



XVI

Black, Blacker, Blackest



The sound of Epherineth's wings broke the tranquil silence of the Hatching cavern, and Valonna straightened where she sat, halfway up the stands. Shimpath had raised her head at the first sound, one wing ready to curve protectively over her eggs, but her eyes stayed calm and blue as she watched her mate approach. Epherineth alighted a careful distance from the eggs, shaking his head as the draught of his landing stirred up the sand. The lithe bronze dipped a shoulder to let his rider dismount, then greeted Shimpath with a graceful inclination of his head, as silent as ever.

The queen hummed a melodic acknowledgement and then barked a stern command, extending both wings over her clutch. Epherineth listened so gravely that Valonna wanted to laugh. *He won't let anything happen to them, Shimpath.*

Males always need to be told what to do, Shimpath replied. Then, satisfied that her precious eggs would be sufficiently well guarded, she edged delicately around them and leapt aloft, darting out through the exit to the Bowl in search of a meal.

Valonna wished she could take such a straightforward approach with Epherineth's rider. T'kamen stalked towards her with all the unstoppable momentum of a rising tide, and the Weyrwoman's stomach clenched unhappily at the bleak expression on his face. The Weyrleader might be doing no more than enquiring after her health, but just seeing him coming was enough to make Valonna nervous.

As T'kamen made his normal perfunctory bow, Valonna couldn't help but notice how haggard the bronze rider looked. She seldom tried to look past the stark black and white that were the only colours he ever wore, but the wrist visible where his shirt sleeve had been pushed back seemed painfully thin, and the bone structure of his face – never softened by excess flesh – was too pronounced, too gaunt. The vitality of bunched muscle and sinew that had marked T'kamen out scarcely four months ago had turned to skin and bone, and something in the set of his jaw told Valonna that her Weyrleader held himself together by force of will and little else. He looked older than his thirty-odd Turns, grimmer, even greyer, and the thin scars beneath his left eye did nothing to lighten his countenance.

He stared at the eggs for a long moment, his eyes narrowing, before he finally spoke. "L'stev says they'll Hatch in five days, six at the outside."

Valonna just nodded, looking at the sampler in her lap without seeing it. She'd learned about the incubation period for dragon eggs from Fianine – no fewer than thirty-two days, and seldom longer than thirty-eight – but she only had Shimpath's one previous clutch to compare. The Weyrleader had more experience from which to draw a conclusion.

The silence dragged on, ominous rather than awkward. T'kamen never had time for small talk, but he usually had something important to say when he did approach her to speak. Valonna risked a sideways glance, but the Weyrleader's face was unreadable.

After a time, T'kamen went on as if he hadn't stopped. "I've invited the Madellon Lords, but I've also sent invitations to P'raima and Margone at Southern, and H'pold and Rallai at the Peninsula."

Valonna raised her eyes at that. Playing host to the other Weyrleaders wasn't unheard of, but L'dro hadn't done it, and she was uncertain of the etiquette. "What will you need me to do?"

T'kamen looked at her, his dark eyes hard and unfriendly, and then looked away, the muscles of his jaw clenching and relaxing minutely. "Nothing, Valonna. Nothing at all."

The Weyrwoman flinched, knowing she'd angered him, but not why. She wanted to ask, wanted to know, but she was too afraid: not in the same way as she had feared L'dro's unpredictable rages, but afraid nonetheless of the pure black intensity of what T'kamen never let out. Valonna feared what would happen if that tight control ever slipped, and as each passing day saw T'kamen more pressured and more troubled, the Weyrwoman worried more.

Abruptly, the Weyrleader turned and stepped down onto the sand. Epherineth, sitting at attention beside the eggs, watched with mild eyes as his rider started to pace around the clutch, occasionally extending his hand to touch a mottled shell. Even after a month with them, Valonna hadn't tired of looking at her queen's eggs, noticing new details in their coloration, feeling the change from leathery pliability to brittle hardness, but T'kamen was regarding them without pleasure. "Twenty-five," he said suddenly, softly. "Twenty-sharding-five. And the queen! Why now, for Faranth's sake?"

Valonna watched the Weyrleader uneasily, not sure if he expected her to respond, and if he did, what she should say. Epherineth made a little growling sound deep in his throat that could only have been translated as dismissive, and T'kamen turned to face his dragon. He didn't speak aloud, but his look spoke of hostility, and by the darkening of Epherineth's eyes, their discourse was far from cordial.

T'kamen broke away from the stare first, turning his back on his bronze. Epherineth gave a disgusted snort and dropped his head to his forearms, curling his tail around the clutch.

It dawned slowly on Valonna that T'kamen had all but forgotten about her. He slumped down on the lowest tier and raised both hands to his head, dragging his fingers through his hair, and from where Valonna was sitting she could see the savage lines of worry that Madellon's problems had scored into his face, and that his shoulders were actually shaking with the strain.

The spectacle more than discomfited, more than unsettled her. It shocked her. Valonna would never have dreamed of seeing the normally implacable Weyrleader in a state of such despair. At odds with his own dragon and agitated by the very clutch that should be lightening his mood, not making it worse, T'kamen had the look of a man under attack from all sides and barely holding his own.

Valonna had never seen the same desperation in L'dro, and yet she couldn't mark that as a point in the former Weyrleader's favour. L'dro had been selective with his responsibilities, decanting the more onerous tasks onto his Council, trusting to D'feng to delegate where necessary, and simply ignoring issues that defeated his capability to cope. By contrast, T'kamen seemed to have accepted the entire unleavened weight of the Weyr onto his own shoulders and, in endeavouring to right the wrongs of L'dro's tenure, doubled the burden. It was a bitter misfortune that his accession to the Weyrleadership had coincided with the southern droughts and northern floods that had ruined Pern's harvests. T'kamen fought odds that seemed to have been deliberately stacked against him, and the struggle was taking a cruelly visible toll on him.

Valonna had never imagined she might feel sorry for her resilient counterpart, and she was certain that T'kamen would resent the least indication that he had become a figure of pity. But she felt for him, for his apparently hopeless situation, and perversely, felt reassured. T'kamen was human, and fallible, and vulnerable, and that emboldened the Weyrwoman.

She put her work aside and, gathering her skirts, began to climb down the steps to the bottom tier. "Weyrleader?" The bronze rider didn't react, and Valonna hesitated before stepping alongside him, so he could not fail to see the movement from the corner of his eye. "T'kamen?"

Epherineth's rider lifted his head and slowly, slowly turned to meet her gaze. When he spoke, his voice was tired rather than angry, as if simply too exhausted to muster greater force. "What is it, Valonna?"

The Weyrwoman opened her mouth to speak, realised she didn't know what to say, and closed it again. Then, after a moment's thought, she said, "I know things are hard right now, I know morale's low. We all need something to lift our spirits. When the eggs Hatch..."

"When the eggs Hatch, the dragon population of Madellon will increase by ten percent at a time when we can barely feed the mouths we have," T'kamen replied, still in that soft, weary voice.

"We'll manage, T'kamen," said Valonna, trying to project positivity into her voice. "We've always managed, and when the Lords Holder have watched the Impression ceremony they'll be more generous with their tithes."

"They've all been to Hatchings before, and even if they were so inclined, they don't have more to give." The Weyrleader shaded his bloodshot eyes with one hand as if to deny reality, even as he outlined, with a stark economy of words, the situation. "The drought ruined the harvest, and too many beasts got sick and died. The wild herds we have left in the unclaimed parts of the South are being systematically consumed, driven off, or carried away. There's land unfarmed, but no one there to farm it, and too many border squabbles over the settled regions for any Lord to spare the men to claim more. There will be people starving come the winter, Valonna. People. And Madellon is less than a sevenday off fielding twenty-five new dragonets, twenty-five insatiable appetites, including a queen that, in two Turns, will be mature and producing clutches of her own, doubling our population growth at a time when *Pern does not need more dragons.*"

There was such frustration, such bitterness in those last words that Valonna almost recoiled before she realised that T'kamen wasn't aiming them at her. "Things will improve by that time, I'm sure they will." Even to her own ears, the assertion was unconvincing, and she hurried on. "T'kamen, you're doing the best you can. You can't blame yourself."

"Blame myself?" T'kamen looked up, dropping his hand, and the anger flooded back into his voice. "I wish I could! If I thought it was my own scorching incompetence that was at fault, then the solution would be as simple as taking myself and Epherineth *between* and leaving the way open for someone else to lead the Weyr! No, Valonna, I don't blame myself. Not unless I count letting Epherineth fly Shimpath so high and so far that she clutches a queen. Or taking the hardest line with the Holds that I can, and still having to compromise my own riders. Or wanting to act like a Pass Weyrleader when I'm still a hundred Turns deep in an Interval!" The Weyrleader's rising voice turned into a ragged laugh as he caught his breath, but little humour rang in it, and less in his snarling smile.

Steady wingbeats announced Shimpath's return, and Valonna looked to the Bowl exit, guiltily glad for her dragon's presence, although the brevity of her absence meant she must have fed very lightly. Epherineth came to attention as his mate landed, and watched stiffly while Shimpath inspected her clutch. Satisfied, the queen arranged herself meticulously around her precious eggs so the tip of her tail curled about the farthest, and the golden shell of the queen egg lay inches from the end of her nose.

"Weyrwoman."

The dismissive curtness of T'kamen's tone indicated that the Weyrleader had regained some measure of control over himself, but as Valonna looked in surprise at the bronze rider, she could still see his seething frustration and fear and strain. Epherineth's rider was on his feet, and the Weyrwoman realised that he intended to leave as abruptly as he had arrived. She knew she should be relieved, but a small, strange part of her insisted that she didn't want him to go. "T'kamen, wait."

The lean Weyrleader halted, pivoting back to face her, the stony mask firmly in place.

"I need to... T'kamen, what can I do? To help?"

For a long moment, the bronze rider's pitiless eyes locked with hers. Valonna swallowed hard, but would not break the gaze. She couldn't like her Weyrleader, but she respected him, and something inside her wanted his respect in return.

"See to your queen," T'kamen told her, and without another word he resumed his stiff stride towards Epherineth.

Valonna felt her cheeks colour, and she stared down at her feet, clenching her fingers on the sturdy fabric of her skirt, until she heard the sweep of wings and knew that Epherineth was gone.

Mindful of the heat, she stepped down onto the sands. One of Shimpath's great jewel-like eyes, gleaming emerald, swivelled to regard her, although she didn't move. Valonna walked

carefully around the clutch and stood by her queen's head, stroking the pliable golden hide that covered a sensitive headknob. No trace of blood showed on talon or fang. Shimpath was a fastidious eater, but there was no evidence that she had eaten at all.

You needed me here, the queen remarked, unruffled.

You need to eat, Shimpath!

I can eat later. Shimpath raised her head. *Epherineth is concerned for his rider. You should be, too. T'kamen works too hard.*

The queen put no particular stress on the bronze rider's name, but the fact that she used it at all spoke of the strange combination of approval and respect Shimpath had for the Weyrleader, despite Valonna's mixed feelings. The golden dragon had never liked L'dro, but nor had she ever made a point of it. *Since D'feng was hurt, he hasn't had anyone to help him.*

Shimpath snorted, although whether at the mention of D'feng or for some other reason, Valonna didn't know. *He works too hard,* she repeated.

Valonna just stood there, taking comfort from her dragon's closeness, moving carefully from foot to foot as the heat of the sand penetrated the soles of her lined shoes.

The queen cocked her head suddenly, a motion that conveyed surprise as much as attentiveness. When she spoke, her voice had deepened with amusement. *Darshanth bespeaks me,* she told Valonna. *He asks me to ask you if you will see his rider.*

"Darshanth?" Valonna wondered aloud. "C'mine's here?"

Shimpath paused, consulting with the other dragon. *No. In his weyr.* Then she noted, *He is bold for a blue, but polite enough to ask me first.*

The Weyrwoman wondered why C'mine wanted to see her. It wasn't the first time the blue rider had contacted her through their dragons – there were few blues so daring as to speak directly to a queen, but Darshanth was an unusual dragon – but she had seen very little of C'mine since his return from Kellad. *Would you mind terribly if I went, Shimpath? Just for a little while?*

The queen shifted anxiously, betraying her discomfit at the notion, but as her eggs neared maturity she had become less insistent on Valonna's constant presence. *For a little while. You won't be long?*

I won't be long, and I'll come straight back if you need me, Valonna promised.

Darshanth will come and get you and bring you back, Shimpath said, with an imperious note in her voice.

Was that Darshanth's idea or yours? Valonna asked, already knowing the answer.

Mine, of course.

Sure enough, when the blue arrived, speeding into the Hatching cavern like a flash of silvery-blue lightning, he looked rather sheepish. Shimpath didn't deign to raise her head, but she eyed the much smaller dragon suspiciously.

It was an easy climb to Darshanth's neck for a rider more accustomed to a queen. Valonna arranged her skirts and braced herself against the blue dragon's ridges. *I'll be back soon, love.*

Darshanth took off smoothly – much more smoothly than Shimpath – and as the blue carried her out into the Bowl, Valonna wondered why. A queen had to spring that much more powerfully, she knew, to get her great weight airborne. But then, Darshanth had more Turns, more experience, and he probably flew more in a day than Shimpath did in seven, even when she wasn't grounded with a clutch. For a moment, Valonna let herself think about what her life would have been like if she had Impressed a green instead of a queen.

The blue landed on the low-level ledge of his weyr, crouching down before looking meekly over his shoulder at Valonna. The Weyrwoman slid the short distance to the solid rock of the ledge and patted Darshanth's shoulder reassuringly.

"Where did you go, Dar..." C'mine, emerging from the inner weyr, stopped and looked at her in bemusement. "Weyrwoman?"

The blue rider's startled expression threw Valonna. "Darshanth told Shimpath you wanted to see me...?"

"He told Shimpath *what?*"

Both riders looked at the blue. Darshanth didn't look abashed, his courage apparently restored away from the intimidating queen, and his reply was audible to Valonna as well as C'mine. *I lied.*

"You lied to *Shimpath?*" C'mine demanded, aghast.

You did want to see her. You just didn't say it.

The blue rider looked helplessly at Valonna. "I don't know what to do with him. I'm sorry. Please apologise to Shimpath."

C'mine's relationship with his dragon was always entertaining to observe, but the blue rider didn't look his normal calm self: stubble darkened his jaw, and his shirt was rumpled, as if he hadn't changed it in a few days. "It's quite all right, C'mine."

The blue rider rubbed his head in agitation. "Do you want to come in, since you're here? Or do you need to get back to Shimpath?"

Darshanth's initiative in calling her convinced the Weyrwoman that something was wrong. "I'll come in, if I may."

"Of course you may. You're always welcome, Valonna. Always."

The interior of the weyr was usually tidy, and today was no exception, but something seemed to be missing. Valonna couldn't put her finger on what it was, but she took a seat by the hearth and accepted the cup of klah C'mine offered her with thanks. The blue rider sat in the other chair and poured himself a mug, but just held it, turning it round and round in his hands without so much as taking a sip. He looked up, as if just remembering she was there, and smiled, but the expression looked distracted, if not quite forced. "How have you been?"

"Very well," Valonna replied, not certain what to do in the face of the blue rider's obvious distraction.

"And Shimpath? The eggs?"

“She’s fine, and the eggs are nearly hard enough to Hatch.”

“Good. That’s good.” C’mine looked down at the mug in his hands, as if he wasn’t quite sure how it had got there, and then carefully put it down on the hearth by his feet. He looked at Valonna with the same wide-eyed stare, and then shook his head. “I’m sorry, Valonna, I don’t know where I am today. I keep trying to pull myself together, but...”

He trailed off. Valonna sipped her klah, to buy herself a moment’s thinking time, then asked quietly, “What’s happened, C’mine?”

The blue rider laced the fingers of both hands at the back of his neck. “It’s C’los,” he said, after a long moment. “He’s...” He stopped, then tried again. “He’s gone. Left.”

“Left?” Valonna queried.

“Left. Me.” C’mine indicated the weyr with a wave of his hand. “Gone.”

Valonna realised then what was missing: the transient clutter of clothes and records, dirty plates and bits of riding harness, that C’los left in an absent-minded trail behind him. C’mine tidied up after his weyrmate so habitually that after a time visitors didn’t even notice him doing it, but the weyr was too painfully neat and tidy, without a sock or hide or buckle out of place. On the other side of the fireplace, the worn leather cases that held C’los’ gitar and pipes were missing: only C’mine’s remained. Only half the amount of crockery graced the shelf above the hearth, half the number of rugs the floor, and the rack beside the door to the dragons’ chamber held only one harness. There was nothing left of C’los’ in the weyr, but the conspicuous lack of things that had been there for over a decade screamed of his absence. On a morning of shocks, the disintegration of what, to Valonna, had seemed one of the most rock-solid relationships in the Weyr was as startling as any.

“Why?” she asked, half in a whisper, afraid to speak too loudly.

“Indioth rose – Darshanth didn’t want to chase her. I couldn’t make him! Especially not after he was hurt, because of me.... Bronth won, K’ston’s blue, and I came in after the flight – not straightaway, I gave them time, I gave them all day – and he was still there...and C’los said he was sick of being rejected, and he’d had enough, and he was leaving.”

The words came out in a rush, and Valonna had to take a minute to sort through them. “Are you sure he wasn’t just still with Indioth?” she asked hesitantly. “Still irrational because of her?”

C’mine shook his head miserably. “He went with K’ston, and then he came back later for his stuff. It wasn’t Indioth. Just C’los.”

Valonna was spared having to think of a response by a call from outside. “C’mine, that disgusting blue dragon of yours is flirting with me again. What did you....”

As the speaker stepped through the archway, she stopped, looking at Valonna and straightening up. “Weyrwoman – I’m sorry, I didn’t realise.”

“It’s all right, journeyman,” said Valonna, at the same moment as C’mine said, “Sorry, Saren, come in.”

Sarenya hesitated, looking from one to the other, and then came in the rest of the way. "Darshanth said you needed me, Mine?"

"Darshanth's been busy," the blue rider said resignedly. "Let me get you a chair." He paused. "Have you two been introduced?"

Sarenya looked at Valonna with a steady gaze, then inclined her head slightly. "I think we have, Weyrwoman Valonna."

"I think so too, journeyman Sarenya," Valonna replied. The crafter's shoulder knots were clear, but the Weyrwoman would have known her rank anyway. This was T'kamen's lover. Her self-possession was formidable.

C'mine brought over one of the chairs from the table and set it in front of the hearth, between the two armchairs, but before he could resume his seat Sarenya had stepped over to him with a frown, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Mine, what's happened?"

As the blue rider related the story again, Valonna observed the rapport between the two wistfully. C'mine was her friend, yes, but it was clear that he and Sarenya had been close for much longer. The dark-haired Beastcrafter seemed almost ostentatiously at ease with Darshanth's rider.

"The miserable, conniving, stinking excuse for a watchwher!" Sarenya burst out, when C'mine had finished. Then she glanced at Valonna. "Excuse my language, Weyrwoman, but I ought to kick him in the backside so hard he won't be sitting down for a month!"

"Don't blame it all on him," C'mine said morosely. "He left because of me."

"Oh, don't be such a wherry, C'mine. *He's* the one who had a tantrum and walked out on you. You know, if you'd stood up to him more over the Turns, he might not be such a self-obsessed ass."

"*Saren*," C'mine objected.

"It's true and you know it. He's been walking all over you ever since I've known you. What have you ever done to warrant him saying he's fed up?"

The blue rider looked briefly stricken and embarrassed at the same moment. "Since Kellad, we haven't.... I mean, I didn't feel.... And Darshanth hasn't...." He looked from one woman to the other, and hung his head.

"Oh," said Sarenya, a fraction of an instant before Valonna realised what C'mine meant. "I see." She looked at the Weyrwoman with a sigh. "Isn't that just typical? Only a man would throw a fit over something that small. Not that I'm saying you're small, Mine," she added.

C'mine laughed weakly, and Valonna found herself smiling. "C'mine, if it were up to me, I'd have told you to kick him out Turns ago. But I know you've been in love with the man longer than I've even known you, and I might not get on with him, but I know he loves you." Sarenya ruffled the blue rider's sparse hair. "He'll be back. When he realises that you're the only man in the whole of Pern who'll put up with him for more than about ten minutes, he'll be back."

Sarenya's no-fuss approach to the blue rider's misery could have been unsympathetic, but it wasn't. Valonna scarcely knew the journeyman, but simply listening to her tackle C'mine's fears gave her a remarkable insight into Sarenya's character. Brusque but not harsh, honest but not spiteful, ironic without ever belittling the depth of the blue rider's personal crisis. And that long-suffering look she'd shot Valonna had drawn the Weyrwoman in, consciously including her when Valonna was accustomed to exclusion.

"What if he doesn't?" C'mine asked, still forlorn, but perhaps not to the same extent.

"Just trust me, Mine." Sarenya looked the blue rider up and down, shaking her head. "Now don't tell me these clothes were clean on this morning."

C'mine looked ashamed. "I had other things on my mind."

"I don't know – the Weyrwoman's sitting at your fireplace, and here you are, unshaven, in yesterday's filthy shirt. C'los might have taken all his rubbish, but somehow I doubt he's carried off the bathing room." The journeyman poked C'mine in the chest with one finger. "Go and have a wash and a shave and put some clean clothes on."

"Yes, Saren," said C'mine. He sighed. "Thank you both for coming. Sorry Darshanth's such a pain."

"That's all right," said Valonna.

"Rather you than me with that one," Sarenya said dryly.

Darshanth's rider ambled obediently in the direction of the bathing room. Valonna, her mug still half full, gulped at her klah, feeling she should drink it and leave.

Sarenya took a third mug from the mantle, spooned a generous measure of klahbark into it, and filled the cup with hot water from the kettle at the side of the hearth. "Want a refill?" she asked Valonna companionably.

"Won't C'mine...?" the Weyrwoman began.

"He doesn't mind." The journeyman took the second mug, added water and a slightly less daunting spoonful of klah, and handed it back to the queen rider.

Valonna sipped the fresh klah, winced at the bitterness, and looked around for milk and sweetening. She added them to her taste, and looked up as Sarenya chuckled from the other side of the hearth.

"You're halfway there when you're making yourself at home in C'mine's weyr," the journeyman said cryptically.

The Weyrwoman stirred her klah, and asked, "Have you known him for very long?"

"Seven Turns. Probably closer to eight, now."

"Is he how you know T'kamen?" Valonna asked, more boldly than she felt.

"Other way round," said Saren, casually, but something tightened around her eyes.

"T'kamen introduced me to C'mine, Darshanth being what he is."

"What he is?" Then Valonna understood. "You were Searched?"

Sarenya smiled, slowly, but her blue eyes held no warmth. “Seven Turns ago. Probably closer to eight.”

Valonna bit her lip, trying not to stare at the other woman, but dredging her memory for any recollection of Sarenya. There had been so many candidates, and she had been one of them for such a short time – brought in by L'dro's Wing the morning of the Hatching, despite the Weyr's traditional vetting period. “I don't remember you,” she confessed.

“Why would you?” Sarenya shrugged. “I went back to the Beastcraft straight after the ceremony. We likely never met.”

Except on the sands, a little part of Valonna's mind whispered. *And Shimpath chose me*. It was the strangest affirmation: both triumph and defeat. She, Valonna, had Impressed the queen that day, but how, when the competition had been as strong as Sarenya? What had made Shimpath choose shy over confident, quiet over outspoken? “I'm sure T'kamen would rather you'd Impressed than me,” she said, and then wondered at herself.

“I'm sure T'kamen would rather many things were different,” said Sarenya. “Fortunately he doesn't have that much power.”

“I'm worried about him,” said Valonna, thinking of how the Weyrleader had been behaving earlier with a shiver. “It's such a difficult time, and he's taken on too much.”

“T'kamen has two fundamental problems.” Sarenya didn't elaborate for a while, instead looking at the fire, and taking occasional sips from her mug, but Valonna waited, sensing there was more. At length, the journeyman continued, “He refuses to delegate to anyone of a lower rank.” Then Sarenya looked straight at Valonna. “And he can't delegate to anyone of equivalent rank.”

Valonna flushed and averted her eyes from that piercing stare. “I tried,” she murmured. “I asked him what I could do. I asked....”

“Weyrwoman. “ Sarenya's tone relented somewhat. “Perhaps it would be kinder to say won't, rather than can't. But you're never going to make a herdbeast fly, no matter which way you groom it. It all boils down to the same thing.” She sighed. “You have to understand the way T'kamen thinks. If you want him to trust you, you have to show him that you can be trusted. If you want him to respect you, you have to prove that you're due respect. He won't come looking for it, and he won't assume worth until he's seen it with his own two eyes. Valonna, if you want to help – and Faranth, girl, you should: you're the Senior Weyrwoman, not a drudge – then you have to start taking responsibility for yourself. Find out what needs to be done, and *do it*. Don't wait for someone to tell you, because the only man in the Weyr with the authority to *tell* you anything is Kamen, and he won't. In his mind, if you don't have the wit to act on your own initiative, you don't have the wit to do anything worthwhile.”

The journeyman's tone wasn't unkind, but Valonna squirmed anyway. It all made so much sense, and yet the goal Sarenya urged her towards seemed unattainable. “I've never learned all the duties of a Weyrwoman,” she said, in a small voice. “I ask because I'm scared I'll do things wrong.”

“Everybody makes mistakes, Valonna. Faranth knows I have. But they’re there to be learned from, and no one’s saying you have to strike out blind. You can’t ask T’kamen for direction, but you can get advice from other sources. The Headwoman should be your strongest ally.”

Valonna made a face. “Adrissa doesn’t like me very much.”

“Then appoint someone else as Headwoman.” At Valonna’s incredulous gasp, Sarenya raised her eyebrows. “You can do that, you know. It’s more than within your authority. Find one of the other senior staff who knows her job and who you can work with, and promote her. Shards, T’kamen didn’t make any bones about changing the hierarchy around to suit *his* needs.”

“But they’ll hate me,” the queen rider said tremulously.

“Better that they hate you for being strong than despise you for being weak, Weyrwoman.”

They stared at each other, the Weyrwoman shocked, the journeyman deadly serious. Then Sarenya sighed and leaned back, breaking the tableau. “I’m sorry, Weyrwoman. Sometimes I don’t know when to shut up. It’s not my place to criticise you.”

Valonna shook her head vigorously, taking a deep breath. “No. I’m glad you did. Shards, Sarenya, why didn’t I see it before?”

The Beastcrafter grimaced. “Because L’dro was a tail-fork, and on his best day T’kamen’s not much better?”

The appraisal made Valonna stare in surprise, and then she looked away. “You know him so much better than I do.”

“A lot of good that’s done me,” Sarenya said, without inflection. “The difference between you and me is that I can choose to ignore him. You don’t have that luxury, so the best you can do is try to get on with him.”

The Weyrwoman wasn’t dumb to Sarenya’s change of subject. She and T’kamen were clearly no longer lovers. Valonna, though, respected the other woman’s right to avoid the issue – and understood the truth of the distinction Sarenya had made. “Will you help me, journeyman?”

“Help you?”

Valonna nodded, her mind made up. “T’kamen needs help, and I need help to help him. I need friends...allies. Someone to point me in the right direction.”

“I’m not Weyrbred,” Sarenya warned her. “If you want to know how to clip wherries’ wings or geld runners, I’m your girl, but other than that, I can only offer my common sense. And maybe some sort of insight into our cheerful Weyrleader’s mind.”

“It’s a start,” Valonna said bravely.

Sarenya grinned suddenly, an expression with more genuine warmth in it than Valonna had seen all day. “You’re right. It is.”