not being loud, C'los."

"You are to me! I'm trying to work here, and I can't even hear myself think with you shuffling around behind me like some stupid drudge without the wit to know when to sit down and shut up!"

C'mine sighed, but answered in the same patient, reasonable, infuriating tone. "You'll be cold in the night if the fire's not banked."

Disgust and resentment crystallised simultaneously in C'los' stomach, and he retorted with ice in his voice. "What would you care about me being cold in the night, C'mine?"

"That's not fair, Los."

"Oh, isn't it?" C'los sat down again and glared at the record hides, as if they were to blame for his bad mood. They were, but only to a point. He kept staring at them as, behind him, he heard C'mine getting to his feet.

The gentle weight of the blue rider's hand on his shoulder tempted C'los to relent, but he forced the reaction away. "Just don't," he snapped. "I don't have time for this right now."

C'los could sense his weyrmate's hurt as C'mine withdrew his hand. He waited for the blue rider's next move with anticipation that verged on the spiteful, but it never came. After several moments of silence, C'los turned to launch another attack, and was pulled up short as he realised that C'mine wasn't there any more.

Thwarted of venting his spleen, the green rider spat several vicious curses under his breath, and gathered up several of the most important records from the table. He left the rest spread messily, in defiance of his weyrmate's love for neatness. With luck, C'mine would have tidied them up by the time C'los returned, and that would give him another excuse to pick a fight.

C'los stalked out onto the weyr ledge, ignoring Darshanth, who regarded him suspiciously from one half-lidded eye, and barely acknowledging Indioth. His green was asleep, but her restless twitching suggested an agitation to match his own.

It was late enough that most weyrs were dark and quiet, but the faint light emanating from the Weyrleader's weyr made a good beacon. C'los arranged his thoughts as he crossed the Bowl, sufficiently professional to focus past his poor humour. Shouting at C'mine for a few hours might have made him feel better, but it would also have made him late.

Epherineth was sharing his ledge with Izath peaceably enough, but something to the rigid set of the sleeker dragon's shoulders indicated that he was not wholly comfortable with the proximity of another bronze. C'los nodded a brief acknowledgement to both big dragons and hurried between them, into the weyr.

H'ned and Valonna sat in two of the chairs in front of T'kamen's desk. They both looked round as C'los entered the room. The Weyrwoman's face was pale, and her demeanour nervous; H'ned simply looked concerned.

T'kamen, leaning against the mantle behind his desk, greeted C'los with the least motion of his head, and indicated with his eyes for him to sit. C'los obeyed, taking the third seat, but he couldn't help but be shocked at T'kamen's appearance. The bronze rider had always been spare of frame, but silhouetted against the glow of the fire, T'kamen actually looked gaunt, and the shadows under his eyes spoke of more than a few late nights. He was still impeccably dressed and groomed, but C'los had to wonder if the Weyrleader spent more time shaving these days than he did eating or sleeping.

T'kamen raised his head, his eyes briefly distant, and from outside came the sound of a dragon shifting his weight. "Epherineth won't let anyone in now," he said. "I don't need to remind you that this is a closed meeting."

"Weyrleader, I feel like I'm the only one here who doesn't know what's going on," said H'ned. The red-haired Wingleader's voice betrayed his strain. "If I've erred, would you please tell me?"

C'los could appreciate the Wingleader's anxiety. H'ned would have met with T'kamen often enough over C'dessa's misdemeanours that the Weyrleader alone would not have fazed him: no

doubt the Weyrwoman's presence was his cause for concern. T'kamen didn't call Valonna away from her broody dragon lightly.

"Not you, H'ned," the Weyrleader replied. "Nor even C'dessa, but we are here regarding one of your riders, and it's your right as his Wingleader to know the background." T'kamen looked at C'los. "Have you found anything new?"

C'los shook his head, gripping the record hides he still held in his hands. Their failure to provide any shred of evidence against his suspicion was at least partially responsible for his bad temper.

T'kamen folded his arms and looked at H'ned. "This doesn't leave the room, through rider or dragon," he said, with enough emphasis to imply dire consequences. "C'los has been investigating the circumstances of E'rom's death. Although it is generally believed that his fall was an accident, we ascertained early in the proceedings that it was not. E'rom was murdered."

H'ned let out his breath in incredulous horror. "Faranth's shards, T'kamen, are you sure?"

"Yes," T'kamen said. "We're sure."

H'ned sat back in his chair, as if struck. C'los supposed they'd all felt that way the first time. The Wingleader looked at him with an expression that seemed to plead with him to deny the truth. "You weren't looking into E'rom's replacement when you interviewed my riders and me."

"I'm sorry, Wingleader," T'kamen answered for the green rider. "I didn't – and don't – want the truth widely known, yet. C'los has some experience of criminal investigation, so I put him in charge of the matter."

H'ned shook his head, gazing bemusedly at the floor as he struggled to absorb the revelations. "I should have put it together," he murmured to himself, "the questions you were asking.... Who else knows?"

T'kamen indicated the room. "The four of us here. Master Isnan. Master Tomsung, the Fortian Healer who diagnosed the cause of death." He glanced briefly at C'los. "Blue rider C'mine."

C'los felt himself redden, but T'kamen didn't pursue the issue, and no one else seemed surprised that C'mine knew.

H'ned looked up. "Who was it?"

"C'los?" T'kamen asked.

The green rider cleared his throat, stared unseeingly at the records in his hands, then looked up at H'ned and the Weyrleader. "There are three elements to consider when attempting to identify a murderer. Method, motive, and opportunity." He was aware that he was quoting Valrov again, and equally aware that he was doing so out of an uncharacteristic need to feel that he spoke with authority. "We know that E'rom was heavily drugged with fellis, and then tipped off his weyr ledge." He heard H'ned's sharp intake of breath, but continued. "His murderer must have been both strong enough to manhandle him through his weyr, and in possession of a significant quantity of fellis. The fact that Sigith remained asleep until the moment of his rider's death indicates that E'rom knew his killer: he would certainly have alerted his dragon to an unknown intruder."

"But why would someone want to kill him?" H'ned interrupted.

"Wingleader," T'kamen said softly. "Let him finish."

C'los looked around at T'kamen's stern mask, at Valonna's white, unhappy face, at H'ned's barely half-convinced expression. "I believe the motive in this case was ambition," he said, and even to his own ears, his voice sounded hollow. "I'm sorry, H'ned. I think it was T'fer."

The silence that greeted the words he had not wanted to say deafened C'los. He had expected denial, outrage, an insistence that he must be mistaken, a demand that he explain himself. But none came, and even though he had told T'kamen the name prior to the meeting, and the Weyrleader would have made Valonna aware of it, their acceptance staggered C'los.

He heard the sound of his own voice before he realised he'd started speaking again. "T'fer was listed as a candidate for the Wingsecond position that was eventually granted to E'rom. According to T'kamen's records," and C'los looked at the Weyrleader for confirmation, "T'fer was his next choice, but E'rom hadn't put a foot wrong as a Wingsecond, and it would have been illogical to pass over a trusted and competent rider in favour of an untried man with a spotty record. E'rom's own records of T'fer's conduct outline several minor incidences of insubordination or disrespect, which paint a fairly clear picture of how T'fer felt about the man who was promoted ahead of him." C'los waited again for someone to say something, then went on, more troubled by the continued silence than he would have been by an objection. "E'rom was preparing for an evening Wing drill when he was murdered. He and his dragon were well known for sticking to strict routines and procedures, which made it easy for his murderer to pick a suitable time to strike. E'rom would have had no reason to be surprised or alarmed at having one of his wingriders visit shortly before a drill."

C'los leafed slowly through the documents he had brought from his weyr until he found the Healer-stamped hide, written in Isnan's beautiful hand, that listed every fellis prescription authorised by a Madellon Healer since Turn's End. "T'fer was prescribed fellis juice a month ago when he went to the infirmary complaining of acute pain from one of his wisdom teeth. The quantity he was given, intended to last him ten days, would be enough to kill a man several times over." He paused and then added, although it was unnecessary, "T'fer is a big man, and more than strong enough to have dragged E'rom through his weyr."

"Wait a moment," H'ned interjected. "You say T'fer had enough fellis to kill a man? Then why did he have to drag E'rom anywhere?"

C'los shook his head. "Maybe T'fer misjudged the dose. Maybe E'rom had a natural resistance to it. Whatever, we know it knocked him out, but it didn't kill him."

H'ned frowned, leaning back pensively. "What about T'fer's alibi? He said he was with his weyrmate when E'rom died."

The green rider sighed. "I spoke to Demmy. She doesn't remember. C'mine's known her for Turns, and he's always said that her memory's no better than a dragon's."

“C’los has already been over the detail of his investigations with me in depth,” said T’kamen. “He has convinced me that there are compelling reasons to believe that T’fer was responsible for E’rom’s death. *But,*” and there was emphasis on that qualifier, “suspicion without proof isn’t enough. C’los?”

The green rider could tell the difference between T’kamen his friend and T’kamen his Weyrleader. “Yes, sir?”

“Do you have any incontrovertible evidence of T’fer’s guilt?”

“No, sir.”

The Weyrleader turned to look into the fire, and the play of light and shadow across his face made his expression unreadable. The weight of the Weyr seemed a palpable force on his shoulders. After several moments, T’kamen turned back, lifting one hand to rub at the parallel slashes on his cheekbone. “We can’t accuse T’fer based on the circumstantial fact that he fits a profile. But if he *is* guilty... If he killed E’rom, he could kill again, and that’s enough of a risk that I don’t want him around the Weyr until we find out the truth, one way or the other.” T’kamen looked at H’ned. “I’m going to hold off appointing your new Wingsecond until this is cleared up. I don’t want to create another target, if ambition was the motive. C’los, what other leads do you have?”

“A few,” C’los admitted. “E’rom’s weyrmate, some of his family.”

“Follow them up, and see if anyone new fits the profile. I’d like...”

“T’kamen,” C’los cut in, “it’s becoming more and more difficult to ask questions without arousing suspicion. Especially with E’rom’s family – I don’t even have the excuse of vetting prospective Wingsecond candidates. If I could just explain...”

“I’m not ready for this to go public yet,” T’kamen replied simply. “I appreciate your position, but you’ll have to manage. If H’ned’s reaction tonight was anything to go by,” and he gave the pale-eyed Wingleader a humourless smile, “Madellon would be in uproar within the hour, and our killer would certainly be alerted that we’re on to him. Unless you want the case muddied even more, I’d prefer you told them that you’re still investigating the accident.”

“Weyrleader,” C’los agreed reluctantly.

“H’ned, with your permission, I’m going to give T’fer a special assignment,” T’kamen told the other bronze rider.

“Of course, Weyrleader, but...what did you have in mind?”

“Something to keep him at arm’s length for a while.” The Weyrleader grimaced. “It’s not an ideal solution, but I want him away from the Weyr. I’ll make the arrangements in the morning. Weyrwoman.”

Valonna started at the abrupt address. She had been so quiet as to be almost invisible, but C’los had always been conscious of her presence. “Yes, Weyrleader?”

“I’d like you to be available to help C’los. There may come a point when Shimpath’s influence will throw some light on a rider’s testimony.”

"If dragon memory were only better, we wouldn't have to go such a long way round," C'los murmured.

T'kamen shrugged. "The ability to confirm or deny that a rider is telling the truth will have to do. Are you agreeable, Valonna?"

"Yes, Weyrleader, of course," the young queen rider replied. "Anything I can do."

"Unless anyone has something else to add...." The Weyrleader looked around, and when no further remarks were forthcoming, he continued, "I apologise for the inconvenience of the hour. Thank you all for your time."

It was as close to a dismissal as T'kamen could issue to such an eclectic group. C'los couldn't help noticing how carefully Epherineth's rider behaved when Valonna was present. The green rider wasn't convinced that the formal approach was helping the Weyrwoman adjust to her new counterpart.

As C'los made his way back across the Bowl to his weyr, he shivered with more than the cold. Self-doubt had never been part of his character, but he suddenly hoped that he was up to the challenge of finding E'rom's killer. Even when all the pieces seemed to be in place, he couldn't be sure of T'fer's guilt. There had to be something he was missing.

The fire in his weyr had been banked: the coals glowed softly under a layer of ash. C'los paused to warm his hands, recalling the mood in which he had left earlier. C'mine had tidied up after him, but the table was still cluttered with documents. The green rider picked up one or two, then put them down again. He was too tired and too disheartened to go through them again.

C'los took off his shirt as he walked into the bathing room, dropping the garment on the floor. He crouched by the steaming pool and splashed warm water on his face, then reached for the towel that had been left thoughtfully close to the edge. There was cold water in the pitcher on the shelf that held his and C'mine's shaving gear and other sundries, and the green rider washed out his mouth several times before drinking deeply.

The furs on his bed had been straightened and tucked in neatly. C'los sat down on the edge of the couch to pull off his boots, and pretended not to notice the curtain drawn across the alcove on the other side of the weyr. He kicked his boots into an untidy pile and pulled unenergetically at his bedfurs. The neatly folded covers resisted his efforts, and C'los swore at them. Why did C'mine have to do everything so precisely?

He stood up, wincing at the coldness of the stone floor against his feet, and making a mental note to find another rug. He hesitated a moment, then crossed the weyr to the other sleeping alcove and peered cautiously around the heavy curtain.

C'mine was as untidy in sleep as he was neat when awake. The blue rider sprawled across his couch, one arm flopping limply over the side, his furs unevenly bunched around him. The smell of aloe had been strong on this side of the weyr since the blue rider had returned from Kellad, but there was no evidence of the plant. C'los made himself look at the scars on C'mine's chest, left uncovered by the tangled furs. The healed burns in evidence on the blue rider's face and arms

were smooth, almost shiny, but the scar tissue on his chest and back stood proud, thick and rough. Darshanth's claws, gripping desperately tight, had left deep lacerations in C'mine's flesh. The knots of scar showed pale against the blue rider's dark skin, and C'los knew it would be a long time before he would be able to look at his weyrmate and not see the terrible disfigurement first.

But the wounds had healed. The aloe and numbweed that had taken up residence on C'mine's bedside table were gone. The blue rider had even been cleared to fly drills again. So why was he maintaining the distance between them?

C'los tugged the furs up to cover his weyrmate's bare chest. C'mine had always been vulnerable to chills, and winter was approaching fast. The last thing he needed was a cold.

Then the green rider pushed back through the curtain and returned to his own bed, to be alone with himself, and his gloom.



In shades of brown and gold and bronze that would not have been out of place in a dragon's hide, the leaves of Kellad drifted from the trees, covering the flagstones of the courtyard, blowing into piles in corners and against walls. They rustled with each bare breath of wind, and the sibilant sound was as constant at Kellad in the autumn as the noise of the ocean at Blue Shale all Turn round.

The crunch of dry, brittle leaves under his boots made T'kamen subtly aware of his knowledge of the Hold. Born and bred a Trader, the train of his bloodline had made Kellad its winter home for more Turns than the Weyrleader had lived. It was early yet for the Frankon train, but the corner of the Gather meadow customarily leased to the traders for the cold months had been cleared recently, in accordance with the terms of the agreement T'kamen's great-grandfather had negotiated with Kellad's first Lord, some eighty Turns ago. From the air, he had noted with a critical eye the area of grass that had been scythed, the evidence of a chore group's toil to remove the hidden rocks that could turn an ankle or lame a burden beast, the newly-cleared path to the river. As a boy he had ridden up to the Hold in advance of the wagons to approve the winter campsite many times, and the habit, even fifteen Turns out of date, ran deep.

T'kamen's companion, the burly Lord Meturvian, had been demonstrating an excess of hospitality by his terse standards. The Kellad Holder had walked him around the sprawling courtyard, pointing out the nuances of his Hold and the adjoining Harperhall. Meturvian had no reason to know that the taciturn Weyr man, defined as he was by the bronze dragon on the fireheights above, had his own excellent knowledge of Kellad. The large, distributed population of the Hold meant that Meturvian wouldn't even know the names of each of his holders, let alone those of seasonal visitors like the Frankon traders. T'kamen saw no particular advantage in revealing his origins to the powerful Lord. The inclusions – and omissions – of Meturvian's tour said a great deal about how the Kellad Holder felt about his lands and people.

The fire of Turn's End had taken its toll on the Hold. Although the flames had not reached as far as the main settlement, the pall of smoke rising from the burning trees had, and the Hold, built of the golden-brown local stone, had been stained by it. The lower walls had been cleaned, the original mellow shade of the stone restored, but for the most part the sheer walls of the Hold remained the dismal grey of ash. The workshops that lined one side of the courtyard, usually redolent with the scent of fresh sawdust, smelled instead of wet ashes. Meturvian explained how they were still trying to salvage something of worth from the thousands of trees that had been burnt, but it was grim work to crafters accustomed to the almost limitless supplies of timber from the lots of the most prosperous forest Hold on Pern. The people, too, looked sombre, and tired, and somehow dingy, as if the smoke that had soiled their Hold had stained them as well.

"Your man's apartment is up there, the third window from the left on the top level of the Hold," Meturvian told the Weyrleader, sweeping his arm in a gesture that almost dislodged the young fire-lizard from his broad shoulder.

The little creature reminded T'kamen of Sarenya, but he ruthlessly diverted his mind from the subject. The bronze rider knew from his experience of the Hold as a child that the top levels were comfortably furnished, and unused only by merit of their remoteness from the main thoroughfares of the Hold. As a purported stranger to the Hold, however, he shouldn't have known, and Meturvian's slightly defensive manner would have made him suspicious. "The rooms are suitably appointed?" he asked, letting scepticism colour his tone.

"Of course, Weyrleader; Kellad would certainly never do your rider the dishonour of common quarters." There was something faintly gratifying about the arrogant Lord's uncharacteristic eagerness to please. "We thought he would be most comfortable close to his dragon. He'll have a drudge assigned to him, and any problems can be directed straight to my steward."

T'kamen made a grudging noise of assent. He certainly needed to be seen stipulating the very best conditions for Kellad's new watchrider. He didn't particularly like the elaborate deceit – on all sides – but he recognised the importance of maintaining it.

Weyrleader and Lord Holder walked on to where a blue and two greens were being loaded with portions of Kellad's tithe to Madellon. T'kamen nodded stiffly to the blue rider, and didn't smile as the young man straightened to attention and returned the solemn acknowledgement. Collecting tithes by dragon had a distinct advantage: produce could be transported quickly from Hold to Weyr, without the opportunity for it to spoil in transit. It also meant that the Holds' bounty could be collected as each resource became available. Nonetheless, it remained unpopular with riders who objected to their dragons being used as beasts of burden. When his business with Meturvian had been concluded, T'kamen intended to call Epherineth down and load him up with his share of the tithe goods. It would do the bronze no harm, and T'kamen a great deal of good, to be seen ferrying loads as readily as any other. The Weyrleader didn't like it much himself, but he had

always believed in leading by example. He'd had few bargaining chips in his repertoire when he had negotiated with the Madellon Lords, and tithe transportation was a necessary evil.

T'kamen was less comfortable with the short-term solution he had contrived to the problem of T'fer. If C'los' suspicions were even half as well founded as he thought, T'kamen didn't want the brown rider anywhere near Madellon. Assigning him to Kellad as a semi-permanent watchrider was the best answer T'kamen had come up with at short notice. It would keep T'fer out of trouble for a few sevendays, but that was about its only virtue. T'kamen didn't like lying to people, and convincing the brown rider that he had been hand-picked to pilot a Hold watchrider scheme had been an exercise in insincerity. Meturvian, at least, had been more than agreeable at the prospect of being the first Madellon Holder to boast his own watchdragon. But there would certainly be repercussions from Winstone and Zinner when they learned of Kellad's favour, and further aggravation from those two Holds was the last thing T'kamen needed. The Weyr, too, would likely regard the move with distrust. F'halig's glum projections of rider opinion might be exaggerated, but T'kamen was painfully aware of the unpopularity of some of his decisions. Both were issues he would confront when he had to, and not before.

T'kamen was trying hard to ignore the additional uneasiness he felt about the morality of stationing a murder suspect at a Hold full of oblivious people. There had been no question of telling Meturvian about the investigation. The Kellad Lord would scarcely have agreed to harbour a possible killer – and T'kamen had no intention of making any suggestion that a dragonrider could be capable of murder. The breach of faith and trust it would cause between Weyr and Hold would be felt across the whole of Pern. He had to take full responsibility for T'fer's behaviour while the brown rider was assigned to Kellad – up to and including any murders he might commit.

The possibility was slim. Even if T'fer *were* E'rom's killer, the deed had been motivated by ambition, and the likelihood of him finding a reason to kill a random Holder was remote. T'kamen had taken care to impart to T'fer that the Kellad assignment was temporary, that he would be representing the whole of Madellon Weyr and, crucially, that the Wingsecond position he coveted so desperately would not be filled in his absence. The lies had made T'kamen grit his teeth, but he couldn't risk T'fer discovering the real reason for his posting to Kellad.

Ultimately, though, it had come down to a very stark choice. If T'fer was the murderer, and he did kill again, T'kamen didn't want the victim to be another rider. Madellon had already lost two lives: E'rom's and Sigith's. T'kamen didn't want to lose any more dragons, even at the cost of a holder's life.

He pulled up the direction of his thoughts and addressed a different issue. "Shimpath's clutch is due to Hatch towards the end of next sevenday," he said, and found that the prospect lightened his spirits. "The Weyrwoman and I hope that you'll be attending."

The magical experience of watching dragons Hatch was not one that any Holder lightly passed up, however politically at odds with the Weyr. Meturvian smiled. "How fares the queen?"

"Well. Rightfully proud of her clutch."

“And has Kellad provided any youngsters to stand for them?”

T'kamen didn't have an answer to the polite question. He had had almost nothing to do with the recruitment or training of the candidates for Shimpeth and Epherineth's clutch, and he could barely remember the faces, let alone the names, of the few he had met. “Kellad always supplies excellent young blood for the Weyr,” he said, feeling slightly defensive. Then he remembered that C'los and C'mine had brought in Leah, and added, “There's a good prospect for the queen from the Harperhall.”

“And from the Hold?” asked Meturvian, as if he was conscious of the Weyrleader's discomfit and eager to exploit it.

Five boys, three girls, Epherineth supplied.

“Five boys and three girls,” T'kamen replied, silently thanking his dragon for his timely save.

“I'm sure there'll be some good bronze riders among them,” said Meturvian.

T'kamen restrained his exasperation at the elitist comment and replied, “I'm sure there will.” Disdain for the 'lesser' dragon colours had always annoyed him. The fact that he himself was a bronze rider didn't give him the authority to declare that bronzes were better than their smaller siblings. Every dragon had the potential to be brave and loving and intelligent, regardless of colour. The bigotry of some holders, to whom anything less than a bronze dragon represented failure for their sons, was infuriating.

“You'll be sending dragons to convey their families to the ceremony?” Meturvian pressed.

T'kamen forced a smile, but Meturvian's manner was starting to verge on the presumptuous. The Weyr's willingness to host Hold guests after Impression ceremonies was a courtesy, not an obligation. “Transport will be arranged.”

Further discussion was halted by the approach of T'fer and Ongye, Meturvian's steward. T'kamen took a firm hold of his composure and met his rider's eye with a curt nod. “Is everything acceptable, brown rider?”

Wayonth's rider raised his head to look down on the Weyrleader – a habit of his that irritated T'kamen. “Yes, sir. More than acceptable.”

The Weyrleader motioned him aside, showing a brief, disarming smile to Meturvian and his steward. “I don't need to tell you not to let them take advantage,” he told the brown rider quietly. “That's why I chose you for this assignment. You're going to set the limits for Hold watchriders.”

T'fer's chest swelled almost imperceptibly with the pride he could not entirely conceal, but his tone remained level. “I understand, Weyrleader.”

“Have Wayonth contact Epherineth directly if you have any problems,” T'kamen told the big brown rider. He considered adding another sop to T'fer's ego, but decided against it: the man wasn't stupid, and T'kamen was already tired of stroking his pride. “Is there anything else you need?”

“I don't think so.” T'fer paused, then asked, “We will be able to attend Shimpeth's Hatching?”

“Yes. You’ll convey Meturvian. And while you’re here, if you’d make an accurate count of the family members of candidates likely to want permission to attend, it would reduce some of the burden on L’stev.”

A barely visible moue of distaste crossed T’fer’s face at the mention of the Weyrlingmaster. “Certainly.”

T’kamen made a mental note to mention that grimace to C’los when he got back to the Weyr, but he turned back to Meturvian with the thinnest of smiles. “I’ll leave you to help T’fer settle in, my Lord.” He inclined his head in a gesture that could never have been mistaken for a bow.

Anticipating his summons, Epherineth descended from the heights in a measured glide. T’kamen met the serenely blue eyes for a moment as the bronze alighted, stirring up a whirlwind of dead leaves, and allowed himself the briefest touch of a gloved hand on the bronze’s lower jaw as he passed on the way to the pile of tithe materials remaining to be transported to Madellon. Even through the lined glove, the bronze’s responsive warmth eased T’kamen’s worries.

As the Weyrleader heaved the first sack over to his dragon, preparing to wrap the neck rope onto a ring on Epherineth’s harness, he noticed the approving glance of the older of the two green riders. It was a welcome, though small, victory. But T’kamen wondered if the green rider would approve if he knew the real reason for T’fer’s posting to Kellad. He wondered how many riders would approve of the secrets he was keeping. Necessary or not, a lie was a lie, and the Weyrleader hoped devoutly that this one wouldn’t come back to haunt him.