
Bronze Ambitions

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Candidates gathered outside the Hatching Grounds, unusually subdued, before their first visit to Amisseth's latest clutch. The newest candidates, many of whom had never seen the inside of a Hatching Grounds before, huddled together nervously. Even the experienced candidates waited in quiet clusters. They were all still a bit in awe of Amisseth, after everything they'd heard about her mating flight and Ytrith's death at her claws.

Of equal interest was the cluster of Benden-native candidates. Their recent arrival had sparked a good deal of gossip -- and resentment -- among the Kadanzer group; they were all circulating jokes about the eagerness of Benden's Weyrleaders to snag a fraction of the old Benden bloodline. They'd all had time to meet, but the Bendeners still tended to group together, clinging to familiarity.

From the middle of the Kadanzer group, Dwayana eyed the Bendeners. She'd heard a rumor -- whether or not it was true was yet to be seen -- that any Benden candidates who Impressed would be packed off the moment the eggs hatched, especially if one of them snagged the queen. That Benden didn't want her left here in the 'jinxed Weyr'. "Bunch of snobs," Dwayana said with no little heat.

"They're not all that bad," said Sapherlin, idly waving a hand. Her braid bobbed as she stood on tiptoes to see over the other candidates. "Some of them are quite nice. Like Ivahla. I wouldn't mind if she decided to stay."

"Well, I can't wait to see *some* of them leave," Dwayana said. She was thinking particularly of that self-absorbed, over-stuffed Darian. When they'd met, she'd made the mistake of mentioning who her mother was. He'd asked after Valenne and Nicareth's health -- and how Valenne was handling her "retirement" -- with just enough sarcasm to bite. He'd rounded it off with, "With all that's happened here, it's a wonder there's still a Weyr here at all." It had taken all her self control not to smack him a good one.

'He'd better watch his flapping tongue or he's going to get it, big time,' she thought. Then she forced him out of her mind. She was about to meet Amisseth's children. Happy thoughts, welcoming thoughts...



Weyrleader D'zan nodded, and Weyrleadersecond Shahara gestured to the group to gather close. At the back,

Resla and Ellya ushered the stragglers forward to where the Weyrleadersecond waited.

"Amisseth will allow you to enter now," Weyrleadersecond Shahara said. "Enter in an orderly fashion. You may approach and touch the eggs, but mind your manners. I don't need to tell you again that you need to be respectful of both Amisseth and her eggs. She will not tolerate bad behavior, and we don't want to clean up the mess if she gets angry."

A couple of nervous giggles quickly died away as the Weyrleadersecond gestured for them to go. The candidates moved out onto the Hatching Sands, where Amisseth sat watching over her clutch of thirty-one eggs. Nearest to her rested the queen egg, gleaming yellow in the midmorning sun. Goldrider Cassidoria stood at the queen's forefeet, a comforting side note to the gold's regal presence. Amisseth watched the candidates approach, and flared her wings out before folding them neatly over her back.

The candidates themselves fanned out among the eggs. A large cluster of girls headed straight for the gold egg at the queen's feet -- but several, oddly, hung back as if cautious of getting any closer to Amisseth than they needed to be.

"Hmph," said D'zan. "Never seen a group of girls more reluctant to meet a gold egg."

"Honestly?" Shahara said, "I don't quite blame them, this time."

"Just hope Mama Dragon there doesn't take it as an affront," D'zan replied. "I sure don't want to be in the way if Amisseth decides to be insulted on her daughter's behalf."



Lyra blinked away unexpected tears when she entered the Hatching Ground and looked at Amisseth. She couldn't help remembering how she and the rest of the dragonhealer apprentices had followed Craftmaster Giselle down to the Feeding Grounds to examine Ytrith's lifeless body, broken by Amisseth in her mating rage. She had spent the whole inspection worrying about Faydra -- only to find, later, that Faydra had chosen the mercy draught.

She had still called Faydra her friend, despite the distance that had grown between them. Faydra had come with her on Savukath to the Weyr. Lyra had been on the sands when Incane died and Faydra Impressed Ytrith.

Now they both were gone.

With a queen egg on the sands, all the girl candidates had been forcefully reminded again and again to respect the dragonet that hatched. Who wouldn't, considering their recent history?

As the girls advanced to the queen egg, Lyra held back. She wasn't sure she was strong enough for a queen. She glanced around for moral support, and her sister, Nori.

Nori had fallen behind in the press, but as soon as Lyra met her eyes, she moved forward and wound her fingers into Lyra's waiting hand. Nori's small smile was enough to cheer Lyra again, and she squeezed Nori's hand.

"Shouldn't we go over with the others?" Nori whispered, her voice trembling a little.

"We should..." Lyra answered. "I just wonder sometimes if I really want a gold after all, with what happened to Faydra... I'm afraid I would lose control too;

that I wouldn't be strong enough." She sighed, and she knew it sounded melodramatic, so she added, "We'll just have to see! We'll find dragons for us, right?"

Nori smiled and nodded. "I'd be happy with a green," she said. "I mean, to Impress a gold would be pretty amazing, wouldn't it? But I don't know if..." and she trailed off.

Lyra could tell she was thinking about Faydra, too. She squeezed Nori's hand again, and then looked back towards the cluster of girls surrounding the queen egg. It wasn't going to thin out anytime soon. "Let's go pay our respects," she said. "We might as well. Whether or not we Impress gold this time, I'd like to think we at least had a chance."

Hakel didn't hesitate as he stepped onto the sands, heading towards Amiseth and the largest egg -- other than the queen, of course -- that he could see. All queens had different clutching habits and Amiseth's main quirk seemed to be keeping all the biggest eggs close to her. Some of the other boys at the Feeding Grounds had wondered if she'd quit fussing at bronzes now that she had an actual *queen* egg to guard, but if anything, the interest that this clutch had garnered had made her pull the largest half-dozen or so to within easy reach.

He glanced around at the other candidates scattered across the sands, some concentrating on the eggs, some chatting in small groups. Some girls seemed intent on ignoring the gold completely, and Hakel wondered how well *that* would go down with Amiseth.

He sketched a quick, polite bow to the gold as he approached her, doing his best to project feelings of gratitude. The surprisingly bold yellow of the queen egg's shell caught and reflected the sunlight, making it almost glow against the sands, and Hakel hoped that she would choose more wisely than Yttrith had. He worked on the Feeding Grounds and had seen entirely too much of what happened when a gold got it wrong.

Still, all that was done now, and he had eggs to meet!

The others could aim for the smaller colors, but Hakel was planning on Impressing a bronze, just like his big brother Bh'ruk's. The biggest of the remaining eggs was a pale tan streaked and swirled with the yellow overtones that indicated it had been laid immediately after the gold, as if the dam's body had still-wet paint within that clung to the next egg out. One end was marked with a large, irregular splash of brown that gave Hakel hope -- everybody *knew* that bronzes came from distinctively marked shells, right?

He squeezed in past two larger lads, one of them a Benden candidate, and placed his palms flat against the egg's warm surface. *It's me you want!* he thought fiercely at the hatchling within. *Me, not these other idiots.*

Balshan, the Benden boy, moved aside a little. "Hey, plenty to go around, even just with this big boy. Guess they weren't joking about the sire's influence!"

"Yeah." Hakel smiled despite himself. "This one's going to be..."

"Yours?" Balshan sounded amused. Hakel ignored it, concentrating on the shell before him.

"Yeah."

From the middle of the crowd of candidates, Dwayana found it interesting to see how different people acted; some rushed towards the queen egg, while others hung back as if afraid.

Dwayana was the daughter of a Weyrwoman, and she refused to be afraid. She just... wanted to wait until the crowd around the queen egg thinned out a bit. Yes, that was it. Besides, she might still Impress a different color, so there was no reason to neglect the other eggs. She had only been Standing for a Turn, and it was still fascinating to see eggs up close as she wandered among them.

She couldn't resist the lure of the queen egg for long, though. She took a deep breath and thought happy thoughts as she made her way through the other girls to get her first good look at the egg. The only other she had been this close to was the one from Nioranth's Oldtime clutch, the one that had never hatched. From a distance, queen eggs looked a solid gold or at least bright yellow, but up close they usually had swirls of lighter and darker yellow and cream. This one, though, was almost uniformly yellow, with only faint brushes of cream. She stood fascinated for a moment, then remembered to turn and bow towards Amiseth before touching the egg.

She had to wait a bit for Ivahla (the Benden girls had gone straight for the queen egg) but when the other girl stepped back, Dwayana moved in. Delicately she laid both hands on the warm shell. *Are you the one for me?* she thought. *I welcome you. We would be strong together.* She pulled away reluctantly so other candidates could take their turns.

Tasyr laid a reverent hand on a green-and-blue-swirled egg, awe-struck as always. He looked over the egg to Weltor, whose large hands were splayed across the top of a larger, more blue-hued egg nearby. "Do you think these hatchlings will get as big as the Ninth Pass dragons?"

Weltor looked at him and shrugged. "Don't know," he said, in a rural drawl even stronger than Tasyr's. "Might be big, might not. In one way, I wouldn't mind a big dragon, 'cause I'm big. But big means a lot of hide to wash and oil. But all that work might be worth it, ya know?"

"They're so large," said Lorelli, who stopped to touch a smaller, dark-blue-and-brown egg just beyond Weltor's. "The eggs, I mean. I've lived around eggs all my life but I always forget how *large* they are. And so many different colors! And yet, we still don't know what's in 'em."

Weltor laughed and patted the eggshell under his hand. "Could be this here egg might contain a big green for all I know. Only egg we know for sure of is that one," and he gestured to the gold egg at Amiseth's feet.

"Still," said Cassia, caressing the egg near Tasyr, "it's interesting trying to imagine what they might be. Oh, that's a pretty one!" she said, and joined Cybris at another egg a little apart.

Sovar approached and put a hand on a brown-and-green egg next to Tasyr. "I've seen a bronze come out of a green-

speckled egg," Sovar said timidly. "First and last time I'll ever bet on a Hatching, that." Tasyr chuckled and put an affectionate hand on Sovar's shoulder. Sovar colored a little at the public affection, but didn't pull away. Seeming to round up some courage, he said, "So... who's hoping for what color?"

"Oh, brown or bronze," Weltor said. "Maybe blue."

Tasyr laughed. "It'd have to be something big enough to hold all your muscle," he said. "Me, I'd settle for... well. A dainty green lady would be charming... a sturdy blue would be nice... That may be the best a farm lad like myself can hope for. Don't know what I'd do with a bronze or brown."

"I'm sure whichever you Impress will suit you perfectly," Sapherlin said philosophically as she passed them. "After all, a dragon always makes the right choice, whatever that choice may be. I'd love an agile green... but I'd be more than honored to Impress blue."

"I'd be happy with anything," Cybris said. "I just want a dragon who needs me."

"I want a green, myself," Kesyr said. "A REALLY small one."

Tasyr snorted. "Green? You?"

Kesyr smiled. "Greens have the least hide to clean. They fly only, what, half of 'Fall... and I'd be guaranteed a good flight every three months. They'd mostly be with men..." he sighed dramatically. "But I've seen a woman or two with blue knots, so I might get lucky." He shrugged. "I'll have plenty of time to pursue my interests." He grinned.

The candidates in earshot snickered, and Tasyr rolled his eyes. Kesyr was always looking for two things: warm beds, and ways to get out of work.

"You can have your greens," came a new voice, and the candidates shifted to look at the newcomer: Darian, one of the Benden candidates. Darian cocked his head to one side. "Me, I'm getting a bronze. Gotta take the Benden line back to Benden, where it belongs; not leave it in this backwoods Weyr carved out of a jungle."

The group of candidates went quiet. Some of them looked at each other. Some glanced toward Amisseth.

"Y'know," Weltor drawled, "these eggs are only *part* Benden. They're half Kadanzer too. Amisseth's blood's in 'em. Sorry 'bout that."

"Besides," Tasyr quipped, "Benden dragons were so inbred that they were first to die in the plague after the last Pass. So what's so special about Benden blood, anyway?"

"I wish that bronze on you, Bendenite," Kesyr said lazily. "I wish you a giant beast of a bronze that puts all others to shame. I hear it takes near more than two hours to scrub the filth off a bronze. With my green, I'll be napping while you've still half a hide to clean."

Several of the other candidates hid chuckles behind their hands at that. They dispersed among the eggs, whispering to each other and pointedly ignoring the Benden candidate.

Darian scowled at them all, then to Kesyr, said, "You can *have* your green. If bronze is too much for you, you'd better leave it to those strong enough to handle it." And he stalked off to another part of the Sands.

Before Darian got far, one of his fellow Bendeners put a hand on his arm. "Don't be stupid, Darian," Veles said. "What'll you do if you Impress here and have to spend the

next Turn and a half in weyrling training with them?" Darian didn't answer.



Before long, a large group of boys -- bronze hopefuls -- had clustered around the half-dozen largest eggs Amisseth had pulled closest to her. The biggest aside from the gold drew the most attention, of course. Tasyr joined the gathering, and offered a smile to Hakel and Balshan as he approached the egg. "Don't hog this bronze for yourselves," he said cheerfully. "Seems this'll be the biggest of the lot." He gave the egg a couple pats.

Darian was close behind. The tall boy nodded to his fellow Benden candidates, then strode to the tall egg for all the world as though he owned it. "Don't waste your time on this egg, boys," he said. "This one's going to be mine."

The boys around the egg looked at him, then at each other. Balshan shook his head and put a hand over his eyes. Apparently this was not unusual behavior from Darian.

"What makes you so sure you're destined for bronze?" Julian chimed.

"Both my parents are dragonriders, and my father rides bronze," Darian said, his face smug.

Hakel snorted. "Half the weyrbrats around here have dragonriders for parents. I thought you were going to tell us something new, like Faranth herself came to you in a dream and told you..."

The others started to chuckle. Darian went red in the face.

Striding up for his own turn at the egg, Weltor said, "Maybe when the dragon's done with it, he'll give you the shell."

That started another round of smothered chuckles, as the candidates looked both towards Amisseth and Weyrilingmaster D'zan for signs of trouble.



Dwayana watched Darian's reddening face, and the laughing candidates around him, with increasing amusement. Lyra and Nori had both taken turns at the gold egg and had just joined her. "What do you two think of the Benden candidates?" she asked.

"They're alright, I guess," Nori replied.

"They seem plenty nice," Lyra said. "Well... except *that* one," and she gestured to Darian.

Nori nodded in agreement. "He's so noisy about his bronze..." then she giggled, and said quietly, "Just watch, he'll Impress a green."

Dwayana grinned again at Lyra and Nori, then glanced at Darian. "I bet he does Impress green. Say," she went on, her voice just loud enough to carry, "Do you think he tries to puff himself up so big because he's secretly ashamed of being small between the legs or something?"

Lyra gasped, Nori blushed, and the two both fell to giggling behind their hands.

"Well, he does have a swelled head." Dwayana was clearly enjoying herself. "That's often a sign of smallness in other places." Lyra and Nori both tried to stifle their chuckles. But when Darian advanced on Dwayana, his face

livid, they swallowed, backed away, and turned their attention to the nearby eggs.

Darian glanced towards Amiseth and her rider, then leaned in towards Dwayana. "Well, wouldn't you just like to find out?" he said, keeping his voice low. "I tell you what, you jungle-born she-wher," and he jabbed a finger at her, "you're never going to know what you're missing."

Lyra gasped, and glanced nervously up at Amiseth. "Please," she whispered. "If you must make a scene, at least wait until we're outside."

Dwayana seethed, but held it in. 'I won't be like my mother; I can control my temper,' she kept telling herself as she forced herself to be calm. Finally she felt she could speak without screaming. "As for me, I don't care," she said quietly. "But the dragonets in these eggs know what kind of person you are now." She smiled oh-so-sweetly. "I'm sure they won't be sorry to miss living with you."

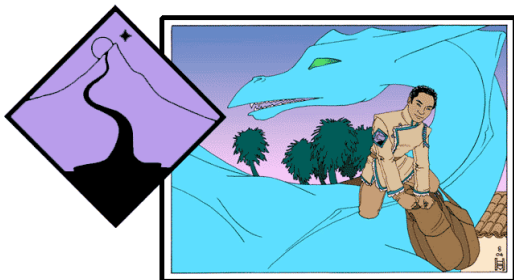
Darian looked stunned. Before he could recover, though, Weyrlingmaster D'zan's bellow cut across the sands.

"Candidates, form UP!"

Everyone froze where they were and looked to where the Weyrlingmaster stood at the entrance. His face was more stormy than usual.

Dwayana had enough presence of mind to bow to Amiseth before following the other candidates out. She was probably headed for trouble, but at least Darian would be in trouble too. She had a great deal of satisfaction seeing Balshan take Darian's arm. She could just catch Balshan's voice as he said, "What do you think you're *doing*, wherrybrain? You're making us all look bad!"

She didn't hear Darian's response, but it didn't matter... and she tried not to smile as she walked out of the Sands under Weyrlingmaster D'zan's stern gaze.



Kadanzer Weyr

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