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# Circles Drawn in Sand

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*...gold and green and heat and need and blistering fury, triumph singing through her veins as green coated gold in pounding, pumping spray and she took it into herself, took her rival's strength and gloried in it, the world sharp and strange and sliding fast beneath her seeking wings...*

Cassidoria woke with a start, the dream fracturing and falling away from her as she opened her eyes to darkness. The sound of the sea was too close here at the northern end of the Hatching Grounds, the crash and hiss of waves against the cliffside nagging at her senses. Amiseth was asleep, a proud and peaceful presence in the back of her mind, and for a moment she half-thought the dream to be her queen's...

But Amiseth had long since forgotten the flight that had quickened this clutch. Cassidoria never would.

The heavy clouds were beginning to lighten to the east as the goldrider stepped out onto the porch of the hatching weycot, unable to sleep further. The early morning air was warmly scented with the earthy tang of wet vegetation and damp earth, the rainy season having arrived in earnest a seven-day before, but there was a breeze coming in from the sea that kept the humidity from smothering the Weyr beneath its muggy blanket. The rocky walls of the Hatching Grounds glistened with the rainfall, the dim light of dawn catching on the winding lines of small waterfalls as they trickled across ancient stone. There was a constant pattering of raindrops against the weycot's roof but it was muted in comparison to the rat-a-tat percussion that would be sounding off the trees elsewhere around the Weyr. Wrapped in a light, brightly embroidered robe, Cassidoria rested her hands on a damp wooden rail and closed her eyes, feeling the whisper and spatter of stray droplets against her cheeks, the promise of another day of endless rain.

It rather matched her mood.

From the weycot porch she could see Amiseth curled beneath the high sailcloth cover that had been erected to keep the worst of the weather from the queen and her clutch. And what a clutch it was – thirty-one eggs, sired by a bronze whose pedigree had every Weyr on Pern paying attention and dancing attendance on Lybelle's every passing whim. Kadanzer hadn't seen a clutch of this size since the early days of the Pass, long before her own Search and Impression; back when Renorath had been the Weyr's sole surviving

adult queen. Thirty-one eggs, one of them gold, the product of a flight as long and high as any famed in ballad –

Not that the flight, nor the new queen, nor even the promise of old Benden blood would be what *this* particular clutch was remembered for....

*There was a low rumble of thunder from somewhere inland and Cassidoria felt Amiseth stir in her mind, a half-formed curiosity that faded back into sleep before it had even fully formed. She envied her dragon her contentment, envied her ability to forget the past almost as soon as it was done. She wished that she could share in Amiseth's pride in this clutch, share in Lybelle's delight, but each time she looked at the eggs she found herself remembering the flight, remembering Amiseth's feral joy as she tore into Yttrith. Nobody had blamed her for the young queen's demise, all fault laid at the door of the dead Faydra... but that didn't mean that there weren't whispered conversations and sidelong glances in the Weyrhall at mealtimes.*

And it didn't mean that she didn't blame herself.

Perhaps it would be better when the eggs hatched and the dragonets Impressed, new lives beginning and wiping away the taint of death. Everybody seemed to think the new queen to be a good omen, a symbolic replacement for the lost Yttrith even if she would not be remaining at Kadanzer. Let Benden reclaim what had been so long lost, take back its precious blood –

Cassidoria shook her head and moved towards the porch steps. Strange how everything always came back to *blood* where this clutch was concerned.

There was a faint glimmer of sunlight above the eastern rim of the Grounds' bowl, pale rays breaking momentarily through the covering cloud as the goldrider walked across the sands, feeling the damp grains work their way between her bare toes. The green watchdragon on the peak stretched her wings, shaking off the rain in a silvery spray before folding them back against her dorsal ridge, a flicker of movement acknowledged then forgotten as Cassidoria moved beneath the sailcloth screening her queen from the weather. The rain was a constant rumble overhead as she took the glowbasket from its hook on one of the wooden supports, sliding the cover aside and stepping into the shadows under the tarp.

Amiseth was a great, pale yellow mass, her body heat noticeably warming the air around her, and Cassidoria smiled almost despite herself as she ran a hand across a golden flank. Even after all that had happened, she couldn't regret her Impression, couldn't regret taking her place on glow-lit sands that had never known the touch of rain. Amiseth didn't remember the old Weyr any more than she recalled Yttrith's existence, didn't know any sands other than these, any clutch but the one carefully arrayed before her.

Cassidoria sighed and lifted her glowbasket, looking at the eggs that reflected the light back at her. This was Amiseth's third clutch and right from the first she had shown a preference for pulling the largest of her eggs close to her, lavishing attention on her bronzes as other queens might for a gold. That there *was* a golden shell in this clutch hadn't changed that, and the largest of Amiseth's unborn sons – and Weyr gossip had it that there would be at least half a dozen bronzes in this clutch, although Cassidoria

thought that unlikely – were all as safely within the queen's reach as her daughter. Beyond the favoured circle, the other eggs were carefully spaced for their mother's inspection, each positioned to her satisfaction. Amisseth was not so fussy as some golds but there was no question that each and every one of her children was cherished.

Some were simply more cherished than others.

Stepping over Amisseth's long tail, Cassidoria moved to inspect the nearest egg. It was large, its shell lightly mottled with blue and brown and occasional speckles of green and cream, the sort of egg that the boys would fall over themselves fondle on those occasions when they were allowed to touch. There was almost certainly a bronze or brown growing beneath the turgid leather of the shell, still hardening as the dragon within developed, and if a bronze then his future would likely lay elsewhere on Pern. A brown – or blue or green, there were few certainties with Hatchings – might well stay, his bloodline stalled by his colour, but the bronzes were a resource to be used, a political currency to be spent. A bronze was *valuable* –

*Turning away from the egg, Cassidoria picked her way across the sands to where the largest shell of them all rested, just a few paces from the sleeping Amisseth's nose. She could remember, as a child, thinking that gold eggs must be gilded like a Lady's gift, sparkling and shining as if dipped in molten metal, but the reality was not quite so spectacular. Queen eggs were larger than their siblings – sometimes barely, sometimes greatly – and smoother in the shell, which gave them a satin shine that other eggs could rarely match. They were not so mottled as their siblings, not so dark, tending more towards cream clouded and swirled with yellow. The hue was shared by none of their lesser kin, although those that immediately followed a new queen from her mother's body would sometimes be streaked and spattered with hints of that same bright colour, as if their dam bore still-wet paint within her and needed to pass another shell to wipe it free – like this egg here – pale, with a little leftover yellow, by its size either a bronze or a brown to rival the legendary Canth. Amisseth's own egg had been beautiful, almost delicate in its shading, but her daughter....*

Her daughter's shell was the very image of a harper-song gold egg, its colour brilliantly vibrant, like the sun so rarely seen in this season. Where most queens bore their colour in blended swirls across a paler base, this one showed the barest hints of cream brushed across brazen yellow, darker splashes of near-bronze standing out here and there. It was no more metallic than any other shell but there was no question as to what it held and after all that had happened to bring her into being – Yttrith's death, Vhauth's survival – there was a great weight of expectation resting on this young queen and her choice.

Cassidoria thought that she might feel more comfortable if there had been no gold in this clutch, if Amisseth's body had somehow resisted the will of the Weyr after her rising. But the egg was there, an omen of good or ill or nothing at all. The hatchling would break her shell within the month and make her choice – better than Yttrith's had been, if there was any mercy in the world – and offer some young woman a name other than the one that haunted Cassidoria's dreams. The world would go on and her training would be smooth

and Benden would take her and maybe some of her brothers long before she rose to mate, and she *would* survive until she rose and –

*You are upset*, Amisseth noted sleepily, cracking open one gleaming blue eye. The queen's tone was unconcerned – her rider's upset had become a familiar thing of late, barely worthy of her attention so long as her clutch was unaffected. *You should not be upset. It is warm and my eggs are fine and you are here with me.*

"It's raining," Cassidoria told her, for want of anything else to say that the dragon might understand.

Amisseth snorted. *The rain cannot reach us here. We are safe and it will pass.*

"I know it will, love. I know."

Apparently content with that answer, Amisseth settled back into sleep. Her rider sighed and looked at the gold egg once more, its colour, brilliant in the glowlight, drawing the eye and eclipsing the far paler shell that sat just beyond it, the smaller eggs behind. Oh yes, this was a clutch to remember, all right, and it *would* pass, and pass – she hoped, she wished – joyously, with thirty-one lives begun and thirty-one lives changed. It would pass and then she could get on with *her* life and hope that the notoriety would pass on to Amisseth's daughter instead.

The constant drumming of the rain overhead lessened, faltered, then stopped. Cassidoria blinked, suddenly realising that the sands beyond the tarp's shelter were lightening with the dawn's progression, the clouds apparently clearing in brief respite. Closing the glowbasket, she returned it to its hook and stepped out into the weak sunlight of a new day.

A gust of warm, salt-scented wind stirred the goldrider's robe, and she took a deep breath as she gazed up at the first fleeting glimpses of blue colouring the morning sky. "Another day, another dawn..." she murmured, not quite able to avoid the memory of other days, other dawns. Yttrith had come into the world with the sun barely risen above the Hatching Grounds' rim; had left it again with the day scarcely begun, both birth and death marked with a violent bloodbath. The circle had been completed... and now that Cassidoria thought about it, it was not the only one that closed with this clutch. Yttrith had died, but her death was giving another queen life. Vhauth had been hatched in another Weyr, in another Pass, and yet on these same sands, while Amisseth was Kadanzer-bred but hatched elsewhere. This new gold was a daughter of both Southern and Kadanzer and would be carrying the – albeit diluted – Benden line back to its place of origin, centuries after it had last left.

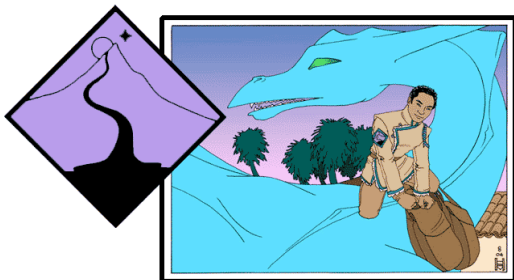
*And one day, perhaps, she or her offspring might return to Kadanzer to start the circle anew.*

The thunder rumbled again, louder this time, and a moment later the heavens opened, sending a warm deluge down onto the goldrider, plastering her red-brown hair against her head. Cassidoria didn't know whether to laugh or cry as she turned and ran back to the shelter of Amisseth's sailcloth cover, her moment of hopeful philosophising shattered by the weather. She caught a glimpse of the gold egg as she turned towards her still-sleeping queen and shuddered involuntarily as the trickle of water over her scalp

reminded her anew of the rising, of Yttrith's bloody birth and violent death.

There was still a month until the Hatching but this was one egg that would not crack soon enough for Cassidora's tastes.

The rain would pass... but not just yet.



# Kadanzer Weyr

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