
Gilded Legacies

by Smitty, Sylvia Armitstead, Jen Bro, Marie Burcham, Carole Byer, Sass Collard, Leia Fee, Carlie Forsythe, Vicky Kimball, Ellen Million, Ron Swartzendruber, Rachel Vardys, Whitney Ware, Cherie Wren
2860.01.10

Printed in FTA #25 (2008)

This story is printed by Kadanzer Weyr (www.kadanzer.org), a fan club approved by Anne McCaffrey in 1995. Kadanzer Weyr is a non-profit group – all materials pertaining to Ms. McCaffrey's works displayed on this website may only be accessed for personal, non-commercial purposes. Please do not reproduce without permission. All references to worlds and characters based on Anne McCaffrey's fiction are copyright© Anne McCaffrey 1967, 2005, all rights reserved, and used by permission of the author. The Dragonriders of Pern® is registered U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, by Anne McCaffrey, used here with permission. Use or reproduction without a license is strictly prohibited.

Amiseth had been restless all night, grumbling to herself and pacing the sands beyond the sailcloth cover that screened her eggs from the worst of the summer rains. Cassidorina barely slept, her dragon's agitation keeping her from resting properly, and she half-feared that the eggs would decide to hatch in the midst of a tropical deluge in the small hours of the night. She couldn't imagine that anybody would be too thrilled about that....

It was a relief when the sky began to lighten in the east, the new day bringing with it a break in the clouds that soon spread to reveal an expanse of flawless blue. Amiseth eyed the clearing skies with obvious satisfaction, rumbling happily as she began to carefully roll her eggs out from their shelter to sit in the sunlight. Cassidorina watched her dragon as each shell was positioned just *so*, the sand fussily arranged around it before she went back to fetch another. Amiseth had always had an odd habit of arranging her eggs by size – the larger shells being apparently more precious than the smaller – and with the sheer number of eggs present here the goldrider was irresistibly reminded of a dragonchess board, with the smaller pieces arrayed on the outskirts nearest the opposition, while the more valuable pieces hid behind them. She wondered what the candidates would think of being cast as –

"It's good to see you smiling again. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten how."

Cassidorina started, her whimsical thoughts scattering as she turned to greet her visitor. "Lybelle... I'm sorry, I didn't hear you coming."

"So I noticed." The Weyrwoman smiled herself, her teeth a flash of white in her dark face, then nodded towards Amiseth. "Will it be today?"

The younger goldrider shrugged. "I'm not sure – she just says 'soon'. Could be today, could be tomorrow."

"Well, today would be a good day for it – the sweep reports say we should have clear skies almost through to evening, which would make for a nice change after the past month." Lybelle chuckled. "Not that L'ars would agree – FireFlight has 'Fall this afternoon.'"

"Thread has no regard for the important things," Cassidorina said, watching Amiseth nosing a pale greenish shell into position.

"What, like letting FireStorm get a skinful at every party available? I wouldn't worry about them missing out

–Binassa and F'gal are looking forward to meeting Benden's latest queen today, even if she's not Revanne's Orylath as they'd prefer, and they have been most *generous* with their provision of refreshments."

"So I heard." Lybelle had, by all accounts, driven a hard bargain with the Northern Weyr, ruthlessly using their desperation to acquire a piece of the old bloodline to Kadanzer's advantage. "I hope it's today." Cassidorina sighed. "I just want this to be *over*."

Lybelle waved a hand dismissively. "Yttrith's death wasn't your fault – things would never have ended well with Faydra. We have to look to the future now, not to the past. Hopefully *this* queen will have more sense than Yttrith did."

"I know. It's just –" Cassidorina broke off as the scent of klah reached her nostrils and she belatedly realised that the Weyrwoman had a basket with her. "You brought breakfast?"

"I thought you'd prefer to eat here than have the whole Weyr staring at you in the Weyrhall." Lybelle set the basket down on the porch table and settled into one of the wicker chairs. "I'm not the only one wondering if the Hatching will be today."

Cassidorina groaned and took a seat herself. "Thank you. I'm not sure that I could face it right now."

"You'll have enough people staring at you once they've hatched," the Weyrwoman told her, methodically unpacking the breads and meats and cheeses from her basket. "Let's just enjoy the weather and take the time while we have it."

"Once they've hatched, I rather hope they'll have a goldrider *other* than me to stare at," Cassidorina muttered. Out on the sands, Amiseth was fussing over a pale tan shell marked with smudges of yellowish-cream that her rider recognised as the largest of the 'bronzes' so admired by the male candidates on their egg visits. "I just want to get on with my life, to have things get back to normal!"

Lybelle snorted. "Normal? You gave *that* up when you stood for gold. As someone else will discover soon enough." She poured klah into two mugs and handed one to her junior. "Look on all of this as a valuable learning experience, Dori. Kadanzer seems to suffer more disasters than most and having your queen kill and blood from another is actually one of the more minor events the Weyr has faced since the start of the Pass. At least the place hasn't exploded on your watch!"

Cassidorina took her mug, a smile tugging at the corners on her mouth. "Yet."

"Fair point." The Weyrwoman chuckled and raised her own cup on mock salute. "Let's hope that today doesn't hold any unpleasant surprises. Faranth only knows that we're due something *positive* for a change."



Amiseth took her time arranging her eggs as the humans breakfasted and Ihyanith's rider went about her business, carefully shifting and positioning each one just *so* in the brilliant sunlight. The sun was hot against her back, and she was pleased – the rain was gone and her rider was not entirely miserable for the first time in what felt like forever to her draconic brain. The sands were dry beneath her claws, beginning to reflect the heat of the sun back

against the shells she was so carefully rolling out into the open. Today, the queen knew, would be a *good* day.

The shadows of the caldera wall retreated as the morning wore on and the skies remained resolutely clear. With her eggs all settled to her satisfaction, Amiseth sat back on her haunches to admire them, a sense of maternal pride running through her as she saw the way the sun gave each of them a satin sheen that was all the more spectacular on the largest of the eggs, its deep yellow-gold colouring seeming to almost glow in the sunlight.

Easing herself down onto the sands beside her favoured shells, Amiseth basked in the sunlight, her eyes second-lidded as she felt the heat against her hide. She did not doze so deeply, however, that she did not feel the faint pressure in her mind, the first tremble of juvenile awareness trickling slowly through the clutch as something *shifted* and became real, became *now*.


Crooning happily to herself, Amiseth sent a wordless wash of welcome to her children and began to hum.

With the humming came a frenzy of preparation, the kitchens and the herders responding with well-rehearsed efficiency as the Feast became an imminent event. Just beyond the rocky walls of the Hatching Grounds, WindFlight stirred itself to action, riders coordinating their roles as they prepared to fetch those families and guests not otherwise able to reach the Weyr for the spectacle. Messages were sent to the other Weyrs – through the Weyrwoman's gold Ihyanith for the most part, although Benden warranted a personal message and escort in the form of the clutch's sire – and to the watchdragons of the territory's Holds, to every point on the globe where the hatching of this most notorious clutch might be a source of interest.

Across Kadanzer Weyr itself, those most intimately interested in the hatching of this most notorious clutch dropped whatever they were doing – in the kitchens, on the Feeding Grounds, in the Dragon Infirmaries and the Weyrfarm and a dozen other points across the Weyr – and raced for the Candidate Barracks and the sleeveless white robes and heavy-soled sandals that awaited them there. The humming filled their world as the smaller traditions were observed, the exchange of hopes and dreams and bets and petty squabbles that meant nothing to those whose opinions most mattered on this day, and the Weyrleader and his assistants gave their final words of instruction and advice and warning.

And then, finally, all was as it should be – the spectators fanning themselves in the heat as the dragons perched around the caldera's rim, a bright-hued crown of flaring wings and twitching tails as they prepared to greet their new brethren. The eggs rocked on the sands, their shells shining in the unseasonably bright sunlight, and Amiseth watched over them all, an image of golden and maternal pride apparently unaware that almost every human observer present was imagining her painted a grisly green with Yttrith's congealing lifeblood....

All that remained was for the candidates to take their place on the heated sand.



Hakel was almost bouncing as he walked with the white-clad procession towards the Hatching Grounds. This was going to be a Hatching to remember, the Hatching where *he* finally found his bronze. He followed Weyrleadersecond Shahara east through the Weyrleaders' Complex towards the northern entrance to the Grounds, almost tripping over several times as the caldera commanded his attention far more than the ground. The sky was a clear, cloudless blue, the sun as hot as it had ever been in his childhood memories of Igen. There were dragons overhead, circling, descending to drop off the last few late-comers or settling to perches on the Bowl's rim, and all were humming until the air itself vibrated, welcoming their new brethren into the world....

Oh, but this was going to be *perfect*.

The march towards the Grounds seemed to go on forever, but they finally passed between the rocky walls to stop at the very edge of the sand. Taking one of the waterskins that Ellya and others of the weyrleaderstaff were handing out, Hakel half-listened as the Weyrleader gave the candidates the standard lecture about behaviour on the Sands – don't be an idiot, don't run, don't shout, don't touch the hatchlings unless they really want or *need* to be touched, don't wonder if you've been Impressed or not because you'll *know* if you have been – nothing that Hakel hadn't heard before although some of the others were paying close attention.

Glancing around at the others, he could see Sergall fiddling nervously with the hem of his white robe, as he did before each Hatching, while Lyra and Nori whispered to one another. Tall Cybris and red-haired Cassia – who, rumour had it, wanted a brown – stood close, as did Tasyr and Sovar, while Tasyr's elder brother Tanyer pointedly ignored them. Some of the Bendenite candidates held themselves apart from their Kadanzer counterparts, but most had mingled into the crowd. Lorelli, the Oldtimer girl, kept glancing out across the sands, while Lina was focussed intently on D'zan's words. Yindi's face was a picture of concentration while Tullarin seemed more interested in watching Sapherlin and Aliana's backsides. Dwayana looked determined, Jelran concerned, Julian confident, Kasenal almost scared. So many familiar faces, but before long some would move on to a new life, leaving the others disappointed on the sands.

Hakel smiled to himself. *This* time, he knew, he wasn't going to be one of those left disappointed.

And then they were being told to move out and take their places on the Hatching Sands themselves. Leaving his empty waterskin behind, Hakel could feel the sun beating down on him as he strode out, could feel the heat reflecting up from the pale sand. Taking his position as close to the eggs as he dared without incurring the wrath of Amiseth or D'zan, he fixed his gaze on his chosen shell – the creamy tan one that was easily the largest bar the gold – and hoped that things would happen quickly before he and the other prospective riders all cooked....

Resla took up the tail of the march to the Grounds, grinning infectiously and not at all bothered by the lack of apparent cheer in return from the more dour and jaded of the weyrings. It was blisteringly hot, and she didn't envy the candidates their hot wait on the sands. The familiar final lecture, met with the familiar mix of agitation and attention, released the weyring-hopefuls out towards the eggs and she watched them go with as much pride as if she were mother to them all.

That thought made her glance to the viewing stands, shading an eye against the brilliant overhead sun, and find V'lar among his wingmates. She was too shy to wave, but she smiled in his direction before moving to the area that was already prepared for the hatchlings that would be coming, hungry, off the Grounds with their new lifemates. Most of the dragonhealer apprentices not standing were helping Giselle to prepare for that afternoon's 'Fall, but she could see young Deza there with Tallah and Corsan, waiting to check the health of the new dragonets and to lend aid in the unhappy case of a hatchling needing medical attention.

Resla looked around at the feeding area, cordoned off from the main sands by screens and open at the northern end for access to the Weyrling Complex, and stocked up on barrels of clean water and jars of oil, clean cloths and soft brushes, as well as basic first aid equipment. Wide, empty bowls were stacked against the stony wall of the caldera, ready for the chopped meat that the herders would shortly be bringing for the hungry hatchlings.

All in all, they were as ready as they'd ever be.

Resla smiled. This was one of her favorite parts of her job, being able to meet the new hatchlings and enjoy the unabashed happiness that new weyrings radiated, and something told her that, despite the heat, today's Hatching would be a good one.



With the candidates in position, an expectant stillness settled over the scene, the joyful song of the dragons drowning out the murmur of the waves and the respectful whispers of the spectators. The sun was high and fierce on the open expanse of pale sand, making those waiting for the dragonets grateful for the thick-soled sandals they wore. Those watching from the Hatching Stands had the shelter of a canopy but the hopeful candidates had no such protection – assaulted by heat from both above and below, they could only hope that the eggs would hatch soon.

Long moments stretched into long minutes, and then –

One of the larger eggs, a near-neighbour to the startlingly gold shell, gave a sudden lurch, actually setting itself rolling for a short distance before coming to a halt. Amiseth crooned softly in the sudden silence as the mottled blue-green egg trembled in its new position, then stilled for a long moment before fracturing and falling away to reveal a sturdy, healthy-looking bronze who blinked at the bright new existence he had found himself in, stretching his brassy wings wide as he shrieked a croaky challenge to the world at large. That statement made, he half-folded his long pinions and looked around, eyeing the available choices with an apparent lack of urgency before setting out towards the boys in a singularly determined manner.

In the stands, Lybelle smiled in quickly-covered relief as she saw the bronze break free of his shell and heard the ripple of reaction that ran through the spectators – it was a stupid superstition, but after the flight that had produced this clutch she was glad of anything that might turn the tide of opinion in a more positive direction. The last mixed-Oldtimer clutch had been Nioranth's, the one she had carried on her long trip between the Passes, and while there was no real comparison in terms of situation, it was hard for the Weyr not to remember the tragedies of that Hatching even amongst all the other points of notoriety surrounding these eggs.

The Weyrwoman cast a glance towards Cassidoria and J'hanos, seeing a look of fierce pride on the bronzerider's face, his slightly-glazed expression telling her that he was communicating with his dragon, though Cassidoria looked just as stressed and drawn as she had for the past few months. The young goldrider's issues would hopefully pass once the Hatching was through – she would need to learn to move on and live with her grief and guilt if she was ever to be a potential Weyrwoman. Dunia and Luka had both been through horrors of their own and come out the other side; hopefully Cassidoria could learn a thing or two from their example.

Lacing her long fingers together, Lybelle leaned forward in her seat and waited for the young bronze to make his choice.



If the spectators were transfixed by the appearance of the new bronze, the waiting candidates were considerably more so. The girls gazed at the dragonet in open and joyful fascination, while the boys straightened their spines and focused all of their attention and dreams and desires on the hatchling, each clumsily projecting thoughts of welcome and love in the desperate hope that the new-born would deign to look their way and choose *them*....

The young bronze didn't hesitate as he marched towards the waiting line, however, didn't look around, didn't deviate from his path towards the one he had chosen. His egg-wet limbs were caked in sand as he finally reached his rider, crooning joyfully as he gazed up into Darian's triumphant eyes.

My name is Hassanth!

The Benden-bred lad went down onto one knee and put his hands on the bronze's egg-damp jaw. He felt swallowed by the rainbow-hued eyes, nearly overwhelmed by the dragonet's strong presence in his mind. He couldn't help grinning. He was a bronzerider! He'd known he would be! Out of all these candidates here, Hassanth had picked him *first*. He was the most worthy! And Hassanth would make the whole stay at Kadanzer worthwhile. He was such a beautiful, strong bronze....

And you are my beautiful, strong rider! Hassanth told him proudly, the thoughts pushing into the young man's mind as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Darian – D'rian – started at being called beautiful... then laughed. "We will be beautiful and strong together, Hassanth," he said, and wrapped his arms around the bronze's neck.

Hassanth crooned and a sense of grinding hunger came with the sound – he was *starving* and would his beautiful, strong rider feed him please?

"Of course!" D'rian said and stood, guiding his new charge to where the Weyrlingstaff waited.



Across the sands, Dwayana rolled her eyes at Darian's Impression. D'rian, now; she'd need to get used to that, unless maybe the Benden Weyrleaders were so happy that they bundled the pair home in a sling right after the Hatching. Though if he stayed, maybe he wouldn't be such an ass now that he had a dragon. Impression changed people sometimes in ways you didn't expect. Hopefully she'd find out first-hand, today.

Further along the line, both Tasyr and Weltor shook their heads at D'rian's Impression, bemused by the vagaries of draconic choice – the Benden lad had never been popular but his conviction that he would Impress bronze had proved accurate. Lyra gaped openly at the bronze's choice, while Cassia gave an undignified squeak of amazed annoyance that had her clapping a hand over her mouth before anybody noticed. Cybris, by contrast, simply sighed in satisfaction at the speed and ease with which the hatchling had Impressed, hoping that her dragon, if it was on the sands today, would make its choice as smoothly.

And then there was nothing to do but wait for the next shell to crack.



With the first Impression made, the eggs seemed to settle back into their sandy beds a little, twitching but otherwise showing no inclination to hatch. Long, sun-drenched minutes passed, and then two blues fell from their shells in almost the same instant, one quickly selecting his rider while the other took a little longer, wandering the line and finally choosing Rolander, one of the holdbred lads.

The second blue had barely cleared the Grounds when another of the smaller eggs shattered to reveal a green who squealed at the suddenness of her birth and all but pounced on a startled Harmina, who squealed just as loudly at the suddenness of her Impression.

The green stumbled off with her happily babbling new partner, and the eggs returned to their lazy twitching. This, it seemed, was not going to be a quick Hatching....



Lyra wiped her forehead with the back of one hand, aware of other candidates mirroring the gesture around her. She was glad Resla had tied her braid with a loop to shade her neck, but it didn't keep the sun from reflecting off the bright sand into her face. The skin on her arms prickled, and she knew her fair skin was already developing a sunburn. She glanced towards her sister, Nori, and hoped that neither of them would end up being carried off with sunstroke – their colouring was definitely working against them on a day like today.

Fanning at her face with a hand, Lyra sent a fervent wish to the hatchlings to hurry – please.



As if in response to Lyra's silent plea, a mid-sized egg shuddered, fine lines running across its mottled blue-brown surface. A crack widened and the tips of dark claws slipped free, the hatchling within apparently seeking the leverage to break out of its prison. The claws shifted against the shell, holding position as the egg fragmented, pieces falling away to finally reveal a sturdy little brown. The dragonet shook out his wings, almost getting tangled in their unfamiliar length as he folded them back against his spine, then took an uncertain step forward.

Finding that his legs were better coordinated than his wings, the brown set off towards the waiting candidates. Tullarin and Julan were briefly inspected, then ignored, Tasyr considered for a moment before being rejected. He snuffled at Veles, then at Cybris, before swinging his head around and making a beeline for Weltor, planting himself in front of the young man and gazing happily up into his eyes.

I am Radanth!

Weltor – now W'tor – beamed at the egg-wet brown. He looked over at Tasyr and Sovar, who stood nearby, and announced, "He said his name is Radanth!" He felt so much joy and completeness. So *this* was what he had stood on the sands for.... Well worth all the sweat and tears.

Of course I am. Now, can we get some food? I am so hungry!

W'tor grinned at his dragon. "Of course, Radanth. This way."



Deza slowly drifted closer to the edge of the Grounds, feeling the oppressive heat that rose in waves off the sand. As hot as she was over here on the sidelines, she would hate to be standing out there in the middle of it. A glance to the right showed the other dragonhealer apprentices, released by Giselle for the Hatching itself, were pointing and whispering amongst themselves as the first few Impressions were made. A brief pang of strong mixed emotions – regret-jealousy-frustration – stabbed through Deza, and she ducked her head so that the others would not see her face as she struggled to keep her composure. Even living among the candidates, her deafness meant that she was still alone and always would be.

You are not alone. I am here, Perffiath's voice spoke quietly into her thoughts, his sentiment echoed softly by other draconic voices.

Deza smiled and shook her head. How could she explain to a dragon what it was like to always live on the edge of the group; to always be on the outside looking in? Dragons were, by their very biology, always part of a larger group, were always connected to their fellow dragons. People, too, were in constant communication with each other. And here she stood, on the outside of all that. Here at the Weyr she did at least have access to dragons' conversations, and to some people conversations through dragon translators, but....

'But what?' Deza gave herself a mental slap and blinked away the tears that threatened to fall. 'You're an apprentice, stupid girl. Quit moaning over what you can't have, and focus on your job!' Taking a firm grip on her composure, she turned away from the sands and moved to meet the latest Impressions.



Another period of waiting, the heat of the sun beating mercilessly down on the waiting candidates. Finally, a blue broke free of his shell, trotting towards a weyrbred boy and Impressing with little fuss. A minute later, another blue emerged, turning circles for a few moments as he attempted to dislodge a piece of shell from his rump. Having finally removed the offending shard, he looked around with wide red eyes and stumbled across to butt against Huriro, the youngest of the Benden candidates.

As H'riro led his blue from the sand, a turquoise-shaded shell – one of those that many of the candidates had fancied held brown, for its size – rolled over once and cracked neatly in two, releasing a robust and long-boned green. The dragonet squawked as her limbs tangled around one another, spending a few moments working out which of her legs went where, then she levered herself up and set out in pursuit of her rider.

Watching from his place in the line, Hakel bit his lip as the dragonets made their choices, torn between wanting one of them to look his way and wanting to wait for his bronze. A bronze, a green, a brown and a full four blues had chosen their riders and now there was another green stumbling around, eager to make her choice and fill her belly. He watched her as she approached, her steps steadying with each step, and found himself wondering what it would be like to be a greenrider. They did say that it meant never losing a mating flight...

The green paused before him, looking up at him with glistening red eyes... and then she was in motion again, seeking her rider further down the line. Hakel let out the breath he'd been holding and returned his gaze to the big pale egg he had picked out for himself the moment he had first laid eyes on it. He grinned – there was no mere green in *that* shell, he was sure of that....



Cybris drew in a breath as the large egg hatched, revealing the lean green hatchling. She knew the odds and both the greens that had hatched so far had arrested her attention. She heard murmurs of surprise at a green emerging from a shell of that size and she grinned to herself as she watched the hatchling make her way across the Grounds. 'Size isn't everything,' she internally chided the crowd. She herself had often felt awkward for being so tall and thin when she was younger. Maybe this green would be for her?

She watched as the green passed over Hakel and continued her search, ignoring some, considering others, occasionally pausing to awkwardly rearrange her damp wings against her back. Cassia warranted a long, assessing gaze, as did Arlynn and Nori, but each young woman lacked

whatever it was that the dragonet was looking for and she moved on once more.

Willing the dragonet along the line towards her, Cybris admired her neat if awkward lines, the way that she seemed to be gaining more and more control over her limbs with each passing moment... but then the green abruptly stopped before Sapherlin, cocking her head to one side as a squeaky, quizzical noise sounded from somewhere deep in her slender throat. Her choice suddenly made, she swung her long tail in a happy arc through scattering sand and gazed lovingly up into the girl's eyes.

Cybris sighed and went back to waiting for the next shell to crack.



I am Lorsenth!

Sapherlin gasped as the name echoed in her mind, pure and perfect and *glorious*. Everything else seemed to melt away, the entire world gone but for the beautiful Lorsenth in front of her.

"Oh, of course you are!" She knelt down and reverently stroked her hands across the young dragon's face, scarcely able to believe that all of this was just for her –

Of course I am just for you. Who else would I be for? I am yours and you are mine and... I am hungry!

Sapherlin's stomach was suddenly awake with a fierce hunger that she couldn't ever remember being so strong before. "Her name is Lorsenth!" Sapherlin announced happily to those around her as she pushed herself to her feet and started to guide her brand new friend towards her first meal. "Lorsenth!"

Where is food? Is it close? Lorsenth's mind was a whirl of questions as they made their way towards the exit. Sapherlin just laughed joyfully and looked towards the dragons lining the caldera's rim, wondering where her father and his brown were perched. Hopefully she would be able to introduce her new dragon to them soon.



Another blue cracked his shell and wobbled off to make his Impression, his choice almost ignored as, mere moments after his birth, one of the largest eggs shuddered briefly and spilt into three neat sections as a second bronze made his entrance. The brassy hatchling stretched his limbs one at a time, as if checking that each was in working order, then extended his wings and set off across towards the line of candidates, his huge eyes whirling a hungry crimson.

The dragonet ignored the girls entirely but peered intently at each of the boys he passed. Tullarin, Balshan, Hakel, Sovar, Kasenal, Netheril, Tasyr, Veles, Julian....

Julan gasped and dropped to his knees, an expression of fierce, joyous triumph on his face as he hugged the bronze to him, murmuring "Ohith," as he finally found his feet and led the dragonet away.

Hakel tried to hold his desperation in check as the bronze looked him over... then bit back his curse as the dragonet moved on, finally choosing to Impress to Julian. 'Weyrleaders in his line, indeed,' Hakel thought bitterly as he watched the other boy embrace his dragon, half-glad that one

of the Kadanzer candidates had managed to attract a bronze and entirely frustrated that it hadn't been him. But his special egg was still intact, the bronze within still working his way towards birth and so Hakel couldn't feel too upset despite the heat that was starting to make him feel positively dizzy. 'Hurry up,' he thought hopefully at the eggs, 'or else you're going to be trying to Impress to dehydrated husks...'

Further along the line of candidates, Tasyr suppressed the disappointment he felt as the bronze passed him by – it wasn't as though it hadn't happened before, and it would likely happen again. He still had three Turns of Candidacy left to him and others had been left standing Turn after Turn before finally Impressing. He glanced across to where his elder brother, Tanyer, was gazing after Julan and his bronze and wondered if either one of them would be finding a dragon today.



No sooner had J'lan and Ohith left the Hatching Grounds than two more shells broke apart, disgorging a green and a brown. The brown looked around as if startled, then made a dash towards Sergall, while the green was more relaxed about the business of her birth, finding her feet and trotting neatly forward to butt happily against Tullarin. The trader lad crouched to greet her, his dark face ecstatic as he murmured, "Kinelyth," over and over.

Now things finally seemed to be speeding up and it wasn't much longer before the next egg cracked and a dainty green tumbled out nose-over-tail to land in an undignified heap. She was still trying to shake sand out of her nose when a blue broke shell and almost trampled over her tail. The green hissed at her brother, then launched herself after him as if intent on beating him to the white-clad prizes awaiting them.

The two dragonets veered off in opposite directions as they reached the line of candidates, however; the blue gazing up at a tall, dark-haired lad while the green showed more interest in the girls. She fixed Aliana with a long, hard look before moving on to stare at Lyra and Nori and Cybris with equal intensity. It wasn't until she reached Byalla that she stopped, her crimson eyes shifting to a cool, calm blue as she looked up into the quiet Benden girl's face.

Whatever attention Byalla's Impression might have attracted was short-lived, however, as a moment later the largest of the eggs jerked violently and toppled to one side, its brilliantly yellow-gold surface drawing every eye. The vibrant shell quivered, hairline cracks appearing on its surface, spreading and widening until finally the egg simply came apart and a perfectly-proportioned young queen stood proudly amongst the shards.

The new-born gold arched her neck and stretched her long pinions out to their fullest extent, flexing her wingshoulders for a few moments before neatly settling her wings back against her dorsal ridge. Her ruddy gold hide gleamed brightly in the sunlight as she threw her head back, giving voice to a fierce – if croaky – bugle before narrowing her great scarlet eyes and stalking towards the candidates, her movements gaining confidence with each step.

The first one she approached was Elisha, but she barely spared the Benden girl a glance before moving on, her

oversized head held high. There was an imperious air to the way she moved, in the way she looked at each of the candidates and found them wanting. The presence of the boys seemed to offend her in some fashion – she hissed at Veles, making him step sharply back, and swung sharp claws at Pagoss, making him scramble frantically away from her. With the unsuitable suitably warned, she continued on her way.

The queen paused a moment before Nori, then turned back to regard Lyra, whom she had previously passed without notice... then rejected both. Arlynnna clenched her fists as the gold looked her way, her face reflecting her determination, but she attracted no more than a glance, as did Ivahla and Cybris. Aliana didn't earn even so much as that as the queen continued on, seeking her rider and clearly determined to pick *just* the right one for her needs...



Lybelle shifted in her seat as the gold egg broke open to reveal an elegant and healthy-looking queen, the dragonet seeming to spend a moment assuring her audience of her perfection before setting off in pursuit of her rider. Glancing towards Binassa and F'gal, she smiled at their rapt attention – *this* was the reason they were at Kadanzer, the reason why they had sent so many of their most promising candidates to stand on foreign Sands. This queen carried with her the hopes of one Weyr, the pride of a second, and the disjointed history of a third, whose ghosts underlay Kadanzer's own current existence.

All that and an inheritance of violence that the dragonet seemed suddenly determined to live up to as she swung at one of the boys, the action carrying a chilling reminder of Yttrith's birth, when she had torn a candidate apart on the sands. Yttrith had been a wilful one and this one – as close to a daughter as Yttrith would ever have – looked to be no different as she strutted down the line. The Weyrwoman could only hope that she would choose more wisely than her unfortunate predecessor...

She will choose well, Ihyanith told her rider. ***She is strong.***

Only as strong as her rider, my love, Lybelle replied, her thoughts shading with love and pride as she recalled her own Impression. *Let's just see how wisely she chooses...*



There was a sudden hush as the gold egg split apart to reveal the perfect little queen, and Resla found her own attention on her as surely as anyone else's. She was so *small* compared to her towering mother... Resla tried to imagine how the candidates must be feeling out there, wondering which of them the gold would choose, which of them would shortly become one of Pern's most precious elite. She couldn't pick just one to root for – and she didn't want to try too hard.

Resla wiped at the back of her neck, getting sticky in the heat, and didn't envy the candidates for having to wait out in the sun so long. 'Shards, I hope they don't get heat stroke,' she thought wryly, before turning reluctantly away

from the new gold's show to get a bluerider set up with his dragon's first meal.



The young queen continued her search, each girl considered, each girl rejected. Midrien whimpered softly as the red eyes looked up into her own... and then blinked once and turned away, sharp talons leaving furrows in the fine, hot sand as the gold hatchling turned her attention elsewhere.

There was a growing impatience to the little queen's movements now, a sense of need, of fierce desire. She fanned her long wings once more, bugling sharply, and then gave a warble of elation as her mind brushed another and something fell irresistibly into place. Her world narrowing to a single point of perfect reference, the golden dragonet threw herself forward, knocking Dwayana off her feet and pinning her to the heated sand as she gazed triumphantly into the girl's eyes and made her choice.

I am Arohath and you are MINE!

The fierce voice filled Dwayana's head, those great eyes filled her world, and in that instant *nothing* else mattered. She reached up – up? – to put her arms around Arohath's damply golden neck and hold her close. That was when she realized she was on her back with the hatchling on top of her.

Let me up, Dwayana said firmly.

Why? We are together.

Aren't you hungry?

Hungry? Yes I am. You will give me food now.

Then you will let me get up now, Dwayana replied, focusing her dazed mind.

But you are MINE!

But I cannot give you meat if you are on top of me.

I want the meat! I will let you up. But you are MINE! Arohath backed up a step, and Dwayana hastily moved her legs to avoid her gold's claws.

She scrambled to her feet, carefully projecting, *The meat is this way.* Smiling proudly, she led Arohath off of the Hatching Grounds, to where someone handed her a bowl.

That meat is MINE!



Lorelli stood her ground as the new gold hatchling inspected the girls standing nearby. Cybris, Arlylna, Ivahla, goldrider Luka's sisters – and then Dwayana was in the sand, happily Impressed. Besides a congratulatory wave in the new weyrling's direction, the Oldtimer candidate kept herself to herself. That made two of the girls she'd known fairly well among the weyrings, and one of the Bendenite transplants besides. There would be no gold for Lorelli, but who knew? Maybe one of the greens...? Bressa had done it. Elounda and Caryli and Mirrim had done it. Not to mention the majority of the greenriders in this time. Why not her?



With the new queen safely Impressed, the eggs seemed to settle once more, twitching gently as candidates and spectators alike sweated in the heat. For what seemed an age, there was no real movement and then...

Two shells abruptly shattered without warning, spilling a blue and a green into the world, both hatchlings protesting their abrupt birth loudly before finding their feet and trotting off in search of their riders. The green, her bright, grassy hide gleaming in the sunlight, moved in an arc parallel to the line, eyeing her choices from a distance and only approaching the candidates to Impress, butting her head happily against a startled Ivahla. The Benden woman laughed aloud, smiling broadly as she knelt to embrace the dragonet.

The blue, a small but robust hatchling with richly coloured hide, was intent on examining his choices more closely than his sister had. Working his way down the line, each of the boys was considered and rejected – Hakel, Sovar, Balshan, Tasyr, Tanyer, Veles. Something was missing, something was wrong....

The hatchling stopped, flapping his wings – showering the nearest candidate with egg fluid – and raising his head as if suddenly realising something. Crooning victoriously, he planted himself firmly before Cassia....

And Cassia found herself staring in to a pair of rapidly-spinning rainbow eyes, eyes that were quickly shading from red to a radiant blue-green. "Sen... Senrhaeth? Who's... oh, you are!" It was then that the full meaning of the blue-hided hatchling before her registered, and all prior thoughts of Impressing brown flew from her head. Brown? *Green?* What a stupid idea. She had a blue!

Cassia's whoop of sheer triumphant delight was not, in any way, quiet. There were joyful tears trickling down her cheeks as she dropped to her knees in the sand and hugged her beautiful blue. "Sharding amazing, you are," she told him. "Don't ever forget it."

I will not. Food?

"Oh, shells! Food, right." Still sniffing, Cassia stood and led Senrhaeth off to where the food and the other new weyrings awaited them.



Cybris sighed as she watched her friend lead the little blue off to be fed – Senrhaeth was beautiful and the expression on Cassia's face made her own eyes fill. Quickly brushing the tears away, Cybris steeled herself. Cassia had gotten the male dragon she wanted. The question now was whether *she* would get any dragon at all. The sands were getting emptier.

'No', Cybris thought firmly, 'there are still quite a few eggs here; I will NOT give up.' She shifted forward a step, towards the eggs, and closed her eyes briefly to clear the sweat away from them. She was in control. Worry and doubt would not factor into this Hatching if she had any say in the matter. She would make an excellent dragonrider.

All that she had to do was convince a hatchling of it.



One of the smaller eggs, palely mottled with blue and green, stilled momentarily from its twitching and gave a violent jerk that unseated it from its position. It rolled a few paces before its weak momentum was broken by a discarded shard, then twisted in place as striations became visible across its surface, spreading by the moment. Another jerk and one side bowed outwards... and shattered to reveal a slender, emerald green hatchling, her underside delicately dappled with a lighter shade. She stumbled from her broken shell, limbs awkwardly unfolding around her, then sat down hard on her haunches and looked around in obvious confusion.

Amisseth turned her head to croon softly at the little green and a moment later the hatchling was in motion, tottering forward on legs that seemed to be making rather random attempts at coordination. She pitched onto her nose twice before finally managing to find her feet and, with at least a semblance of stability, making her way towards the waiting candidates.

Her steps grew more confident as she moved, spreading her wings slightly for stability. She ignored the boys, peering instead at one girl after another, taking her time to make *just* the right choice. She was still considering her selection when another blue hatched out, shaking himself like a dog before all but bouncing across to Impress to one of the boys. The green grumbled softly at this interruption, swinging her head around to look at the new pair, then cocked her head to one side as she considered Nori. She gazed at the girl for long moments... and then she was in motion once more, not stopping until she finally found herself at Lina's feet and looked up at her, warbling happily.

I am Tayath!

Lina reeled first from amazement and then from joy as the words sounded inside her head. Her own legs suddenly as wobbly as the dragon's – her dragon's! – she sank to the ground to embrace her.

Beyond Lina and Tayath's happy tableau, one of the mid-sized eggs was rocking fiercely, cracks spreading across its mottled surface. It rolled slightly, quivered, then erupted into shards, revealing a strongly built brown hatchling who immediately made a beeline for Veles. Moments after that Impression, two more eggs hatched, spilling out a sturdy blue and surprisingly slender bronze. Both dragons wandered the line for a while before making their choices, the blue to a delighted Yindi and the bronze to Kesyr. Another blue followed quickly behind, Impressing without pausing to consider anyone but the holdbred Jelran.

And then the waiting game began once more.

It was long minutes before first one green, then another made their appearance, examining one another curiously before finally deciding that more human companionship was what they desired. Their Impressions seemed to encourage the remaining seven eggs in the clutch, however, which all began to rock fiercely, fine cracks spreading over their sun-warmed surfaces. The three largest, the ones that had convinced the candidates that they could contain only bronzes, were almost dancing in their sandy beds, the dragonets getting closer to emergence with each passing

moment. Hakel edged a little closer to the largest and lightest of the eggs, his heart in his mouth as he imagined himself astride the bronze that would *surely* be his, the image perfect and complete in his mind, missing only the name....

He swallowed hard, wiping his palms against his robe. This had to be it, this *had* to be his dragon. He had lavished so much attention on the palely-swirled egg on each and every visit to the sands that the bronze just *had* to want him. He was aware of other boys around him, Kadanzer and Benden-bred alike, aware of their own focus on the shell, aware that each of them wanted the dragonet within every bit as much as he did. Hakel didn't care about them, didn't care about anything other than what was inside that gleaming shell, the heat of the sun burnishing its yellow-streaked surface brightly as it twitched, rolled, shivered and then split asunder to reveal –

Not bronze.

Quite *definitely* not bronze.

Hakel stared open-mouthed at the dragonet as she scrambled to unsteady feet and looked around her in confusion. Red eyes blinked once, twice, and then she was in motion, away from her startled suitors, the sun burnishing her damply golden wings brighter even than it had her shell.

Amisseth's attention was fixed solidly on the largest remaining shell as it shuddered its way to birth, her soft croon audible even from the stands. Lybelle frowned as she watched the egg, seeing its pale curve as if for the first time, the yellowish streaks and swirls suddenly bright against the creamy buff shell now that its sister was no longer there as comparison. For a moment she wondered if perhaps... but then the Weyrwoman shook her head and discarded the thought –

Only to gasp aloud as the shell burst open to reveal a second queen – smaller than her sister, to be sure, but not by much, her colour a brightly perfect yellow-gold. A ripple of reaction ran through the crowd – amazement, disbelief, delight – and Lybelle quickly schooled her features. Let them think that she had known all along, had planned for this surprise to be revealed before the great and the good of Pern. Two queens in a single clutch was unique, amazing, something told of in the ballads of the early Passes but certainly not seen in the Tenth Pass, nor even in the Ninth. And two queens in *this* clutch, with its history and its bloodline? That was treasure indeed, a political prize to be considered most carefully – she had only promised Benden *one* gold, after all.

Ytrith might have chosen badly and paid the price, but her legacy might yet be turned to Kadanzer's favour.

Lybelle smiled to herself and watched the hatchling as she sought her rider from amongst the waiting girls.

Nori gasped at the sight of the second little queen, along with nearly everyone else there. She shot a hand out to grab Lyra's wrist, partly to get her attention and partly to

verify that it wasn't just the heat getting to her, that there really *was* a second gold hatchling before them on the sands.

Her sister squeezed her hand delightedly. "A second queen! That's a fine joke on those bronze-seeking boys!"

Nori grinned – not her imagination, then – and squeezed back. "Oh, just think of the wagers lost! No one would have guessed at a second gold!" She tried to push aside her astonishment and think warm, welcoming thoughts toward the searching little queen. Maybe this time....



Solea blinked once or twice after the hatching of the largest remaining egg, certain for a moment she'd lost her head to the heat and hallucinated that a second gold had just hatched. But the little queen remained real and bright before the waiting candidates, spreading her damp wings and setting out to find her lifemate. Hope that had been utterly extinguished when Dwayana led Arohath away blazed to renewed life, making her light-headed, and she couldn't take her eyes from the delicate golden form as it came closer...

Please....



Resla, helping the weyrlingstaff and the dragonhealers with the newly-Impressed just off of the Grounds, was making sure that two young blueriders weren't tripping over each other on their way to food when the largest of the remaining eggs hatched. She knew something was off by the reaction – a quick glance showed that some of the audience had even gotten to their feet in the stands, and there was a distinct rise in the murmur of conversation – but she couldn't see much more from her current position.

With the two new blues being fed by their new riders and checked by the dragonhealers, there was a lull, and she could return to the edge of the sands to try to figure out what had happened. There was no horror in the sound of the surprise, so Resla didn't precisely fear another mauling on the sands, but *something* had turned out unexpectedly – was it a sport dragon like the tiny white Ruth the ballads and their Oldtimers spoke of? Or a dragonet deformed in some fashion or crippled like those of Nioranth's time-touched clutch? She didn't want to have to ask one of the riders for the news – they were busy, she shouldn't bother them....

And then she saw it, a flash of yellow out on the sand. A *second* gold? The dragonet paused to gaze up at a candidate, and Resla laughed out loud in pure delight. It *was* a lucky day.



The little queen moved across the sand with increasing confidence, her head swinging from side to side as she sought the one who would be right for her. The first girl approached was Jepha, but she was quickly discarded in favour of Hanavi, then Lytora, then Meiriel, each found wanting and left behind as she continued her search. Elisha drew herself up as the dragonet approached her, determination written across her features, but the young

queen turned away after a cursory glance, leaving the Benden girl wilting in the heat.

The other eggs hadn't stilled while the queen searched for her rider, and a shell abruptly split, sending a small blue rolling, protesting loudly all the way. Pushing himself up on wobbly legs, the blue flapped his wings in an effort to dislodge the sand sticking to his wet hide, then gave it up as a bad job and set off in search of his own partner.

It didn't take the blue long to spot the one he was looking for, homing in on Sovar joyfully and announcing his interest with a firm butt to the boy's midriff.

My name is Duhonth!

Sovar, astonished, gasped as the swirling eyes swallowed his entire world and any sense of *I* vanished beneath the pressing need of *we*. The hot sand was burning his knees, but he barely noticed he'd fallen to them, reaching out instead to hold the blue's delicate face with his hands and rub just *so* on an eyeridge.

"Duhonth..."



Arlynnna held her breath as the queen wandered, seeking her rider. She was for her, she *had* to be for her. She'd come to Kadanzer knowing that this could be her last chance for a gold and her hopes had faded with Dwayana's Impression, but this... this was nothing she had expected and everything she could have hoped for. The queen *had* to be for her....

The dragonet continued onwards, each step bringing her closer to Arlynnna, closer to that final chance. Each girl rejected reduced her odds, and she just *had* to –

The queen paused before Arlynnna, glistening red eyes gazing up into her face as if searching for something there. Holding her breath, Arlynnna poured everything she had into thoughts of welcome, of strength, of love, of determination. "Come on," she whispered, "*please....*"

The gold blinked, then swung her head away, moving further down the line. Arlynnna's shoulders slumped in defeat. It looked as though she would be returning to Benden empty-handed after all.



Cybris' gasp of surprise at the second queen's entrance into the world mirrored those around her. She had never heard of a clutch that produced two queens, and she was guessing by the reaction in the stands, that many other people hadn't either.

Maybe now the uncomfortable muttering about Yttrith's death would cease.

Maybe this was her chance.



Tasyr's own voice joined the gasps of astonishment when the favoured "bronze" egg hatched a second queen. He surreptitiously glanced at Hakel to see how the boy was handling the surprise; he'd had his heart set on that large shell.

The new queen's birth almost distracted him from noticing a much more humble Impression... Sovar, with his arms around the neck of a blue. Tasyr almost couldn't help cheering for his friend, but he restrained himself... and settled for giving Sovar a triumphant wave. He wasn't sure Sovar would notice, since he was so wrapped up in his new lifemate.



The hatchling queen continued her search, examining each of the girls with increasing frustration. She peered hopefully up at Lorelli, at Tymania, at Lyra and Nori, but none seemed to have whatever it was that she was looking for. Aliana was next, then Solea, each examined closely before their rejection. Fanning her golden wings in apparent annoyance, she gave a squeaky bugle and then continued on her way, her search growing ever more frantic by the moment.

Beyond the queen's ongoing hunt, the five remaining eggs shivered and rocked, blissfully ignorant of their sister's upset. As if attempting to upstage the young gold, two bronzes hatched in almost the same instant, one tumbling over his feet to sprawl on the sand, while the other made a rather more dignified entrance into the world. The pair regarded one another for a long moment until, by some silent accord, they pushed themselves up and started towards the candidates.

One of the smaller eggs broke open as the two bronzes passed it and a green almost sprang from the shards, twisting and hissing at the nearest of her brothers as if blaming him for her sudden birth. The bronze jumped back with a squawk as the green lashed out at him with claws undulled by use, leaving shallow furrows across his broad chest. The green hissed again, glaring around her as the two bronzes retreated, one whimpering unhappily, then made her own way towards the line of waiting candidates.

Several of those candidates took a wary step back as the fierce little green approached, drawing more hisses from her as she stared at her choices... then made her decision. Suddenly charging down the line, she overtook her golden sibling and almost sprang at Cybris, claws still carelessly extended.

Instead of backing away from the angry little green, Cybris stood her ground and the dragonet, her eyes whirling red, collided with her clumsily. As their eyes met in the confusion, the green's claws caught and flexed on Cybris' thigh, near her hip, sharp claws tearing through her candidate robe and skin alike to leave a long shallow cut down the girl's leg. The pain was hot and sharp, but Cybris hardly felt it through the sudden joy of Impression.

"Sujath!" Cybris gasped out loud, tears of happiness filling her eyes. She bent down carefully and unhooked the hatchling's wayward claws from her robe and skin before hugging the green to her, feeling foreign thoughts and emotions wash through her mind. She was hungry and she was *angry!* It had taken her so very long to hatch because she had been so sleepy and confused and another dragon could have *stolen* Cybris and she was so hungry and the smell of blood was making her even hungrier....

Blood was already welling up and soaking through the white gown, Cybris realised, but she still seemed to be able to walk despite the pain. For a moment her vision swam as the loss of blood coupled with the heat of the sands to....

'No, I need to wait to faint until I get off the Sands,' Cybris thought, biting her lip in pain even as she smiled in joy.

Why do you need to wait? Is something wrong? I am hungry! Sujath's eyes were still swirling red and yellow and Cybris, taking that as a warning, controlled her thoughts and feelings – and the pain – as best she could.

To her amazement, she felt Sujath calm too, blue replacing the red shining in her eyes.

"Let go get you fed then, beautiful Sujath. There is meat back here." Cybris stood, resting a hand on the green's shoulder joint as she made her way slowly to meet the other new weyrings. As she limped from the Hatching Grounds, her left sandal slippery with blood, her grin was huge to see.



Hakel stared in amazement as the green hatchling erupted from her shell and left scratches across the chest of one of his precious bronzes. The larger hatchling drew back as the green hissed and went after the candidates like a slasher seeking prey, evidently not interested in *that* particular fight. Hakel felt a surge of relief at that – the last thing they needed was an actual fight between hatchlings. He remembered something similar happening at the Hatching his brother Bh'ruk had Impressed from, but that hadn't resulted in anything more than scratches either.

The scratched bronze wandered down the line towards Hakel and he held his breath, willing it onwards... but then released it in a huff of frustration as the dragonet looked up at Balshan and red eyes turned to a shining blue.

This *really* wasn't fair!



The scratched bronze looked in Balshan's direction... and suddenly the young man's head filled with a dizzy swirl of feelings. His chest hurt sharply, his stomach was burning with hunger, and –

I am Atieth!

Balshan's legs gave way and his knees hit the hot sand. He threw his arms around Atieth's strong neck and hugged him tightly. A bronze. *His* bronze....

I am hungry and my chest hurts. Why did that green scratch me?

I don't know why she did, but I will get you food! And numbweed! There was suddenly nothing in the world as important as tending to Atieth. Beaming in delight, B'shan lurched clumsily to his feet and led his bronze towards the edge of the sands and food.



Another blue broke shell and shook his wings out fastidiously before tucking them back against his dorsal ridge. That done, he trotted across to Kasenal without so

much as a glance towards the gold and bronze still wandering the sands. The hatchling queen had reached the end of the line and was now working her way back again, examining and rejecting the girls once more, her eyes whirling with swift crimsons and scarlets tinged with yellow and violet. It was becoming increasingly clear that whoever she was looking for was not on the Sands and there was a ripple of excited fear through the audience as the younger women shifted in their seats, wondering if maybe, just *maybe*....

Her bronze brother was looking rather less concerned as he considered his options. Netheril wasn't *quite* right, nor Hakel, nor Morres, nor Kelion. Another searching step forward, then another, and then –

The bronze gave a sharp, happy bugle and gazed up at Tasyr adoringly. ***My name is Yengarth!***

Tasyr gasped as his mind was slammed with a penetrating Other, and a triumphant sense of reaching... seeking... *finding*.... The Otherness wrapped itself around his being and merged with it until they were inseparable. The force of it was overwhelming, sending T'syr to his knees before the bronze dragonet.

Nothing Weyrlingmaster D'zan had told them could have prepared him for how intense it was to become one with an alien mind. Everything was new, curious, loud, bright, and intensely present. And he... had changed. His universe had realigned itself with Yengarth at its center.

Yengarth pushed his nose into T'syr's chest, smearing his white robe with membrane and egg fluid. He found himself wrapping his arms around the bronze shoulders and gazing into a faceted eye of whirling rainbow hues, bathed in mental acceptance and Rightness.

It didn't matter what his family thought about him... he had Yengarth, and for Yengarth, everything about him was absolutely *right*.

Of course it is, Yengarth told him. I found you, you are mine, all is right. Except... And T'syr realized he was starving, hungry like he had never been hungry before, a pit of hunger. Over the smells of the eggs and the dragons and the crowd was a coppery smell that meant meat. He salivated, lashed his tail – and shook his head, trying to separate Yengarth's thoughts from his own. This was going to take some getting used to....

Food! There! Yengarth said, and pulled away from T'syr's embrace. The bronze hatchling headed in that direction with a stumbling march, not waiting for T'syr's guidance.

'But...' T'syr thought, still stunned. 'I shouldn't have bronze! People like me get greens!' He stood and followed his hatchling, bemused.

Yengarth sent a thought like a dismissive snort. ***You do not belong to a green. You belong to ME. They cannot have you. I will have food NOW. THEY are eating it all.***

Laughing, T'syr hurried to catch up with his dragon.

Hakel wanted to cry from frustration as the bronze looked him over... and passed him by to Impress to Tasyr. There was only one egg left unhatched and it was one of the

smallest, rocking quietly to itself on the shard-scattered sand. He had been so *certain*....

Sighing, he looked towards the young queen as she wandered unhappily away from her latest reject. Hakel refused to believe that she would be unable to find anyone suitable for her – even if the candidates didn't meet her requirements, there were dozens of girls in the stands, and they would turn the kitchens out if even the spectators were rejected. She was beautiful, her bright hide gilded by the sun's savage rays, and he didn't dare think that the little queen wouldn't be able to find –

At that moment, the golden head lifted and she gave a questioning chirp, her gaze fixing on Tasyr... T'syr's bronze as he left the Grounds in search of food. Flicking her tail sharply against the sand, the queen set out in pursuit of her brother and Hakel could only watch open-mouthed as the gold dragonet began to leave without having first selected a rider.

Lybelle sat up in her seat, a frown creasing her dark brow as the golden hatchling set off *away* from the candidates, ignoring the stands completely. The young queen didn't look too distressed, but this was *far* from normal behaviour. "What in sweet Faranth's name is she doing?" she murmured, her words lost in the rising hubbub of voices around her. "Doesn't she know that she's supposed to Impress first, *then* eat?"

She is still searching, Ihyanith said in her rider's mind, her tone calm. ***She will find her rider and then she will be whole.***

Lybelle's frown deepened as she watched the gold's continuing progress. *I only wish I had your faith, my love*....

The little queen stumbled along in bronze Yengarth's wake, evidently determined to join her clutchmates with or without a rider. She could see the bright colours of her siblings ahead, could feel the touch of their minds – some confused, some happy, one hostile – could feel....

Her steps slowed and she blinked, seeing more humans nearby, humans not clad in the same brightly white robes as the others, the rejected. And there was something *else* here, something that she might just be able to –

She stopped before the tall one with the strange pointed things in her hair, feeling strength, feeling kindness. She cocked her head to one side as she gazed up into the human's face and considered her choice....

Resla held her breath as the golden dragonet looked up at her. She had to be the most perfect little hatchling she had ever seen, delicately formed from the tip of her long nose to the end of her graceful tail, and her finely faceted eyes were captivating, even full of red distress as they were. The fluid from her egg was beginning to dry on her in the fierce heat, and the brilliant hide on her shoulder twitched in irritation. "You need a rider to take care of you," Resla told her, reminding herself not to touch the creature – Incane's lesson was well learned. She couldn't say anything further,

and didn't dare suggest that it be her – even as hope crowded unexpectedly up in her throat. It wasn't unheard of for someone her age to Impress – but it was more rare than two golds in a clutch, and... a gold? For *her*?

Did she imagine that feather-touch of curiosity in her mind? 'You'll know,' she reminded herself, and waited, dizzy in the heat and surprise and sudden hope....

The little gold crooned softly, almost apologetically, as she turned her head away from the tall human, leaving Resla standing alone. Not right, not quite, not for her, but she could feel another close by, so close....

There.



Back out on the sand, Lyra watched the gold marching resolutely away from the line of candidates in pursuit of a rider elsewhere. Her face etched with disappointment, she glanced back to the lone egg left rocking by itself... and then she fainted, the sun and heat finally overwhelming her.

Hakel turned as Lyra collapsed, catching the movement out of the corner of his eye. He glanced towards the last egg, knowing that the healers wouldn't set foot on the Grounds until the final Impression had been made, then edged his way around to where the girl lay. It wasn't as if he had any interest in green or blue, after all....

He reached Lyra in the same moment as Aliana and Arlynnna, Lorelli following a moment behind them, and crouched to help Nori – who barely looked any better than her sister – shelter her from the sun: he was Igen-born and his colouring more suited to this weather than Lyra and Nori's fair skin and hair. "Come on, Lyra," he said, shaking her shoulder gently.

Arlynnna laid a careful hand against the younger girl's face. "She's burned to a crisp, poor thing. No wonder she passed out." She patted the reddened cheek gently. "Come on, Lyra, sweetie, wake up."

Hakel frowned and glanced back over his shoulder at the last remaining egg as it shivered in its sandy nest. "I hope she wakes up soon, because I'm not sure how much longer that shell is going to last...."



Unaware of the scene on the Sands, the golden hatchling turned away from Resla, reaching out with her mind... and there, *there* was the one that she wanted, the one that *would* be her own. Bugling sharply, she barged a young bronze out of the way – he was no rival, but he was a bronze and needed to know his place – and pushed her head firmly and decisively against a startled Deza's chest.

There you are! I am Keralth and I have looked so very far for you!

Deza stared at the queen. *I can't! I'm not supposed to! I'm deaf...* She looked at Resla in panic, shaking her head as tears welled up in her eyes. She was going to get in such trouble for this....

But Resla just smiled at her, her eyes filled with warmth and support and pride as her lips formed the words, "Lucky Deza."

Deza glanced around frantically to see if the Weyrlingmaster was anywhere near, then looked back down as Keralth butted against her again. Biting her lip and feeling sick with nerves, she finally allowed herself to fully meet those whirling red eyes... and Impression occurred.

And in that moment Deza learned the difference between simply hearing dragons and being bonded to one.

I want food. You will feed me now. Keralth pulled her nose away from Deza, and sniffed toward the table with the bowls of meat. She crooned sweetly at the nearby Atieth as he picked himself up after her assault. ***I have many bronzes?***

Deza struggled to her feet and reached for a bowl, half-expecting someone to slap her hand away and tell her that she was being presumptuous even as her clutchmates closed in to congratulate her.



The final egg shuddered and then split in two, releasing a delicately-boned little green onto the sand. The dragonet squeaked as she pitched into the world nose-first, flapping and floundering for a few moments before she finally got her feet beneath her and looked around, finding herself quite alone, with all of her siblings hatched and Impressed and gone to feed.

Shaking out her wings, the green started forward towards the white-clad forms that she instinctively knew were what she needed to fill the aching need within her. There was a small knot of bodies gathered together – one flat on the hot sand, others clustered around – and she could sense something there, something right for her....

Aliana gasped as the green started to head towards her and the other trying to help Lyra. "Get up, a dragon is coming!" She looked to the others for help. "If that green comes and tromps all over her it won't be pretty," she said. "For Faranth's sake, we'd better pick her up."

"No, we leave her where she is," Arlynnna told the younger woman firmly. "That green is coming here for a reason and there's nobody behind us – it's one of us that she wants. If we pick Lyra up, she may well end up getting dropped if one of us Impresses and forgets that we're holding her. Believe me, I've stood for more than enough Hatchings to know that Impression can wipe everything else out of your mind." She looked around at the others – Aliana, Nori, Lorelli and Hakel – and then down at poor heatstruck Lyra. "Come on, a few paces forward to meet her. And let's just hope that it isn't Lyra that she wants! That could get messy...."

"Right," Aliana said, looking embarrassed. Arlynnna smiled reassurance at her, then glanced at Hakel, who nodded nervously as he eyed the little green. There was a soft moan from behind them as they stepped forward, but Arlynnna didn't glance back. Hopefully the green wasn't looking for Lyra, but if she was, then they could at least buy the girl a little time to recover her senses before the dragonet got to her....

The green approached the candidates, her young mind wondering at their movement as the cluster dispersed and formed a line before the fallen one. She stopped a few paces away from them, cocking her head to one side as she

considered her choices, brushing her mind gently against each of them in turn. The fallen one wasn't for her, nor the one with hair as pale as the sands, nor the nervous male. The dark-haired females were more interesting, but only one truly called to her, truly *fit* against her seeking touch....

Trotting forward, she gazed happily up at Arlynnna. ***I am Cerauth!***

Arlynnna gasped as the connection was made, a moment of *invasion* that was suddenly impossibly *right*. She crouched, catching herself with one hand before she ended up on her knees and reached out to stroke the slender curve of Cerauth's neck. Green, not the gold she had always imagined herself on, but it was easy to let the dream go with the bright mind mingling with her own, forming a part of her she had never realised she was living without....

You are mine, Cerauth told her firmly. ***You do not need a gold.***

"So it would seem, my sweet," Arlynnna murmured. *You're hungry*, she said mentally, tentatively testing the bond between them as she felt pangs that were not her own. *Come with me, I'll get you fed.*

Not looking back once, Arlynnna started from the sands with Cerauth trotting happily behind her.



Hakel watched as Arlynnna left with the little green and felt his shoulders slump. Another Hatching over, another long wait until Ihyanith's clutch graced the sands, and he had been so *certain* that he would find his bronze this time....

Mato and Morres, the other unImpressed herder candidates, were already starting to drift off towards the edge of the sands and the promise of refreshment; Tullarin had already left, embarking on his new life as a greenrider. Weyrherder Marshall would no doubt be grateful to have only lost the one of them – the farmcrafters had seen a good half-dozen chosen today – and would be putting them to work chopping meat for the hatchlings that might have been theirs before the day was out. It was a familiar routine, one that he had been through far too often, and he'd give just about *anything* to see it from the other side with a dragon of his own.

Turning away from the last of the new weyrings, Hakel saw Lyra sitting up with her head resting against her knees, her usually pale skin burned almost as red as her hair. She'd be suffering badly for days and her sister looked no better, their crimson complexions echoed – if not quite so violently – by others left standing on the sands. They'd all have been better off if it had rained. Aliana was crouching by the sun-struck girl, talking quietly as she tried, with Nori's help, to get her to stand, and Hakel frowned, realising that he should probably try to help as well, for all that he just wanted to get off the sands and find a cup of water or three....

He caught Lorelli's eye as she moved towards the others. "Bad luck with the queen... queens."

The Oldtimer girl smiled and shrugged. "I'll have other chances to Impress – gold or green or blue or brown – more than I ever would have in the Ninth Pass. I'm just glad I had a chance to be a part of this! I wonder who the second gold went to?"

"Dunno, but I'm sure we'll find out soon enough." The hatchling queen had passed from sight after she had rejected Resla – and wouldn't *that* Impression have just topped thing off for this clutch? – but the crowd was dispersing and the dragons leaving the caldera's rim with no signs of agitation, so he could only imagine that she had found whoever she was seeking. "I just wish that...."

"She'd been bronze like we all thought?"

"Well...."

Lorelli laughed and went to help Aliana and Nori, leaving Hakel feeling faintly embarrassed. Yes, he *did* wish that that egg had held a bronze... but even leaving empty-handed, he could at least say that he had been there for a clutch that the harpers were no doubt already frantically composing ballads about. And Lorelli was right – there would be other clutches, other chances. Other bronzes.

And one of them *would* be for him.

Holding firmly to that thought, Hakel went to help Aliana and Lorelli get the sunburned sisters off of the sands.



The unseasonably clear skies persisted throughout the Hatching Feast, but by evening the clouds had returned, dark and heavy with the promise of rain. Amisseth was curled in her wallow with a full belly and a sense of smug achievement, but her rider found it less easy to settle even after the great and the good of Pern had retreated to wherever they had come from, leaving the festivities to Kadanzer's weyrfolk. A day of spectacle and noise and endless congratulations had left her longing for solitude and the chance to work through her own thoughts, to finally put this clutch and all of its peculiarities behind her.

The Hatching Grounds were dark and quiet as Cassidoria made her way out onto the sands, feeling the last of the day's savage heat warming her feet as she stopped to gaze across the empty caldera. The sailcloth screen had been packed away to await the next clutch and the broken and empty shells removed by weyrings and weyrfolk all too eager to convert such fragments of history into marks. All the talk at the Feast had been of Dwayana and Deza and ancient bloodlines, of harpersong glories made real before the eyes of the world, and it was as if nobody even recalled Faydra and her Yttrith, as if they had never existed, and for all that she was glad to –

"Abandoning your admirers so soon, Dori?"

Starting out of her thoughts, Cassidoria turned to find the Weyrwoman gazing at her in the half-light. "Lybelle, I –"

"This is getting to be a habit." Lybelle chuckled softly. "Still, I can't say that I blame you for wanting to escape – your Amisseth put on quite the show for us today. Did you know?"

"About the second gold?" Cassidoria laughed shortly. "No. No, I swear that I was as shocked as anyone. Amisseth never said a thing and you know how she is for arranging her clutches! And... things like that just don't *happen*. Not in real life. Not to *me!*"

"Why not to you? After all, why should our Dunia be the only one immortalised in song?" Lybelle sighed and cast her gaze across the empty sands. "It's fitting in a way."

This story started with two queens and it ends with two queens, and young Arohath and Keralth are a far finer memorial than Faydra deserves. Yttrith's death was a tragedy but it was far more her fault than it ever was yours. She chose badly. Amiseth did not." Lybelle smiled. "And neither did her daughters."

"Deza wasn't even a candidate."

"No," the Weyrwoman admitted, "and for good reason. But Benden has welcomed her with open arms and the promise of individual training, which is exactly what she needs. Deza's requirements would have proved disruptive if she was trained alongside the rest of her clutch, but I think that she and her Keralth will do well at Benden."

"And Dwayana?"

"A third-generation queenrider? We'll see who makes us the best offer." Lybelle's smile spread. "Arohath looks to be at least as headstrong as Yttrith ever was, but Dwayana seems to have learned well from Faydra's mistakes. I have high hopes for her, wherever she ends up. The bronzes look promising too...."

Cassidoria nodded, feeling suddenly weary, as empty as the sands before her. All of the circles had finally closed and she felt detached, outside of it all at last. The eggs had hatched, the dragonets Impressed, and whatever happened after this was none of her concern. She closed her eyes, feeling the first drops of rain splash against her face... then opened them again as Lybelle's hand settled on her shoulder. "Dori, go and get some sleep. It's over. Faydra, Yttrith, all of it. It's done, it's past. Go and rest. You've earned it."

"I don't know if I –" Cassidoria stopped and took a deep breath, reaching out for Amiseth's peacefully dozing mind. The gold dragon had no concerns, no worries for anything but the moment, her past left behind and her future open. What was done was done, good and bad alike, and all that she had to do was just *let go* and move on....

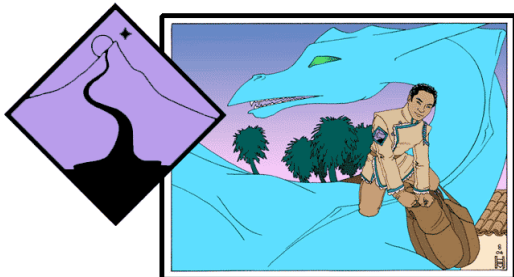
And so, with a final wordless apology to the unfortunate Faydra... she did.

You feel lighter, Amiseth commented sleepily. ***That is good. I do not like it when your mind is too heavy.***

I can't say that I'm too fond of it myself, my love. Cassidoria brushed away the tears that suddenly seemed to be filling her eyes. *But no more, all right?*

Good, the queen said firmly, then drifted back to sleep, no longer interested in the peculiarities of humans.

Looking up to meet the Weyrwoman's expectant eyes, Cassidoria smiled, more genuinely than she had managed in months. "Yes," she said, "it's over."



Kadanzer Weyr

Alternate Tenth Pass *Dragonriders of Pern*® Fanclub

www.kadanzer.org