
The Dilemma

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A little to the left, Eorawth said, the pleasure easy to hear in his mental voice. Z'haq obliged his large bronze friend as he continued to rub oil into his hide. With the utmost care he massaged the dragon and made sure to reach every ticklish or sensitive spot.

You are such a baby sometimes, Z'haq chuckled. Despite that though he continued to pamper his friend. *Next thing I know you'll be complaining that you're hungry again.*

But I am hungry. Why could I not have another herdbeast?

We went over that already. More blood, less meat. You'll be lighter than the other bronzes when Nioranth rises.

I can catch her, Eorawth rumbled with pride. *You said I did before.*

This time Z'haq had no reply. Maybe he was being too strict. Maybe he was putting too much of the burden for his own failings on his dragon. If he could only screw up his courage to go talk to Dunia then none of this extra preparation would be necessary. Whenever he steeled himself to go talk to her though something always seemed to happen. Generally, it was that he chickened out. He had to face facts; when he cared so much his courage seemed to fail him... at least as far as Dunia was concerned. Why was it so hard to just go tell her what he really felt?

When it came to fighting Thread there was no one braver than he and Eorawth. They could find the courage to do whatever needed doing. As far as women in general went, his courage seldom failed him there either. They had been in many a mating flight, especially since his dragon had such a taste for the greens. In fact, Eorawth's sexual appetite seemed to know few bounds, much like his rider. When actual feelings were involved though, Z'haq found that his resolve faltered and he felt like a stumbling child.

Nioranth's rider is fond of you, Eorawth stated simply, seeming to understand the nature of his rider's misgivings.

I hope so, Eorawth, I really hope so.

Z'haq was not as comfortable as he tried to sound though. Maybe it was a crazy idea and maybe not. He hoped that if Eorawth could catch Nioranth as he had once before, then maybe the passion of the moment could carry him past the uncomfortable fear that came upon him whenever he tried to talk to Dunia. So much had changed for her in the ten

Turns she had spent in the past. What for him had only been a few days must have been like forever to her. She had borne children, had a weyrmate, an entire life that he wasn't a part of. That had been a lot for him to absorb when she had returned, so he had kept his distance and let her sort it out in her own time.

In that time, though, he had ample opportunity to reflect on what she meant to him. He realized that it was more than sex or a good time. He had real feelings for her and was afraid that she didn't feel the same for him. As time went on and she became estranged from the father of his children, those feelings, and the hope that maybe she would reciprocate, began to dominate his thoughts. Only time would tell, he supposed, but if at all possible he was going to try and game the odds just a bit and get his dragon as ready for this flight as possible. Maybe the two of them were not meant to be, but the only way to know for sure was to talk it out.



Nioranth would be rising sometime soon and, as usual in the days before a mating flight, she was being an outrageous flirt with everything that had even a hint of bronze hide. Dunia was subject to a commentary on the virtues and masculinity of what seemed to be every bronze in the Weyr, not to mention the few visitors who had 'just dropped by' from other Weyrns now that Kadanzer's junior flights were open to others. She half expected that before long her queen's obsession with all things of a bronze hue would expand to include firelizards and metalwork!

My hide gleams. All the bronzes admire me, the queen informed her smugly for at least the third time in the last half hour.

Hmmm... Dunia made a non-committal noise of agreement. Nioranth was still down at the bathing beach, having decided to stay there after Dunia had completed washing and oiling her. The fact that the bronzes of FireFlight were also sunning themselves after a post-Threadfall bathing probably had a lot to do with this decision.

She and Cassidoria were in an archives room at the Weyrleaders' Complex, going through tithing records for last Turn from Ierne Island, Dawn Sisters and Izmir. With Turn's End only just passed, Lybelle had all the goldriders checking each other's notations and calculations to make sure that all the tithe summaries for the Turn were meticulously exact.

Eorawth admires me, Nioranth continued.

Uh huh. Dunia totalled up another column of figures and allowed herself a small smile as they agreed with Cassidoria's calculations. She initialled the bottom of the sheet and reached for the next in the pile.

Eorawth's rider admires you, the queen said. She managed to sound smug about this as well.

Dunia blinked. *Z'haq? Yes, we've been friends for a long time*, she replied. She and Z'haq had a friendship going back Turns. They had stood as Candidates together for a couple of Hatchings, and he had Impressed his bronze in the clutch immediately before the one that had contained gold Nioranth. After they had both graduated into the wings there

had been many a fun evening spent together with Z'haq, Tildy and R'san. They'd even been lovers for a time. But the ten-Turn gap in those friendships and relationships was well beyond the capabilities of dragon memory, as were the strains put on it since her return from the Ninth Pass. She wondered exactly what Nioranth and Eorawth meant by 'adores you'...

Back in 2858 Nioranth rose for the third time, and bronze Eorawth had flown her. That had sparked off a relationship between her rider and Z'haq – the most significant that Dunia had been in, up to that point in her life. They had made a good pair, as lovers, she remembered wistfully. But that relationship had been before the *betweening* accident that had sent her hurtling through time to the Ninth Pass.

And when she had got back, Z'haq had changed.

No, that wasn't true. *She* had changed. What had been mere days for him had been Turns and Turns for her. At first, Dunia had missed Z'haq fiercely, just as she had missed all her other close friends and family. But then days had turned into months and then into Turns, and she had become more and more wrapped up in her life in the Ninth Pass and her relationship with Corsan. The memory of Z'haq had faded. She knew that he was still alive, and that one day she would return to her own time and see him again, but in her mind he became akin to some childhood friend who had transferred to another, faraway Weyr or a crafter sent to another posting.

When Nioranth finally burst into the air above Kadanzer once more, Dunia brought with her almost ten Turns of added age and experience, not to mention a trio of children and the raw, jagged edges of a long-term werymating that had just been smashed to pieces by the tsunami. Whilst Z'haq had remained... Z'haq. They were reunited, but he – and her other friends – suddenly felt so *young*...

Z'haq had gone from being three Turns older than her to six Turns younger, but initially the gulf seemed as broad as that between the Ninth and Tenth Pass. He was sweet and fun to be with, but since she had come back from the Ninth Pass she couldn't help but look at him primarily as a bronzerider and not as Z'haq.

Eorawth says his rider is not happy. His rider is afraid. Nioranth's tone changed to puzzlement. His rider is afraid that you do not like him any more.

Dunia abruptly sat up straighter in her chair, drawing a puzzled glance from Cassidora. She waved a hand at the other goldrider to indicate it was nothing. "Nioranth is gossiping," she said by way of explanation. But it was the implications of exactly *what* Nioranth was gossiping about that concerned her. Was this a typical bronzerider anxiety with an upcoming gold rising, or was it something deeper?

Tell Eorawth that of course I like his rider, she informed her gold cautiously, being careful not to include the word 'admire'. And then firmly put all thoughts of Z'haq, bronzes and mating flights from her mind as she set to adding up another long column of figures.



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You did what? Z'haq asked, aghast at what his dragon had said.

I told Nioranth that we admired her, was Eorawth's distracted reply as he blooded his second herdbeast in as many moments. Both rider and dragon were feeling the physical and emotional effects of the imminent gold fight. Even now Nioranth was preparing to rise and was trumpeting her challenge to all of her suitors. Z'haq was only dimly aware of his bond's mental replies across the distance that separated them.

I mean the rest of it, Eorawth. Why did you tell her that I was afraid that Dunia didn't like me anymore?

A mental shrug was all that Z'haq got in way of an answer as the bronze's concentration turned towards preparing for the flight. As if it wasn't bad enough that his dragon was gossiping, the silly thing hadn't bothered to tell Z'haq about it. Now he had the impression from Eorawth's mind that he and Nioranth had been discussing this for days. What must Dunia be thinking of him now?

Fortunately there wasn't time to dwell on it. Another wave of near-overpowering emotion hit him as Nioranth took to the sky. He got a double dose of it from the state that his own dragon was in. Z'haq had never before known Eorawth to be so focused during a mating flight, nor so confident of his ultimate victory. Up till now he had felt a twinge of guilt for putting the bronze into such a position because of his own personal problems. That thought was pushed to the back of his mind though as all thoughts but the need to catch the queen were stifled in both his own and the dragon's mind.

Nioranth was as always an outrageous flirt, but she was going to make her suitors work for their victory. She turned this way and that to make sure that they all could see her in her full glory. Once she was certain of having their full attention she then altered course so that some of the lead bronzes bumped each other in trying to match her. As they disentangled themselves from one another they were quickly overtaken by those behind and the lead changed hands several times in the first few moments.

Eorawth remained more or less in the middle of the pack, conserving his strength. Z'haq marvelled at his self-control in the heat of the mating urge. It would seem that his willful dragon was maturing a bit. Again, he didn't have time to dwell upon this. The press of the crowd brought new sensations to his mind as he realized how near Dunia was. He hazarded a glance at her, noticing her returning his gaze. Her expression was one of unfocused lust, directed not at him but at any and all of the bronzeriders surrounding her. There was just too much going on. Seconds later both of their attentions were returned to the drama playing out in the sky.

The golden dragon had again twisted in midflight so as to shake some of her less agile pursuers. Three more bronzes were left in the dust or had to leave the flight after midair collisions. Z'haq's own dragon however was not amongst those and he felt a surge of pride as he felt Eorawth take the lead. It was almost as if he could sense Nioranth's next move before she made it. She beat her powerful wings in order to gain altitude but he remained right on her tail. Bit

by bit the two of them began to leave the rest of the dragons behind as they climbed higher into the sky. For many long moments she tried to shake him off and though she might gain a bit of distance from him he always came back and narrowed the gap.

They were now so high that any spectators below would have trouble making them out. Most of the bronzes had given up by this point and their riders had gone off to be consoled. Z'haq stood, statue like, trying by sheer force of will to give Eorawth the strength he would need. Suddenly the tension of the chase was replaced by another sensation. A wave of relief and elation surged through Z'haq's being as he realized that Eorawth had won the flight. It was the last coherent thought he could manage though as he felt himself surrendering to the same feelings as his dragon. Dunia, who had been so close before, was even closer now as the two of them melted into the same embrace that their dragons were experiencing.



How long they had lain together he couldn't say. Dunia and Z'haq were physically exhausted but both their, and their dragons', passions were fully spent. For the first time in ages he felt at peace. It just seemed so right to have her by his side. Now all he had to do was make her understand that. With the successful mating flight behind him he had some inkling of how foolish he had been not to just come out and tell her what he felt. It was just that the time they had been apart, the blink of an eye for him and what must have seemed a lifetime to her, was a hard hurdle to overcome.

What must he seem like to her? She who now had Turns of maturity over him and children of her own. Children he wished he could have had a hand in making. He was roused from his thoughts by a glance from Dunia. She knew him well enough to know how troubled he was, even if it wasn't for the gossiping of their dragons. When she started to speak he gently placed a fingertip upon her lips.

"No, don't say it. Let me talk while I've the courage to do it."

She looked a bit perplexed, but still lovely in his eyes. He sighed deeply and forced himself to speak what was in his heart.

"It was only a little while here, but seemed like forever to me while you were gone into the past. When you got back I was so happy... but so much had changed."

He paused for a bit since the words weren't coming easily to him.

"Well, you know all of that. The thing is, I was scared that you wouldn't need or want me anymore. Maybe you had grown up or something and were leaving me behind. You had a family of your own and I realized that I wished it could have been me that you had a family with."

Her eyes widened slightly at his words but she let him continue.

"I guess it sounds silly but it's true and I didn't know how to say it. Then I thought that maybe if Eorawth could win the flight then maybe I could get the courage to say what I was really feeling. Funny isn't it? I can fly into

Threadfall without flinching but I can't tell you how I really feel without getting all tongue tied?"



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Dunia emerged from her weycot and blinked at the early morning sunshine. The gold and bronze bulk of an entwined Nioranth and Eorawth occupied the queen's wallow. The sight was simultaneously reassuring and unsettling in the light of Z'haq's post-flight confession.

She liked Z'haq – she really did. Memories of dragon-induced passion sent a delicious tingle through her. And her previous relationship with him had been a fun period of her life. Returning to something like that... She had to admit she was tempted.

However, she didn't think that was the be all and end all of what Z'haq was pining for – he seemed to want something deeper, and that was what unsettled her. Mating flights don't count! But the bronzerider appeared to hope that this one *would* count – and be a stepping stone to a more permanent arrangement between them.

She'd prevaricated a little – well a lot, to be honest – telling him that she needed time to think about what he'd said. Reminded him that mating flights don't count and that she wanted time to assess her own feelings in the cold light of day. And flinched a little at the disappointment in his eyes when she said it.

Dunia wasn't sure – even after almost two Turns – that she was ready for another weyrmating. Friendship, yes. Sex, yes. But after hearing what Z'haq had said about fathering her children, it gave her pause. She'd thought, up to this moment, that she would never have any more children. She'd decided that, should she get pregnant from a mating flight or a casual fling, she would quietly let *between* sort it out. Farnya, Corsia and Murgon had been a huge part of her life in the Ninth Pass, and her reduced place in their lives here at Kadanzer still caused pangs of regret. She didn't want to become attached to another baby and then have to give it up to a foster mother.

Now, knowing how Z'haq felt about children, there was an unexpected wrinkle in her plans. If they weyrmated and she got rid of a pregnancy, what would that do to their friendship? If she kept a child and fostered it out, how did that fit into Z'haq's rosy view of she and he being a 'family'? And if she felt grief and regret at the fostering, would that poison what she felt for her friend?

Oh Nioranth, she said to her sleeping queen. *Why couldn't you have let another bronze catch you?*



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