
Awaiting A Decision

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At the first glimmer of dawn on the very last day of month 12, Nioranth rose and J'hanos' bronze Vhauth caught her once more.

Dunia returned from the flight rooms at mid-afternoon, having bathed and borrowed a voluminous shawl from Headwoman Ima to walk back across the Weyr to her cot. Nioranth's early rising had caught her unprepared for wandering about in public once more people than the hopeful bronzeriders were up and about.

Nioranth was now back in her wallow, with Vhauth's neck entwined in hers. Both were fast asleep. As she passed the intertwined dragons, and approached her weycot, Dunia found Corsan's sister Ceresa sitting on the porch, darning some clothes and wearily answering a stream of questions from five-Turn-old Farnya and her two younger cousins, as to what a mating flight was and why only bronze dragons chased gold dragons. Only little Corsia was too young to add incessant "But whys—?" to the conversation. Instead, the toddler sat on the steps of the porch, sucking on the foot of the rag doll Corsan's mother had made for her. Corsia was thus the first to spot Dunia returning, and waddled over to her mother as fast as her plump little legs would carry her, the rag doll still dangling from her mouth.

"Hello, cutie!" Dunia scooped up her youngest daughter and returned her to the porch and a clamorous greeting from the other children.

Ceresa smiled apologetically. "They have been mating flight mad all morning. It was all I could do to stop Farnya going to the Flight Rooms in to ask you her questions in person. I figured that waiting here was the lesser evil."

Farnya looked up at her mother solemnly. "Ceresa said that you would be back soon after Nioranth came home, but you took *ages*. And why are you wearing Headwoman Ima's shawl?"

Dunia laughed and tousled her oldest daughter's hair with affection. "I'm wearing Ima's shawl because Nioranth didn't give me much time to get dressed this morning before she rose. And I took a long time because I had to have a bath first."

Her two nephews wrinkled their noses at the thought of delaying anything for something as distasteful as having a bath. Farnya was on to the next question after barely a

second to consider the answers to the first. "Will Vhauth be living here with you and Nioranth now?"

"If Nioranth wants him to stay in her wallow he might visit, but he won't live here. He still lives with J'hanos and has a wallow of his own."

"Will Nioranth visit Vhauth's wallow?" The questions continued as Dunia handed Corsia over to Ceresa and headed inside her weycot to dress properly. About half an hour finally exhausted all the queries on mating flights, Nioranth's sleeping arrangements and Ima's shawl, and had returned to tried and tested ones like "Can I have a firelizard?" and "Will there be bubbly pies at the next Hatching Feast?"

Receiving the same answers that they always did to these last staple questions, the older children darted off for an exuberant game of tag around the weycot. Vhauth briefly opened an eye to watch them. Nioranth slumbered on oblivious. The two women settled Corsia down for a nap and sat companionably in the shade of the porch, doing their darning.

By late afternoon the mending was done, and Corsan returned from the dragonhealers just as his sister was herding the children together to take them back to her cot to wash before supper. He smiled at the rabble as Ceresa attempted to get them to leave. "I hope you have all been behaving," he said with mock severity. "I don't want to hear that any offspring or relatives of mine have been getting into mischief."

"We've been behaving," said Farnya primly. "But Mama had to borrow Ima's shawl because she went out without enough clothes."

"Ah, yes. Your mother." Corsan shook his head sorrowfully. "Who would think a gold dragon would pick someone so badly behaved?"

The children giggled in delight and scooted off chanting "Badly behaved! Badly behaved!" with Ceresa in tow.

Dunia raised an eyebrow at him as Corsan put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. Her weymate had, of course, been witness to Dunia's precipitous early morning departure. Nioranth's shriek upon awakening could have roused the dead, let alone someone in the weycot next to her wallow. "I assume such an expert in decorum and polite behaviour will, of course, not be wanting this badly behaved woman to take off any of her clothes now or later this evening, hmm?"



"I've been thinking," said Dunia, as she and Corsan walked back to their weycot from the Weyrhall later that evening.

"Oh, you don't want to be doing that, love," Corsan remarked. "Bad for you, thinking is. Gives you worry lines and causes diseases of the feet."

"Diseases of the feet?" She couldn't wait to hear the reasoning behind that one.

Corsan nodded. “Oh yes – all that pacing up and down, brow furrowed in thought. Blisters, stubbed toes, corns and bunions. Thinking invariably leads to diseases of the feet.”

She giggled at the silliness of this idea, and grabbed his hand to pull him to a halt. “Well then, perhaps you ought to stand still while I tell you my thoughts. I wouldn’t want you to get bunions.”

“I am all ears,” said Corsan, with a little bow.

“I was thinking that shortly after this next clutch of Nioranth’s hatches... That then might be a good time for us to go forward to the Tenth Pass. What do you think?” She had been living here in the past for over six Turns now. Little Corsia was already several months past the age where it would be safe to take her *between*.

Her weyrmate nodded thoughtfully. “Yes... if we’re to go, then I’d like a good lead time to prepare. After the hatching certainly gives us plenty of time to plan and get everyone used to the idea that the pair of us are leaving.”

“And you are certain that you want to come forward with me and the children?”

Corsan kissed her forehead. “Yes, weyrmate of mine – I’m certain that I want to travel forward to times unknown with you.” A twinkle came into his eyes. “I’ll even commission Harper Alstan to write a ballad about it!”

“Oh no you won’t!” Dunia had had quite enough of Alstan and his subtle hints that he’d like to write a ballad about her journey into the past. She didn’t need Corsan encouraging the man.

“Of course, I don’t know how the place will cope without us.”

“You’ve said yourself that the dragonhealers have two apprentices who are more than ready to make journeyman.” The pair of them began walking again, hand in hand. “And it’ll be about five months before we’d actually leave – I’m sure Master Renthic can arrange a transfer to replace you by then if he feels that pair aren’t experienced enough.”

“Ah, but can he find someone with my wit and style in that short a time?” quipped Corsan.

“I’m more worried about whether the Tenth Pass can cope with the arrival of your wit and style,” countered Dunia, with a smile. “Now that *would* be a topic worthy of a ballad...”

Corsan grinned. “I hope your Weyringer is up to it.” They continued to walk companionably back towards Dunia’s weyrcot. “Have you talked to Genna and K’med about this yet?”

“Of course, not – I wanted to speak to you first.”

“I thought the Weyr always took precedence for you dutiful goldriders.” His remark was only half in jest.

“Which one? I have two.” Dunia gestured broadly with her free hand. “This one here and now and my other one away in the future. Besides, Southern – *this* Southern – will cope. It will be a long while yet before Teshea leaves for Barrier Mountain. Gold Sirith is over a Turn old now and she and Tesai are doing well in their training. When she graduates, she and Kadana between them will be able to keep that flutterbrain Vivia out of Genna’s hair...”

Except that Kadana should be Weyrwoman of Barrier Mountain, not Teshea, and Tesai, Vivia and Genna would all perish in the tsunami two short Turns after Tesai graduated...

Corsan had caught her slight uncertainty. “Something wrong, love?”

She shook her head. “No, no, I’m fine. It’s just... Every now and then I want to tell someone something I remember from a ballad or a record hide. Something I can’t. It’s—” She stopped, her emotions in turmoil as she thought again of all the lies and half-truths her life here at Southern was built on. She took a deep breath. “I want to go home. I want to live somewhere where I’m not afraid I’ll say something I shouldn’t and change all of history!”

Her weyrmate looked at her with concern. She could see the questions in his eyes, but trusted him not to ask them.



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“Now, pay attention Farnya – this is Mama’s bag for when we all go on Nioranth to the Weyr where Mama was born.” Explaining time travel to a child would be as pointless as it was dangerous – who knows whom Farnya might tittle-tattle to at a hatching feast or gather? So their destination was always described as *a Weyr far, far away* or *the Weyr where Mama was born*. “Mama keeps all the things she’ll need for the journey in it, and Daddy has his own bag right beside it. So now I’m going to make up another bag, just for you and Corsia’s things.”

“Can’t I have a bag of my own?” said Farnya sulkily.

“No, sweetie, we don’t want to carry too much, and you and Corsia are just little, so one bag will hold things for both of you. Now can you remember what sort of things can stay in the bag all the time, and what sort of things will get packed later?”

Farnya’s brow furrowed as she remembered the new lesson-come-game that Dunia played with the selection of items readied for the trip forward. “Clothes. Clothes and blankets can stay all the time. We fold them neat and they stay in the bag and don’t get dirty.”

Dunia nodded. “Uh huh, that’s right. What else?”

“A comb and a bag of soapsand and rags for washing my face.”

“And what gets packed later?”

Farnya grinned at that question. “Foood!” she carolled. “Food that would go horrible if we left it in the bags. Can I pick what food goes in my bag, Mama? I want redfruit juice and bubbly pies and fish with no bones in it and I don’t want ANY redroots. Ugh!” She screwed up her nose at the thought of having to pack the hated redroots in her luggage.

Dunia laughed. “I promise – no redroots or fish bones for the journey.”

“What about bubbly pies?”

“I think we may have to wait and see what the kitchens are doing the day before we leave. And bubbly pies might be a bit messy to carry on Nioranth! She won’t like it if you dribble juice all over her.”

Farnya sighed at this injustice.

“And what does Mama need to carry?” Dunia continued.

“Two jars of oil for Nioranth, needle and thread for mending things, flint and tinder for lighting fires, maps of where we are going to show Nioranth the way. But can’t Nioranth remember the way if she was born there?”

Dunia shook her head. “Can you remember being born?”

Farnya frowned. “No,” she said.

“And your memory is better than Nioranth’s isn’t it?”

A solemn nod. Farnya always seemed overawed that she could do anything better than the huge gold could do.

“So Nioranth can’t remember that far back either. I need the maps and charts to help her remember. Now what will Daddy carry in his bag apart from clothes and blankets?”

“That’s easy – his shaving things and more soapsand and some medicines in case we or Nioranth hurt ourselves on the journey. And skins to put water in, but we won’t fill them until the day we leave, ‘cos otherwise the water would go bad.”

“Good girl.”

“I can take Dolly and Yarrie, can’t I?” the little girl asked, naming her toys. “You’ll make sure the bag is big enough?”

“Of course I will. Why don’t you go fetch them now and we’ll make sure there will be plenty of room for them.” Dunia smiled indulgently as the little girl ran out of the cot and headed off to Ceresa’s to fetch the toys. Her calculated journey would take seventeen jumps *between* times. It would undoubtedly be frightening and stressful for the children, so the more matter-of-fact that she and Corsan could make it by preparing them for the trip, the better. If all went according to plan, it might just seem like an extended family outing, and a sevenday or two of sleeping under the stars would be an exciting adventure for the little ones.

Which reminded her... she must speak to Headwoman Ima about whether the Weavers at Southern Hold would be able to supply her with a canvas tent of a size to accommodate two adults and two forever-squirming children. Sleeping under the stars in good weather might be an exciting adventure, but doing so in the rain would swiftly bring tears and tantrums.

Now, what else would they need?

I do not like fighting Thread when there is rain and wind, grumbled Nioranth. Water sheeted off her wings with every stroke as they flew through another gust of rain.

Dunia’s goggles were spattered with raindrops and fogging up inside so that she could hardly see. She lifted a hand from her flamethrower to pull the goggles up off her face. The riders on flaming dragons could rely on their bondmates’ vision in this low visibility, but queenriders had to be able to see to use a flamethrower.

I don’t like it any more than you do, dearest. But we can hardly let Thread fall unchecked, can we? There, that was better. She could at least see further than the end of her own nose now.

Maybe Thread will drown in the rain? Nioranth said hopefully. She banked gracefully to allow Teshea and Elnath to chase a clump that fell writhing between them.

I don’t think the rain will get heavy enough for that, dear, Dunia replied. The rain was that irritating squally sort that never quite got heavy enough to kill Thread in midair, but never quite slackened off enough to make the ‘Fall anything other than an unpleasant chore. *That one certainly still had plenty of life in it.*

Not any more, Nioranth observed primly as Teshea’s flamethrower charred the Thread to ruin.

The Wings were doing their best, but the intermittent rain and flurries of wind were not ideal conditions. The Thread did not fall faster than usual, but the water flung from the dragons’ wings with every beat *did* have a mass, and the wind had to be countered. With each wingstroke, a bit more exertion than normal was required. Not much over the course of a few minutes, but over the length of a whole ‘Fall, it was significant. The greens and smaller blues were tiring a little faster than usual, and change-outs for fresh fighting pairs had already rotated in. The Weyrlingmaster had ordered several of the weyrings who were fighting with the Queen’s Wing back to the Weyr, as their stamina flagged and they became a danger to themselves and their wingmates. Clumps of Thread were making their way down to the Queen’s Wing more than Dunia would have liked. No doubt there would be more burrows than usual, and Southern’s Steward, Cynestan, would kick up a fuss on his Lord’s behalf. Ah well, perhaps when the rain reached the ground it would drown Thread and Cynestan alike...

There is a clump! Irineth claims it. Nioranth switched her attention from the strands to the skies above as Kadana’s huge Benden-blood queen headed for the threat.

That was one advantage of such a huge queen, Dunia supposed – all those enormous full Benden dragons certainly had the stamina for a ‘Fall like this. ***Size isn’t everything,*** commented Nioranth, and then surged up toward another tangle. ***Thread above and to our right. It is ours!***

Dunia leaned into the riding straps and Nioranth tucked one wing in and twisted her neck to the side, allowing her rider to rake the Thread to ashes with her flamethrower as they dove and spiraled past the tangle. The threat gone, the gold swept her wing out again and veered back onto her previous course.



Fallurth and Viath are Threaded! They go between! They are gone! Nioranth raised her head to utter a mourning keened for the passing of the two greens. ***Lorth says many clumps fall to our level. Elnath and I rise to meet them. Irineth waits below.***

As Nioranth and Elnath powered upwards, Dunia craned her head back to look upwards into the cascading rain. She blinked water furiously from her eyes, searching for the sight of the silver-grey threads against the rain-grey sky. There! Lorth had not exaggerated when he said ‘many clumps’ – there must be half a dozen in an area a few dragonlengths across. The death of Fallurth and Viath must have left a temporary gap in the formations above.

Tell Elnath we will start on the left and move across to the right. Dunia was right-handed and Teshea left, so working toward the centre from opposite directions was more comfortable for both. She hefted the nozzle of her flamethrower and fire licked out at the first patch of writhing threads. About half the clump crumbled to ash. *Warn Irineth that that one is coming, please.*

She sees it. Nioranth was already flapping powerfully towards the next target. To their right, Elnath’s wings flashed gold against the dark grey sky, illuminated by a burst of fire from Teshea’s flamethrower as they claimed another tangle. A bronze Weyrling and the Weyrlingmaster soared overhead, protecting the two queens from any further Thread that might fall through the gap.

Dunia destroyed a second clump, and squinted through the rain, trying to assess if they would get too close to Elnath if they pursued a third, as the other gold swept in to attack another target. Safer to leave it for Irineth, waiting below. *Tell Irineth—*

The thought remained unfinished, and cold horror gripped her as the light from Teshea’s flamethrower showed disaster unfolding – a clump of Thread shredded to ashes in the centre, but two snaking tendrils from the edge twisted mindlessly round to slap Teshea across the face.

Across her unprotected eyes, goggles abandoned as Dunia’s were, to let her see in this sharded rain.

Teshea screamed, and hands flew to claw at the writhing horror that now wrapped her face and head. The nozzle of the flamethrower dropped, but the flames did not cut out soon enough, and fire splashed across Elnath’s neck. Then abruptly the queen was gone.

The death of Teshea and Elnath threw not just Southern, but all the Weyrs, into a frenzy. Dunia felt that she was drifting alone in some bizarre calm at the heart of the storm, her own emotions blunted and out of kilter.

Nioranth had lifted her voice to keened the death of poor Elnath, but – after the initial shock of the event itself – Dunia felt strangely numb. Teshea was dead, and somewhere at the core of her, she felt that that was... right. She had liked the woman, she had worked with the woman. But history said that Teshea could not be the Weyrwoman of

Barrier Mountain, and now that proved true. Teshea was dead, and Dunia found that she could not grieve.

Instead she felt... relief. Relief as one might when an aged and sickly relative passed away after a lingering illness. Then came the guilt at that relief. Guilt that she could be so callous as to dismiss the life of poor Teshea as an unimportant footnote in history. However, she could display neither her relief nor her guilt to those around her, so she squashed both feelings and instead wandered round in a numb haze, all her emotions muted – like the colours faded out of an old piece of clothing.

Corsan noticed, of course, and worried at her sudden inability to smile or react to the antics of their children when his sister brought them round to visit. He hinted that she should go to see the healers – after all, she was hardly the first dragonrider to react badly to the death of a comrade – but Dunia ignored the hints. What could she say to the healers? Smile and tell them ‘It’s all right – Teshea was supposed to die’?



While Dunia retreated to her numb and distant view of the world, Kadana threw herself into the pursuit of the Barrier Mountain Weyrwomanship like a bronze after a virgin gold. With Teshea gone, Kadana no doubt expected Southern’s undivided support, and she still had the approval of the Benden leadership as well. So she now spent a great deal of her time trying to court the approval of the Eastern and Telgar Weyrleaders, as neither of those Weyrs had put forward applicants of their own. High Reaches too, was a sudden target for Kadana’s politicking and all the charm she could muster, for that had been the Weyr where Teshea had Impressed gold Elnath, and they had spoken in her favour as well as for their own candidate, Zemuna.

Again there were delegations of golds and bronzes flitting to and from each of the Weyrs, as Threadfall allowed, and a date was set for the Weyrleadership of all the Weyrs to meet. Dunia declined to attend this one. It was all she could do to rouse herself from bed these days, and she felt no inclination to attend another round of debate on the suitability of this applicant or that.

The news that Kadana had been chosen brought neither surprise nor relief. History had reasserted itself. Dunia accepted the news passively, and kept away from the celebrants that trailed Kadana back from the Weyrleaders’ Conclave.

Only the bond between Nioranth and her kept Dunia from drifting completely into a passive, emotionless state. She could block out the need to react to the anxieties and concerns of her family and friends, but Nioranth was plugged directly into her heart. Corsan’s declarations of love she could ignore, but the queen’s affection and devotion poured straight into her soul.



A sevenday after Kadana's victory had been announced, Weyrwoman Genna asked Dunia to come to her office for a private meeting, and the junior goldrider wearily complied. She expected Genna would try to get her to talk about Teshea's death, as Corsan had done. To put her feelings into words and thus pull herself out of the fugue she had fallen into. Dunia went to the meeting with a sense of resignation: she could not talk about any of this – not truly talk. All she could do was keep silent, or add yet more lies to the barrier that separated the Ninth Pass from the Tenth.

But Genna did not begin with the expected motherly smile or offer of a cup of klah. Instead she was all business. "With Teshea dead and Kadana now taking up her reins on the construction of Barrier Mountain, Southern finds itself with only three full time weyrwomen – myself, you and, ah, Vivia." Genna grimaced at the name of Southern's weyrwoman-fifth – now weyrwoman-fourth, on Teshea's death. "The girl means well, but you know as well as I do that she doesn't have the collective brains of that fair of flitters of hers."

Dunia nodded. When she was alive, Teshea had been only too happy to let Dunia act as a buffer between her and Vivia. When she left for the Tenth Pass and Kadana left for Barrier Mountain, Vivia would become weyrwoman-second.

"So." Genna tapped a finger on her desk. "I would like you to delay your departure to the Tenth Pass, for a few months yet."

"Delay?" Logic said that she should have known the request was coming, but the words still took Dunia by surprise.

"Yes. I know you and Corsan planned to leave after Nioranth's next clutch hatches, but I would like to hang onto you for a time beyond that." Genna paused to assess Dunia's reaction, but seeing little but the passive stare that everyone had gotten used to over the past few sevendays, she continued: "Tesai and gold Sirith will graduate in month eleven of this Turn. When that happens, I intend to negotiate with the other Weysrs to transfer them out in exchange for another queenrider. Southern needs an older gold. Someone more experienced than Vivia."

Dunia nodded slowly in agreement at that statement. "Sirith and Zyath are both Yashelth's daughters. You could do with getting a queen of another bloodline with Irineth and Nioranth leaving... and Elnath dead."

Genna nodded as well. "I am hoping that Nioranth or Irineth will grace us with a gold egg before they depart, but counting clutches that aren't laid yet is a fools wager, and we both know it."

"How long would you need me to stay?" Dunia was counting months in her head. If Tesai and Sirith graduated in month eleven, then a transfer would not be likely until they had proved themselves in a few 'Falls at least. Perhaps not even until Sirith had had her first rising, to prove that she was fertile and to lay her first clutch at her new Weyr. So likely Nioranth would do her own rising before Sirith transferred out, and she and Corsan would be at the stage they were today, but one Turn on.

To her surprise, Dunia found that the calculations sparked more interest and emotion than any other subject had elicited since Teshea's death. If she agreed to Genna's request, then she and Corsan would not leave for the Tenth Pass until month three or four of 2439. The tsunami, she knew, hit Southern in 2440, but late in the Turn. She had never been able to recall the exact date from the ballads and records, but she knew that it was mentioned as having happened in the Southern spring and the Northern autumn. To delay her departure until, say, month four of 2439 would still give her well over a Turn – perhaps as much as a Turn and a half – before disaster hit the Weyr that had become her home.

That final clutch of Nioranth's... they would not yet be graduated when the wave came. She wondered at her own feelings on that – to feel a stirring of grief for dragons not yet clutched or hatched, yet to feel nothing for the loss of Teshea and Elnath?

Genna confirmed some of her own thinking on when it would be most suitable to transfer Sirith out. So she was indeed looking at another Turn here at Southern. Dunia stared at the floor for a moment or two, trying to assess how she felt on the matter. Where did she belong most – Kadanzer or Southern? She felt she was some sort of strange hybrid of the two Weysrs, the two timelines. Her former life at Kadanzer, and the other goldriders there – Luka, Lybelle, Cassidora – now almost seemed like places and people out of a ballad. When she glanced up again Genna was looking at her expectantly, awaiting a decision.

"Yes," she said simply. "Yes, I'll stay."



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