
The More Things Change

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Alstan tugged distractedly at his new tunic for the third time in a minute, trying to recall anything that he might have forgotten. His new rank cords still felt strangely heavy on his shoulder a full seven days after his sudden promotion, and for all that he felt more than a little pride in the trust that Weyr and Craft had placed in him, he still wasn't entirely certain that he was ready for this.

Rel hopped down from his usual perch on the headstock of Alstan's gitar, pacing along the worktable for a few steps before launching himself to settle on his owner's blue-clad shoulder, humming happily into the harper's ear. Alstan reached up to pet the little brown, glad that someone was enjoying the anticipation that preceded this Hatching. There hadn't been a gold egg on Southern's sands in the best part of a decade and spectators were arriving from across Pern, the great and the good converging to enjoy the spectacle. Genna and T'del were understandably proud of Yashelth's daughter and the attention she was drawing to Southern Weyr, and riders and weyrfolk alike seemed eager to join in the gather atmosphere. It didn't seem right to be nervous as a candidate when everybody else was so determined to enjoy the day, but of all the times that Stanek could have picked....

A sharp knock at the door pulled Alstan out of his thoughts. Tugging at his elaborately embroidered tunics once more, the harper took a deep breath and called, "Come in!"

Journeyman Fedrek pushed the door open, his features set in an expression of determined neutrality as he said, "The Weyrleaders await your presence, Weyrsinger."

Alstan nodded. "Of course," he said politely, not wincing until after the other harper had turned away. Fedrek was five Turns Alstan's senior and had been at Southern Weyr for two Turns longer, but it had been Alstan that the outgoing Enril had named as his choice of successor, a choice swiftly ratified by the Fort Harperhall. The overlooked Fedrek, all too aware of his seniority at the Weyr, hadn't yet forgiven him for accepting the role.

Rel took wing as Alstan left the Weyrsinger's office, the young brown joining a fully adult green as she danced overhead. A familiar dark-haired form fell into step at the harper's side and a cheery voice said, "Is he still sulking?"

"I'm not sure I'd describe it quite like that, Ves," Alstan

said with a sigh. "I think he feels that he has understandable grievances and reservations about --"

"As I said, sulking," Vesoz said, flashing his friend a smile. "Tell him to take it up with Toric if he has a problem with it -- it's not as though Enril exactly went *far*." He looked wistfully in the direction of the Hold. "I'm going to miss being able to wind him up, you know...."

Alstan snorted. "As you said, it's not as though he's gone far."

"True, but now he can set Toric's guard on me, and where would be the fun in that?"

"Depends on who you ask." A broad grin spread across the harper's face. "I'd imagine that Enril would find it hysterical."

Vesoz chuckled and looked up as a full half-Wing of dragons appeared overhead, each adding their voice to the birthsong as they carried their passengers towards the landing field. "Shards, looks like we have most of the bloody planet coming to watch." Shaking his head at the sight, Vesoz started back towards the Weyrhall, turning to say, "I'd better get going before Fujita misses me -- she and Ima have me fetching and carrying all day. Good luck with it all!"

"Thanks, I think I may need it," Alstan said softly as the younger man jogged away. Enril's leaving the Weyr had been something of a surprise -- the older harper had been Weyrsinger for Turns and, given his rather *forthright* approach to politics, it had been generally believed that he had only gained the position through the machinations of his bronzerider -- and sometime Weyrleader -- brother, K'med. For over a decade, the harper had sent the Weyrleaders into fits by telling Lord Toric to his face what most only dared to whisper in private.

And in all that time, nobody had ever suspected that Toric might actually *like* Enril's bluntness.

So when Southern Hold's harper, the admittedly ancient Stanek, died in his office, it had been Enril that Toric requested as his replacement. Alstan had no idea what the Lord had offered by way of incentive but it had evidently been sufficient to lure the harper across the beach and into Toric's domain.

And so, Southern Weyr's Weyrsinger was now Southern Hold's harper and *far* too close for his successor's comfort, especially on a day such as today. All things considered, Alstan would far rather have faced this test without Enril being there to watch how he performed on the political stage.

More dragons burst into the air overhead, wheeling down to deposit their human loads on solid ground. Alstan watched them for a few moments, then took a deep breath and pushed his concerns down to where he could ignore them, at least until this day was done. He had work to do.



Three heartbeats after leaving Landing, Toth re-emerged above Southern Weyr, and the big brown's wings

tilted to take them in a soaring circle around the peak of the Hatching Ground. He kept the turn shallow, in deference to their passenger, and A'zelen turned his head to say over his shoulder, "We'll have to wait our turn to land!"

"Don't hurry on my account!" the woman replied, with a smile.

A'zelen had known Master Nedra since his own apprentice days at Landing, when she had been a journeywoman Starsmith and by far the best teacher of the complicated subject to students like himself, who were willing but whose strengths did not perhaps run in the direction of numbers and formulae and calculations. He wasn't at all surprised that she had made master -- few people he knew embodied the ideas of the crafter enclave at Landing better.

So he was happy being able to do her a good turn now. Not that Landing wasn't crawling with dragonriders who would have provided her with transport to Southern Weyr for the Hatching, but volunteering to go had given A'zelen a rare chance to see his parents, and taking Nedra home when it was all over would give him an opportunity to spend some time with them as well. His life at Southern was full and busy, but that didn't mean that he didn't miss Landing sometimes... not to mention the draw of catching up on all the latest finds and theories.

He'd offered to bring his parents as well, but Hatchings were terribly hard to plan for in a busy schedule and when the time came his mother was already busy with a class of her own, and his father... well, Master Melborn had never liked flying on dragons and avoided it whenever he could.

That made Nedra's obvious enthusiasm a distinct contrast, and A'zelen grinned as he faced forward again, watching along with Toth for an opening in which to land.

The brownrider loved the view of the Weyr from the air, but never more so than on a Hatching day. The Hatching Grounds peak that dominated the point of land was a dramatic sight from any angle, but only from the air could the true size of its ridge-ringed bowl be appreciated. On days like these, though, it was alive with dragons -- not just a queen on the sands and a watchpair on the peak, but most of its rim edged with a bright, moving scrim of colours and flashing wings. Dragons circled and spiralled in the air, landing to deposit passengers at the cleft in the Ground's southern end and then taking off again to find perches of their own if they were lucky.

There were few occasions that brought an entire Weyr together, and a Hatching was one of them. It was a magnificent sight, and it never failed to cause a swell of emotion in A'zelen's chest.

We will land now, Toth told him, dipping his wings and beginning his descent. A'zelen warned Nedra, and her grip around his waist tightened.

The closer they got to the ground, the more apparent their speed became as the terrain whipped by underneath and beside them. Toth's wings began to cup the air to slow them, but they were still coming in fast towards a clearing where two big bronzes and a brown were still on the ground.

A'zelen eyed the space with misgiving. *It would really help if they would* -- he started, only to have Toth interrupt him calmly.

I have told them that we are landing. They will move in time, the brown said, with absolute assurance. And indeed, almost at his words, the other brown and one of the bronzes took off, leaving plenty of room for Toth to settle in their place.

A'zelen slid off first, then turned around to help the Starsmith, who held onto the riding straps as she jumped down to the brown's considerably raised forearm. Hopping to the ground, she patted the dragon's arm, giving it a few good, hearty slaps. "Thank you, Toth!" she called, and the brown turned his head in their direction and inclined it as if in acknowledgement.

It is my pleasure, said Toth to his rider, and A'zelen smiled at the regal, pleased tone. Dragons liked courtesy as much as anyone else.

The brownrider took off his flying helmet, and offered his arm to the Starsmith. "Toth says you're welcome," he told her. "But now we've got to let him make room for others, so allow me to escort you to the viewing stands, Master."

She took his arm, and looked around with interest. "There are more people here today than for the last Hatching I came to," Nedra observed as they strolled into the steep-walled notch that would take them to the sand-filled bowl. Behind them, Toth launched himself into the sky and beat his way upwards, heading for his favourite spot on the rim.

"That will be due to the queen egg," A'zelen said.

"Ah yes, that's right, of course." Nedra laughed. "Can you believe I forgot about that? I've been so busy worrying over whether Kaitan will end this day a dragonrider or not --"

"And whether you'll get back your promising apprentice, or whether we'll get to keep him?" the brownrider asked, with a smile.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Why, A'zelen. There is no honour greater than becoming a dragonrider -- do you think for a moment that I wish anything less for him?"

His smile became wry. "Of course not. But not every master is that generous, as you know."

"Those that aren't," she returned, sharply, "forget what is truly important. You should know me better than to think that I'd agree with such fools."

That brought a full grin to the brownrider's face, his nose wrinkling with good humour. "No, Nedra," he agreed, "you're right, I know better, and I've always known you were anything but a fool."

The Starsmith master gave him a level, calculating look, before squeezing his arm and echoing his grin. "Good. Now let's find me a shady seat, young man, before the Hatching starts and they're all gone."

"I think I see Weyrsmith Baldis --" A'zelen said, shading his eyes with his other hand. "Shall we --?"

At the Starsmith's nod, he began to lead her in the direction of the entrance for that section of the stands.



At the age of fifteen, Revanne had already known that she did not want to marry whatever man her father chose for her. It wasn't that he had chosen someone she didn't like, only that she was sure that whoever he chose would be the sort of man her father wanted as a son, and as a herdsman at their cothold. This, Revanne realized even at that age, put very far down on the list the question of whether he would be the sort of man she wanted herself.

Not that she had ever met a man whom she wanted. And growing up, she had known no boys but her brothers and cousins, all of whom were annoying in that way that brothers and cousins were apt to be. Her uncle Darris had not been annoying; in fact, she had adored him, because he allowed her to tag along after him and help with his repairs on things like the sluice gate, and the millwheel, and the ancient agenothree sprayer that was always breaking down. But Darris was married, and her uncle, and though she could see in him the sort of man she might be willing to be married to, she wasn't sure she believed there could be more like him in the world.

Then, having reached the age of fifteen, her father allowed her to accompany him on his trip downriver to Delta Hold on the coast -- her, along with her younger brother and two of her cousins. For the boys it was important experience. For her father's oldest daughter, it was a chance to survey the marriage prospects to be found at the large, busy seahold. Few travellers came through their cothold, and all the residents were too closely related to her by blood for her to marry.

What her father had not counted on was her catching the eye, not of a sober, steady holder, but of a blue dragon.

Revanne was well aware that everyone in her cothold assumed that M'tan's Search of her was a convenient excuse to take her to his bed. After all, there was no queen egg on the Sands of Southern Weyr, which made the bluerider's explanation of his dragon's insistence on Searching her seem suspect, and of course, *everyone knew* about dragonriders. The truth was, Revanne remembered thinking, that *nobody knew* a flaming thing about dragonriders, which meant that they filled things in with guesswork and assumption, and whatever made for a good story.

Her father had hemmed and hawed, and she had overheard another uncle remarking to him that perhaps this was a bargain he should accept. Revanne had never been known for her sunny disposition or her generous, gentle nature. She had a sharp wit and a sharper tongue that often sent her annoying cousins and siblings scurrying away, and she was perfectly willing to knock them onto the ground if a scathing retort failed to work. She was strong, but she wasn't a great beauty, and her father agreed with his brother-in-law, privately (but also in Revanne's hearing), that he had been slightly worried about the idea of finding a husband for her at all. At least, finding a husband who wasn't likely to beat

her or strangle her before a month of the marriage had passed.

Looked at that way, perhaps allowing his daughter to go to the Weyr with a man who seemed actually to want her -- never mind what he wanted her for -- was a fine idea. Who knew what benefits might come of it?

That was the point at which Revanne had marched into the tent and pointed out to both men that it was her right to accept Search or not, and her father's wishes had little to do with it -- an action that really had only confirmed what they had been saying all along.

Revanne didn't particularly care that her family thought she was going off to the Weyr to become some dragonrider's lover. She hadn't actually been afraid that M'tan would force her -- only an idiot, or an over-protective father, would have believed that of the bluerider, who was earnest and friendly and so very clearly not that kind of man at all.

Once at the Weyr, Revanne had known that she'd made the right decision. With no queen egg on the Sands, there was no candidate training to go through, and the weyrfolk were remarkably anxious to help her feel at home and to find her something to do -- something that *she* wanted to do, which surprised her, as she had been half-wondering if they would simply assign her to the laundries.

She did, in fact, work in the laundries -- she had never seen so many clothes and linens before in her life, and by the time her stint there was done, she never wanted to again -- and she also worked in the kitchens, and in the gardens, and with the Weyr's herders. Sooner rather than later, though, she had come across Weyrsmith Baldis, the man who kept everything running, from the carts used to haul compost to the great spits outside the kitchens, to the plumbing all around the Weyr, and especially the flamethrowers that the queenriders used when they flew Threadfall.

Baldis had proved remarkably similar in outlook and temperament to her uncle Darris, only a bit softer, a bit less rough, and even more radically accepting of the idea that a girl might have a talent for the kinds of things that a Smith had to do. Darris, she realized, had tolerated her help, because in a remote cothold like Three Rapids, far upriver from Delta Hold, everyone had to pitch in where they could and it would be foolish to ignore talent where you found it. But it was only after she met and worked with Baldis that she understood what being valued for her talents meant.

That had been three Turns ago, and in all that time, no queen eggs had been laid at Southern -- much to the chagrin of M'tan, who every time he saw her felt compelled to apologize and reassure her that his Nolth had been insistent, utterly adamant that she be Searched. Even though, disconcertingly, Nolth no longer remembered this at all.

Still, working for the Weyrsmith was fulfilling, and in Revanne's opinion just as good as if she had Impressed a dragon. The journeymen who assisted Baldis weren't always as open-minded as the older man, but he kept them in line. He had apprenticed her, formally, with the approval of his Craftmaster -- the Smiths were still one of the Crafts most

welcoming of women, though most of those seemed to prefer to work at Crafhalls or at places like Landing.

What was more, nobody expected her to marry.

Baldis had begun to talk recently about what Revanne would have to do in order to become a journeyman. He thought that they would have to send her away, temporarily at least, to one of the Crafhalls, so that the masters could examine her and so that she could learn things that he couldn't teach her himself, in the Weyr. Revanne found herself looking forward to that. Not because she didn't like the work at the Weyr, but because Baldis was right, there were things that the Weyr did not call upon them to do, that she would at least like to try for herself.

She thought that she would want to return here, as a journeywoman - she knew that Baldis wanted that, too -- or perhaps that she would go to another Weyr. She liked the work, and the people, and the way of life here. But she knew that she couldn't know for certain, until she tried the other possibilities open to her.

And then Yashelth, Southern Weyr's senior queen, changed all of those thoughts and plans by laying a gold egg....



Bressa could feel the humming in her teeth, in her bones, the dragons' song filling her and quickening her pulse in anticipation of what was to come. The midday heat was oppressive, even beneath the broad branches of an ancient spongewood tree, and she wiped her palms against the thin white robe that seemed to cling to her slender form, wondering, not for the first time, what it would be like to actually Impress. Around her, other girls shuffled and whispered to one another, occasionally casting glances across to where the boys waited in their own anxious line.

It was different for the boys, of course. Eight or nine clutches graced the sands of Southern every Turn, clutches whose wobble-legged contents required riders. If any of the boys failed today, there would be another Hatching before Turn's End, another chance to find their partner on the sands. The Wings needed fresh blood, young men to take the place of those lost to the ancient foe. The role of women was to keep the Weyr fed, to support it from the ground and to provide the sons that would Impress in the future. Or so - Bressa allowed herself a small smile -- her father would have her believe.

Today, however, she would take to the sands and know that Reilen was every bit as excited as she was. It had been Turns since a gold egg had last graced the sands of Southern Weyr, Turns in which Bressa, like every other girl in the Weyr, had waited and dreamed and wondered. Queen dragons were a breed apart, their fertility granting them a power that no other colour could command. And, most importantly, no queen would accept a male as her rider. Today would likely be Bressa's only hope of joining her bluerider brother in the skies, of making real the sundreams

she had harboured in her heart since she had first learned what Impression meant.

Bressa clung to that thought, remembering the rapture on Veitor's face as he met Isalth's eyes. There would be pain and there would be danger, but it would be worth it. *It had to be worth it.*

The humming seemed to be growing louder, more insistent, the sound of the crowd gathered to view the spectacle just audible above the draconic chorus. Toying with the end of the thick, black braid of her hair, Bressa distractedly wondered who would be there, if the presence of the gold shell had attracted dignitaries from further afield than merely Southern. It had long been a game to try to spot visiting notables in the stands, pointing out Weyrleaders and Craftmasters and Lords in their finery. Lord Toric barely counted, so familiar a sight was he, but the Masterharper had attended Irineth's last Hatching and the Tillek Lord had been a regular attendee when his sons had stood Candidate. Of course, if the day went well, then perhaps *she* would be one of the dignitaries at future Hatchings....

The girls around her suddenly hushed, and Bressa pushed aside her daydreams as Weyrleader T'del and Weyrleader G'teris appeared. G'teris only glanced their way before moving to address the boys, but the Weyrleader strode towards them with a proud smile. "So, ladies, are you ready to meet Yashelth's daughter?"

Bressa smiled back fiercely. "Yes, sir!" Around her, others replied with varying degrees of confidence, some giggling nervously, others seemingly struck dumb by the occasion.

"Good, good," T'del nodded approval, looking at each of them in turn. "Remember what you've been told about handling hatchlings -- let her approach you, don't touch her unless she's in obvious physical distress, and don't impede her progress. Clear the sands as soon as she has Impressed. Do you understand all of that?"

"Yes, sir!" came the chorus again.

"Good. Ladies, if you would follow me...."



Alstan took his seat near the Weyrwoman, noting almost absently that the Weyrsinger got a rather better view of the proceedings than his journeymen ever did, not to mention a far more comfortable chair. T'del, as Weyrleader, was still on the sands, leading the girls to take their places around Yashelth's precious gold egg, and Alstan slid a glance towards K'med, seated on Genna's other side. Gold Yashelth was a strong, mature queen, but she was quite enamoured with both K'med's bronze Lorth and T'del's Suloth, a fact that meant the Weyrleadership switched from one man to the other with startling frequency. The bronzeriders seemed to take this in good part, each naming the other as his Weyrsecond whenever Yashelth's fickle favours changed and maintaining some continuity that way. Lorth, however, had yet to sire a queen on any gold and Alstan had to wonder if that affected K'med's attitude

towards his old friend and rival. Enril had always been remarkably difficult to draw out on the subject of his younger brother, evidently feeling some loyalty there despite their frequent arguments. There had been those who wondered if their bickering had had anything to do with Enril's decision to leave the Weyr but Alstan knew better -- all the fights and occasional stony glares amounted to little more than two strong and similar personalities contained within the same family.

The eggs rocked and twitched on the sands below, their occupants fighting their gradual way towards birth. The queen egg, half again as large as its siblings and touched with a golden sheen that made it almost glow in the afternoon sun, was set to one side and guarded by a jealous Yashelth, the queen's usually amiable manner transformed in the defence of her daughter. Dragons perched around the eroded rim of the Grounds, each as eager to see the event as their riders in the stands. A Hatching was always a fine spectacle and this one promised to be a finer show than most. Hopefully the little queen would choose well and not show tastes quite so... *eccentric* as Zyath's.

Rel fidgeted on the harper's shoulder, all eager impatience, and Alstan reached up to soothe him -- he was doing his best to train the young firelizard to good behaviour but his new duties weren't making the task easy. Looking down at the rapidly filling stands, the Weyrsinger recognised the Southern Lord and his entourage taking their seats, Enril's dark head clearly visible next to Toric's white thatch. The Paradise River Lord was also present -- if sitting well away from the Southern delegation, Alstan noted -- as were several Northern Lords, several high-ranked crafters, and the Leaders of what looked to be most of the Weyrs of Pern.

And, the Weyrsinger was certain, *more* than a few of those Weyrs' wingleaders, lured to Southern not by the promise of a new queen but by that of one already a few Turns out of her shell. Teshea's elevation to Weyrwoman-to-be had attracted more than a little attention from the more ambitious bronzeriders, and not just at Southern -- every social occasion that the goldrider attended seemed to be awash with hopeful suitors from across the world. The Hatching would have attracted considerable interest even without the added incentive of Barrier Mountain's future Leadership, but with it, the politicking became all the more intense. The rumour was that Toric was not overly-pleased at the idea of having his territory split between two different Weyrs, even if he did know -- and, to some extent, respect -- the new Weyrwoman. The Southern Lord was getting no younger and as his holding spread it was accepted that it was only a matter of time before some upstart tried to claim a Lordship in the more distant territories. The patrol area of a new Weyr might just look like a natural place to draw political lines of a different sort...

Alstan sighed to himself. The last time he had settled down to watch dragon eggs hatch, he had just needed to look and listen and report back to Enril. Today, he was at the centre of the information web, trying to make sense of

the complicated relations that made up the political landscape of the South, a political landscape that *he* was now an intrinsic part of. There were those who thought that being a harper was all about looking good with a guitar and, indeed, that was often the image that drew young men to apprentice to the Craft, but the reality was entirely more complex.

Hushing Rel once more, Alstan watched the spectators take their seats and waited for the show to begin.



Whenever Lord Toric being home at Southern coincided with a Hatching at the Weyr, it was the Lord's custom to attend. His relationship with the Weyr had had its ups and downs over the Turns, sometimes alarmingly so, but one thing that Toric liked was to remind people, friends and opponents alike, of his importance. The South's first Lord also, Weyrsinger Enril had remarked on more than one occasion, liked to know what was going on, especially on his own doorstep as it were, and he had never lost the habit of trusting his own firsthand observations before those of any representative.

Therefore, he attended Hatchings. Not necessarily out of interest in the event itself, but for the opportunity it presented to come into the Weyr, to observe, to test the waters with various bronzeriders whom Toric might, one day, find leading the Weyr his neighbour. He came, he dressed well, he still looked frighteningly fit for a man of his age, his broad shoulders still unstooped, tall and sun-bronzed with a mane of perfectly white hair and a voice that could still be heard across the Hatching Grounds. Often he was accompanied by his lady; sometimes, by whoever his Heir might be (lately, a favoured grandson). Once in a while, his Steward attended him. And even when he came alone, he was escorted by a guard.

A'zelen remembered Alstan asking Enril about that, back when Alstan had only just arrived at the Weyr. Was it meant as a not-so subtle insult to the Lord's dragonrider hosts, that he felt the need to bring a soldier along with him? Enril had laughed sardonically, and said that probably yes, there was an element of calculated insult to it, because the Lord had always been known for being a provocative man. It both amused him, and served a purpose, as he studied the reactions to his provocations. But besides that, it was a practical matter. The guard wore his livery, leaving no one in doubt as to Toric's identity; and it gave the Lord someone to wait upon him, another subtle show of power and prestige.

Toric often showed more avid interest in Hatchings that featured gold eggs -- whether or not he approved of the power that women wielded in the Weyr, he seemed to be a pragmatic enough man to acknowledge that reality. Just as he was interested in the bronzeriders for their potential to become Weyrleaders, so he recognized in even hatchling golds the potential for her rider to become Weyrwoman within his lifetime. Gold Hatchings, too, brought in more

spectators, affording Southern's Lord a greater chance to see and be seen.

This time, A'zelen saw, the Lord was accompanied by Lady Nalesse, and the grandson, Heir Torald, as well as a dark, pretty woman the brownrider assumed must be the Heir's lady. He didn't remember seeing her before, and made a note to ask Enril - no, to ask Alstan her name. He shook his head slightly. That was going to take some getting used to.

In fact, yes, there was Enril, standing on Toric's right - showing his change in station already. There were some who would miss the old Weysinger, and A'zelen was surprised to realize that he numbered among them. He and Enril had never been great friends, but... he did recognize the man's worth as a Harper. As did Lord Toric, apparently, surprising as that was.

No matter what happened out on the sands today, the brownrider thought to himself, this was likely to prove one of the most interesting Hatching Feasts that Southern had seen in a long time. And it wasn't even worth betting that he'd enjoy watching Alstan's debut as Weysinger a great deal more than Alstan would enjoy participating in it himself. That was a given. The younger man was probably wishing right at this moment that Fedrek had been named to the post instead of him, no matter what an honour it was.

But before that excitement, it was time to find out who Southern Weyr's newest queenrider would be.

Seeing his weyrmate Sharenne approaching the stands, A'zelen made room for her next to him, just as he also saw the Candidates beginning to file out. The hatching was about to begin.



Bressa's heartbeat was hammering in her ears as the Weyrleader led her and the other girls into the eroded caldera that housed Southern's Hatching Grounds. After Turns as a spectator, she felt painfully self-conscious at having so many eyes trained on her, at being at the centre of so much attention. The sands were baking beneath her feet as she followed T'del to where Yashelth crouched with the golden-hued egg twitching before her, set carefully apart from the twenty-two shells that formed the remainder of the clutch. The queen rumbled low in her throat as the girls arrayed themselves before the precious egg, observing them through slitted eyes, and Bressa curtsied clumsily, feeling that some show of respect were needed. She caught T'del's nod of approval from the corner of her eye and flushed, pleased to have done something right as the other young women followed her example.

Taking a deep breath, Bressa glanced around at her rivals for the new queen. Two dozen girls for a single egg, most older than her own seventeen Turns, but a few younger. Holdbred and weyrbred alike, they had been carefully selected from all those who might wish for the honour of riding gold. Some, like Mareha and Tesai, were girls Bressa had know her whole life, while others were still

virtual strangers, whisked away from their homes and families to take their place on Southern's sands. A few were unsuccessful Candidates from other Weyrs, sent to try again; Luana, standing confidently to one side, had been brought in from Benden and seemed to think that that fact alone guaranteed her the queen.

Bressa snorted softly. As if there were *any* guarantees where draconic choice was concerned....

The humming ceased abruptly, leaving human gasps and a distinctly non-human wail to fill the void. Half turning, Bressa could see wet brown wings flapping and flailing at the remnants of a shell as the first hatchling announced his arrival. Finally freeing himself, the brown stumbled towards the waiting boys while other shells rocked and cracked behind him, disgorging a blue, two greens, a handsome bronze --

Swallowing hard, Bressa forced herself to look away from the other eggs and to focus on the golden shell before her. *Choose me*, she thought fiercely at the dragonet within. *Please. Choose me and we will be perfect together!*



Revanne's thoughts were focused not on the Hatching but on the thing that already made her special, on the journeyman's knots she was sure she could earn, and on whether Baldis might send her to Telgar Smithcraft hall itself, and what that place would be like. The problem with being a candidate, she mused, with a kind of detached clarity, was that every one of them, every girl here and every boy over there, had been Searched. And every Search dragon and his rider had no doubt been convinced of their choice, as they had to be. But just look at the numbers. There were two dozen girls here for a single egg, a single queen who would choose only one of them and leave the others standing, no matter how special they had been at the moment of their Search.

Then the golden egg cracked and broke open.

Revanne studied the gold dragonet critically; she had never seen a gold hatch before, of course, no matter how many other hatchings she'd attended. Even now, the little queen was noticeably bigger than her clutchmates, which Revanne supposed made sense, given how big the egg had been. She was no more graceful or gainly than the rest, though, as she swung her richly golden head from side to side and made querulous noises.

The hatchling marched forward, towards the nearest of the girls; of course, it would be Luana, who seemed to think that the dragonet was heading directly for her and that was that. Revanne was quite sure that she shouldn't be feeling the wave of satisfaction that washed over her when the gold bypassed the girl with hardly a glance... and that, she realized, brought the hatchling closer. Only Ashena was between her and --

And then the gold was past Ashena, not looking at the short, plump seaholder's daughter either, and Revanne raised her chin slightly, as if bracing for what was coming, as she

became next in the line that the dragonet would have to examine and pass... or not.

There was hardly a hitch in the little queen's step as she passed Revanne by, too.

Well, and that was that, the Smith girl thought, curiously unmoved by the rejection. It *still* didn't seem quite real, as she turned her head to follow the queen's progress down the line until she stopped in front of Tesai, a weyrbred girl who Revanne quite liked, actually, and with a twitch of her tail and a moment's study, the queen chose.

So, she had tried. And Nolth had been wrong, but so had another few dozen Search dragons, and that was the way it always was. But it didn't really make much difference to Revanne. Search had still brought her great fortune, and put her on the path to a life she loved. If it wasn't a life that included bonding with a dragon, it was still a very good life indeed.



Bressa held her breath as the little gold paused before Tesai... then let it out in a sigh of disappointment as the hatchling butted joyfully at her new rider, who dropped to her knees murmuring, "Sirith, of course, of course...."

She watched the pair numbly. She had known Tesai since childhood and it was hard not to feel joy for her, but it was harder still to not feel the bitter burn of jealousy. Swallowing hard, Bressa turned to leave the sands with the others --

And stopped, half-thinking that someone had called her name, although her ears told her that no one had. Shaking her head, she took another step forward and the vague sense of summons increased, a wordless nagging at the back of her skull, like some forgotten task whose details could not be placed. Bressa glanced back to where Tesai was climbing to her feet, still babbling happily to Sirith, then frowned as a sudden commotion arose from the watching crowd, a stirring that swiftly spread to the other girls. "Oh! Look!" Otana gasped from just behind her. "She must want one of us!"

Bressa was almost knocked to the ground as Luana fled the sands, closely followed by Aoni and several of the holdbred girls, none apparently willing to risk the choice of the small, dark green hatchling that was stumbling away from the boys and towards Sirith's rejects. *Father wouldn't approve*, Bressa found herself thinking, but she couldn't force her legs to movement, couldn't do anything but stand and wait for the green to reach her. Otana and Mareha took tentative steps towards the dragonet, as deaf to the Weyrleader's bellowed commands to leave the sands as Bressa herself was, their eyes wide with hope and excitement and for a moment Bressa thought --

There! The green's head swung away from Otana, and Bressa cried out as something *other* meshed with her mind, the sense of invasion lasting but a moment before being swept away in a rush of joy that had Bressa scrambling

forward to gather the sand-specked dragonet to her. ***I was looking for you but you were so very far away!***

"Oh, Devereth, I'm here now, I'm here..." Bressa breathed, lost to anything but the glory that was her dragon. How could she have ever thought she wanted a gold?

I am not gold, Devereth said, her baby thoughts and emotions meshing with Bressa's in a way that transcended human speech. ***I AM hungry!***

Bressa blinked, instinct driving her to her feet as the green's hunger pushed through the rapture of Impression. She looked around, realising that they would need to trek across to where the boys were still awaiting the last of the hatchlings if Devereth were to find the meat she so desperately craved. Devereth swung her head around, her infant movements ungainly. ***I was there before***, she protested. ***I am hungry HERE!***

"She's beautiful, Bressa, congratulations."

Bressa blinked and looked up, pushing her senses back out to acknowledge the wider world outside of the bond she now shared with Devereth. "Thank you," she breathed, smiling shyly at Tesai. "Congratulations on your gold."

A faint blush coloured Tesai's dark cheeks as she looked down at her own dragon, who responded by flexing her brassy wings and making a croaky sound of impatience.

Sirith is hungry too, Devereth reported, then added, ***but I am hungrier!***

Each smiling indulgently at their own dragons, the two girls set off in search of the Weyrleader and the food that awaited them.



Gortelth Impresses, Toth reported, continuing his steady litany, as he did every Hatching. With each announcement came a vague impression of dragonet colour, and A'zelen basked in the remembered glow of his own Impression to the brown.

The queen hatches, the brown added, unnecessarily, for A'zelen could not only see the moment but could hear the exclamation of the crowd around him. He sensed, over distance, Toth drawing himself up slightly, paying greater attention.

"Oh! Isn't she a pretty colour!" exclaimed Sharene beside him, and A'zelen, his arm around her slim shoulders, hugged her to him briefly. The little queen was wobbly and awkward, squawking and overbalanced, but her hide did shine with a deep, mellow, rich colour even through the detritus of shards and shell-fluid.

This Hatching was almost over. Most of the eggs had cracked and their inhabitants had found their lifemates, although a few hatchlings still stumbled around the sands, inspecting candidates. Only one or two eggs remained intact, and just as A'zelen thought it, one broke apart to tumble out a blue dragonet. ***Dimath Impresses***, said Toth absently, of a remaining green. The brown's attention was definitely focused on the queen, who even now had reached the semi-circle of girls.

To the nervous, expectant, waiting girls, the little queen's scrutiny probably felt like it was taking forever. To the spectators it happened all too quickly, the gold working her way down the line, sometimes pausing to inspect and sometimes not, before she stopped in front of a dark-skinned girl who fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around the dragonet.

Sirith Impresses, Toth announced, his deep mind-tone a heady mixture of strong approval and dignified draconic deference, even to so small a queen. Around them the crowd gasped, and bronzes bugled, and out on the sands the disappointed girls turned around and began to make their way off the Hatching Grounds.

But it seemed that the bonding of a new gold pair wasn't the last of this Hatching's excitement. Over on the sands where the main part of the clutch had hatched, a few dragonets still tottered around, looking for their own bondmates, and one, a darkish green, had broken off from the main grouping and was heading away from her clutchmates at an angle.

"Look at that green," Sharenne said, just at the moment that A'zelen noticed the dragonet himself. His weyrmate shaded her eyes. "Where's she off to?"

"Uh-oh," said the brownrider, all too able to guess. He shot a wordless question to his dragon.

She is searching, the brown answered him, complacently. This was no cause for worry to the dragons.

"Given her direction, I'd say she might want one of the girls," A'zelen said aloud.

It happened, once in a while. Not often. But ever since the day when a green had climbed into the Hatching Stands at Benden Weyr and chosen a female rider, Weyrleaders around Pern had not exactly encouraged what was happening now on the Southern sands, but not entirely discouraged it either. On those rare occasions when girls went out on the sands to stand around a gold egg, one or two (or on one memorable and historic occasion at Fort Weyr, three) might find themselves selected by greens.

Accordingly, out on the sands now, some of the erstwhile queen candidates hurried away; willing to Impress gold, perhaps, but not green. Some hesitated, and a few moved forward almost eagerly.

The little green, as if she had already made her decision, bypassed them and went straight up to a tall and slender dark-haired girl.

"Stars above, that's Bressa!" Sharenne exclaimed. At the same moment, Toth said in A'zelen's mind, *Devereth Impresses*. This time, the brown's tone did not give a hint that he thought this unusual, or of particular note.

"Can't wait to hear what Weyrhealer Reilen has to say about that!" the brownrider said aloud, with a smile at his surprised weyrmate.

"He won't like it!" she said, with conviction, and A'zelen snorted.

"He can dislike it all he likes, but I think he's going to find an awful lot of people reminding him of the old axiom that dragon choice is never wrong." And, while the

Weyrleaders, and any dragonriders really, would be among the strongest supporters of that argument, A'zelen had a feeling that, as the Harperhall's official voice of tradition in the Weyr, their new Weyrsinger Alstan was about to find his powers of argument and persuasion put to the test, at least when it came to smoothing down a shocked father's ruffled feathers.



"I can't complain about the young queen's choice," Genna said in an undertone, "or that green's for that matter -- young Bressa's a bright girl. But something tells me that Reilen may be in need of a stiff drink."

Alstan nodded. "He didn't look too happy, did he?" In truth, that was something of an understatement -- Southern's Weyrhealer had been sitting just a few seats from the harper and had managed to come out with some words that might make a sailor blush when his daughter Impressed. "I'll keep an eye on him, Weyrwoman, though I think his wife and Journeyman Wenras have him in hand for the moment."

"You do that," Genna said, pausing to smile brightly at the Holder of the recently founded Waterfall Hold. "I suspect that much of the excitement here will have to do with Teshea's admirers -- nothing that she can't handle. Keep your ears open with the Holders, though, especially those in what will become Barrier Mountain's territory. Liase with Enril if you can -- let's see if we can't make his tendency to speak his mind work *for* us for once."

"Leave it with me, Weyrwoman." Alstan watched as the goldrider moved off and suppressed his groan. He had been hoping to avoid Enril for as long as possible but it was true that the other harper would be watching the politicking of the Holders with even greater interest than he himself would and comparison of notes would do no harm to either side. He just didn't want to find himself getting critiqued on this particular performance....

Moving through the throng as it drifted in the direction of the Weyrhall and the Hatching Feast, Alstan found himself reassuring several holders that greens invariably preferred boys, and that no, Search riders wouldn't be stealing away their daughters as well as their sons -- girls only stood for golds and besides, today's unexpected Impression had been weyrbred. No, they couldn't take the dragon away from her -- Impression was irrevocable and draconic choice was never wrong as any rider would be pleased to tell them....

He was making his way through the Weyrhall, checking on the entertainment rota with his journeymen and trying to position himself closer to some of Toric's more southerly holders in the hope of hearing something interesting, when a woman dressed far too practically to be a holder wife touched his arm. "Weyrsinger -- I believe congratulations are in order on your promotion?"

Alstan turned, his smile wide and polite. "Why thank you... Master Nedra," he said, spotting the cords of a Smith master on her shoulder and recalling her face from

occasional trips to Landing. "It's always a pleasure to see fellow Crafters attending Hatchings."

"Oh, I had to be here today," she told him. "One of my boys -- an apprentice, that is, Kaitan -- was Searched."

"Did he Impress?"

"A green," Nedra said, her expression one of almost maternal pride. "I don't yet know her name, but I hope to catch up with Kai-- with K'tan later. I'm sorry to lose him, but there is no greater calling than to be a dragonrider."

"I'm sure that the Weyrwoman would be glad to hear you say that," Alstan told her. "Not everyone is so pleased to part with an apprentice or a child."

"Then they're fools who think that the Pass is already done," Nedra said dismissively. "Thread will be a historical curiosity soon enough, but for now Pern still needs every dragon available and I for one will not begrudge the Weyr any apprentice it needs."

Alstan didn't allow his expression of polite agreement to waver at those words -- the truth of Dunia's origin was not known outside of the Weyrs and, while the harper knew full well that rumours had leaked out on occasion, none seemed to have been regarded as anything more than just that -- rumour. Certainly the starsmiths at Landing, of whom Nedra was one, had more reason than most to want to believe the Ninth Pass the last. "It's undeniable that the South needs more dragons right now," the harper said, "given how rapidly the population is expanding."

"Show holders land and they'll breed to fill it," Nedra said with a snort. "Too many promising girls are being denied the chance to apprentice in the South because their fathers want to expand their holdings as fast as they can."

"Sadly true," Alstan said. "And not all crafters are willing to encourage girls anyway."

"I trust that you're not among that number, Weyrsinger?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Of course not!" the harper assured her quickly. "The lack of female apprentices amongst the harpers here was Enril's doing, not mine. But you know how it is -- even those Crafts that accept women are leaving the choice to the ranking crafters at each site. For example, we have girls apprenticed with our Smiths -- indeed, one stood for the gold today -- but none with our Healers or Herders."

"Times are changing," Nedra said confidently. "The women of Pern are finally showing themselves to be more than just wives and mothers. Even the dragons are sensing the shift in the wind -- that green knew who she was looking for and it wasn't a boy. There are more and more greens finding women to be just as capable as riders as men."

"There are still more women riding gold than green," Alstan pointed out with a smile.

"For now," the starsmith said, looking around at the riders filling their plates. "If the girls were allowed the same access to the sands as the boys, if they weren't just held back for the queens, who knows what might happen?"

"More upset fathers, most likely, if the Weyrs started taking daughters for every clutch." Alstan looked around, wondering where Reilen had ended up, and caught Rel

before the little brown could make a break for the cold meats. "But you never know -- maybe one day the rules will change."

Nedra sighed. "Not soon enough, Weyrsinger. Not soon enough."



Being a wingsecond meant attending one's wingleader and, much as it wasn't A'zelen's preference, circulating amongst the guests of the Hatching. He spoke to Holders and their ladies, and listened to parents who wanted to exclaim over sons who had Impressed. Just as frequently, he had to lend a sympathetic ear and reassuring voice to the parents of the disappointed.

Whenever possible, though, A'zelen hung back, letting J'hanos take the lead and the brunt of the encounters.

"Making him do all the talking again, are you?" whispered a voice in his ear, and the brownrider turned his head to see Vesoz's grin. The young man held up a moisture-beaded pitcher and offered to refill A'zelen's cup.

"He's good at this kind of thing," he said, nodding at where the charismatic bronzerider was smiling warmly down at a short, older woman, wearing the colours of a minor Hold, who had her hand on his arm and was speaking earnestly.

Vesoz snorted. "And of course, being a harper, you wouldn't be good at it at all."

A'zelen shot the younger man a quelling look. "I didn't say I *wasn't* good at it," he pointed out loftily. "Didn't say I liked it, either."

"You think Jal does?" the bronzerider's brother asked wryly, and A'zelen shrugged, unsympathetically.

"I think that your brother has ambitions that mean he can use all the practice at this sort of thing that he can get."

"Oh, so really, you're doing him a favour. This is for his own good," Vesoz said, nodding in understanding.

"Absolutely," the brownrider confirmed, with a perfectly straight face.

"Well, don't look now, but I think D'ralt is about to do you a similarly good turn," said the young man cheerfully, nodding past A'zelen's shoulder before melting away into the crowd.

A'zelen glanced behind him, and sure enough, the older bronzerider had that look on his face that he privately identified as 'wingleader looking for a graceful means of escape'.

"That is very interesting, Master Loaker," D'ralt was saying to middle-aged man wearing the knots and colours of a Smithcrafter. "And do you know, my wingsecond is the very man to tell the entire story to. He was once apprenticed at Landing, you know, and I am sure that he will -- A'zelen, there you are!"

The brownrider put on a welcoming smile and his most open, inviting expression, knowing when he was caught. "Wingleader," he acknowledged with a nod. "Smithmaster,

it's an honour. I'm sure you don't remember me, but you may have known my parents..."

Over the crafter's shoulder, A'zelen caught a glimpse of Vesoz's wink and cheeky grin, and it was all he could do not to allow his attentive expression to change as he waved dismissively at the younger man, out of the Smith's line of sight. He could be charming when he needed to, so he took another sip of chilled white wine, and set about proving it.



Bressa watched Devereth as the little green finally succumbed to sleep, her belly swollen with her first meal. It was so hard to believe that this perfect creature was hers, all hers....

Finally managing to take her eyes from the hatchling green, Bressa looked across to where Tesai stroked Sirith's eyeridges, soothing the young queen into her own slumber. It was so hard to believe that she had wanted to Impress the golden hatchling, that she might ever have wanted any dragon but Devereth. Her brother V'tor had told her that Impression changed everything, but she had never quite understood what he meant until Devereth's eyes had met her own.

"I never thought I'd actually do it," Tesai said softly as she straightened up. "I never thought she'd choose me...."

"What, you think she'd prefer someone like Luana?" Bressa chuckled softly at the memory of the look on the other girl's face when Sirith passed her over. "Being Searched by Benden doesn't guarantee you a gold, no matter what some people think. And she didn't want to consider anything but gold, did she?"

"More fool her." Tesai crossed the room -- in actuality a sectioned-off corner of the Weyrling Barracks into which a second bed had hastily been dragged when it had become clear that there would be two female weyrlings instead of the expected one -- and settled down at her friend's side. "We're the ones they chose... oh, I can just imagine what my mother is going to say when I see her!" Tesai laughed. "I'm a queenrider! I can't believe I'm a queenrider!"

"And I'm a greenrider," Bressa said, her smile brilliant, "and I think I *know* what my father is going to say." She sighed, but her smile barely faltered. "He won't even take female apprentices -- he's never been happy with the thought of women doing 'men's work'. And there's nothing more masculine than being a fighting rider...."

"Tell him to argue it out with Devereth. I'm sure she'd put him right." Tesai grinned and hugged her knees to her for a moment before hopping off the bed as a tap sounded on the wooden divider that separated them from the boys and Weyrlingsecond A'heyn's voice came from the other side.

"Ladies, the showers are empty if you want to take your turn."

"We'll be right there, sir!" Tesai called, then paused as her gaze returned to Sirith's sleeping form. "I still can't

believe she's mine. Do you think she'll notice if I leave her?"

"I think we'll be back long before they wake up," Bressa said, looking at the elegant lines of Devereth's dark green neck, the way her tail curled around her neatly folded limbs. She wasn't gold... but there were things more important than mere colour and the promise of eggs, Bressa now realised. "And I think I'm almost as hungry as Devereth was...."

"Almost as sticky too," Tesai said, one brown hand plucking at her white robe, now stained with blood and sand and egg fluids. She looked at the gather gown hanging on a peg, the clothing having been brought to the Barracks before the new pairs had even arrived. "I think I need that shower."

"Me too," Bressa said quietly, forcing herself to look away from her green as she made her way towards the door. It was time to get ready to face the world and to face her father. Touching the warm place in her mind that was purely *Devereth*, Bressa decided that she didn't much care what Reilen thought.

She was a greenrider. Her dragon's approval was the *only* one that mattered.



"Aha! *There* you are!"

The crowds were thinning, the Feast winding down as riders took the Hatching guests home. Alstan was exhausted, having spent what seemed like a month on his feet, smiling and speaking and listening and organising and even taking a few turns with the entertainers himself, his new rank ensuring some interest in his musical performance. He still needed to speak to his fellow harpers and to the ranking riders -- and to Vesoz, whose natural nosiness had its uses -- to see what information they had picked up during the course of the day, carefully crafting a mosaic of intelligence that would serve both the Weyr and the Harpercraft well in their political dealings. With so much to think about and so much to do, Southern's Weysinger had almost forgotten the presence of his predecessor until the familiar voice sounded from behind him and a firm hand landed on his shoulder. "I was beginning to think that you were avoiding me!"

Alstan turned to look up at the taller man. "Harper Enril," he said with a smile more genuine than he had thought it might be. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Well, I thought I ought to look in on the old place," the former Weysinger said, glancing around. "Seeing as we're neighbours and all. Good to see that you haven't managed to run it into the ground just yet."

"I'm doing my best," Alstan said lightly, inwardly cringing as he awaited Enril's verdict. He personally thought that the day had gone rather well, but the other man had never been one to hold back on his opinions. "It was all a bit hectic today but I think it went well."

"It certainly seemed to," Enril replied, pitching his voice low. "Hard to go wrong with a gold egg, of course, but wading through the politics after is a bloody headache. You

think *you* have it hard with Genna, K'med and T'del, you should try it with Lord Cranky across the beach. Can't blame him for wanting to keep an eye on all the underlings but it's not easy when they're scattered all over the arse end of the planet."

"I can imagine," Alstan said, startled to realise that Enril seemed to be forgoing the performance review. "Did you catch the interplay between Hedrik of Redvale and Senril of Twintail Falls?"

Enril looked interested. "Not directly, though I did see them speaking at the edge of the Gather Square before the dancing started. You got more?"

Alstan nodded. "I'll give you the details --"

"Oh, forget them," the older harper said with a dismissive gesture. "They can wait. You *know* what I want to hear about! What did old Reilen do when his daughter got nabbed by that green? I saw Wenras pouring wine down him at the Feast but couldn't get close enough to hear what was said."

"Ah, well, you *did* want to go over to the Hold and give up that nice seat right next to the other senior Weyr crafters...."

"Yes, yes, I know. Come on -- what did old Baldy have to say for himself?"

Alstan grinned. "Nothing that I'd want to repeat in polite company, so I'll tell you later. But I wouldn't have thought it was possible for anyone to turn quite that shade of purple and live. Didn't help when all the riders kept congratulating him too...."

"Hah, he's been in a Weyr long enough to know how people react to Impression of any colour," Enril opined, a wicked glint in his eye. "And no rider is going to say that a dragon made a bad choice!"

"Well, there was Zyath...."

"The exception that proves the rule. So, Reilen though to get a goldrider in the family and ended up with a green. He's going to be going around with a face like a constipated wher for the next month, I can just see it." Enril sighed happily. "Almost makes me sorry I'm not here to enjoy it...."

"You have Lord Cranky to play with, remember?"

"Yes, and there is a man who really *appreciates* a good argument." The older harper chuckled. "So, Weyrsinger, shall we find some wine and compare political notes? *After* you've told me *exactly* what Reilen said, of course...."

Alstan grinned. "Of course." Maybe having Enril as a neighbour wouldn't be so bad after all....



Kadanzer Weyr

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