



V

And Quicker To Champion Me



Shimpath nosed at her smallest egg, testing its temperature, then rolled it with infinite gentleness into a different position. It completed the newest pattern in the sand: the zigzag arc that half surrounded the queen, with the largest eggs in the centre and the smaller ones ranging out to each side, in perfect size order. Some of the precious eggs lay on their sides and others on their ends, but each had been positioned with tender care and the instinctive skill of a queen dragon who knew exactly how best to warm her clutch.

In the stands, close enough to Shimpath to keep the queen company, but not so close for the heat of the sands to cause discomfort, Valonna sat absorbed in needlework. The idea had come to her in the first few days of her dragon's imposed confinement to the Hatching ground: she would cross-stitch a memento for each of the twenty-five new riders who would Impress the dragonets of Shimpath's clutch. The six samplers she had almost finished lay, folded carefully, on the seat beside her, each embroidered with the outline of a hatchling dragon. Of course, she wouldn't be able to complete them until the clutch had Hatched, but then it would be a simple matter of stitching on the date and the names of each new dragonpair, and filling in the hatchling outline with the appropriate colour. It made satisfying work, and it took her mind off some of the unpleasantness of the past few days.

The death of a dragonrider was always cause for mourning. Valonna supposed herself lucky to have been born in the middle of an Interval, when she would never have to cope with frequent deaths in Threadfall. She still remembered the awful shock of losing classmates during training, and the three pairs that had never graduated from Shimpath's first clutch, but it was rare to hear that terrible dirge of dragon grief. The death of the brown rider – E'rom – had come as a sad surprise. But how could someone have killed him deliberately?

T'kamen's mood had been foul even by his standards when he'd come to tell Valonna the news. The new Weyrleader seemed capable of a cold fury more frightening than L'dro's passionate rages had ever been. With L'dro, she'd known what to expect. T'kamen's temper had never been directed at her – he remained scrupulously polite and courteous, if distant – but Valonna could scarcely be blind to the anger and frustration seething just under the surface, or the signs of strain on his face. Leading the Weyr never seemed to have affected L'dro so severely.

But then, L'dro hadn't been a good Weyrleader. Valonna forced herself to remember that. Her former weyrmate, the only man she'd ever loved, had used the rank to better his position, and left the common riders, the 'lesser' riders, without. It had taken one of those common riders to make Valonna see not only how destitute the Weyr had become, but what a weak and selfish man L'dro truly was, too.

The Weyrwoman missed C'mine. The blue rider had become her friend, maybe her only real friend, and although openly affiliated with T'kamen he'd never used her to further the bronze rider's ambitions. There had been times in the trying early days of T'kamen's term as Weyrleader when Valonna would have done anything for some of C'mine's calm advice and undemanding company. Now he was back, but Valonna couldn't leave Shimpath, and she wouldn't have dreamed of summoning him. She just wished she had someone to talk to in the long, slow hours when the queen dozed over her eggs. Shimpath's serene personality changed dramatically when she was broody: the golden dragon hated to be alone, even when she was asleep.

Valonna had never found it easy to make friends. As the youngest child of a modest family, she had learned from an early age that making a fuss seldom did anything but aggravate her parents and elder siblings. The importance of enduring difficulty and hardship without complaint ran deep in her character, and with it, a need to retreat into the background, to deflect attention. She'd had few friends at Jessaf before her Search, and no time to make new ones at the Weyr before her Impression of Shimpath had forever set her apart from the other girls. The Weyrleader had intimidated her, and the Weyrwoman, Fianine, had already been too unwell to have time for her. Her only human solace through the two Turns of weyrling training had been L'dro, and now even he had gone, exiled to the Peninsula, and the last of Valonna's hopes that he still cared about her with him.

It didn't help that T'kamen was so...unlovable. Oh, handsome enough: the sharp, angular lines of his face, the lithe grace of his movements, the fierce intensity of unsmiling dark eyes all held a strange allure. An intelligent man, and fair, and clearly dedicated to making things right in the Weyr. But Valonna knew she could never warm to him, and further, she knew he would never warm to her. Any true partner of his would have to be as aggressive, as determined, and as stubborn as he. Valonna knew she would never be those things. And T'kamen had a lover, a Beastcraft journeyman, Sarenya. He didn't flaunt the relationship, but neither did he make a secret of it. Indeed: directly after Shimpath's flight, T'kamen had made it plain that not only would he continue to pursue his personal attachments, separate from Valonna, he expected her to do the same – with the caveat that she should choose her partners with discretion.

But whom could she have chosen? Even if there had been someone else, Valonna couldn't have trusted him. L'dro had seemed sincere for Turns before she had discovered the full extent of his disdain for her. Another bronze rider would surely have ulterior motives for courting her. Association with a brown or blue rider would make gossip. A man who wasn't a dragonrider at all wouldn't understand what it was to be Weyrwoman and subject to the whims of a queen dragon. Truly, only another queen rider could comprehend her situation.

There would be another soon enough. Valonna let her eyes rest on the queen egg, its mottled golden shell half-buried in the sand. Perhaps the new hatchling would divert some attention away from Shimpath and her.

Abruptly, the queen raised her head from where she had been dozing, muzzle on forepaws. The movement of Shimpath's eyes accelerated fractionally, and she spread her wings over her clutch.

What is it? Valonna asked, setting her embroidery aside.

The queen remained in her alert stance for a full ten breaths, and then wings, eyes, and posture subsided all at once. *Vanزانth's rider brings the young ones.*

Valonna rolled up the pile of half-finished samplers as L'stev herded his charges onto the Hatching sands. More came each day, now: new faces mixed in with the familiar Weyrbred youths. At the Weyrlingmaster's barked command the candidates organised themselves into a line and filed past Valonna, inclining their heads and muttering greetings. Some of the nods seemed more cursory than others, and some of the murmurs almost unintelligible, but the bows the candidates offered in Shimpath's direction demonstrated their fervent wish to gain her good grace. Nobody wanted to upset the largest dragon at Madellon. The queen watched the newcomers warily, her eyes moving back and forth among them, but she didn't prevent their approach.

As the candidates spread out among the eggs, L'stev stepped up into the stands. Valonna rose to meet him, mechanically brushing loose threads off her skirt.

"Weyrwoman," the old brown rider greeted her, in the low growl that still made her flinch.

Valonna bowed her head awkwardly. "Good afternoon, Weyrlingmaster."

L'stev watched the candidates as suspiciously as Shimpath for several moments before turning back to look at Valonna. "You well, Weyrwoman? Need anything? One of this sorry lot to run errands for you?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine," Valonna said quickly.

The brown rider grumbled something under his breath that might have been assent. "And Shimpath? Anything she needs? More light, less light? She been eating properly?"

"Thank you," she said, "but Epherineth's been bringing her wherries."

L'stev grumbled a bit more. "She needs to get out and have some sunlight and fresh air at least once a day."

"She doesn't like to leave the eggs," Valonna told him. "Even when I stay with them."

"No queen does, but nothing's going to happen to them if she goes out for an hour's sun, and she'll make herself sick, cooped up in here." L'stev's eyebrows knitted into one. "You could do with a change of scene, too. If she doesn't want them left unattended, get Epherineth to take over. T'kamen won't mind."

"Oh, I couldn't, he's much too busy," Valonna protested.

"If you ask him, you'll find he won't grudge you an afternoon's loan of his dragon to see that Shimpath stays well," said L'stev. "Yes, he's busy, and so he should be, but the queen's health, and yours, are a priority. He just can't be expected to know if you don't tell him."

99,05.



TWO MINDS ARE
NOW AS ONE

MADELLON WEYR

Wanda Appleby

The Weyrlingmaster's words reminded Valonna strongly of something T'kamen had said to her directly after Shimpath's flight. *I need to know what you think, what you want, what you need. I can't promise you'll always get it, but if I don't know, I can't try.* She bowed her head in acquiescence. "I will, L'stev."

"Good." The brown rider scowled then, and raised his voice. "Move it along, Dastur; sitting on that egg won't make you a bronze rider."

The powerfully-built youth in question had been standing possessively by the second largest egg. He threw a resentful look at the Weyrlingmaster, but shuffled along the line to give a slightly smaller egg a grudging pat.

"There's always a few," L'stev muttered, although Valonna wasn't sure if the comment was meant for her.

Shimpath's eggs varied in size: the great golden queen egg half as large again as the smallest of the others. Valonna remembered from Shimpath's first clutch that no one could tell for sure what dragon would come from each shell, regardless of size. But most of the candidates had focused on the biggest ones – the boys obviously hoping to influence bronzes, girls drawn to the queen egg. A few of the older girls seemed content with the smaller eggs at the far end of the arc.

With an odd little lurch, Valonna realised that some of the candidates were nearly as old as she. Of course, the same had been true for Shimpath's last clutch, when there had been candidates as old and older than Valonna's seventeen Turns. But this was different. This time, Shimpath had clutched a gold egg.

She glanced sideways at L'stev. The responsibility of training the new weyrings didn't appear to concern him, but he had Turns of practice at his job, having ridden a dragon forty Turns or more, and learned his craft from D'hor, his predecessor as Weyrlingmaster. By contrast, Valonna had been the only queen rider at Madellon for seven Turns, following Fianine's premature death, and the old Weyrwoman had taught her so little. But Valonna, too, would bear the responsibility of passing on her wisdom and experience to the new weyrwoman. There was no one else.

The thought that the new queen weyring might be of an age with Valonna herself, as experienced as she and maybe more so, made Shimpath's rider a little nervous.



Epherineth's rumbled greeting should have been enough to jolt T'kamen out of his reverie, and if not that, then the clearly audible footfalls across the dragon's inner chamber. But the Weyrleader had been concentrating, comparing two tally slates with similarly worrying contents, and so it wasn't until his visitor ducked through the curtained archway to his office that he jolted back to reality and to his feet with an exclamation of, "Faranth's first!"

“Same to you, too, Kamen,” said Sarenya, moving aside several slates on T’kamen’s desk to set down the covered tray she had in one hand and the wineskin slung over her opposite shoulder.

You couldn’t have let me know? T’kamen asked witheringly of his dragon, and said aloud to Sarenya, “You could have been anyone.”

You complained last time, and I wouldn’t let just anyone through.

“Epherineth wouldn’t let just anyone through,” Saren replied at the same moment. “Anyway, I thought you’d rather I came up here myself instead of sending one of the boys. You’re an hour late.”

T’kamen looked at her, putting aside a sourceless surge of annoyance for later examination. “Oh,” he said, finally remembering. “I forgot.”

“Did you really? I’d never have guessed.”

“Saren....”

She shook her head. “It’s all right. I expected you’d be late, at least. I know you’ve got a lot on.”

The Weyrleader sighed, glad that Sarenya, if no one else, didn’t need appeasing. “I’m sorry. I lost track of the time.”

She shrugged. “Are you ready now?”

T’kamen looked at the lists, inventories and reports he was trying to complete. “Not really,” he admitted, “but then you could ask me that a month from now and I’d give you the same answer.”

“Then it’s time you took a break.” Sarenya stepped closer, placing one hand on his arm and peering into his face. “You’re looking terrible.”

T’kamen tried not to look away from her solicitous regard. “Thanks.”

Sarenya traced some of the lines scored into T’kamen’s face with light fingertips. “I’m serious. When was the last time you had a decent night’s sleep? Or sat down to eat?”

“Last Pass sometime, I think,” said T’kamen, but he could feel himself relaxing. “If I’d known there was going to be this much work....”

Sarenya cut him off. “Epherineth would still have flown Shimpath. You’re going to sit down and have something to eat, and I’m not above hitting you with a stick to make you.”

“I’m the Weyrleader, not a runnerbeast,” T’kamen grouched, but he let Sarenya pull him towards his living quarters.

“I’d never hit a runnerbeast with a stick,” Sarenya said indignantly. “You, on the other hand....”

T’kamen chuckled and didn’t resist as the journeyman pushed him in the direction of his couch. He slumped down into the depth of upholstery and closed his eyes for a moment. He’d forgotten how comfortable it was – or maybe he’d never found out, since he couldn’t recall the last time he’d sat here for any length of time. It felt good, anyway, and he settled into the soft cushions, acknowledging how deathly tired he really felt.

He opened his eyes to watch Sarenya padding back and forth from his study, carrying through the food and wine she'd brought, then cups from somewhere else. "I knew you'd come in handy for something one of these days."

"Don't get used to it," she warned him. "If I'd wanted to run around after a man I wouldn't have entered the Beastcraft."

"Running around after cows is more to your taste?"

"Ha!" Sarenya shook her head. "Less trouble than over-conscientious bronze-riding Weyrleaders who forget about little things like eating, sleeping, and me!"

"I didn't forget about you," T'kamen protested. "Just that we were meeting tonight."

"It was your idea, Kamen." Sarenya shot him a suspicious glance as she sat next to him. "Which begs the question: are you feeling all right? It's usually me trying to pin you down to a time."

"Something reminded me." He didn't mention that the 'something' had been C'mine, after E'rom's funeral. "Anyway, where are your lizards tonight?"

"Left them with M'ric," she shrugged. "They'd have got in the way if I'd brought them, but they're too fascinated by Agusta to worry about what I'm up to."

"M'ric?" T'kamen sat up. "The Peninsula brown rider?"

Sarenya nodded, cracking the seal on the stopper of the wine skin. "We seem to keep running into each other. His fire-lizard gets lonely, and it's good for the boys to have the company of their own kind."

T'kamen thought back to his brief meeting with the two new riders. It had been less than a sevenday ago, but so much had happened since.... "He's settling in all right?"

"I think so." Sarenya poured wine for them both and handed T'kamen a cup. "I'm not sure he's impressed with D'feng as a Wingleader."

The Weyrleader heaved a silent sigh, and sipped his wine. He'd let D'feng keep his Wingleader rank to guarantee the other bronze rider's continued cooperation. "Anything specific?"

"Apparently D'feng's insisting on flying Trebruth as if he's a blue. He's fast enough, that's not an issue, but he's got a brown's stamina." Sarenya gulped a mouthful of her own wine. "It's a bit insulting. M'ric was a Wingsecond at the Peninsula, and D'feng's treating him like a weyrling who doesn't know his own dragon's abilities."

"He was complaining to you?" T'kamen asked.

"No, but he has a dry way of remarking on things."

"Sounds like someone I know."

"I can't imagine who."

T'kamen reached over to the tray Saren had brought in, hungry now that attention had been drawn to his basic needs. "How's work?" he asked, taking the cover off the food.

“Hard. Smelly. Dirty.” Sarenya picked up one of the warm pasties from the tray and bit into it. The smell of braised meat and vegetables made T’kamen’s mouth water. “Much the same as ever, in other words.”

“And your apprentices?” The Weyrleader started on his own pasty.

Her mouth full, Sarenya waved an expressive hand. “Depleted, since we lost two of them to L’stev.”

“You might get them back. Not everyone Impresses,” T’kamen said. Then he could have kicked himself for the thoughtless remark.

Sarenya made a face that was at least half grimace. “I’d be happy not to have Goridar back, although I wouldn’t wish him on a dragon, either. Belligerent little sod.”

“There are always a few,” T’kamen said. “I expect L’stev will be sending me reports on the worst of the current lot sooner or later.”

The journeyman frowned, licking crumbs from her fingers. “I know it’s not my place to say this, Kamen, but shouldn’t you be delegating more?”

The Weyrleader laughed shortly. “Who to?”

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t Valonna be doing some of the domestic side of things?”

T’kamen started to reply, then closed his mouth. He took his promise to see that the Weyrwoman was not disrespected seriously, even in the privacy of his own weyr. “She doesn’t have the training, and I don’t have the time to teach her.”

Saren looked unconvinced, but didn’t pursue the issue. “There has to be someone else. Isn’t there a Wingleader...?”

“Not that I’d trust as far as I can spit,” said T’kamen. “They all supported L’dro, remember? They haven’t done as well out of the change as everyone else.”

“C’los?”

He shook his head. “He’s got the sharpest mind in the Weyr, Saren, but he’s too highly-strung, and no one would take a green rider seriously. Besides, the sheer tedium of what I’d like to offload would send him spare.”

Sarenya broke the end off a loaf of bread and chewed thoughtfully for several moments. “What about the retired bronze riders? They’re not a threat to your position, and R’hren...”

“...wants the Weyr run the way he would have run it if he’d been man enough to stand up to Fianine,” T’kamen told her. “I’ll listen to his advice, but I won’t give him a voice with the Holders, and I can’t make him a clerk.”

Sarenya frowned again. “You’re going to have to compromise at some point, Kamen. You can’t keep this up.”

“I’ll manage,” the bronze rider replied doggedly, reaching for the other end of the loaf. “I’d rather do everything myself than make a second out of someone I don’t trust.”

“Then how do you explain D’feng?”

“He doesn’t have the imagination to be a threat.”

"It was his idea to have me posted here, wasn't it?"

"I only use him when I have to, and he's useful enough." T'kamen scowled, irrationally annoyed by Sarenya's perceptiveness. He was relying more heavily on D'feng than he should. "Do we have to talk about this? I thought I was meant to be relaxing."

The silence that followed was made uncomfortable by his excessive sharpness. T'kamen regretted it almost immediately, but he didn't feel gracious enough to be the first to speak again.

You're too stubborn, T'kamen, Epherineth commented.

I didn't ask you.

"C'mine's looking better," said Sarenya, after several moments.

"He mended faster than the Healers at Kellad thought he would," T'kamen replied quickly.

Sarenya poured herself another cup of wine, and topped up T'kamen's. "He says that's thanks to Darshanth wanting to get back to the Weyr."

That reminded T'kamen of Winstone's demand for Hold watchdragons. "Dragons don't like being away from others for any length of time. It's not fair on them."

"I think C'mine's glad to be back, too." She leaned back with her wine cup, looking thoughtful. "I haven't seen much of C'los, though."

"Missing him, are you?" T'kamen asked, with irony.

Sarenya shrugged. "You know how I feel about C'los. Still, he never seems to be there when I visit Mine. In fact I don't think I've seen the pair of them together since before last Turn's End."

"He's working on something for me."

"I know, C'mine said something about him investigating that brown rider for you, but couldn't you give him a break? I mean, Mine's only just -"

"No." The anger and frustration that T'kamen had been suppressing since his audience with Tomsung started to seethe. There was a killer at Madellon, a murderer, and Sarenya wanted C'los to drop everything? The Weyrleader struggled to fight down his irritation, but some of it came through anyway. "He's working on something for me, Sarenya, and I'm not going to distract him just to nursemaid C'mine."

Saren shot him a look like a storm front, thunder briefly clouding the normally clear blue of her eyes. With visible effort, she schooled her expression and controlled her response. "I wasn't suggesting you did, T'kamen."

But all the same, T'kamen felt keenly the brittleness of his self-control for the rest of the evening. He couldn't make himself unwind, couldn't get the pressing business of the Weyr out of his head, couldn't make himself forget, even for a few hours, the gravity of the issues weighing on his mind. Sarenya's knowledge of Weyr politics extended far enough that T'kamen had to tread carefully, but there were things she simply didn't, or couldn't, understand: not a rider, nor Weyrbred, nor party to the many confidential facts tormenting him.

Even much later, when sleep should have come naturally to him, and Sarenya already drowsed, snuggled contentedly in the crook of his arm, T'kamen lay awake, feeling the perspiration cool on his skin, and wondering how he could be so very tired and yet so totally disinclined to sleep.

Epherineth? he tried, but the dragon slept too.

The Weyrleader looked at his lover, arranged elegantly against him, her long hair – freed, for once, from its braid – fanning soft and dark over the fair skin of her bare shoulder; serene in sleep, with no greater concern on her mind than stubborn cows or sick wherries. Her clothes lay where she'd dropped them, her boots half across his doorway, and the wineskin she'd brought drooped over the edge of his bedside table.

The irritation he had pushed away earlier came back. Sarenya had always been quick to make herself at home in his quarters – too quick. In the space of a few hours she could leave a trail of chaos through his orderly weyr. It was a quirk of hers he had once found tolerable, if not quite endearing. Once. Things had been a bit different, then.

T'kamen pushed himself away from her, sliding noiselessly out of bed. Sarenya barely stirred.

He picked up his discarded shirt, using it to towel the sweat of exertion from his face. He took clean garments from the pile someone had left atop his clothes chest, and dressed in the half darkness. Then, without a backwards glance, he pushed through the hanging in the doorway.

T'kamen hesitated in the central room of his weyr. He'd intended to go back to his office and look at those inventories again, but the cool flow of air from outside tempted him. Making a decision, he pulled on his boots. Some fresh air would clear his head.

Epherineth lay fast asleep on his stone couch, his head resting on his crossed forearms, the tip of his tail hanging limply off the edge of the platform. He breathed in a slow, regular pattern, and by the occasional twitches of sleek muscle under smooth hide, he was dreaming. T'kamen left him alone.

He emerged into a fitful breeze that whipped his hair and made him fold his arms reflexively. The Bowl was cold, and dark, and quiet. Slate-grey cloud marbled the he irregular oval of sky enclosed by the towering cliffs, and the crescent-shaped sliver of Belior gave off a weak, milky radiance. The faint light of glows threw the Star Stones, on the eastern edge of the Rim, into ghostly relief; the watchdragon seemed colourless in the gloom. Perhaps half a dozen of the hundreds of weyr openings showed dim illumination, but most were dark, the outlines of dragons sleeping outside barely discernible. The only significant source of light in the Bowl emanated from the main entrance of the lower caverns.

T'kamen inhaled deeply, feeling the chill air burn his lungs and sharpen his dull brain. Still and silent in the dead of night, the Weyr presented a calm face to the world. But the Weyrleader was painfully, agonisingly aware of the sobering realities just beneath the surface.

A thousand souls slept at Madellon Weyr, and T'kamen had responsibility for them all. He had been made Weyrleader by the dragons' choice, and Epherineth's desire, and his own ambition. It had been so easy to criticise L'dro's decisions as Weyrleader. Now, T'kamen found himself wondering if he could do any better.

Those inventories weren't going to resolve themselves without him. He had to look over the recommendations H'ned had sent him, too. At least while peace and quiet reigned, he could work without fear of disturbance.

The wind had teeth like a tunnelsnake. T'kamen went back inside.



Sarenya came awake in the twilight before dawn.

She always woke well before first light. Over her thirteen Turns as a Beastcrafter she had adapted to the necessity of being alert and functional before the sun had risen, to the point that she couldn't have slept past dawn if she'd wanted.

But her body clock hadn't woken her. The culprit of that was determinedly pawing at the bedfur, letting in cruelly cold air, and prodding at her with his nose to make her move.

Sarenya turned over, pushing her hair back out of her face. "Sleek?"

The fire-lizard chattered triumphantly and dived under the displaced covers, curling close against her hip. The ridges of his tail prickled against her bare skin. Sarenya prised him off with a mutter, then grabbed the smaller of her fire-lizards under his wings and hauled him out. "That wasn't funny, Sleek."

The little blue made an apologetic noise, his eyes whirling with contrition, and offered her an image of Tarnish and M'ric's queen Augusta. Sarenya chuckled, putting Sleek down on the fur. "Ignoring you, were they?"

Sleek started to preen his wings in a false show of indifference that Sarenya didn't believe for a moment. She looked over at the other side of the bed, wondering where T'kamen had gone. The furs had cooled, which suggested he'd been gone a while, but dawn hadn't yet broken. Sarenya frowned. She wasn't sure she liked waking up to an empty room after a night with T'kamen.

She got out of bed, looking pensively at the archway that led to T'kamen's bathing room. Tempting, but she didn't have any clean clothes. It would probably be easier to bathe back at the Beastcraft lodge.

She dressed in the previous day's tunic, then combed out her hair with her fingers and tied it back. T'kamen's conspicuous absence irritated her, she realised, as she pulled the tie on her hair too tight and made her eyes water. He'd been less than good company last night: more touchy than usual, quicker to criticise, and clearly distracted. Sarenya had bitten her tongue several times, holding in ripostes, and giving him some latitude on the basis that he was tired and

overworked and under immense pressure. That hadn't stopped her taking offence to the tone of his voice. T'kamen could be incredibly insensitive.

"Come on, boy," she said to Sleek. "Let's find us some breakfast, and then we'll go and drag Tarnish away from that queen."

The blue fire-lizard swooped over to land on her wrist, a lighter burden than Tarnish's familiar weight. Saren rubbed his handsome head and then transferred him onto her shoulder.

They found T'kamen in his office, staring fixedly at a hide on his desk. He looked like he hadn't slept. "Kamen?"

The bronze rider glanced up, acknowledged her with a mutter, and returned his attention to his work.

"I'm going to go now," Sarenya said.

T'kamen didn't react.

Sarenya set her jaw, glaring at the unresponsive bronze rider. She considered saying something caustic, then thought better of it. "All right. Goodbye."

She was halfway through the curtain when T'kamen called, "Wait a minute, Sarenya."

The journeyman turned back, slightly mollified, but T'kamen was already sitting down at his desk again.

"Don't go via the ledge," he said shortly. "Take the back stairs."

"I'm sorry?"

T'kamen looked up again. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and he looked drawn and weary. "Take the back stairs," he repeated.

"Why?"

"Just do it, Sarenya."

Sleek shifted uneasily on Sarenya's shoulder as she gazed at the bronze rider in dawning disbelief. "Why should I?"

T'kamen threw her a dark look. "Because I'm asking you to."

"That's not an answer, T'kamen."

"Because it's inappropriate!" T'kamen spat the words out with a viciousness that made Sarenya take a step back. "It's in bad taste, having my lover walk out the front for the whole Weyr to see."

Rendered momentarily speechless by the bronze rider's tirade, Sarenya couldn't find anything to say, but Sleek didn't need words. The little blue drew himself up, spread his wings, and hissed at T'kamen, his eyes gleaming red. Sarenya found her voice again, and asked incredulously, "You think I'm inappropriate?"

By the expression that briefly crossed T'kamen's face, he regretted his choice of words, but he was clearly in no mood to refute them. "Just go, Saren."

“You didn’t think it was inappropriate when you invited me here,” she said tightly, putting a hand up to hold Sleek back. “You didn’t think it was inappropriate when you gave me that ‘mating flights don’t count’ speech. This is a Weyr, not...”

“Don’t you quote Weyr tradition at me!” T’kamen snapped, coming to his feet. “Who do you think you are?”

It was too much for Sleek; the lizard broke free of Sarenya’s restraining hand and flew at T’kamen, shrieking with outrage. “Get back here!” Sarenya cried, but not before the blue had swiped at the bronze rider’s face.

T’kamen swore, and backhanded his assailant aside. The force of the blow knocked Sleek flat against the wall, but blood welled on the Weyrleader’s cheekbone, just under his eye, where wickedly sharp talons had sliced through the skin.

Sleek crumpled to the floor in a dazed heap. Sarenya scooped him up, examining him anxiously. The impact had damaged a wing, the fingertip bent back and the sail torn, and he lay limp in her hands. “You didn’t have to hit him that hard!”

T’kamen was cautiously feeling the cut on his face. His fingers came away bloody, but it didn’t appear to be serious. “Just get out,” he said harshly. “I don’t need this.”

“You’re right,” Sarenya hissed, between gritted teeth. “You don’t. Good day. Weyrleader.”

And cradling her injured fire-lizard in her arms, she turned and went – defiantly, via Epherineth’s ledge.