



II

Your Charge Is Sure



“Isolate the area. Investigate it. Touch nothing. Disturb nothing. Make a sketch of everything you see. Include every detail, no matter how irrelevant it may seem. Never rely on your memory. Make accurate, objective notes, and trust them. These initial observations often make the difference between solution and frustration.”

C'los had never before had reason to think of that lecture of fifteen Turns ago. Or was it closer to twenty? He couldn't remember. Strange, then, how he could recall one-armed Valrov's words so precisely. Not only the words: he could picture the cramped confines of the old Harper's office, the unpleasant warmth of too fierce a fire in the small space, the way that his awareness of the discomfort had paled against the fascinating content of Valrov's lesson.

Carellos had been twelve, past the normal age of Harper apprenticeship, before the Master Crafters had passed judgement on him. He was not to be apprenticed as a Harper. He didn't have the aptitude, they said: not the skills, nor the patience, to fully apply himself to the Craft. Masterharper Gaffry himself had broken the news to him, bluntly and without apology. It had been a stunning blow to a cocky young ego - and yet with the humiliation of being turned down had come an immense sense of relief. Carellos hadn't wanted to be a Harper. Oh, he'd sung in the chorus, like all the other lads with half-decent voices, and he could play pipes and gitar and drum, like - well, like virtually every man, woman, and child in the Kellad-Harperhall complex - but he hadn't grown up at the Hall itself without realising a few hard truths about the profession. Singing and playing weren't the half of what it meant to be a Harper. Carellos had known that Harpers were teachers before all else, and that was what he'd dreaded. If, after a four-Turn apprenticeship, he hadn't distinguished himself in any field - and he'd already known that his singing and playing were indifferent, and his compositions mediocre at best - he'd have been doomed to remain a senior apprentice or very junior journeyman, trotting around muddy paths to muddy holds, teaching reading and reckoning to muddy coholders with muddy brains. The very thought of it still made C'los shudder.

“You'll never be a Harper,” Gaffry had told him, placing the slightest breath of emphasis on that title: the kind of nuance of which Carellos had always been intensely aware. “But that doesn't mean you can't be of use to the Hall.”

Carellos had been packed off to study with a string of masters, journeymen, and less decorated individuals. His brashness had earned him more than one clip round the ear, but the content of his lessons had soon absorbed him to such an extent that he had ceased worrying about who his teachers were in favour of soaking up everything he could learn from them.

Domenge, the Harper Master whom Carellos had thought senile for Turns, had imparted to him the skill of playing a convincing role, using dialect, costume, and mannerisms to affect the part.

Elroon, assistant steward at Jessaf Hold, had instructed him how best to gauge and influence people, individuals and groups, from drudge to Lord Holder. A nondescript man Carellos had known only as Sedd had taught him the arts of stealth, of blending into a dark shadow or a drifting crowd. And Valrov - one-armed, foul-tempered Valrov - had educated him in observation, reasoning, and deduction.

Much later, C'los had realised that those Turns of studying – usually under the façade of less interesting errands – had been his apprenticeship. Ultimately, events had taken his life in a different direction. His friendship with Cairmine had drawn more attention to them both than his diverse Masters had liked, and the interest of a Madellon Search dragon had put an end to Carellos' training, but C'los still valued and used much of what he had learnt.

Neither Carellos the boy nor C'los the man could have known that, one day, Valrov's lessons would be put to use in the investigation of a dragonrider's death. And yet now, with the hushed, fascinated crowd of riders and Weyrfolk still loitering at the scene of E'rom's death, C'los could hear Valrov's clipped voice in his mind as clearly as if his old teacher were standing beside him.

One of Isnan's journeymen was leading E'rom's shocked and traumatised weyrmate away. C'los looked for T'kamen, but the Weyrleader was already stalking off, his spare frame radiating anger and frustration at the death. C'los started after him, then stopped. T'kamen had put him in charge of the investigation. Troubling him with details at this stage would achieve nothing. He turned instead to his own dragon, crouching at a respectful distance from the scene of E'rom's fatal fall. *Indioth, tell Santinoth and Chyilth that I need to see their riders. And that I need something to write with.*

The green, grey-tinged with her grief for Sigith, rustled her wings softly as she passed along the messages. C'los waited with the patience he reserved for his dragon: accuracy, not speed, was what counted when he needed her to relay. *They're coming*, she reported finally.

"Green rider?" Master Isnan's voice cut into C'los' thoughts. "I'd like to get the body back to the infirmary, and then if you and Indioth would be so good as to deliver a message to the Fort Healerhall..."

C'los' brain sometimes worked faster than his conscious mind could follow: this was one of those times. "I don't want you to move the body just yet," he heard himself say. "I need to figure out how he died."

"That much is clear, C'los," Isnan said. "Look."

C'los followed the Healer around the screens. E'rom's twisted body made a grisly sight. His neck was clearly broken. C'los looked at the weyr ledge, not much more than twenty feet up. Steps led from it down to the Bowl. The observation made C'los' fingers itch for recording tools.

"Can we move him?" asked Isnan.

C'los looked at the body, committing the details to memory. He couldn't imagine ever forgetting them. "Mark where he fell," he said at last. "I want to have a look in the weyr. Don't let anyone come up after me."

Isnan nodded. "I'll have another rider go to the Hall."

"Thanks," C'los said, but his mind was already elsewhere.

Taking a deep breath, he started up the rocky stairs that led to the dead man's weyr. There was a thin layer of sand on each step, kicked or scuffed from above, wet with the rain that had been falling on and off all day. The weyr ledge had a thicker coating of dust, and C'los paused before setting foot on it. The damp sand was marked with footprints, dragon and human: the impressions of different sized feet and boots with varying treads, the great claw scars of at least two different dragons, an occasional thin line scraped into the sand that could have been a careless wingtip. There were other marks, too, that defied immediate identification. C'los made a mental note to study the imprints in more detail later. He stepped around the edge of the area, taking care not to add footprints of his own, and entered the weyr.

The chamber that had belonged to E'rom's Sigith was dominated by the raised stone couch, scattered with sand. That, then, explained the abundance of the stuff outside, although the floor was mostly clean. A brush leaned against the far wall. Neither detail was unusual: many dragons liked a layer of sand on their beds, but few riders liked it on the floor. The sand on the ledge outside had obviously been brushed or trodden from the dragon's chamber over many Turns.

C'los moved on into the living area of the weyr. He felt momentarily guilty for intruding on another rider's private space, but shrugged off the uncomfortable sensation. This rider was dead, and he had to find out why.

It was a good-sized weyr: not as spacious as the caverns C'los and C'mine had been bequeathed by one of the elderly founding bronze riders of Madellon Turns ago, but considerably larger than the cramped quarters inhabited by many riders. Three curtained archways led to other areas of the weyr. Nothing looked out of place: the thin rugs on the floor were neat, the chairs drawn tidily up to the table. But the reek of Jessaf brandy that had exuded from E'rom's corpse was strong in the room, too.

He found the bottle under the table, where it had rolled against the wall. C'los crouched to examine it, being careful not to move anything. Liquid had pooled under the uncorked neck of the vessel, and a dark stain on the rug showed how the bottle had rolled, spilling its contents in an arc.

C'los left the brandy bottle where it was. There was a jug on the table, half-full of what appeared to be water. He sniffed carefully but couldn't detect any other odour. A wherhide case next to it contained a dragonrider's standard leatherworking kit, and a piece of riding gear – one of the narrow straps that linked the dragon's harness to the rider's belt - beside that showed evidence of recent repairs. A glint caught C'los eye: a thick, curved needle, still threaded, lay on top of the fighting strap.

Nothing else looked unusual. The shelves held everyday miscellany: plates, utensils, folded cloths, a set of five matching cups. Other than the cloying smell of brandy, the room seemed innocuous.

C'los pushed aside the oiled hide hanging that partitioned off the bathing room. A small natural pool, just deep enough to sit in, rippled with the force of the fresh water bubbling up from the porous rock. Fading blots that could have been footprints made a trail towards the archway into the main room of the weyr, and a damp towel was folded neatly on a rocky shelf.

The sleeping room, little more than a niche, held a bed, tidily made, with a low chest at its foot. C'los had to squeeze past the bed to investigate the chest, but it contained only clothes. A picture hung on the wall, and the green rider paused to study it. Charcoal on hide depicted E'rom as a youth with a half-grown Sigith beside him.

The final archway leading from the living chamber of E'rom's weyr revealed not another room, but a narrow staircase. C'los made a quick mental projection as to where it would lead, based on the location of the weyr. The laundry rooms, he thought. He followed the stairs down to confirm his guess. After thirty steps, a door opened out into the humid heat of the cave system that housed Madellon's big thermal pools for bathing and washing. That accounted for the vigour of the water recirculating in E'rom's bathing pool. But it also meant that there was a back way into – and out of – the dead rider's weyr.

C'los quickly retraced his steps back into the weyr. He gazed around the main chamber, trying to draw the pieces together in his mind. Absently, the green rider placed his hands on the back of one of the chairs, and then exclaimed as a sharp sliver of wood jabbed into the flesh of his palm. The back of the chair was cracked and splintered.

Belatedly, C'los realised that he had already disregarded Valrov's advice to take notes. He hastened back through Sigith's cavern and then outside, taking care not to obscure or add to the marks in the sand of the ledge. His brain was buzzing with the possible conclusions to be drawn from what he had found.

Indioth, where's... he began, half turning, but stopped as he saw two new dragons, a brown and a bronze, landing beside his green. C'los hurried down the steps to the Bowl to meet them, noticing that Isnan and his assistants had already taken E'rom's body away, although someone had outlined the shape of the fallen rider in chalk.

Both brown and bronze rider wore the double stripes of Wingseconds on their shoulders, although one was barely half the age of the other. T'rello, who made up for his scant seventeen Turns with a conscientious and mature manner, looked pale beneath his summer tan. A'len, the easy-going rider who had always been part of C'los' extended circle of friends, gravely offered chalk and slate.

C'los took the tools and started making notes in shorthand, hurrying to record what he had seen. As he scribbled, he glanced up at the two Wingseconds. "I need you two to close off this weyr. There's a back way in from the laundry rooms. Roster a couple of your most trustworthy

riders and have them guard both entrances. I don't want anyone going in or out, or touching anything, until I've finished investigating it."

The two Wingseconds exchanged a glance. "What's going on, C'los?" asked A'len. "We heard Sigith go *between*, but..."

"T'kamen wants me to find out what happened to him." C'los glanced up at the grey sky, making a face, and noted down the approximate time. "I just need to be sure that nothing's tampered with."

"Why would anyone tamper with a dead man's things?" T'rello asked in a hushed tone.

Another question hung on the air between the three riders: the question C'los hadn't yet committed himself to asking. "I don't know," he lied. "I just don't want the place cleared until I'm done."

T'rello seemed to accept that, and although A'len's more experienced gaze was still troubled, the brown rider nodded. "We'll see to it, Los."

"Thank you." C'los started back up the steps to E'rom's weyr, intent on recording everything he had seen.

"Hey, C'los," T'rello called after him. "How's C'mine?"

C'los looked blankly at the young Wingsecond, his normally agile mind struggling to cope with the sudden change of subject. "Uh, he's fine," he said finally, and tried not to think too hard about the fact that his weyrmate, so recently returned to health and home, had never been further from his mind.



T'kamen was watching from a high window when the two browns winked in from *between*. Epherineth had commented that he would have been happy to report the new arrivals, but T'kamen had declined the offer. He was looking for more than dragons.

He turned back to the room, glancing briefly at the two men already there. Winstone, Lord of Jessaf and the designated host for the day's meeting, sat stiffly in his chair at one end of the great skybroom table, his expression as stony as the lines of age carved into his face. D'feng looked scarcely less tense. T'kamen spared a moment to regret again the necessity of bringing the other bronze rider. There was no doubt that he needed a second, and D'feng certainly had more recent experience of the Madellon Lords than any other rider in the Weyr, but T'kamen didn't like being forced to rely on a man who had been a political opponent such a short time ago. There were half a dozen riders he would rather have had at his side, but none could have filled the role. L'stev was deeply involved with his duties as Weyrilingmaster. C'los had been absorbed with C'mine's recovery until recently, travelling between Madellon and Kellad on a daily basis, and as a green rider would not have carried the necessary gravitas with Holders. T'rello, for all that T'kamen valued the young man's potential, was virtually a weyrling. The two riders T'kamen had taken on as his own Wingseconds were still finding their

feet with him. So it had fallen to D'feng, a bronze rider with the soul of a clerk, to accompany T'kamen to these consultations with the three major Holders of Madellon territory. The Weyrleader took his only solace in the knowledge that at least none of the Lords would be able to baffle him with numbers.

Winstone's steward, a small man who almost certainly knew a great deal more than his impassive expression revealed, preceded the other three dignitaries into the room. Meturvian, Lord of Kellad, came first: burly, blonde, and as unsmiling as Winstone, wearing the brown and green colours of his Hold. The young Lord of Blue Shale Hold, Zinner, was a less formidable presence in blue and red. Gaffry, Masterharper of the South brought up the rear in the blue of his Craft. The riot of colour against wall hangings of Jessaf yellow was almost painful to the eye. T'kamen was glad for his own sober attire: the dark leathers of a dragonrider, with Madellon's indigo limited to the cord of his rank knots.

"Winstone," Meturvian addressed the Jessaf Lord curtly. "T'kamen."

Zinner murmured acknowledgements, and Gaffry nodded to each of them, including D'feng. Trust the Masterharper to be diplomatic. As the only man present not of a rank with the others, D'feng was usually ignored by the three Lords, but today T'kamen only wanted him to listen. What transpired today would colour Weyr-Hold relations for the foreseeable future, and Gaffry – for all his purported neutrality – knew that.

"Master Gaffry," the Weyrleader greeted the Harper cordially. He paused, and then added in a more formal tone, "My Lords Zinner and Meturvian."

Winstone cleared his throat impatiently. "Sit, gentlemen, sit."

One drawback of meeting on Hold territory was that Winstone had total control over the seating arrangements. The three Lords arrayed themselves at the head of the table, leaving the central seat for Gaffry, and the two chairs at the foot of the table for T'kamen and D'feng. None could have failed to mark the role of supplicant in which Winstone had cast the Weyr.

T'kamen took his designated place without comment or complaint, trusting to D'feng to back up his tacit disdain for Winstone's tactics. Nearly five Turns as the subordinate of a hated rival had taught him restraint. Winstone would have to do much better if he wanted to needle a reaction out of Madellon's new Weyrleader.

The steward moved around the table, filling glasses from a wineskin. T'kamen recognised the inferior vintage, although there were precious few skins of even this poor wine in the storage caverns of Madellon, and wondered if Winstone intended to insult his fellow Lords as well as the Weyrleader he resented. Neither Meturvian nor Zinner objected to their host's miserly choice, however, and T'kamen suddenly grasped the Jessaf Lord's intent. In serving a third-rate wine, Winstone was making a show of his Hold's poverty.

Well, T'kamen intended to impress upon these three men that the Weyr wouldn't accept substandard products. He waved the steward aside before the man could fill his glass or D'feng's,

and fixed Winstone with a stare that was as flat as it was unimpressed. “Thank you, we’re not thirsty.”

Winstone scowled. “That will be all,” he told his steward brusquely.

T’kamen waited for the heavy door to latch shut, and then spoke immediately, keen to take control of the proceedings. “Thank you for attending, my Lords, Masterharper. I’m glad you place such importance on your relationship with the Weyr.”

It was a calculated dig, voiced so blandly that none of the Lords would be able to object, although Winstone’s glower deepened, and Meturvian’s mouth twitched in the beginning of a frown. Zinner, the youngest and, usually, the quietest of the three powerful Madellon Lords, showed no reaction. The expected responses, then: Winstone openly hostile, Meturvian – who owed the Weyr the most – more guarded, and Zinner silent.

“You have the Weyr’s list of requirements, T’kamen?” asked Gaffry.

Gaffry would translate “demands” into “requirements,” T’kamen remarked to Epherineth. “I do,” he replied, drawing the three flat rolls of hide from the inside pocket of his riding jacket. He pushed them across the table, taking care that each man received the correct document. There were several important distinctions between them.

Then he leaned back, watching intently as the three Lords perused the lists he had drawn up with such precision. He could see D’feng’s tight-lipped expression from the corner of his eye. The older bronze rider had argued the contents of the tithe demands with him for hours, insisting that the Weyr must ask for more than it needed, to leave room for negotiation. That was what the Lords expected; it was a traditional aspect of the sometimes uneasy Hold-Weyr symbiosis. T’kamen wasn’t interested in what D’feng thought they expected. A mere five Turns of L’dro’s tactics scarcely counted as tradition; prior to that, the Madellon Lords had dealt directly with Weyrwoman Fianine, Valonna’s formidable predecessor. Zinner was too new in his Lordship to have known Cherganth’s rider, but Meturvian and Winstone would both have spent many Turns railing futilely against Fianine’s uncompromising demands. T’kamen intended to make it clear that he subscribed to the former Weyrwoman’s values, not the self-indulgence of his own predecessor.

Silence dominated the room for several moments, broken only by the soft creak of D’feng’s riding leathers as the Wingleader shifted nervously in his seat.

Then, Meturvian looked up from the tithe demand T’kamen had compiled for Kellad Hold. “This is too much.”

“It’s what the Weyr needs, Meturvian,” T’kamen replied. “It’s the minimum I can accept to sustain Madellon’s riders and dragons at a basic level.”

“Weyrleader -”

“I’m not asking you for luxuries, my Lords,” T’kamen went on implacably. “Not your best wines, not your prime animals, not the scarcest timber. Just food that you wouldn’t object to eating yourself, good quality hide so we can cut harness that won’t risk lives, enough animals that our dragons don’t have to deplete the wild herds -”

Winstone exploded. "If there weren't so many of your thrice-seared dragons –"

Outside, Sejanth and the two browns immediately echoed Epherineth's affronted bugle.

"Lord Winstone!" Gaffry objected.

T'kamen clenched his teeth, fighting back his outrage at the blasphemy. D'feng had paled with shock, and even the other two Lords were protesting at Winstone's oath.

"It's the truth," Winstone growled unapologetically, glaring at Zinner and Gaffry. "We can't support –" he consulted his document, "- two hundred and twenty-three dragons!"

"Two hundred and twenty-two," D'feng corrected pedantically. "A brown rider died several days ago."

T'kamen could have kicked him, not only for speaking up uninvited, but also for drawing attention to an incident that reflected poorly on the Weyr. He made a mental note to chase C'los up on his investigation when he got back to Madellon. The green rider had gone uncharacteristically quiet. "Considerably fewer than both Southern and the Peninsula, both with well over three hundred dragons."

"And established Hold populations to match! You might have forgotten, Weyrleader, that Madellon territory comprises the frontier of Hold expansion in the South. My uncle was the first Lord of Jessaf, T'kamen – and that was fewer than fifty Turns ago! How can a developing Hold be expected to support two hundred and twenty dragons?"

"Your development will depend on dragons soon enough, Winstone," T'kamen said coldly.

"You offer a payment deferred for a hundred Turns," the Jessaf Lord declared, "and it no more sways my opinion than have the demands of Interval Weyrleaders to any Holder throughout Pern's history."

T'kamen didn't bother to mask the disgust in his voice. "The Holds always have been quick to forget their debt to the Weyr once a Pass ends."

"And what debt is that? Madellon dragons have never fought Thread over Jessaf."

The arrogance of this man, who dared to blaspheme against the dragons whose ancestors had preserved the lives of his, made T'kamen seethe, but the Weyrleader was determined to control his temper, and he could feel Epherineth's steadying touch helping him. He spoke very carefully, very softly. "Carry on, my Lord Winstone, and Madellon dragons never will."

Winstone shrugged. "I'll be dust in the wind by then, T'kamen, and so will your threats."

T'kamen did not respond for a long moment, staring across the table at the Lord of Jessaf Hold. "You are short sighted," he said at last, although he could have voiced a dozen less measured retorts.

"T'kamen, Winstone doesn't mean to insult the Weyr," said Meturvian.

The Weyrleader transferred his gaze to the Kellad Lord. Famously belligerent, the powerful Holder looked ill at ease in the role of appeaser, but Kellad owed the Weyr a more recent debt than that of all Pern to the dragons. The wildfire that had caught in Kellad's rich forests at Turn's End had killed dozens of holders, and would have taken the lives of many more if not for the bravery of

Madellon dragonriders. C'mine had nearly died that day. No one who had been there, and least of all Meturvian, would soon forget what was owed.

"It's not that we're rescinding on our vows to tithe," Meturvian went on. "But the drought means we all have to tighten our belts. Harvests have failed across the South because of it, and we can't even trade with the North because the flooding there has destroyed winter reserves and set back the early plantings. We've got hungry people to feed, T'kamen."

"So have I," the Weyrleader replied flatly, "and twenty-five new dragonets on the way who won't eat unless you tithe what is required."

"The last clutch wasn't so big," Winstone complained.

T'kamen smiled, without warmth. "No, it wasn't."

"It's irresponsible," the Jessaf Lord declared. "L'dro agreed to see that the size of future clutches was kept down."

"L'dro was good at making promises he couldn't keep."

Unexpectedly, Zinner spoke up. "You have to offer us something."

By the way that Winstone and Meturvian relinquished control of the discussion to the youngest man in the room, T'kamen surmised that Zinner's contribution, like everything else, had been carefully planned. The bronze rider felt the burden of the entire Weyr press suddenly down on him; he was solely responsible for negotiating for Madellon's needs, but the idea of bargaining for those needs with Weyr resources unsettled him. He folded his arms. "What did you have in mind?"

"Transport," Zinner replied readily.

T'kamen studied the Lord of Blue Shale, wondering why the least experienced of the three Lords had been chosen to deliver what they had obviously decided to demand in return for tithes. "The price of dragon transportation has been fixed for Turns."

"Waive the fee," said Zinner. "At least for those on official Hold business."

The Weyrleader frowned; he had reduced the required tithe of marks significantly, counting on the revenue generated by the regular service of dragon transport. Any rider could offer the services of himself and his dragon to convey passengers or messages, with or without a price, but all major and minor Hold traffic went via the Weyrleader, and transport duty was rostered out among all wingriders. The marks belonged to the Weyr rather than the rider who had made the trip. The relative frequency of journeys made it a significant source of income, independent of tithes. To permit free travel not only trivialised a dragonrider's time, it undermined a financial resource upon which T'kamen had been depending. "My riders won't appreciate being treated like runners."

"Of course, a small gratuity for the rider involved would be appropriate," said Meturvian.

Winstone muttered, "If your dragons would carry goods, I'd be willing to pay...."

"No." T'kamen didn't wait for the Jessaf Lord to finish. "Messages and passengers are one thing, but dragons won't carry cargo."

D'feng nudged T'kamen's elbow, and the Weyrleader threw a sidelong glare at him before noticing what the other bronze rider had wanted him to see. Zinner was looking at Winstone with an outraged expression. The young Seaholder quickly rearranged his features into a bland mask, but the inference was clear: Winstone had not discussed his plans for dragons as beasts of burden, and Zinner, whose Hold boasted one of the largest fleets in the South, felt betrayed.

"I'll consider the waiving of the transportation fee," T'kamen said slowly, "although conditions would apply. I won't have my riders called upon for petty errands."

Meturvian cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable again. T'kamen suspected that Kellad's Lord would rather take an approach much like Winstone's. "Kellad respectfully asks that the Weyr provides a trained service to assist with the protection of lives and land against wildfires."

T'kamen had half expected that, although Meturvian's phrasing aggravated him. "I nearly lost a rider saving lives, Meturvian; I wouldn't risk one just to save a few trees." He watched the blonde Lord's eyes widen in anger, and went on before Meturvian lost his temper. "A Wing will be trained in appropriate methods of wildfire containment."

The Weyrleader had the satisfaction of seeing Meturvian agree too quickly, caught off-balance between indignation and his awareness of Kellad's debt. It didn't matter either way to T'kamen: the fire-fighting Wing had been an obvious step to take after the brave but disorganised efforts of dragons and riders at Turn's End.

"Cargo or no cargo, if we're to tithe what you require, then dragons can come and collect it," said Winstone, as if he hadn't even heard the exchange regarding fire-fighting. "Sending men and beasts and wagons when a dragon could go *between* in a few breaths is absurd."

Reluctantly, T'kamen nodded. It wasn't an unreasonable request. He glanced at Gaffry, who had been silently recording details of the agreements that had been made so far. The Masterharper's face revealed nothing. "Have you finished?"

Zinner and Meturvian both looked at Winstone. The difficult Lord scowled at T'kamen, his eyes almost vanishing beneath bushy eyebrows. "Hold watchdragons."

"Absolutely not."

"Oh, come now, T'kamen, you can't tell me there isn't a rider or two you'd rather have somewhere where they can't cause mischief?" Winstone gave a snort of laughter that could have meant anything. "You are a new Weyrleader, after all."

"Dragons don't live away from the Weyr," T'kamen said flatly. "It isn't natural for them. I wouldn't ask that of any of my riders."

"Weyrleader, I think you have to...."

"I think I don't have to anything." The Weyrleader got up from his place, his patience finally spent at the audacity of the demand. A dragonpair on hand day and night to pander to the whim of Holders? No amount of marks could buy that. "You will each have the quantity and quality of items outlined in those tithe documents ready for collection by dragon on the allotted date. Thank you, Masterharper."



“I haven’t finished yet!” roared Winstone.

T’kamen took a deep breath, vowing to hold in his fury, the indignation of a dragonrider whose pride has been affronted. “I have. D’feng?”

The other bronze rider rose instantly to join him, but T’kamen didn’t stop to see if he approved of the abrupt ending to the meeting or not: he was already walking towards the door.

“But there’s the problem of the border violations on the Peninsula side,” Winstone protested.

T’kamen kept walking, calling Epherineth down from the fire heights. He didn’t want to stay at Jessaf any longer than necessary.

“I said you should have left room for negotiations,” D’feng muttered as they stepped out into the courtyard of the Hold.

T’kamen could have chosen any one of many angry epithets to hurl at his default, and quite worthless, second, but something – perhaps Epherineth – held him back. “Shut up, D’feng,” he said, with finality. “Just shut up.”